Success as a Social and Dynamic Process

Reflections and Implications from the Field of Leadership Development in a Global Pharmaceutical Company

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Abstract

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Conduct a quick internet search on "success" and one is greeted with an extensive list of inspirational quotes propagating the conventional belief that setting goals, working hard, and believing in oneself will ensure enduring success. This common portrayal of success as a linear and straightforward concept contains the underlying message that if individuals are not successful, they are doing something wrong—they must try harder, strengthen their mindset, and persevere in the face of difficulty. While such quotes may feel motivational in the moment, the reality of the situation is not so simple; in fact, quite the opposite.

This thesis explores the true nature of success in organizations, providing a close and critical examination of the topic and diving deeply into the nuances of everyday events and organizational dynamics that shape and define our experience of success at work.

Underpinned by the "complex responsive processes of relating" perspective (Griffin, 2002; Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2010), which acknowledges the inseparability of individuals and their ongoing influence on each other, this body of work sheds new light on the connections between social, evolutionary, and other forces that impact the choices we make in our everyday lives as we strive for success, and builds our understanding of success as a social and dynamic process in organizations.

Additionally, this thesis provides an in-depth, novel critique of the dominant discourse regarding success, highlighting how business and academic literature fall short in acknowledging the complexity of the topic, and exposing the discord between the idealized, formulaic, and prescriptive mainstream rhetoric and the actual, lived experience of individuals in the workplace.

Finally, the findings and arguments offered, which provide a fresh perspective for how success may be understood, carry important and tangible implications for those working in the field of leadership development, a discipline typically saturated with overly-simplistic models and ideals regarding success. This research builds the case for us to modify our approach to leadership development, starting with a critical look at the ubiquitous foundational beliefs of the field of leadership development itself. By adding depth and dimension to the topic of success through close examination of everyday organizational experiences, practitioners will find that it is no longer possible to approach leadership development (or attempts to achieve personal success) in such a simplistic manner. The more nuanced understanding of success provided in this thesis will cause practitioners to confront conventional expectations to implement the familiar, simplistic practices and tools commonly used in development fields, and instead begin to challenge the assumptions and beliefs that have, for too long, lain unquestioned beneath them.

Introduction

Research Question

In this thesis, I explore the question, "What does it mean to be successful in organizations today?" In a series of four projects spanning a period of over three years, I conducted research into this seemingly simple question, only to find layers of complexity that, once closely examined, revealed powerful forces that shape our everyday experiences of success in organizations.

Success is a topic that permeates both our everyday lives and, as specifically explored in the context of this thesis, our work lives—from the day we land our first job throughout the trajectory of our careers. As a Leadership Development practitioner, my work has largely been focused on helping leaders become more successful. At the same time, I have been pursuing my own success in my chosen field. As a result, I am highly familiar with the prevalent discourse surrounding development and success in organizations (i.e. tips, formulas, and models promising greater impact, better results, increased success—and the assumed stability of that success once it has been achieved). Over the course of my career, however, I began to notice that the shortcuts and formulas I (and others in my line of work) buy and sell are not foolproof; in fact, quite the opposite is true.

I enrolled in the Doctor of Management program in October 2018 with the intention of challenging my thinking about the field of Leadership Development; the result has far exceeded this expectation. The nature of the Doctor of Management program and its focus on complexity forced me to expand my scope beyond the confines of a specific discipline of Human Resources; by directing my attention to a theme that underpins Leadership Development—namely: success—I have been challenged to incorporate and grapple with the many variables that influence work within and across organizations. In taking a step back and attempting to view the situation from the more detached perspective that this unique program offers, I became curious about the concept of success in organizational life, generating a list of questions that grew over time as I intensified my research and more closely examined what I came to understand was a highly unstable and fluid topic.

Through deep examination of my personal experience, I have learned to see how a multitude of variables co-mingle and influence each other to produce both expected and unexpected outcomes in our lives at work.

This thesis is relevant specifically to others who work in the fields of personal/professional/leadership development, but also—more generally—to all individuals and leaders in organizations, as the desire to achieve a sense of success cuts to the core of our humanity. Whether we like it or not—or even acknowledge/are aware of it—we all desire to feel successful (Han, 2015). Achieving this, however, is not as simple or straightforward as it may seem on the surface. In fact, it involves a myriad of factors (relationships, history, societal trends) that influence our ability to achieve success—or even define it. In other words, success is a common topic with depths of (often-unexplored) layers beneath it. This thesis illuminates connections between social, evolutionary, and other forces influencing the choices we make in our everyday lives as we strive for success, and builds our understanding of success as a social and dynamic process in organizations.

Organizational Context

In my research exploring the concept of success in today's workplace, I inquire into my experience as a leadership development practitioner in a large multi-national pharmaceutical corporation ("Pharma") that is in the midst of transformation. As is the case in many companies today, pressure on the organization's leaders (along with our entire workforce) feels as though it is continuously increasing; expectations are high to maintain financial success while determining how best to respond to the many changes in the world brought about by globalization, advances in technology, and other major trends influencing business and society, including, most recently, a catastrophic global pandemic. Our leaders and employees are struggling to balance the past with the future, attempting to keep pace and maintain relevance in a period of rapid change and uncertainty.

During the course of my studies, my role in the organization has shifted. When I began my research, I was responsible for the design, delivery, and oversight of Pharma's global leadership development programs, a small suite of mainly face-to-face executive development courses focused on improving the leadership skills and abilities of Pharma's senior and "high potential" leaders. In parallel to my work developing leaders, my attention over the past year or so has been split not only between supporting the success of our leaders, but also on ensuring my own success during this period of great change and organizational transformation. As Pharma's Human Resources function reorganized and

transformed throughout my tenure on the Doctor of Management program, I eventually took on the responsibility for leadership development company-wide.

This is the context in which my research took place.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organized to present a comprehensive view of my research, including the research methodology and the research itself, followed by a synopsis, which covers a summary of the research, my key arguments, and my contributions to knowledge and practice. The text proceeds as outlined below:

Following this introductory section, I explain the method for my research and the related ethical considerations.

Next, I present my four research projects in full. Each project contains one or more "narratives" from my organizational work followed by a critical examination of the content, informed by related research and the mixed-methods approach described in the methods section.

Then, in the first part of the synopsis, I summarize and reflect upon these projects, elaborating specifically on how my thinking has evolved related to my research question as a result of engaging in my research.

In part two of the synopsis, I present and elaborate upon my key arguments.

Finally, in the last part of the thesis, I present my contributions to knowledge and practice.

Methodology
Overview

The Doctor of Management program at the University of Hertfordshire lies in the field of Critical Management Studies, an area of management scholarship which critiques traditional/orthodox management theory for being overly simplistic and instrumental, and which, instead, incorporates and pays attention to complicating factors such as power, history, and human relations in organizations (Mowles, 2017a; Mowles, 2017b). Insights from the complexity sciences are integrated into the program (e.g. Griffin, Mowles, Shaw, Stacey), along with group analytic theory (e.g. Foulkes), pragmatism (e.g. Mead, Dewey), and sociology (e.g. Elias) (Griffin, 2002; Mowles, 2017a; Mowles, 2017b; Stacey, 2012).

One of the primary intentions of the Doctor of Management program is to help manager/researchers such as myself become more critical thinkers by taking our experience seriously, including paying close attention to and questioning our practice. Such attunement and examination may then allow for new and different ways of thinking and, thus, new and different opportunities for action (Alvesson & Skoeldberg, 2018; Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Mowles, 2017a; Mowles, 2017b).

Grounding in Complex Responsive Processes of Relating

Program founders Professors Ralph Stacey, Doug Griffin, and Patricia Shaw developed a way of understanding human interaction they termed "complex responsive processes of relating;" at its core, complex responsive processes of relating acknowledges the inseparability of individuals and their ongoing influence on each other (Griffin, 2002; Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2010). The complex responsive processes of relating perspective stipulates that we are inseparable members of the complex social networks that we form—constantly participating in co-creating the emerging present in a predictably unpredictable manner, cooperating and competing to get things done (Griffin, 2002; Griffin & Stacey, 2006; Mowles, 2017a; Mowles, 2017b; Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2012). While not a research method per se, the complex responsive processes of relating perspective has significantly influenced the formation of the methodology used in the Doctor of Management program; the hybrid individual/collective approach (described in the sub-sections below) is a demonstration of this foundational position and emphasizes the understanding of research as a social activity.

The approach requires careful articulation and examination of organizational work and focuses particularly on how the researcher influences and is influenced by others—along with how this affects stability and change in the situation as it evolves. The approach extends the practice of autoethnography, which embraces the researcher's personal experiences and observations as a way of understanding the social context they are studying (Lapadat, 2017), by applying intense reflexivity along with iterative group and social processes to each researcher's thesis/body of work. In this way, rigor is increased, subjective individual interpretations of experiences are reflexively engaged with, and both research contributions and the generalizability of conclusions are maximized (Mowles, 2017a; Mowles, 2017b).

This multi-faceted methodology guards against individual bias, forces close examination of aspects of our lives that are often taken for granted, ensures a thorough and critical exploration of everyday life, and supports rethinking the obvious, where prevailing understandings can break down and allow space for novel ways of understanding to emerge (Alvesson & Karreman, 2011). The inherent complexity of both personal experience and organizational life make a comprehensive approach such as this a highly appropriate choice by allowing researchers on the program the opportunity to deeply explore complex concepts such as success (Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001).

I will now expand upon significant aspects of the methodology: autoethnography, reflexivity, embedded group practices, and the iterative nature of the approach.

Autoethnography and Reflexivity

Grounded in the pragmatist belief that "knowledge emerges from our actual living" (Martela, 2015, p. 542), the Doctor of Management program emphasizes the central and critical role of experience in our inquiry. Autoethnography, one aspect of the mixed-methods approach used on the program, is an approach to qualitative inquiry in which the researcher recounts a personal experience (a "narrative") and couples that with an ethnographic analysis of the cultural context and implications of the experience; as such, the author is both subject and researcher (Lapadat, 2017). In other words, by employing an autoethnographic approach, the story of my experience represents the empirical material, or "data," of my research. I commence each project by relating a personal experience(s)

from my organizational work, and then closely examine the occurrence, paying additional attention to the experiences of others and examining influencing factors, such as broader social structures, norms, and institutions. As a result of operating in this way, I have become an investigator of my everyday experience (i.e. a researcher/practitioner), writing about and reflecting upon the interrelations of the many variables at play, describing what is going on as things evolve and change, and paying particular attention to how I am connected to and influence/am influenced by my situation and the people in it.

Participants in the Doctor of Management program are expected to reflect critically not only on our work, but also on the research method we employ. The autoethnographic aspect of the approach, in particular, stands in stark contrast to most scientific research, in which the last thing the researcher is expected or encouraged to do is put themselves front and center in their inquiry.   As such, it is important to note that there is general agreement that there are limits to using one's own experience as research data (Alvesson & Skoeldberg, 2018; Bordieu & Wacquant, 1992; Griffin & Stacey, 2006; Martela, 2015). For example, as philosopher and researcher Frank Martela points out, "In the pragmatist epistemology, there is no such thing as pure uncontaminated experience…" (2015, p. 549). Additionally, because of the inherent instability of human experience, it is impossible to isolate or declaratively state "truths" about any given experience, be it lived by one individual or an entire organization or group (Alvesson & Karreman, 2011); we must remain aware that there are always counterarguments and alternative ways of accounting for experience.

Reflexivity, which generally refers to the examination of one's own beliefs, judgements, and practices—and how these may have influenced one's actions (including in the research process)—is therefore considered a key component of robust autoethnography (Adams, et al., 2017; Hibbert, et al., 2019; Lapadat, 2017) and of the Doctor of Management methodology. As social complexity researcher Antonacopoulou states, "It could be argued that reflexivity is central to critique as critique is central to reflexivity" (2010, p. S9).

On the Doctor of Management program, we mitigate the risk of empirical "impurity"—while simultaneously enhancing the validity and generalizability of our research claims—through a high level of reflexivity and multiple forms of critique, including the development of critical skepticism towards practices, assumptions, and arguments—both those of others and our own. The approach involves many opportunities to practice reflexivity and encourages both

self-reflexivity, which focuses on surfacing and questioning one's values and assumptions, and social reflexivity, which focuses on one's external environment and one's place/role within it (Hibbert, et al., 2019; Lapadat, 2017).[1]

As previously noted, an individual researcher's view is always somewhat subjective, filtered through the lenses of personal history, culture, experience, and a range of other variables (Alvesson & Karreman, 2011). As Alvesson and Skoeldberg reinforce, "Reflexivity is not only an accomplishment of the lone, heroic researcher but very much a social enterprise" (2018, p. 394). In this way, the social aspects of the research methodology (described further in the next section) also help to ensure academic rigor and support "quality control," as engagement with the research community informs and assesses the credibility and value of contributions (Alvesson & Karreman, 2011, p. 75).

Research as a Social Activity: Embedded Group Practices

In the Doctor of Management program, in alignment with the complex responsive processes of relating philosophy, research is considered a group activity; at all stages of inquiry in the program, the research community is engaged (Mowles, 2017a; Mowles, 2017b). As previously mentioned, robust research of this nature cannot be conducted in isolation; in fact, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to undertake this type of research alone. The complexity of the organizational topics studied demand review, reflection, and dialogue with other researchers, all of which are both readily available and considered important components of the Doctor of Management program. Embedded group practices (such as those described below) are employed to further enhance reflexivity and criticality, adding an important social dimension to the research process (Griffin & Stacey, 2006).

In addition to actively exploring our own lenses (see Project 1), we actively seek out a variety of perspectives by reading relevant literature and engaging in dialogue and conversation with fellow researchers, so that ideas can be tested, explored, expanded, refuted, or elaborated, and we may increase the chances of developing broadly relevant contributions. We subscribe to the notion that, as a researcher, it is imperative to be able to take the

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[1] These two "types" of reflexivity are outlined separately here to further emphasize the importance of taking both the individual and the social into account; in reality, they are inseparable components of a robust process of reflexivity.

perspective of both the airman and the swimmer—both immersed in and distanced from the situation (Elias, 1987/2001); the collaborative, reflexive process embedded in the program allows for this combination of perspectives and helps support the de-centering of each researcher from his/her subjective experience.

As a foundational aspect of the program, the research community (including current students and faculty) meets in person[2] quarterly for four-day residential weekends, where we engage as a research community, participating in faculty and guest lectures, discussing student work, and engaging in "Community Meetings."

The ninety-minute Community Meetings, which take place most mornings, are borrowed from the concept of experiential groups in the group analytic tradition (Foulkes, 1964). At these meetings, students and faculty sit in a circle with minimal facilitation and no set agenda and engage in an open, emergent, and generative discussion regarding our research and other related topics. In addition to challenging our thinking intellectually, these sessions are also often intense, emotional, and psychologically demanding experiences. Building on the idea, stated succinctly by program director, Chris Mowles, that "…the most potent place for learning about groups, where we spend most of our lives, is in a group" (2017a, p.505), we utilize the meetings as an additional opportunity to practice taking our experience seriously, exploring and discussing emerging and evolving patterns in the research community and applying/testing these with regard to our research, generalizing from the local interactions to the global themes we are exploring.

Further exploration into research topics occurs in the informal processes that take place within the Doctor of Management community, particularly on the long residential weekends when opportunities for interaction increase (e.g. breaks, meals, drinks in the bar, informal gatherings, etc.). These interactions often mirror the everyday politics of organizational life (e.g. evolving relationships, group dynamics, etc.)—and frequently are discussed in the Community Meetings outlined above. In other words, the community environment allows for the possibility of exploring generalizable organizational issues within the cultural microclimate of the Doctor of Management program.

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[2] Exceptions were made for select sessions in 2020/2021 due to travel restrictions brought about by the coronavirus pandemic; in these instances, sessions were held remotely via Zoom.

Additionally, as part of the program, the research community is subdivided into "learning sets," consisting of four students and a supervisor. Learning sets meet many times throughout the year (both virtually and in person at the residential sessions) to further discuss and critique each other's narratives and our subjective interpretations of them. We carefully read and reflect upon every version of one another's work, forcing a process of revalidating, exploring, and contextualizing of findings. Utilizing the collective ideas and critique of these many voices, we are engaging in an ongoing loop of reflecting, writing, discussing, gathering/processing feedback, and re-writing—improving and enhancing our work at every turn.

A Progressive, Iterative Approach

The iterative nature of this approach is fundamentally different from other, more common, research approaches in which fully formed ideas are presented; instead, as researchers in the Doctor of Management program, we remain open to evolution throughout the process—maintaining the assumption that we are fallible and learning as we go, holding conclusions and assertions lightly and maintaining an ongoing, open skepticism, recognizing that we are not trying to find a single universal truth or final "right" answer. (Martela, 2015). As Alvesson and Skoeldberg state, with emphasis throughout,

> *Empirical material should be seen as an argument in efforts to make a case for a particular way of understanding social reality, in the context of a never-ending debate.* (2018, p. 370)

The progressive approach employed on the program represents—in each researcher's body of work—a recognition of how understanding evolves over time. Groundbreaking theories and revelatory insights are rare and usually represent iterative, ongoing examination of ideas and theories; indeed, peak discoveries are often built upon the work of entire thought collectives of academics who evolve and further inquiry to make such pinnacle moments possible (Fleck, 1935/1979).

In light of this understanding of research as an evolving process, ideas from multiple sources are integrated accordingly *throughout* the research process on the Doctor of Management program, building upon and improving the robustness of arguments and conclusions along

the way. For example, literature is incorporated to augment the research throughout the process as the work evolves. Rather than beginning the journey with a traditional, comprehensive literature review in which a gap is identified and/or confirmed and serves as the basis for research, relevant literature is identified and explored in an ongoing and emergent manner, correlated with the unfolding investigation of the primary research topic.

The progressive approach used on the Doctor of Management program makes the movement of thought transparent and allows for an emergent manner of researching—evolving and improving content, connections, and conclusions along the way. This approach helped me hone and refine my work and, as a result, my work has been informed, enhanced, and evolved through the examination and input of many scholars.

As expected, this iterative, social process evoked my own movement of thought and promoted additional depth of reflection, effectively changing who I am as a researcher (and as a practitioner) along the way. In other words, by employing this mixed-methods approach to my main theme (success), each of my projects builds on the last and reflects my ongoing development—bringing my transformed self to each successive project, to my work, and to this culminating thesis.

Ethics

My research indirectly involved colleagues, internal and external partners, and other individuals who appear in my narratives. The purpose of my narratives, however, was not to analyze specific others, but to deeply explore the situations we were engaged in together and our interactions in these situations, noticing how our assumptions, histories, and ways of thinking contribute to these interactions. Rather than study individual people in detail, my intention was to examine and reflect upon the experience of our interaction, to expand my understanding, and to draw broadly applicable generalizations. Nevertheless, I have anonymized the organization and the people featured in my research and, when possible, I have informed these individuals that I was engaged in a process of research in which I studied my own interactions with the people with whom I work.

Additionally, ethics were a regularly discussed topic in the Doctor of Management research community and within my learning set. Contrary to more traditional methods of research, ethics in the process utilized in the Doctor of Management program were emergent by definition. As one of the program founders, Doug Griffin, aptly states,

> …ethical meaning does not reside in external universals to be applied to interaction but, rather, ethical meaning continually emerges in the interaction itself. Ethics are being negotiated in the interaction. (2002, p. 182)

In other words, what is ethical is indeterminable ahead of time because of the emergent nature of the research; I was unable to judge the outcomes of my actions before acting, since the future was being constructed in the interaction itself. In alignment with pragmatist philosophy, I was simultaneously a participant and an observer, in a paradoxical process of perpetually constructing an unknown future (Griffin, 2002; Griffin & Stacey, 2006).

The autoethnographic aspect of the mixed-methods approach to research used on the program (including/especially the deep exploration of real narratives) can blur the boundary between literary writing and social science research, increasing the need for vigilance toward ethics beyond the typical steps required by ethics boards/institutionalized ethics processes (Lapadat, 2017). Furthermore, the understanding of ethics as emergent throughout the research process suggests that differences in perspectives and understandings are likely; this differs significantly from the typical consensus building approach—and may evoke a sense that identity is at stake and/or emotions and

organizational politics become important. In light of this, I anticipated ethical concerns as much as possible, as I have documented in the University's ethical approval process, and also maintained vigilance throughout the program—continuously reflecting upon and assessing the topic of ethics as my research progressed.

Furthermore, it is believed that engaging in reflexivity (including incorporating extensive critique and promoting questioning of one's thinking and practice, as mentioned above) enhances one's awareness of potential ethical implications (Antonacopoulou, 2010); I believe my growing reflexive competence provided me, as a researcher, with an increased ability to think through and be responsible for my actions throughout my work on the program.

A final point regarding ethics concerns the attention that must be paid not only to those mentioned in the narratives, but also toward ourselves as researchers. As Lapadat states, "Auto-ethnographic work can affect the researcher in unforeseen ways" (2017, p. 594). The process opens up the researcher him/herself to intense scrutiny and often involves the retelling of unsettling experiences. As Geertz elaborates in his book, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*,

> Most social scientific research involves direct, intimate, and more or less disturbing encounters with the immediate details of contemporary life, encounters of a sort which can hardly help but affect the sensibilities of the persons who practice it. (2000, p. 22)

Add to this the deep reflexivity, which necessarily includes intense self-examination, applied throughout the Doctor of Management program, and it seems impossible to emerge unscathed/unchanged. Mitigating this risk and minimizing potential long-term harm, once again, is the extensive Doctor of Management research community (including peers, supervisors, and former participants and scholars) who temper and contextualize what can at times feel like a highly vulnerable experience.

Finally, as Professor of Education, Judith Lapadat, who maintains a special focus on ethics in qualitative inquiry, states,

In having the courage to make the private visible, auto-ethnographers embrace personal vulnerability but cannot know how it will play out as the written material takes on a life of its own. (2017, p. 594)

This represents the hyper-connected world we live in today, with the fluid democratized power of the internet and social media through which information can spread quickly and broadly, or sit dormant for years. As such, I cannot predict the future impact of this work, though I have taken the many precautions listed above to minimize the risk of unintentional harm.

The next section of this thesis contains my four research projects in full. *Note: As the projects represent my thinking and the organizational context at the time the projects were written, present tense has not been changed to past tense and the descriptions of the context shift (or remain the same) based on the specific situation at the time.*

Project 1 – Intellectual Autobiography
Introduction

In this project, I endeavor to document my 'intellectual autobiography,' illustrating how I have come to think over time. I intend to utilize a reflexive approach to highlight significant inputs, paying particular attention to how influences from my culture, education, and professional experiences have shaped and influenced my assumptions, thinking, actions, and worldview.

To aid in this process, I will proceed chronologically, starting in my youth.

Part 1: A Liberal American Upbringing

I was raised in the Northwest corner of the United States, in Seattle, Washington, a politically- and socially-liberal port city founded by fishermen and timber barons. My parents were drawn to and settled in the area for its natural beauty and harmonious communities, and, like many Seattleite children, it was instilled in me from an early age to care for the earth and my fellow human beings, believing that we all need to "do our part" for the betterment of all.

In a broader context, the greater American cultural values of independence, personal improvement, competition, and capitalism also strongly permeated my consciousness and influenced my thoughts and actions. I internalized these values and was driven to achieve from a very young age. I believed, based on what I was told by my parents and teachers, that I could do or be anything I wanted, as long as I was willing to work hard for it; and I believed that this was equally true for all Americans.

Additionally, like most Americans, I was taught that, along with hard work, education was the key to success. My access to educational opportunity started early when, as a young child, I was selected to enroll in a special academic program called "Horizons," which was designed for "gifted" students and which positioned its participants on the track for higher education. Participation in Horizons included many benefits, the most important of which was the experience of growing up with the labels of "smart," "gifted," and, therefore, "special." This labeling strongly influenced my perception of and expectations for myself, and further drove me to succeed.

The Horizons program was housed in a number of neighborhood schools throughout Seattle and we (the participants) changed schools as we changed grade levels. Given that the population of the "gifted" classes was almost entirely Caucasian and the host schools for the program were often in minority communities, we (the program participants) were leveraged as part of Seattle's efforts to desegregate its schools. In fact, however, by virtue of our separated classrooms, which allowed for only minimal interaction with the general population of the school, the Horizons program, while technically desegregating the schools as a whole, maintained a de facto segregation *within* the schools themselves.

One specific event brought this discordant situation into focus when I was just ten years old. A boy arrived at the door of the classroom and was introduced by the teacher as a new student. My initial reaction was, *"This can't be right. He's come to the wrong classroom; he should be downstairs with the other children."* And then—I could almost feel my own thought process unfolding, managing the scenario in slow motion—I remember asking myself, *"Why do I think he doesn't belong here? He looks like he's my age…"* And finally realizing, with some horror, shame, and an overall feeling of *wrongness,* that I assumed he was in the incorrect classroom because he was Black. It struck me: I had been shown but not told, via the demographic makeup of our "gifted" student body, that certain populations (i.e. most minorities) were not as "smart," "gifted," or "special" as us White students; we were segregated not only by race, but by expectations for success.

Clearly, these limiting generalizations regarding minorities were not true, and our new student was indeed a brilliant young man. This incident, however, sparked my thinking about how different external expectations for success effect people. It was impossible not to see how economics, race, and other factors were linked with access to opportunities and robust education; I found myself adjusting my earlier assumptions and came to the modified conclusion that, though we all had the possibility to achieve the American Dream, some people must work much harder to reach it. Later in life, I would find myself motivated to help level the playing field in this regard and would find myself further questioning even this modified assumption—is the American Dream indeed a possibility for everyone? And what happens when "success" is not truly an option?

By the time I was in my teens, my parents had divorced and gangs had started to creep into Seattle's inner city, where I was assigned to attend high school. Because of the increase in gang-related violence, my mother insisted that my brother and I use my father's address in a nearby affluent suburb to attend school in a safer environment, thus landing us in a racially and socio-economically homogenous school.

The transition to suburban schooling was eye-opening for me; though I had experienced much of what urban Seattle had to offer, I had not spent much time in the suburban bubble in which I then found myself. In suburbia, my definition of success shifted, shaped by my new environment. My high school, one of a handful in the United States allocated special multi-million-dollar funding by state and federal government to become a model "School for the 21st Century," encouraged us (the students) to set our sights high, providing not just great teachers, but also access to extensive extracurricular activities and college/career guidance, effectively raising the bar and setting new expectations for achievement. I readjusted my goals accordingly and set a manic pace for myself, enthusiastically engaging in many of the myriad opportunities now available to me.

I can see now that, as a young adult in the capitalistic American culture, this was a first formation into becoming an "achievement subject" (Han, 2015). In philosopher and cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han's 2015 book, *The Burnout Society*, he states,

> Twenty-first-century society is no longer a disciplinary society, but rather an achievement society [Leistungsgesellschaft]. Also, its inhabitants are no longer "obedience-subjects" but "achievement-subjects." They are entrepreneurs of themselves. (p. 8)

I believe I experienced a combination of these two influences simultaneously—I was an "obedience subject," conditioned by societal praise and rewards into a compliant mindset, including adopting the new definition of success—and an "achievement subject," driving myself in all areas of life, not just academics.

After four years of pushing myself to succeed in this manner, I found myself exhausted, yet ultimately dissatisfied with my "accomplishments" (awards, trophies, etc.) which, in retrospect, did not amount to anything meaningful or satisfactory, especially in the context of the Protestant values upon which I was raised, particularly the expectation to "do my part

for the betterment of all." I felt I needed to reevaluate my priorities and re-ground myself to ensure I contributed to something more meaningful in my college years.

Part 2: An Education in Education

Within my family, the act of helping others through education, particularly those less fortunate, is highly valued. Many of the women in my immediate and extended family were teachers. My mother, as a result of her upbringing on the tough South Side of Chicago, was particularly passionate about helping inner-city children—a passion she passed down to me and which was reinforced by my exposure to the dichotomy of urban and suburban schooling in the Seattle area. I spent many hours as a teenager volunteering in schools with low-income children. As a result, I became curious about what it was that made people grow and progress. I had seen from my own educational experience that environmental factors (funding, well-resourced classrooms, access to opportunities and experiences, etc.) could make a significant difference. I was curious: What other factors were important? And what could be done for those without access to such resources? What could I do to assist in and/or accelerate this process? I can see now that this line of questioning involves certain assumptions about social life and achievement that come from the way I was brought up, particularly centering around how things "ought" to be in the United States, the importance of helping others, and the expectation for all to succeed and "reach their potential." Additionally, I believed that there must be a formula for achievement, which, with the required specific components, would guarantee success.

Leaving for college, I followed in the footsteps of other women in my family by declaring a major in Education, determined to become an elementary school teacher. This decision was highly approved of by my parents and dovetailed perfectly with the Protestant work ethic and values with which I was raised. As sociologist Max Weber summarizes in his work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905/2012), Protestants believed:

> It is true that the usefulness of a calling, and thus its favor in the sight of God, is measured primarily in moral terms, and thus in terms of the importance of the goods produced in it for the community. (p. 100)

As a teacher, I would be serving the community directly and thus doing my part for the greater good.

During my undergraduate studies, I moved to New York City for a year to attend school on a national college exchange program. Eager to continue working with children, I obtained an internship at a specially funded school program focused on science education. I split my time between taking classes at my university on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, in one of the wealthiest zip codes in the nation, and my internship on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, among the city's poorest and most dangerous housing projects. The school facility itself was the worst I had ever seen, implying the lowest of expectations for its students. The building was protected by several security guards and surrounded by chain-link fence and a "playground" that consisted of nothing but cracked asphalt. Aside from beat up desks and chairs, there were almost no supplies in the whole building, including a lack of paper, pencils, and even soap for the bathrooms. The children were often hungry and/or tired, and most were desperate for praise and attention. I had not learned the theory yet, but it was a true representation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), with many of the children and the school administration preoccupied with simply getting basic needs met. It was nearly impossible to teach the proposed science curriculum under these circumstances and it was clear that the students, their families, and the community had very little ability to change the situation. I continued thinking about the foundations for education and the role of expectations and environment in academic success—What needs to be in place for a person to effectively learn and develop? What expectations for success are communicated through our educational environment and surroundings—and what impact does that have?

After my experience in New York, I encountered and was particularly struck by the works of author Jonathan Kozol, an American activist best known for his books on public education in the United States. His book, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (1991), which highlights the discrepancies between America's richest and poorest schools, along with the various societal factors that amount to what Kozol refers to in a subsequent piece as "the restoration of apartheid schooling in America" (2005), strongly resonated with me and reinforced my resolve to work with the neediest children in our poorest neighborhoods. I

was eager to improve the lives of urban children, and, following my year in New York, I returned to Washington State to finish my undergraduate degree in Education.

Back at my home university, I read extensively about theories of development (including Piaget, Erikson, and Skinner) and best practices in curriculum and instruction (including Dewey, Bloom, and Taylor). My learning centered around a progressivist approach to education, a movement which began in the 1880s and persists still today, emphasizing individual interests, learning by doing, and stressing the emotional, artistic, and creative aspects of human development. In my coursework I learned how to craft behavioral objectives, assess student progress, manage a classroom, and put pedagogical theory into practice. In essence, I was given a formula and framework for how to effectively teach any subject to any student. Later in my career, I would come to recognize the oversimplification—as well as the utility—of this cybernetic approach to development; I will return to this.

Upon completing my degree in Education, I accepted a teaching job with the local school district at one of the poorest of the city's seventy-two elementary schools. While I was thoroughly enjoying my experience in the classroom teaching, I was also getting my bearings as a new teacher and was slowly beginning to understand the politics of the school system. Within the school district, I noticed that the "better" schools (i.e. those with more parent involvement and more funding) with the "better" teaching jobs (i.e. those with well-appointed classrooms and students arriving at school ready to learn) were located in the more affluent parts of the city and held the most highly sought-after teaching positions. Partially because I equated these positions with career success and partially because I was tired of buying pencils, books, and other supplies with money from my own very meager paycheck, I decided to apply for and landed one of the coveted roles.

In the classroom, math was one of my favorite subjects to teach, and I somehow caught the eye of the district's Head of Mathematics Education, who asked me to facilitate teacher training courses for other teachers in our district. I began traveling frequently, teaching and consulting not only for my school district, but also for both a local non-profit focused on math education and a major textbook publisher. Soon I was consulting regularly, making far more income teaching adults than I was working with children.

Over time, as an enthusiastic young teacher, I found again that I had become overextended in my drive to "do it all" and "succeed"—holding down my full time job as a teacher, consulting on the side, and taking on additional responsibilities such as speaking to the school board, hosting student teachers, and leading discussion groups for other new teachers. No one was forcing me to work so hard, but my efforts were clearly shaped by societal expectations of teachers in America—to give constantly and serve selflessly for the good of the children. This, combined with my upbringing in what I now recognize as the aforementioned "achievement society," had me driving myself relentlessly. I was spending my days intensely engaged with my students and my nights and weekends creating lesson plans, grading papers, shopping for supplies, and worrying about how to individualize my approach to best support each of my students. As Han states,

> In this society of compulsion, everyone carries a work camp inside. This labor camp is defined by the fact that one is simultaneously prisoner and guard, victim and perpetrator. One exploits oneself. It means that exploitation is possible even without domination. (2015, p. 19)

Once again, I found myself in an unsustainable, exhausting situation, full of activities that did not fully align with my passion for working with underprivileged children, but that looked (at least on the outside) like "success" in the field of education.

At the same time, given the booming economic climate in Seattle and the corresponding increase in the cost of living, I was finding it difficult to make ends meet on my teacher's salary—at the end of the month, after paying off my student loans and other bills, I had twenty dollars left over; had it not been for my part-time consulting income, I would have been living just above the poverty line. I was growing tired of the societal messages implied in teacher compensation—that my work was not important, not valued, and not worth a living wage.

The decision to leave classroom teaching was not easy. I recall the opinions of trusted friends and confidants who served as a sounding board in my decision-making process. My mother and others were encouraging and affirming, urging me to stick with it and keep teaching, reinforcing my desire to make an impact in the lives of children. I remember the husband of a close friend, however, who, after listening to my laments over dinner one evening, summed up his opinion with the simple statement, "If you don't like it, then quit." I

was appalled at the bluntness of his statement, but something also rang true in his words that aligned with my American values of independence and individual choice. Why should I fight against a broken system, when I could just leave and likely be better off financially, personally, and professionally?

As sociologist Norbert Elias poses in his overview of how aspects of society can be represented by "game models," I found myself considering the balance of power in my situation:

> Whose potential for withholding what the other requires is greater? Who, accordingly, is more or less dependent on the other? Who, therefore has to submit or adapt himself more to the others demands? (1970, p. 79)

Ultimately, finding myself in the less powerful position, yet unwilling to remain dependent or accept the conditions inherent to inner city teaching, I decided to quit the "game." I left the school system and returned to university to complete a Master's degree in Adult Education. I reasoned (based on my recent consulting experience) that adult education involved greater funding and a higher salary—both of which proved to be true. I convinced myself that I would still be making a difference and "doing my part" to help others, just targeting a different part of the population. I can see now how my way of thinking attempted to reconcile the Protestant work ethic with which I was raised with the capitalistic society in which I lived; this evolution in my thinking corresponds with Weber's description of the evolution of America's capitalistic society in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905/2012). In this work, he states,

> A specifically bourgeois economic ethic had grown up. With the consciousness of standing in the fullness of God's grace and being visibly blessed by Him, the bourgeois business man, as long as he remained within the bounds of formal correctness, as long as his moral conduct was spotless and the use to which he put his wealth was not objectionable, could follow his pecuniary interests as he would and feel that he was fulfilling a duty in doing so. (p. 111)

I was attempting to redefine success for myself, yet again; this time, however, in a more individualistic and capitalistic mindset, shifting my aspirations more toward financial success. This fracture away from my family's preferred vocation turned out to be the first turning

point in my struggle to strike a balance between altruism and capitalism that has continued throughout my professional career.

Part 3: Transitioning to Adult Education and Leadership Development

I earned a Master's Degree in Education, completing my thesis on "Blended Learning in Corporate Education." Blended learning is generally understood as an educational approach which combines digital educational materials with more traditional classroom methods. My thesis included a literature review of the research pertaining to education in the private sector. The Department of Education, through which I was completing my degree at the University, focused mainly on education in primary schools, secondary schools, and higher education (colleges/universities), and my supervising professors and I were struck by the significant lack of rigorous research regarding education in corporations. I spent hours in both the Education and Business School libraries, combing through journals in an attempt to gather academic references regarding best practices for training and development in private organizations. I was able to find a decent body of work regarding technical training, however little robust research was available with regard to soft skills, and even less when it came to the topic of leadership development. Leadership development had become a specific area of interest during the course of my research as I was determined not to experience the financial challenges I encountered as a teacher in my next occupation; through my research and preliminary job searches, I gleaned that leadership development was the most prestigious and highly compensated area in the field of corporate education.

In spite of the lack of well-founded research available, I was able to complete my thesis and, upon graduating with my degree, was hired by the University's Department of Professional and Organization Development to design and deliver soft skill and leadership development courses for the staff of the University. It was here that I was first exposed to the dominant discourse in management and leadership development, comprised of various two-by-two grids, simple steps to success, and techniques to motivate employees and drive organizational achievement and efficiency. Among other offerings, I was certified to deliver a course based on Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989/1999) and became a practitioner of the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (Myers, 1962). I can see

now that these "tools and techniques" greatly oversimplified the task at hand, but were commonly considered "best practice" in the field (Stacey, 2012); I recall once requesting the rationale for why our department had selected a specific set of frameworks and was given the simple response that "these are the most commonly used tools in leadership and organizational development; someone must have done the research to prove their effectiveness if everyone is using them." I did not, at the time, recognize the irony of utilizing several of the unfounded models permeating corporate learning and development at the same research-funded institution from which I had just graduated, where I had, just months before, struggled so greatly to identify (without much success) any academic foundations for such methods.

Personally, I was taken in by the order and uncomplicated guidance professed by these tools (e.g. seven habits, sixteen types, etc.) and perceived them to be very useful and applicable to both my own personal and professional life, and the careers of the adult learners with whom I was working. I certainly had not paused to question my methods or the ideologies they were built upon. As Mowles suggests,

> The thing about grids, tools, and frameworks is that they are often convincing in their logic, reassuring in their certainty, powerful in their way of reducing complex phenomena and representing them in simple schemata, but ultimately they are decontextualized, reductive and misleading. (2016, p. 9)

In hindsight, I believe my uncritical acceptance was also partially due to two additional factors: my desire to smoothly integrate into my new role without challenging too much, and the structure of the capitalistic business models built into the use of many of these tools.

The aforementioned *7 Habits* curriculum represented the most extreme example I encountered of embedded free-market enterprise. The materials were exceptionally attractive and well-produced—glossy, aesthetically-pleasing handouts, professionally produced videos, and a fully-scripted facilitator guide—and the business model behind the content was a thoroughly conceived money-making machine. In order to utilize the tools, I was required to attend a weeklong training near author/founder Stephen Covey's home in Utah, commencing in a mandatory written acknowledgement indicating my agreement to deliver all content without deviation from the prescribed materials and procedures. The

University, as my employer, was also obliged to contractually agree to per-use licensing fees and other various commitments that locked-in ongoing long-term use of the model and materials. Subsequently, I found that this type of approach is common in Leadership Development; by literally "buying-in" to the model, it becomes more difficult to publicly question it.

After a few years of working at the University, desiring a sunnier climate and a chance to try my hand working in the private sector, I decided to move to Southern California. I gave my notice, packed up, and set out down the West Coast with a copy of *Fortune* magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work For" (an annual list that ranks U.S. companies based on employee satisfaction). I started at the top of the list, looking for organizations with locations in Southern California, reasoning that the companies on *Fortune's* list must be committed to developing their people; I wanted to work where I would have the resources to develop people and, thus, make a difference in the organization. I did not have to look far down the list; as fate would have it, that year a well-respected life sciences company was at the top of the list and had an opening in HR Learning & Development at their site in Southern California. I applied and got the job.

At "LifeSci", I was stunned by the relative availability of resources and abundance of perks. Entire rooms of office supplies, complementary snacks and refreshments, and generous budgets for travel and development; the situation felt opulent compared to my experience in school and government work. In this environment, I was further exposed to common practices in the field of leadership and employee development, becoming certified in and teaching Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership model and adding another style inventory, the Strength Deployment Inventory, to my repertoire. I continued to be seduced by the simplicity and practicality of the tools and methods I was employing and, utilizing these, I worked with managers and their teams to clarify roles and goals, and to diagnose, organize, and simplify interpersonal topics into clean, neat packages that could be dealt with in a rational manner. In line with strategic choice theory (developed by Child, 1972, and critiqued by Stacey & Mowles, 2016), in which the primary focus is on the leader who communicates goals, monitors performance, and ensures team functioning, I focused on each leader's ability to direct and motivate their team, concerning myself with "...the

qualities leaders must possess and the styles they must employ in order to fulfill these functions effectively and efficiently" (Stacey & Mowles, 2016, p. 86). This had great appeal to the mainly scientists and engineers with whom I worked; once we covered the often somewhat dubious reliability and validity of the models and/or tools, they seemed more or less to be willing to suspend any remaining doubts and put themselves into my hands as the expert/HR professional.

I felt like I was "living the dream"—enjoying my new life in sunny Southern California, where everything felt simple and easy and where self-improvement in the form of personal and professional development is a way of life. My definition of success at that point in my life was somewhat shallow and narcissistic—living in a beautiful place, making good money, working in the field of personal and professional improvement. My strategy of "following the money" and leaving the struggles of public sector work appeared to have worked—at least on the surface. As time went on, however, I began to grow tired of the superficiality of Southern California. Perhaps on some level I was beginning to notice the similarities between my environment and the depth of the work I was doing. In retrospect, I can now see that at the time I was too enmeshed in my situation to view it critically. As Elias states, "People need to distance themselves from the figuration in which they stand…if they are to see it as it were from the outside" (1970, p. 166). I had, in many ways, fallen for the attraction of systems thinking, applying a simplistic "if-then" formula to my work and my life in an attempt to achieve my latest definition of success.

Part 4: Starting to Question

As time passed and I settled into the field of learning and development in the corporate world, I spent more time learning about personal, management, and leadership development. I picked up and read many of the popular business books at the time and started to feel overwhelmed and frustrated by the large number of philosophies and often conflicting advice. As mentioned previously, I had struggled to find well-founded conclusions in the academic research, and the popular literature offered no additional clarity.

To further my own development, I enrolled in a coaching certification program. The approach was based on the work of James Flaherty, program founder, who believed that

most management and coaching techniques applied what he called the "amoeba theory," in which "…managers and coaches attempt to bring about changes in others by figuring out how to poke them or give them sugar" (2005, p. 6). He proposed, instead, that we pay close attention to people's language, practices, and "structures of interpretation" to change their behavior and, thereby, their results. In the course of the program I was introduced to and read works by a variety of authors, all of which further encouraged me to coach leaders to be more present, focus on "being" instead of "doing," and to pay attention to the nuanced experiences of a person—considering how thoughts, emotions, the environment, and many other factors influence behavior. For me, this meant that personal and professional development required more attention to the complexity of the individual, rather than superficially applying the tools and techniques I had previously been utilizing without regard to the intricacies of each individual's unique experience and situation.

During this same period, I completed a certification in organization development (OD), where I participated in a T-Group (a multi-day course with no set agenda) and took classes in organizational development theory, organizational diagnosis, intervention strategies, and group dynamics. Reading the works and understanding the legacies of Edgar Schein, Kurt Lewin, and others helped me to draw new insights and develop an understanding of organizations as systems and leaders and OD consultants as key manipulators of these systems. The coursework was based heavily on the theory of strategic choice, teaching me to look objectively at the system, diagnose the organizational problem(s), and apply appropriate interventions, which should then lead to the desired changes. Looking back now, I see that these learnings perpetuated my assumption that there must be a formula for success—identify the right components or intervention, and the desired outcome will be achieved.

It was in the OD certification program that I was first briefly introduced to the complexity sciences in a single, short chapter of our textbook, *The NTL Handbook of Organization Development and Change* (2006), in which the author introduced complexity science as an approach, and framed it as "…the opposite of the traditional OD approach of top-down change" (p. 466). Given the difficulty of being able to easily digest, understand, and utilize this new information, plus the comfort and security of the traditional, structured OD approach, I quickly glossed over the complexity sciences content, dismissing it for a later date.

At the time, I neglected to draw the connection between the content regarding complexity sciences, my coaching certification, and my experience in the T-Group, which had fascinated me with its messy unfolding of group dynamics and utilization of current experience as a live case study. The T-Group encounter in particular was refreshingly authentic and highlighted the drama and importance of minutiae in interpersonal interactions. In retrospect, I can now see how the T-Group experience was a perfect illustration of an application of some of the key ideas in the complexity sciences which, as Stacey and Mowles state, attempt to "…assist people to make sense of their own experience of life in organizations, to explore their own thinking, because how they think powerfully affects what they pay attention to, and so what they do" (2016, p. xvi). While intimidating in its intricacy, the T-Group was likely the most important learning in the certification program regarding organizational change.

Meanwhile, as a next step in my professional career, I transferred to a greenfield manufacturing site up the coast, where I became the head of the Learning Solutions group, tasked with technical, soft skill, and leadership development for the site. Here, in a technically-focused manufacturing organization, in juxtaposition to my parallel professional development experiences in coaching and OD, I completed Greenbelt training, learning Lean Six Sigma methodology, which, with its numerous quantifications and tools to increase productivity and reduce waste, was highly applicable to creating technical training offerings for teams in the labs and on the manufacturing floor (Munro, 2008). Here, the focus was on scientific management and efficiency in all aspects, echoing Frederick Taylor's central objective of optimizing and simplifying jobs and thereby increasing productivity (1985/1911).

It was a very tough working environment, again representative of Han's "burnout society" (2015), with most people working extremely long hours with precious few holidays or vacation time for years on end. As a start-up site, we had very limited resources or time for anything other than getting the plant up and running. The plan was to do everything better, faster, and cheaper than the other manufacturing sites in the company. To lower personnel costs, we had a very flat organizational structure with the smallest possible overall headcount, which resulted in manufacturing leaders working nearly round the clock to cover the supervision of shift workers, who invariably had to work overtime to complete work

processes that were not yet optimized.   I left my office one day to find a manufacturing supervisor leaning against the wall in the hallway, sound asleep on his feet.

With this as the reality of life at the site, I was asked to focus on technical training and simply put "the basics" in place for our leaders and new managers, curating and delivering a small portfolio of leadership and soft skill courses. In line with the overall site strategy, the leadership courses the site's HR director, General Manager, and I identified were—once again in alignment with strategic choice theory—selected for their ability to teach leaders how to be more efficient and effective at getting work done via their employees. The General Manager was not concentrated on developing people or an organizational culture of learning and development at that point in time, a significant shift from the more established site in Southern California from which I had transferred. She was (understandably) primarily concerned with ensuring regulatory compliance and developing technical competence; managerial/leadership skills were a secondary priority. Success meant quickly obtaining profitable, compliant production, and projecting an image of ease, accomplishment, and independence, regardless of the fact that we seemed to face unending challenges that prevented our ability to achieve these goals.

The resulting leadership development curriculum felt to me like an anemic offering of "one and done" courses with little opportunity to make any impact on the lives of the leaders, and certainly not on the people they managed. Even though I was responsible for learning and development at the site, I felt powerless to actually make impactful change in individuals or groups, who seemed to be swallowed up by the organizational culture of grind and exhaustion; it was back to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs—I felt the leaders had no chance of developing themselves when they were regularly working twelve-hour days and their primary concerns were with launching a profitable production line and keeping their jobs.

Our extended leadership team meetings paint a representative picture of the tone of the site. Each meeting generally started with a lukewarm kickoff by a member of the site leadership team, followed by a depressing review of KPIs, most of which were significantly off or below target. When a leader spoke out with enthusiasm and/or passion (a rare occasion given how exhausted most of us were) to propose a novel idea, the poor proponent was usually left on their own to implement the idea, often with no support or funding, and then tasked with an expectation to report back on progress at the next meeting, effectively

setting him/her up for failure and subsequent embarrassment. I learned quickly, as did the other leaders, to keep my head down and my ideas to myself.

Additionally, I could not imagine that applying the various tools and techniques I was so familiar with, which now seemed trite and extremely inadequate in the face of overworked and exhausted leaders and employees, would be effective. As a result of my reading, the coaching and OD certifications, and the experience I was having at the new plant, I was starting to rethink my approach to and assumptions about management and leadership development in organizations; some niggling shadows of doubt regarding my work had started to creep into my awareness. Thinking back to my days of elementary school teaching, in which I could measurably observe changes in my students over time as a result of my lessons, I was missing the confidence and daily proof that my leadership development interventions in the corporate world were having any real impact.

Once again, I found myself playing a game which I could not win; I felt isolated, depressed, and trapped, effectively unable to achieve a sense of success—both for myself and for the site I was supporting—and I wanted to stop playing. I was used to winning and I wanted to find another game in which I could succeed. In Elias' terms, I wanted to join another "figuration" (1970). I was reminded of my friend's husband's words, "If you don't like it, then quit." I started updating my resume and prepared to leave the company; fortunately for me, I was offered another option.

Part 5: A Success and a Setback

LifeSci was acquired by Pharma and I was presented with what felt like a fresh start and a new chance for success: the opportunity to move to Europe and work at Pharma's headquarters. Once in Europe, I eventually took over responsibility for managing Pharma's global leadership and high potential development programs. Upon starting in this role, I felt fortunate to be working in an environment where the focus was clear (leadership development), resources were relatively plentiful, and the learners (mainly senior leaders) were generally functioning well beyond a "basic needs" level.

Our leadership development offerings typically followed a fairly traditional format, bringing together the most senior and/or high potential leaders for a week of face-to-face learning

focused on specific components of leadership development. However, a few months into my role, following a request from our Executive Team to support the senior leaders with responding to the evolving business environment, we endeavored to launch a new, more innovative offering focused on leadership and agility.

In supporting the design for the new executive program, I harkened back to my formal education, recalling and applying Dewey's focus on the importance of experience in constructing learning and employing Bloom's Taxonomy (1984)—a hierarchical model used to classify learning objectives into levels of complexity—to ensure activities were leveraged at the highest possible levels to maximize learning application. The program design followed the familiar format previously described and involved bringing the senior leaders together face-to-face for one week, providing interactive activities and facilitated discussions, and challenging the leaders to apply their learnings back to their roles in the business.

In addition to this traditional structure, we augmented the weeklong session with two additional components. First, prior to the face-to-face session, the participants completed a 360-degree survey based on models of adult development and highlighting the benefits of managing one's mindset in achieving business results. Second, subsequent to their participation in the weeklong session, participants were offered the opportunity to engage a certified facilitator to conduct a team-based follow up session with their peers and/or direct reports, focused on furthering discussion around the key topics of agility, leadership, or both, thus supporting their ability to apply learnings to their current and future work.

Following the launch of the program, feedback was unlike any experienced in the history of leadership development at Pharma; leaders were practically clamoring to attend the program. Some participants even described the program as "life changing" and "the most impactful leadership development program" they had ever attended. Many program alumni immediately launched agility experiments within the organization, and employees reported marked differences in how leaders showed up following program attendance. I had never seen a development program have such an immediate and positive response, with corresponding self-driven changes in behavior and follow-up activities on the part of the participants.

Though I was unclear about the exact factors that led to the initial success of the program, I felt a glimmer of validation. By diligently applying instructional design principles, selecting

excellent facilitators, and preparing the participants for immediate synthesis and application, we had achieved success. Though it was early days, it felt like we had cracked the code to leadership development.

Unfortunately, this feeling of elation did not last long as a couple of new inputs suggested a need to for me to pause and look more closely at the situation. On a business trip to San Francisco, I came across a book in an airport shop titled *Leadership BS* (Pfeffer, 2015). I believe the title caught my eye because of my aforementioned doubts about the efficacy of my work in the corporate world. The author, Stanford Graduate School of Business professor, Jeffrey Pfeffer, makes clearly founded statements lambasting the industry of leadership development and pronouncing that "…much of the oft-repeated conventional wisdom about leadership is based more on hope than reality, on wishes rather than data, on beliefs instead of science" (2015, p. vii). Shortly thereafter, upon learning about the Doctor of Management in Complexity Sciences program at the University of Hertfordshire, I began reading the work of Stacey and Mowles, who clearly state "…there is no body of scientifically respectable evidence that the approaches, tools and techniques put forward in most textbooks do actually produce success" (2016, p. 4). Mowles further submits, "It is my contention that many contemporary books on management, replete with recipes for success, are analytical, concrete, logical, convincing and wrong" (2016, p. 16).

Additionally, I can see now that we (the program design team) were deeply embedded in select pitfalls related to systems thinking—for example, attempting to apply science to management, "…equating the manager with the scientist and the organization with the phenomenon that the scientist is concerned with" (Stacey & Mowles, 2016, p. 59). In essence, we were attempting to utilize the leaders (many of whom, by training, actually are scientists) in the traditional methods of organizational intervention, to manipulate and control the system. Predictably, as outlined by Clarke and Newman in their book, *The Managerial State*, we even tied the narrative of our organization's survival to a narrative of transformation, explicitly using the metaphors and designing exercises around "reinventing" the old way of doing things and creating "visions" of a new and better world (1997, p. 42).

To add to this, as time has passed and the transition to an agile organization has proven to be more difficult than anticipated, rumblings of cynicism have emerged in the organization.

Based on all of these factors, it is becoming clearer that what initially seemed a panacea, of course, has its limitations. As political scientist/anthropologist James C. Scott proposes in *Seeing Like a State* (1998) regarding how we make sense of particular outcomes in hindsight,

> …because things do turn out a certain way after all, with certain patterns or causes that are clear in retrospect, it is not surprising that the outcome should sometimes seem inevitable. Everyone forgets that it might all have turned out quite differently. (p. 160)

At the time, we took our early victory, which may have been simply a stroke of luck, to heart. Now, however, it was confirmed by both scholars and experience: even with good intentions, and what felt like a modicum of success, applying a linear, systems-thinking based approach, regardless of the thoroughness and thoughtfulness involved, provides no guarantee that all will go according to plan—and it all may still turn out quite differently.

Part 6: Current State, Reflections, and Thoughts for Further Research

In spite of these revelations, life at work goes on. We are currently in the midst of revising the leadership development strategy for the organization, as well as designing several new leadership development courses to deploy over the next few years. Despite my formal and informal education and in light of my recent epiphanies, I find myself untethered—looking for a foundation upon which to anchor and build. I am now particularly unconvinced that many of the tools and techniques I have learned over the years will serve me or the organization well—or at least as well as I had originally expected. At a loss for other options, I am still trying to apply the well-worn formulas for development in which I have been educated, however it seems like a futile, hit-or-miss game given the uncertainty and complexity of working with adults in the ambiguous field of leadership development.

In the process of composing, reflecting upon, and iterating this document, I have uncovered patterns in my thinking and behavior of which I was previously unaware, such as a tendency to accept theories and solutions without question and an affinity for oversimplifying complex topics and situations. For example, as a child and young adult (and indeed still

today to an extent) I viewed my role in the world via what Elias would call a "naively egocentric" mindset, with myself at the center of my worldview, then family, school, and finally broader society radiating outward in concentric circles, with little overlap or interconnection (1970, p. 14). This was evidenced in my choices to focus on what was directly in front of me, rather than the nuanced interconnectedness of "figurations" of interdependent individuals or systems. As a teacher, I attempted to ignore the powerful systems at play, such as school funding, politics in the educational system, and other socio-economic factors. I focused instead on my personal contribution to remedying the situation, rather than seeking to understand and tackle the complex system of urban schooling itself. In working with adults, I gave up on questioning or exploring the origins and soundness of theories and practices, instead electing to employ them without sufficient examination.

Similarly, I can now see that my undergraduate coursework was grounded in linear thinking and mirrored the scientific approach to management that would appear later in my career; as a young teacher, I was taught to define standards and objectives, isolate variables, teach specific content, and test to confirm results. Later on, in the corporate world, similar trends and ways of thinking played out that, as mentioned previously, I did not question. Given the evolution in my thinking I am now left with more questions than answers. Additionally, I am beginning to recognize the complexity in my work—and I see all of this as a step in the right direction.

Peer and faculty reviewers have pointed out additional themes that permeate my writing and have influenced my actions, such as financial compensation, a sense of duty, a tendency to focus on how things *ought to be* rather than how they *actually are*, and the ongoing desire to make a difference—all of which resonate with me. Harkening back to my childhood memory of that new student, I find myself wondering, "What other blind spots do I still have that I need to be made aware of? What unconscious assumptions am I making? How have I been socialized without my awareness—and how does this impact me, the choices I make, and the work that I do?"

Another significant theme that emerged very strongly is a propensity to focus on and drive for "success." As a result of completing this project, I now find myself questioning the concept of "success" itself. In the fields of both child and adult development, it is considered critical to have a target or goal for development in mind; in other words, a clear

picture of what success looks like. However, in capturing meaningful chapters of my life for this project, I noticed that definitions of success have varied significantly throughout my life, both for myself and for others (e.g. classmates, friends, leaders at work) and these definitions often vary based on society's values and expectations for different populations and occupations (e.g. who is "special"—leaders, high potentials, etc.). Perhaps it is time for me to loosen my grip on the idea of success and consider a different approach and way of thinking.

Therefore, in Project 2, in an attempt to handle things differently, I would like to take a critical look at the meaning of success in the field of leadership development and how my own definition of success as a learning and development professional plays into this. Definitions of leadership and expectations of leaders are evolving, and correspondingly, definitions of "success" in the field of leadership and leadership development are changing. As I remain committed to "making a difference," I plan to explore what this means in my work at Pharma, perhaps delving into questions such as, "How are my colleagues and I constructing the meaning of success?" "How are we already dealing with the absence of a clear definition?" "How does defining/redefining success influence our actions and mindset?" and "What is the mindset behind the need to clarify what a 'successful' leader (or person) should know and do—and how does this reflect wider societal trends?"

In line with philosopher Michel Foucault, who stated, "I write a book because I still don't exactly know what to think about this thing I want so much to think about, so that the book transforms me and transforms what I think. Each book transforms what I was thinking when I was finishing the previous book" (2002, p. 240), I look forward to utilizing my subsequent projects to further reflect upon, explore, and evolve my thinking.

Project 2 – Exploring Success in a Global Pharmaceutical Company

Introduction

In this project I utilize my own experience working in the Learning and Development function of a large global organization to explore meanings of success in today's corporate workplace.

In researching the theme of success and writing this paper, I have come to notice how success is an enjoyable and attractive topic to discuss and explore; it is no secret that in Western culture we value and are drawn to the concept of success (Jackall, 2009; Weber, 2012). Correspondingly, it was my original intention to focus my research solely on the subject of success. However, as Elias poses in reference to researching communities in an inclusive manner, it is important not to separate research topics which are interlinked. He states,

> It means [not] separating research problems which are, in fact, closely connected and often inseparable on account of the different values attributed to them. One cannot expect to find explanations for what one judges to be "bad," for a "malfunctioning"of society, if one is not able to explain at the same time what one evaluates as "good," as "normal," as "functioning well," and vice versa. (1965, p. 166)

I concur that it is necessary to reflect upon a concept (success) and its opposite (failure). Furthermore, as will be evidenced in my work below, exploring success along with not only failure, but also with topics such as survival, uncertainty, and control, are imperative to painting the full picture in the context of large global organizations. In the course of composing and iterating this project, I have begun to wonder, when we talk about success today, with constant change and threats of redundancy dominating many industries, do we really just mean survival? Or is success, in fact, merely a strategy for survival? Furthermore, how does the desire to succeed (or survive) relate to uncertainty and the need for a sense of control?

To explore these questions, I will provide examples from my daily work which highlight the tensions and nuances between these intertwined themes surrounding the concept of success.

Part 1: Context
The Organization

Pharma is a large global pharmaceutical company headquartered in Europe. Pharma's differentiating strategy, and a great source of pride for the corporation, is its focus on innovation—identifying and targeting unmet medical needs rather than producing generic replications of drugs and products discovered by competitors. In Pharma's lengthy history, the company has grown and thrived, consistently maintaining profitability and launching many blockbuster products; success through innovation has meant "doing well by doing good."

Pharma's reputation as a business, rooted in tradition and a long history of respect and integrity throughout the global business community, is anchored on its commitments to reliability, quality, and integrity; the emphasis is on innovation, but with a safe, steady, and conventional approach. This can be viewed in stark contrast to several of Pharma's competitors, who, while also interested in developing new products, are better known for prioritizing cutting-edge, risk-tolerant, and cost-minimizing practices, all of which allow for and enable speed, efficiency, and profitability.

In recent years, as is the case in many companies today, pressure is increasing on Pharma's CEO and our senior leaders to maintain financial success while determining how best to respond to the many changes in the world brought about by globalization, advances in technology, and other major trends influencing business and society. Pharma's top leaders are struggling to balance the past with the future; attempting to keep pace with change and maintain relevance in a period of rapid change.   As a result, there is significant interest from Pharma's leadership to transform the conservative, traditional model to a nimbler and more responsive approach to business—perhaps borrowing a page from our competitors' handbooks—all while maintaining Pharma's longstanding commitments to quality, integrity, and reliability. It is in this organizational context that my work in leadership development— and this project—takes place.

My Role

I work in the Global Learning and Organization Development (L&OD) team at Pharma's headquarters. Specifically, I am responsible for the Global Leadership Development

Programs, a small suite of mainly face-to-face executive development courses focused on improving the leadership skills and abilities of the most senior and high potential leaders in the company.

Within L&OD, my peers and I focus on the design, delivery, and oversight of our leadership programs, while my direct reports concentrate on operations—the logistics and behind the scenes program management required to execute the programs. Supporting my team remotely, we fund and partner with a small team of four additional employees in Warsaw, the location of one of Pharma's recently opened Service Centers. Common among multinational corporations these days, the Service Center model allows for departments to pay for administrative work to be completed remotely, at a lower cost than hiring or maintaining headcount in high-cost locations (such as Western Europe, where my team and I are located); Service Center employees are Pharma employees, but staffing is more flexible—the funding department can add or remove headcount quickly with minimum risk or long-term commitment. The team we partner with in Warsaw is currently responsible for managing routine administrative tasks (processing invoices, scheduling courses, entering data into the learning management system, etc.) but has also begun to expand their scope of work to include more complex responsibilities, undertaking many tasks similar or identical to those performed by my local team, such as working directly with vendors and our procurement department to clarify contracts, fielding challenging questions, and resolving complex program issues.

Part 2: Explorations on the Theme of Success
Narrative: Oliver—Dealing with Shifting Definitions of Success and Fears of Failure

Oliver is one of my direct reports and has been working in L&OD for many years. An Austrian in his late-forties, he is a consummate perfectionist. Formerly having worked in luxury services, he is used to anticipating the needs of others and dealing with the specific idiosyncrasies of senior executives. He comes across as competent, efficient, and friendly.

As the programs we offer in Global L&OD are prestigious (attendance is often by invitation only) and highly visible, expectations for flawless execution are correspondingly elevated. I recall a senior leader in our function once reminding me with regard to the executive

programs, to "…just make sure everything is perfect." "Perfect," in this case, means everything running on time and according to plan—with no uncomfortable or embarrassing situations or experiences among the participants or facilitators. With Oliver on my team, I have had no need to worry; by paying attention to detail, carefully and thoroughly planning events, and providing excellent customer service, Oliver has thrived in his position as Program Manager and has added a polished and professional sheen to all events and offerings in which he has been involved.

I first glimpsed Oliver in action prior to my joining the L&OD team, when I observed him at one of our executive leadership courses. Dressed in a well-fitted suit, he was carefully placing a glass of water near the podium for an Executive Committee member who was launching into a speech for a group of senior leaders. Oliver slipped in and out of the frame smoothly and discreetly, accurately predicting and addressing the needs of the situation. I later learned that he had organized everything for this session down to the last detail—from scheduling the video crew, to ordering a tasteful arrangement of plants for the podium, to ensuring the appropriate level of guests in the audience. In preparation for the event, he spent weeks creating and executing to multiple color-coded spreadsheets and checklists.

With the introduction of the Service Center in Warsaw three years ago, and thanks to ongoing advances in technology, the majority of the responsibilities that make up Oliver's job description (including most of the tasks enumerated on the checklists and spreadsheets in the above example) can now be outsourced to a less costly location (with the exception of the very few duties that must be performed in person or onsite, such as fetching water for presenters). In other words, in spite of Oliver's well-developed abilities to organize and coordinate programs, it no longer makes sense to pay for the performance of this type of work in one of the more expensive locations in the world.

Over the past two years, my team of direct reports—with the exception of Oliver—has been working closely with the Service Center, delegating increasing amounts of their administrative tasks eastward. While other members of my team felt relieved and eager to transfer routine work to our Service Center partners in favor of being able to spend time on more complex and strategic work, I began receiving complaints from our new colleagues in Warsaw that Oliver would discuss delegating tasks to them, but would ultimately insist upon

doing everything himself, resulting in occasional duplication of work and general frustration on the part of our Service Center associates.

When Oliver would complain about feeling overwhelmed in our one-to-one meetings, my consistent response was to suggest that he transfer administrative duties to the Service Center. He would agree to do so—and then not do it. I was frustrated at his hesitance to offload some of his work as I needed him to start taking on more complex responsibilities like his teammates were doing. At the same time, I sensed the root of his fear—that he was not capable of more complex work and that the Service Center was going to take over the work he was both good at and enjoyed. Oliver, however, explained his hesitance to delegate work as a desire to maintain quality control and ensure excellence for the programs. Deploying skills and abilities he developed while working in the luxury services industry, Oliver enjoyed the personal interactions with the executives and their assistants, building relationships and adding a personal touch to routine scheduling and coordination tasks. Over time, though, as our Service Center colleagues proved themselves also to be highly competent in these areas, often exceeding our expectations for excellence and developing their own relationships with senior leaders and support staff, Oliver's rationale for concern lost its plausibility. The reality of the situation was clear; Oliver needed to evolve his skills or risk becoming extinct.

Given his affinity for spreadsheets and checklists—and in an attempt to build his comfort level and confidence with embracing a new way of working—my manager asked Oliver to take on a Project Manager role in one of his large projects, hoping this would allow him to perform some higher level work that could not be performed remotely by the Service Center. Unfortunately, this venture failed, as Oliver was unable to develop several of the key traits of an effective Project Manager (most notably the tenacity and willingness to drive and hold others to account); additionally, because he was struggling to manage the volume of work and added complexity of the role, he made several critical errors which resulted in the cancellation of a program, a costly mistake that impacted both the participants and the reputation of the department.

In a discussion following these events, Oliver finally openly articulated what I had previously suspected—that he just wanted to perform the tasks with which he was already comfortable and confident handling (mainly administrative work); he explained that he was not

interested in and felt unqualified to take on more complex responsibilities. Oliver felt he had been unfairly put in such a position and then blamed for his failure. I counselled him not to be too hard on himself, took on some of the responsibility as his manager for allowing him to be put into a role he was not ready for, but also continued to reinforce that in order to be both successful in his evolving role and manage his workload, he needed to stretch himself to step into non-administrative, less customer-facing work and delegate routine tasks to the Service Center.

A few weeks later Oliver approached me, completely overwhelmed with a backlog of coordination tasks for one of our most complex leadership development programs; he was behind on many critical deliverables and was about to go on holiday with his family. When the program launched 18 months prior, it was important for Oliver (rather than the Service Center) to manage the majority of the coordination until the program could stabilize and a process could be documented for the management of further offerings. As we had reached the stabilization point, I believed this was the perfect time to transition the work to Warsaw. I asked Oliver to arrange a video call to transfer the majority of the coordination tasks to a colleague at the Service Center. During this call, which I insisted upon joining, I applied significant pressure to ensure the work was fully delegated to the Service Center, walking through the long list of program tasks one by one and pressing Oliver to identify and fully hand over each item that could be performed remotely (approximately 90% of the list).

When the video call ended, we said goodbye to our Service Center colleagues and Oliver closed his laptop, turning to face me. He looked directly at me and said, "If they're going to do all of that, what am I going to do? Am I going to lose my job?"[3]

I sat momentarily frozen. I had, in fact, just come from a meeting in which my manager, our HR Business Partner, and I explicitly discussed Oliver's severance package; the plan was for me to present this to him in the coming weeks as part of a larger departmental restructuring. Thoughts were racing through my mind and I was grappling with conflicting emotions. I did not want to lie to Oliver, thus compromising my integrity and potentially misleading or giving him false hope, as it was almost certain he would imminently lose his job; at the same time, I was in a position familiar to many middle managers—bound to

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[3] Paraphrased for anonymity

silence and required to wait for the agreed upon date to disclose the plan for our reorganization.

I was suddenly acutely conscious of the various roles I was playing in this situation—as Oliver's manager, subordinate to my manager, and an individual with my own ideals and beliefs—and I felt hyper aware of and uncomfortable with the conflicting interests and motivations inherent in these roles. I struggled to reconcile the complexity of my relationship with Oliver—he is not just my employee, he also is a kind and thoughtful person, a husband and father with a family to care for, and a competent worker who thrives under the right circumstances. I was also very cognizant of the fact that my reaction to Oliver's questions was important and would influence what would happen next. Should I placate and reassure him, pretending nothing would change? Or strongly encourage him to start looking for other work? Or something in between? I did not want Oliver to panic—as I was confident he could find another position at Pharma or elsewhere, but I also wanted to be authentic and start to mentally prepare him for what was to come. And, as mentioned previously, I needed to ensure I maintained my commitments as a manager by not revealing too much.

In the room with Oliver, I felt as though he could read my mind—somehow discerning that I was concealing his impending layoff. Additionally, I was convinced he was interpreting each moment of my hesitation as greater assurance of his career demise. I was frantic to fill the silence and found myself floundering as I tried to rapidly consider my options before speaking. Anything short of telling the whole truth felt like a form of deception.

From a distance, I am now able to reflect upon my experience in those few moments utilizing theoretical lenses. Christopher Boehm, an evolutionary theorist, points out in his book, *Moral Origins*, that,

> As actors on a social stage, we are keenly aware of ourselves—of our selves—and this also enables us to realize that others have similar selves, of which we become intuitively aware during social interaction. (2012, p. 101)

This was certainly my experience as I scrolled through the possibilities in my mind of what might resemble an appropriate and acceptable response in this situation. Boehm would classify my actions in this emotionally and politically-charged situation as a survival strategy; he asserts,

> …An efficient evolutionary conscience is one that lets us express ourselves socially in ways that help us to both keep ourselves out of trouble and get ahead in life. (2012, p. 32)

This was undoubtedly my aim in this situation—in addition to consoling Oliver, I was concerned with legally, ethically, and competently performing my role as line manager and, as a result, not jeopardizing my own future career at Pharma; how one handles reorganizations, downsizings, and other major shifts does not go unnoticed in organizations and it is critical to frame restructurings and related messages in the appropriate light (Jackall, 2009, p. 51). As a middle manager, I was under special pressure to frame the situation and related messaging in such a way as to make sense to at least three different audiences: my superiors, my subordinates, and myself (Sims, 2003).

Elias, with his special interest in power structures and relational dynamics, calls attention, like Boehm, to the human ability to distance ourselves from our experience and make choices as to how we will respond with others in mind—and then adapt our responses with regard to the given context. Elias calls this reflection and assessment of people, power, and potential actions and their consequences a "detour via detachment" (1939/2000). I found myself doing just that—reviewing the situation and trying to control it by carefully considering what to say and what not to say to achieve an acceptable outcome. In retrospect, I see this "detour via detachment" and careful selection of words and phrases playing out as a form of self-preservation—an awkward, simultaneous combination of deception and transparency in which I was trying to control the narrative and Oliver's reaction, while maintaining my conflicting loyalties.

Sitting together with Oliver, I began making benign comments, pointing out that most transactional work across HR is being moved to the Service Centers, and using clichés such as "the writing is on the wall," "you can read between the lines," and "it doesn't hurt to keep your eyes open." In essence, I was (at a minimum) not telling the whole truth, leaving significant room for doubt, and attempting to manipulate Oliver's interpretation of the situation in an attempt to reduce his anxiety—and my own.

Of course, I failed in my efforts to control the output of our conversation as, within an hour of our discussion, I spotted Oliver in what appeared to be a deep conversation with one of

his trusted colleagues, no doubt relating our exchange and conveying the impression that his fears of losing his job had been confirmed.

Going home that night, I felt hollow and agitated, grappling with a sense of failure and frustration as a result of this no-win situation. Oliver had failed to evolve and would therefore lose his job, and I was trapped in the bureaucracy of middle-management, attempting to manage the emotions and moral conflicts embedded in the situation. Robert Jackall, a sociologist who investigated the lives of corporate managers in the United States, would consider my plight and conflicted feelings typical of the many "moral mazes" managers must navigate to be successful in their roles (2009). In any case, in this circumstance, there seemed to be no adequate consolation for either party.

Oliver as "Everyman" in a Culture of Uncertainty and Fear

Oliver's simple question, "Am I going to lose my job?" gave voice to a general sense of unease permeating the culture in recent months at Pharma. As I will later explore in more detail, Pharma is in the midst of multiple reorganizations, many of which involve downsizing and/or shifting of routine work to computers, less expensive countries, or external suppliers. Used to feeling successful—and, by extension, safe and secure—many Pharma employees have developed a sense of invincibility or immunity over time that now seems to be eroding. In essence, there is a little bit of Oliver's story in all of our work lives; he is the "Everyman" of the corporate world, ordinary and relatable, and susceptible to the traumas embedded in today's workplace. We (individuals, leaders, even entire organizations) may be highly competent—even close to "perfect" in many respects—but as the world and definitions of what it means to be successful in any given role or situation evolve, irrelevance may be lurking just around the corner.

Throughout the scenario related above, I found myself in a position of relative comfort and certainty—initially, at least. The Service Center's current capabilities provide no threat to me personally and, compared to Oliver, I had access to more information about the upcoming structural changes, having been regularly consulted in the reorganization process. In discussions with my manager regarding the upcoming restructuring, I had been assured that I would be "safe" (i.e. I will keep my job), as my skillset was still deemed critical (read— non administrative, strategic) and in high demand; in fact, we had recently posted an

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opening for a job similar to mine to increase capacity to support my current workload. The main impact on me of the restructuring is that I will no longer have direct reports; we will lay off one person in addition to Oliver from my team, and the remaining people on my team will be absorbed into my manager's span of control; we will then pool our resources with other correspondingly downsizing teams in an effort to increase our agility (more on this later), efficiency, and ability to respond to the needs of the business.

While I soothe myself with a positive mindset and the placations provided by my manager, shadows of doubt lurk in the back of my mind regarding my long-term prospects at Pharma. Bringing these to the forefront over lunch one day, a peer of my manager asked me as we discussed the upcoming reorganization, "Do you think your job could be done from Warsaw?" I was rattled—were they now thinking of moving my position, too? It had not yet occurred to me that my assurances of safety might have a very near expiration date; I suddenly felt the threat of redundancy looming. I answered "no" to her question and provided rationale regarding proximity to senior leaders and headquarters to justify my response, but of course my job could be moved—as much as any of our jobs could. We work from home, we work while travelling, we work from all over the world; in a knowledge economy enabled by technology, one can question to what extent physical presence is required for nearly any role. At a fraction of the cost of headcount in Western Europe, it makes sense to move as much work as possible to Warsaw (or many other lower-cost locations in the world). Though my job is "safe" for now, who is to say how long it will remain that way?

Later on, I must admit I felt some level of satisfaction when this same colleague who questioned my local relevance was asked by the local Works Council if her job was really still needed as a result of this reorganization. This sense of schadenfreude (joy at the misfortune of others) was likely brought on by a combination of rivalry and desire for justice on my part, as I have occasionally experienced this leader as somewhat arrogant, coming across as unusually self-assured of her own success and survival, while I and others at Pharma struggle to cope with doubt and ambiguity. As sociologist Peter Marris, who derives his thinking from attachment theory, explains, in order to manage uncertainty, people require both reliable relationships and the freedom to act (2003). My experience is that as we descend in the organizational hierarchy, the prevalence of both reliable relationships and freedom to act diminish. At an organizational level below my self-assured colleague, I felt disadvantaged—

by my relative lack of power, freedom, and access to information; upon further reflection I wonder whether perhaps Oliver felt the same way toward me.

Outside the Pharma organization, signs of downsizing and reorganization are also omnipresent in other companies and industries. For example, on my way home from work one evening, I spotted a notice posted for a "workers demonstration" against one of the other major employers in the region. The graphics on the notice depicted a man standing near the edge of a cliff, at the bottom of which many people were gathered. A large forearm representing the company, with money falling out of its shirtsleeve, was depicted with fingers poised, ready to flick the man off the edge of the cliff to (hopefully) be caught by the people below. The demonstration was being organized to protest the company's seeming disregard for individuals, their families, and the social impact of treating employees as replaceable, disposable, and easy to dismiss if determined unnecessary.

In line with a scientific/cybernetic/systems thinking approach, some organizations are viewing many of their employees as interchangeable cogs ("human resources"), simply and easily removed or replaced. With rapid improvements in technology and growing opportunities to move jobs to less-expensive locations, this is particularly true in large multi-national organizations, where some workers and jobs (e.g. unskilled or minimally skilled) are quickly being marginalized and treated as cogs or machines while others (e.g. data engineers, digital experts) are in high demand and may even require specific retention strategies. This treatment of some employees as interchangeable harkens back to the introduction of "scientific management" introduced by Frederick Taylor in the early 1900s, emphasizing efficiency and objectivity in business (Stacey & Mowles, 2016; Taylor, 1911/1985). In today's everyday business environment, this dissociation often manifests in an attempt to conveniently separate human considerations from decision-making. In reality, however, while processes and procedures allow for some measure of removal, "moral blindness," and distancing of management from impacted employees, the consequences of decisions are still felt and experienced quite directly and personally—as in my interaction with Oliver (Bauman & Donskis, 2013).

The posted notice echoed the sentiments I was hearing within Pharma regarding expendability, success, and survival. I recently overheard a leader attending one of our development programs express a statement directly voicing these concerns; in a group

discussion regarding the changing role of leaders, she emphatically stated, "No one knows whether they're going to have a job or not—least of all us!" The other participants nodded in agreement.

In an even broader context, societal movements (and the mindsets behind them) are important influencers. As evidenced with Oliver's work moving to Warsaw, globalization is augmenting the interchangeable, replaceable cogs attitude toward employment through the movement of jobs to less expensive locations. Additionally, people are living and working longer and can no longer expect the predictable career path common in previous generations (Gratton & Scott, 2016). Organizational changes are causing unpredictable shifts away from traditional careers for many people, eroding long-held norms about career security and "jobs for life." Rather than rely on the traditional linear models and specific ideas we may have been raised with about how careers should proceed, employees are now expected to continuously scan for, identify, and acquire the skills for success and survival in the future, including developing flexibility in terms of willingness to change jobs or companies (Jackall, 2009; Wolf, 2019). In essence, to remain competitive, corporations must be prepared to eliminate employees—and sometimes whole departments or functions—at a moment's notice, and employees are expected to quickly pick themselves up, adapt, and move on (Ehrenreich, 2006).

On another front, a global rise in nationalization is influencing actions and decisions in governments and organizations. For example, specifically impacting Pharma, small differences have arisen in recent years with relation to local and global employment laws. The fact that Oliver is Austrian was a comforting factor in discussions regarding his upcoming redundancy; as an EU citizen, he has benefits that do not necessarily apply to employees with other citizenships. European social systems (represented in the aforementioned posted notice by the group of people gathered under the cliff) are generally favorable to workers; significant protections are in place, a fact I consoled myself with during discussions of Oliver's dismissal. For those Pharma employees coming from other parts of the world (e.g. the United States, Latin America, etc.) a different fate is possible; when employment ends and residence permits are eventually correspondingly revoked, the safety net looks much less auspicious. These differences weigh heavily on the minds of managers who must lay off workers from less supported locations and puts additional pressure on employees from outside Europe (such as myself) to remain ingratiated with higher levels of management.

Furthermore, advances in technology and digitization have created an enhanced sense of speed, innovation, and change. There is a notion that the pace of change is never going to be as slow as it is today, an assumption that has been broadly accepted. We marvel at the seemingly endless developments in technology that impact our ability to be flexible in our work lives, allowing for opportunities to leverage information and interact with others to get things done in ways never before thought possible. Juxtaposing this sense, however, Alvesson, a Critical Management scholar, points out that perhaps things are not so different as in the past. He states,

> …a historical flashback indicates that our own age has no monopoly on being turbulent and subject to dramatic changes. For a long time, every decade has been imbued with a high degree of uncertainty and disruption… (2013, p. 125)

Regardless of how one interprets the current state and rate of flux, the truth remains that change is constant, and the underlying expectation is that one must be mindful and evolve correspondingly to ensure survival and success.

These threats of globalization, longevity, nationalistic movements, and a sense of accelerating change (whether it is real or not), all highlight how societal trends and the resulting shifts in power provide the setting of our daily lives and operate like "an inescapable, irritating background buzz, a perpetual source of fear" (Ehrenreich, 2006, Location 2972). In this context we are left to wonder: What does it take to be successful (in the workplace/in the world) today? How does one stay relevant when definitions of success keep changing? What is one to do in the meantime?

Part 3: Failure, Success, and Survival in the Context of Leadership Development
Leadership Strategy and Context

Unfolding in parallel to developments in the broader context and the evolving narrative with Oliver and our departmental restructuring, my work related to leadership development at Pharma also overlaps with the themes of success, failure, and survival. Specifically, my current focus involves implementing our refreshed leadership development strategy, which includes utilizing our leadership development programs to communicate new leadership behaviors and expectations designed to meet the changing demands facing the business.

Let me provide a brief reminder of the current business context. The Pharma organization is eager to transform into a nimbler and more responsive company, poised to effectively leverage and integrate the latest technology to meet the needs of patients, while maintaining our reputation for integrity, quality, and reliability. Rapid changes in the external market (e.g. biosimilars, digitization and the introduction of "big data") have underscored the uncertainty of the business environment and introduced a newfound fear of fallibility incongruous to the company's previously held sense of near untouchability. This situation calls to mind parallels to the financial crisis of 2008 in which the banks were mistakenly considered "too big to fail." Pharma, as well as its individual leaders, may be suffering from the "Icarus Paradox," based on the Greek fable of Icarus, who's greatest asset—wax wings—became his (literal and figurative) downfall when he flew too close to the sun.

The Fall of Icarus, Carlo Saraceni

The Icarus Paradox is applicable to individuals or organizations that have been highly successful in the past and, because of this success, are susceptible to a narrowmindedness which prohibits alternative ways of thinking, inhibits change, and invites complacency (Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Miller, 1992). My sense is that, while there is great confidence at Pharma based on past success, there is also a growing feeling that even the most competent and previously thriving individuals and entities are at risk. Oliver's "Everyman" example can easily be extrapolated from the individual to the organizational level; just as employees who were previously successful may suddenly find themselves facing a lack of security and

shifting definitions of success, the same phenomenon is taking place at the corporate level, again echoing "Everyman's" vulnerability and potential for failure.

Our leadership development strategy, designed partially to address these challenges, is unfortunately grounded in the limited mindset of systems thinking. In essence, our strategy and offerings are built around the belief that leaders serve as a unique resource for transforming the organization, known in critical terms as "managerialism" (Mowles, 2016, p. 14). While we believe the Pharma organization is changing organically, we also expect to be able to control, at least to some extent, the direction of growth and change in the company through leadership and organization development initiatives. This viewpoint exemplifies a contradiction inherent to systems thinking; as Mowles states,

> …on the one hand the organization is thought of as a self-regulating system which evolves continuously into new states of greater harmony with its new environment. On the other hand, managers and/or consultants are thought to have a unique role in identifying, choosing, and propelling the organization and its employees to this new desired state. (2016, p. 5)

In our department, we concentrate our efforts on the latter, attempting to utilize leadership development to support the culture we want to build; there is comfort in charting a path, following it, and bringing others along with us. As I progress in my studies, however, I find myself with an increasing number of doubts and questions about our approach and have started taking notice of the result of thinking along these defined and prescriptive lines; I will expand on my observations in the final section of this project. In the meantime, I will explore how our leadership development efforts are playing out with regard to our current focus on the implementation of agility as a key to success at Pharma.

Leadership Development Interventions: Supporting Agile Transformation as Key to Business Success

In accordance with the aforementioned belief that leaders have a unique opportunity and ability to catalyze change, and in an attempt to shore up our goal of ongoing business success, our department launched a leadership development program just over two years ago (referenced in Project 1) that focused on supporting leaders in transforming the

business to a more agile organization. A clear example of systems thinking in which "the manager stands detached from the organization they are part of and acts upon it as a scientist conducts an experiment" (Mowles, 2016, p. 17), the program emphasizes the idea that leaders are expected to leave the program and launch agility initiatives throughout the organization, thus improving our ability to be fast and flexible, and consequently leading to Pharma's overall success. In the executive program, we focus on two main themes—the mindset needed to lead an agile organization and the methodology for implementing agile ways of working.

Via this and other various leadership development programs, we have begun to spell out new expectations for what successful leaders in the organization should be doing. At Pharma, successful leadership in the past has meant defining a clear path forward, directing and controlling the organization and its resources, and ensuring work is planned and executed to perfection. Now standards are shifting and, while not yet fully defined, it is evident that leaders are now expected to think more strategically, work more collectively, release control to lower levels in the organization, take risks, and publicly celebrate failures (e.g. in venues such as "F%@k-Up Nights" or lessons learned sessions) all in an effort to create an agile, learning organization. One can easily find parallels to the changing expectations in Oliver's role, in which he needed to transition from controlled administrative tasks to higher level, more strategic work.

Former business coach Frederic Laloux's book, *Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage in Human Consciousness* (2014), has become an organizational bible and instruction manual of sorts for the implementation of agility at Pharma. In his work, Laloux outlines the organization of the future, which he colorfully terms "Teal." This idealized organization is touted to ensure the "self-actualization" of the employees and the organization (2014, p. 69). Throughout the aforementioned development programs, we provide examples of agile (Teal) organizations and hold them up to our leaders to exemplify what success looks like: efficient, engaging, empowering solutions that promise to resolve many of our current problems and release the seemingly unlimited potential within the organization. With parallels to Scott's critical examination of high modernism in *Seeing Like a State* (1998), the emphasis is almost exclusively on the future, all but ignoring (at our own peril) Pharma's long history and the

legacy—and learnings—that come with it. Scott summarizes this trend, pointing out this simplification of the situation, stating,

> The past is an impediment, a history that must be transcended; the present is the platform for launching plans for a better future. (1998, p. 95)

Just as with high modernism, we rely heavily on visual images of heroic progress toward a completely transformed future, conducting "gallery walks" and "agility safaris" with our leaders to clarify our vision of success and create inspiration to realize that aspiration.

Alvesson, an acute observer of organizational and leadership trends, describes the tendency to frame future organizations as flat, flexible, and idyllic using different terminology, but essentially painting the same picture. He explains how these idealized future companies are typically described in recent business literature, summarizing,

> The PBO (post-bureaucratic organization) will be achieved by horizontal and vertical networking and mutual adaptation, and is guided by visions and common values rather than by direct orders, rules, standards, and controls. It is claimed that if organizations fail to adapt to the new environments with such organizational characteristics, they will encounter major problems and find it difficult to survive. (2013, p. 121)

In this statement, Alvesson calls attention to several of the main messages in the executive development program—outlining both the desired state and the inherent risks to not achieving it—the carrot and the stick frequently cited to motivate our senior leaders to move toward agility.

With the implementation of the executive program, and in accordance with our refreshed leadership development strategy, we are attempting to evade the Icarus Paradox and avoid organizational complacency. By sharing a new definition of success and providing the required tools (e.g. agile mindset and models) and motivation to achieve it, we aim to transform Pharma into its desired future state.

Agility as a Panacea

Agile methodology originally arose from the software industry, in which specific roles, tools, and techniques were developed and introduced into the workplace to allow for rapid,

flexible development and iteration of software (Rigby, Sutherland, & Takeuchi, 2016). In contrast to technology companies, however, the use of the term "agile" at Pharma is somewhat vague and does not necessarily imply or require the full or traditional application of more formal agile methodologies (e.g. scrum, design sprints, etc.).

This ambiguous guidance allows for multiple interpretations of what an agile workplace looks like and doubtlessly leaves staunch agile adherents appalled. To clarify and support leaders in understanding when formal agile approaches make sense, many Pharma departments have enlisted the support of vendors and consultants to guide their implementation. Not surprisingly, "agility" has become a bit of a buzzword across the organization, albeit with different meanings and levels of cynicism attached to it. At the same time, seen in a positive light, the agile movement at Pharma is felt to be empowering employees and allowing for greater collaboration within and across the organization.

This movement toward becoming an agile organization is not unique to Pharma; it is increasingly common across industries. At this point, however, it is difficult to tell if the movement toward agility is simply a passing trend or an important transition worthy of great energy and attention. As Alvesson points out,

> In working life and organizations, professionalization projects, leadership talk, and reorganizations are typically in accordance with the latest fashion. (2013, p. 15)

There is plenty of evidence that agility is currently in fashion; as complexity researcher David Snowden put it, "…even McKinsey now has a webpage dedicated to agility—a sure harbinger of doom" (2018).

Regardless of whether agility is in or out of fashion, I concur that the idea of moving to an agile organization is going to solve all of Pharma's problems and allow for "self-actualization" seems utopian. For, as philosopher John Gray defines it in *Black Mass*, "A project is utopian if there are no circumstances under which it can be realized" (2011, p. 378).

Evidence that agility is the ultimate solution to today's complex business environment is lacking, even among firms which have embraced agility for years. In these early days at Pharma, we have seen mixed results in departments in which agile methodologies are becoming well-established—for example, in one group of early adopters, employee engagement results have risen, but business results have dropped. Upon deeper

examination of any of the external examples we put forth in our agile gallery walks and agility safaris, there are skeletons in the closet. For example, Amazon may be well known for its agile methods, but it is also notorious for its high turnover and miserable work atmosphere (possibly reflecting the difficulty of working in such an environment) (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015).

Additionally, success (in the form of agile organizational transformation) is often seen as a destination, implying the possibility of a perfect end state and attempting to "close the gap between the current messiness and the idealized future" (Mowles, 2016, p. 39). This achievable, perfect destination can effectively serve as a mirage designed to lure leaders in the direction of the oasis of agility; rather than face the difficulties and complexities involved in the situation, we tend to maintain a distant view, frosted and rose-colored—a sort of organizational "detour via detachment". As Mowles suggests, "It can be a destabilizing idea that there are limits to managerial control and that complex organizational situations may require complex ways of thinking about them" (2016, p. ix).

In summary, while acknowledging some of the benefits of striving to become a more agile workplace (e.g. greater collaboration, employee empowerment, etc.), I join Mowles, Alvesson, Gray, and Snowden in their skepticism of these utopian visions of the future and any silver bullets prescribed to achieve them. In light of this, I have been paying close attention to the ways in which we cope with the unknowns built into the implementation of agility at Pharma.

Part 4: Leaders' Responses to Shifting Expectations and Definitions of Success

In the face of the expectation to evolve toward agility, leaders at Pharma are struggling to determine what success looks like in their part of the company and how best to "survive." As organization structures flatten, power must be redistributed and reconfirmed (often causing instability, anxiety, or even paranoia) and, as outlined earlier, those who retain leadership positions are expected to behave differently.

Expectations for Agile Leaders: Play Jazz

In an attempt to illustrate the expected behaviors of agile leaders in a novel way, we included a session with a jazz trio in the design of the previously mentioned executive program, which focuses on leading in an agile organization. During the first offering of the session I observed as the musicians riffed with each other while the program participants watched, the facilitator stopping the musicians occasionally to highlight the agile aspects of their way of working together (e.g. no single formal leader, minimal rules, etc.). Occasionally, the facilitator would ask questions directly of the musicians. At one point, one of the musicians spoke about how they had once invited a traditional string quartet to join their jazz trio—to create music together. He explained that the string players were extremely uncomfortable—to the extent that they played so poorly in this new, more flexible setup that you would not have been able to tell they were professional musicians. The string players were so conditioned to the structure and formality of classical music (e.g. following a conductor, strictly adhering to the notes on the page, etc.) that they found it nearly impossible to be successful in the more flexible jazz setting. As we listened to the musician relay this experience, a series of questions formed in my mind that I believe were shared by many in the room: "Am I going to be able to play jazz? Or will I end up like the string players, unable to adapt, perform, and succeed in this new context? Furthermore, do I even *like* jazz?"

Leaders' Responses to Revised Expectations

In the current context, it is difficult to know how best to respond—including when to adopt a flexible, agile, "jazz" approach to leadership—and when sticking to the safety and security of the traditional, "classical" style and methods makes more sense. To use Mead's terminology, the "gesture" on the part of the organization, including the expectation to embrace agility, is being met with a variety of "responses," calibrated in light of the power structures, risks, and rewards inherent in their specific situations (Griffin & Stacey, 2006, p. 20; Mead & Morris, 1934/1962). Let me now outline a few of the most common responses I have observed of the leaders at Pharma.

Succumbing to Peer Pressure

Peer pressure and the threat of exclusion are not insignificant forces in the movement toward agile leadership and lend a helping hand toward conformity. Attendance at the executive program has created an in-group and an out-group among leaders; to be invited to the program is an indication of success—or at least an indication of potential for success. Once indoctrinated into the agile mindset at the program, we often find the leaders in competition with each other to create the most agile function or team, in essence applying peer pressure to each other to implement and drive agility in the organization.

We can see the results of this peer pressure in the massive restructurings that are occurring across the organization. Organizational structures are flattening, people and resources are being pooled to allow for greater flexibility, and routine feels like an artifact of the past. This can be witnessed at all levels and all parts of the organization, including, as previously referenced, within my own function.

The intention to "jump on the bandwagon"—via restructuring or adopting other principles of agile organizations—is understandable. The "all or nothing" level of commitment expected of leaders at Pharma (based on the wholehearted embrace of Laloux's philosophy) is starting to feel a bit tyrannical and weaponized as leaders vie with each other to show up as the most radically agile—or, at a minimum, not the *least* agile. As Alvesson remarks,

> Doing what everyone else is doing (or one thinks they are doing) is a strong motive, reducing the risk of criticism and reducing your own anxiety. Going your own way—even if this may be sensible, upon careful reflection—in the face of other people's intensive change race can be unwise. The risks involved in dubious change must be weighed against the risk of appearing stuffy and backward. (2013, p. 134)

In other words, there is safety in numbers.

Hypocrisy and Masking

For some leaders, conforming means embracing hypocrisy. Runciman, an academic in the areas of politics and history, points out in his work *Political Hypocrisy* that the roots of hypocrisy in the theater, in which the Greek term "hypokrisis" meant "to play a part" (2018, p. 7). He goes on to distinguish between first-order hypocrisy, which is essentially pretending

to be something to others, and second-order hypocrisy, in which one pretends not only to others, but convinces oneself along the way (2018, p. 53). In his explorations on power, Scott highlights impression management as a key survival skill in power-laden situations, lending additional weight to the idea that keeping up an act, even if it means wearing a mask, can be compulsory and that "…those obliged by domination to act a mask will eventually find that their faces have grown to fit that mask" (1990, p. 10). One might wonder, in a work environment such as Pharma in which it can feel imperative to "tow the company line"—or potentially risk the demise of your career—how many leaders find themselves wearing masks and living in a state of first- or second-order hypocrisy when speaking about our agile transformation. In a metaphor that may apply to many Pharma leaders, Runciman states,

> Chameleons, though they may be hiding from their enemies, are nevertheless coloring, not cloaking, what lies beneath, because what lies beneath is essentially neutral: just their own skin, which, like everyone else, they are doing their best to save. (2018, p. 59)

As a result of all this masking and hypocrisy, David Sims, a professor and organizational researcher, talks about the "peculiar loneliness, precariousness, and vulnerability that characterize middle management" with regard to the expectation to tell stories and spin messaging to ensure it resonates with others, pointing out the psychological and emotional toll this takes on the managers (2003); this was certainly my experience in my previously described interactions with Oliver. Ehrenreich, who writes extensively about the bleak realities of work life in corporate America, offers the perspective of one of her interviewees, who explained,

> Though most of us were taught that smarts, independent thinking, creativity, and loyalty were valued in corporate America, we know now it's all a lie…The real mantra of surviving in the workplace is 'go along to get along'. (2006, Location 2998)

For most leaders, tolerating and accepting some amount of hypocrisy, performance, and mask-wearing is considered to be part of the job, and many of them seem to be applying this attitude toward the implementation of agility at Pharma (Jackall, 2009; Hochschild, 2012).

Moving Blindly Forward

Some leaders are less strategic or intentionally political in their action and are adopting the agile expectations and methodology blindly, with little regard for or reflection upon their own beliefs.   Few leaders are openly interrogating Laloux's teachings and, in contrast to those resisting the change, many leaders seem to have unquestioningly embraced his methods and philosophy as a possible cure-all for the troubles they are facing. Alvesson points out that,

> …ideas, ideals, and recipes for what should be done are being constantly developed, and some of them tend to have fairly widespread dissemination, which is often taken as evidence that the idea or recipe is useful and should be taken seriously. But more substantial evidence is often weak or non-existent. (2013, p. 19)

He goes on to state, "In the absence of self-confidence, time to think, and critical reflection, people tend to imitate others" (2013, p. 19). This is certainly one trend I have seen in action at Pharma. In general, most senior leaders are trying to fit in and reinvent themselves, following the trend toward agility in hopes of survival and/or success. As leaders attempt to reinvent themselves in alignment with updated expectations, many find themselves rejecting their past selves and ways of being in an attempt to generate a new, more appropriate leadership methodology/practice. As a manager in a similar situation in the finance industry morbidly put it, "we climb upwards on the stepping stones of our own dead selves" (McKinlay, 2002).

Dabbling Skeptically

Additionally, many leaders are attempting to keep a foot in both worlds and hedge their bets, maintaining the traditional styles and structures of the Pharma culture, while dipping a toe in the water and experimenting with agility, demonstrating what I would consider a healthy level of skepticism. Witnessed from deeper in the organization, one employee commented, "We're basically taking agile methodology and wrapping it around the existing command and control structure of the Pharma organization." Alvesson would call this an "illusion trick," essentially,

> …small changes in the substantial content, while repackaging an object and presenting it in a more elegant form. (2013, p. 18)

He expands the concept further, explaining,

> Illusion tricks are particularly successful when the people concerned are not
> particularly well informed and, at least in some quarters, the intentions may be good.
> They often involve some element of the deception of one's self and others. (2013, p.
> 18)

In this case, leaders may have convinced themselves that they are doing the right thing by
moving to more agile work practices, but they are succeeding in only partially fooling
themselves and others. It is in this camp—half in/half out—where I find myself most of the
time. I am open to agility, but skeptical of its applicability to all circumstances. I like jazz,
but I am a classically trained musician, comfortable with the rules and dynamics inherent in
this way of playing. I am not sure I would like the life of a jazz musician.

Watching and Waiting

Finally, in contrast to leaders who are moving forward—blindly or otherwise—with adopting
agile practices, others sit almost motionless on the sidelines. While some of these leaders
seem paralyzed in the face of possible failure, others remain immobile as they appear to be
waiting it out—hoping for the best as they anticipate the passing of the agility trend and
biding their time until the pendulum swings back to center. Still others are observing the
situation, attempting to glean some learnings from the failures and successes of others.
Upon reflection, I find myself wondering whether or not embracing these new trends toward
agility will actually lead to success. Perhaps these leaders are wise to wait.

Reviewing the continuum of leaders' responses reminds me that while leadership in practice
generally requires finesse and flexibility, there also tend to be many unwritten rules (Jackall,
2009). Similar to jazz, management practice is inherently improvisational, and it can be
difficult to know for certain which gesture or response to adopt in any given moment.
Additionally, to take the music analogy a step further, it is also true that trying to combine
two or more different genres of music at the same time is difficult at best, and can easily
result in an unbearable, cacophony of discordant noise. Numerous options are possible,
from joining in the jazz session and playing along, to toe tapping and clapping with the beat,

to standing uncomfortably at the back, waiting for the music to end. Given the multiple responses of leaders at Pharma, I am hoping for a harmonious tune to emerge from the chaos, however I am evermore doubtful of this outcome.

Part 5: Managing Uncertainty Through Control and Avoidance

The responses of leaders noted above (conformity, blind adoption, skepticism, distancing, etc.) can all be recognized as attempts to control or avoid uncertainty and risk—and to alleviate anxiety. Let me take a step back now and explore how ambiguity and changing expectations impact all of us (not just leaders) in our shared desire for success and survival within the complexity of organizational life.

First, in order to make sense of the chaos, we attempt to impose some order to what we are dealing with. Uncertainty naturally breeds a desire for control to ensure success and/or increase the likelihood of survival. As Mowles states,

> …there is still a tendency to assume that complexity is something we can get on top of. It is another thing to manage, where manage has come to mean control. (2016, p. ix)

Marris builds on this sentiment, remarking,

> Uncertainty is a fundamental condition of human life. We try to master it by discovering the regularities in events which enable us to predict and control them. When they do not turn out as we expected, we look for ways to revise our understanding, our purposes and means of control. When we cannot foretell what will happen, we try to keep our choices of action open; and when none of those choices seems hopeful, we try to withdraw into familiar certainties or fall into despair. The management of uncertainty is therefore a very individual endeavor, because each of us learns in our own way, through our unique experience, to find patterns of events, and develops our own strategies of control and avoidance. (2003, p. 1)

Mowles and Marris make an important point—essentially that uncertainty and complexity drive us all toward a desire for control and simplification. This inherent desire reinforces the seductiveness of if/then formulas and systems thinking.

On an individual level, common narratives claim that, in order to succeed and survive in this new global, complex, and flexible world, one must not relax, but instead take matters into our own hands: develop strategic alliances, remain aware of changing trends, and constantly improve our skills in order to survive and succeed (Jackall, 2009, p. 63). According to Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott, authors of *The 100 Year Life,*

> Making the most of a long and multi-stage life means taking transitions in your stride. Being flexible, acquiring new knowledge, exploring new ways of thinking, seeing the world from a different perspective, coming to terms with changes in power, letting go of old associates and building new networks. These are the transformational skills which call for a potentially huge shift in perspective and require real foresight. (2016, p. 14)

Just as Oliver was being asked to broaden his skillset, Gratton and Scott advise all workers to plan ahead for multiple stages in their careers, implying that we can control our fate by anticipating the future—however one may question how much foresight we can actually expect to have. As Marris states,

> …it is bothersome, often worrying and sometimes acutely distressing to have to choose our actions when we are unsure what will help or harm us, or simply waste our energies. (2003, p. 8)

Some employees at Pharma are participating in what seems to be a mad scramble to obtain the latest certifications and skills deemed critical today; workshops on scrum methodology, design thinking, digital expertise, and agility coaching are popping up everywhere and are filled to capacity.

Others have responded to the uncertainty and are attempting to control the situation by casting about externally for the new definition of success. Alvesson points out that,

> Some time ago, Riesman (1950) and Fromm (1955) identified a cultural shift from people who were controlled from within, permeated by internalized ideals and with relatively stable values that provided a clear sense of direction, to people who were externally controlled or market-oriented, sensitive to signals from their surroundings, and willing to comply with the expectations of others. (2013, p. 14)

Those "externally controlled" or "market-oriented" have latched onto the agility topic (e.g. attending various agility training programs mentioned above)—believing this to be the new key to success for both leaders and employees at Pharma.

For Oliver, his need for control initially resulted in attempts to hoard work. Subsequently, he tried in vain to identify a new target or aspiration for himself. Hochschild states in her book, *The Managed Heart*, that many people with experience working in service positions (including administrative positions, such as Oliver's) have become accustomed to learning to "…actively manage feelings in order to make their personalities fit for public-contact work." (p. 229) Oliver had become a master of this skill, managing perceptions by presenting a customized and pleasing face to others. Unfortunately, without customers to focus on, he has been unable to clarify and adjust his comportment to the new expectation of how to "be" at work in order to survive.

My own attempts to control were demonstrated in my desire to manage Oliver's reaction to our conversation and in my attempt to justify my position in Europe, as well as in my participation in the design and implementation of the new executive development program. And for the leaders I work with, the desire for control is manifesting in their various aforementioned responses to the new expectations of leaders.

At the highest level in the organization, Pharma's senior leadership team is attempting to control and manage the situation through the transition to agile ways of working, rewarding leaders who embrace the new approach. Additionally, the senior leadership team is leveraging broader organizational strategies that provide a greater degree of certainty and control, one of which is evidenced in the opening and utilization of the Service Centers, managing uncertainty, maximizing its options, and attempting to ensure success by shifting work to less costly locations.

An alternate or complementary coping mechanism, avoidance is another tactic we tend to utilize in complex or uncertain situations. Exemplifying this strategy, Oliver found himself feeling powerless and ultimately giving up, leaving outcomes to chance. Marris explains this phenomenon, asserting,

> When events are entirely beyond our control we no longer face the responsibility of
> acting, with all its anxieties. We may then think of the outcome as our fate—

something that was bound to happen because we could do nothing about it. (2003, p. 13)

and further expounding,

When people feel weaker, they may turn to more passive and less self-punishing forms of disengagement. Since everything is insecure, they may treat all events as inevitable: what is beyond prediction or control becomes paradoxically certain—our fate, God's will. (2003, p. 83)

Of course, there are other strategies for dealing with changing environments, expectations, and definitions of success (e.g. confrontation, denial, etc.), but I would argue that they are all embedded in the categories of control or avoidance. Some colleagues I work with would strongly reject my interpretation of how they are responding to the current situation at Pharma and would speak intensely about their own sense of agency—denying any connection to control or avoidance. I believe this represents a small, unusually self-assured minority that, upon deeper inspection, would ultimately be able to identify links to the overarching responses of control and avoidance.

Part 6: Further Reflections and Implications
Reflections

When I selected the topic of success for further research at the end of Project 1, I (naively) did not expect to find so much complexity and conflict in the topic; I thought of success as a clear-cut subject that involved simply clarifying a goal—and then working long and hard enough to achieve it. I hoped to explore questions such as: "How are my colleagues and I constructing the meaning of success?" and "How are we already dealing with the absence of a clear definition?" and "How do changing definitions of success influence actions and mindset?" As a colleague in my learning set pointed out, however, this thinking is flawed. There will never be a clear and stable definition of success, and searching for a static and broadly recognized definition, even for a specific situation or isolated period of time, not only implies that there is one right answer, but exposes and highlights my own deeply embedded desire for control. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, I see the many-faceted aspects of the theme that make the exploration of success rich, complex, and paradoxical.

These insights have caused me to question my own ways of thinking and have led me down an unpredicted path. I began by exploring a narrative from my experience with an employee, Oliver, as we navigated the changing nature of and expectations for his role. As he attempted to transform his skills to meet evolving expectations, I tried to support him through the process while managing my conflicting roles in the situation; unfortunately, both of our efforts ultimately failed.

Expanding the context, I related how Oliver represented a corporate "Everyman," susceptible to unpredictable changes in the private sector, which are shaped by both internal and external forces. Exploring some of these influences, such as globalization and expectations for constant upskilling and relentless personal reinvention, highlighted today's almost universal sense of insecurity in large multi-national organizations, reinforcing the concept that success is temporal and socially constructed, thus making it perpetually and inherently elusive.

I then tied this exploration to my work in leadership development, highlighting similar changes to the definition of success and correspondingly shifting expectations of leaders at Pharma. By examining these changes, seeds of doubt were planted in my mind regarding the utopian vision and unquestioned optimism embedded in the new aspirations for agile leadership. Taking a critical look at what we are asking from our leaders exposed potential flaws and fallacies in the vision and caused me to question the true purpose, achievability, and usefulness of the redefined leadership standards that have been causing widespread, frenetic activity across the organization.

Finally, I noted the basic human reactions to uncertainty—grasping for control of or attempting to avoid the situation—that underlie our desire for success and drive for survival. It was through the iterative and reflexive nature of completing this project that I came to notice these undercurrents of control and avoidance directing behaviors in organizations— and in myself.

Ultimately, what started out as an exciting opportunity to investigate the origins and meanings of success in this project has led to a depressing journey into survival assurance, failure avoidance, and the struggles of leaders and employees to adapt and adjust in the face of ambiguity and changing expectations. The fundamental and unavoidable human desires for power and control are infused throughout all attempts to attain success, and my hope to

continue to view success as an achievable destination has been extinguished. On the bright side, however, this somewhat meandering path provided me with a rare gift—visibility to some of my own blind spots and constrained thinking.

Implications for the Field of Leadership Development

What does all of this mean for the field of leadership development? What can be generalized from the narratives and insights above?

In brief, and particularly in light of my aforementioned doubts regarding the design, application, and effectiveness of our leadership development strategy at Pharma, I believe the single most important shift to make in my work with leaders is away from over-simplified models (e.g. agility) and systems thinking that paint the world as controllable.

As one of the designers of the new executive program, my original intention was to introduce leaders to new expectations for leadership in the Pharma organization. Upon reflection, I can see that this prescriptive, systems-thinking approach has allowed our department to direct leaders in a coordinated manner. However, I now wonder if it was just an attempt to manage uncertainty and control the situation, and alleviate anxiety—as in the situation with Oliver—both my own and that of Pharma's leaders.

While I do not believe there is anything *wrong* with the leadership development approach at Pharma, I can now more clearly see its limitations. I find myself feeling slightly cynical and sarcastic—with a measure of self-contempt—wanting to overcorrect in a vicious loop of trying (inherently unsuccessfully) to identify the new "right" way of being or thinking about personal success and leadership development. So, though I am tempted to propose an alternate approach, I recognize now that doing so would be futile and would simply provide another example of an attempt to control in the face of uncertainty.

I propose to move the focus of my work with leaders more toward the here and now, allowing time and space for sense making and reflection, and paying close attention to the co-creation of our futures together, and acknowledging the reality that we are all simultaneously and paradoxically involved and detached, independent and dependent, participants and observers.

The awareness that, just as definitions of success and failure are contextual and socially created, the definition of what makes a "good leader" similarly evolves at Pharma and in other organizations, and is important to keep in mind in my work with leaders. This means that leaders, as previously mentioned, must manage the expectation of constant evolution and reinvention. What, then, are helpful responses to this situation? Clearly, as discussed earlier, employing Icarus' sense of overconfidence is not an ideal strategy. Rather, I would suggest that developing the ability to step back and take a "detour via detachment," reading the political situation, is critical for success and survival in organizations—and is also an important skill for leadership development professionals like myself. For example, taking a moment to explore questions such as "Who benefits from each new definition of success? Who does it put at risk for failure? How are shifting definitions influenced by organizational power and politics?" The ability to recognize the game in which we are involved—and to be able to step in and out of it and make corresponding adjustments and adaptations—is an important skill for all of us (and perhaps, especially, leaders). All of these insights will now influence the way I design and think about the work that I do with leaders—and with my colleagues—at Pharma.

Next Steps

In the course of iterating this project—reading, writing, researching, gathering feedback, revising in multiple combinations—I have begun to notice connections between how we think about success and how we identify, craft, and revise narratives about ourselves in light of our circumstances and life stories.

My new understanding of success and failure as socially defined and transient lead me to want to delve deeper. As I mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this project, it is rare to see failure examined with the same fervor as success. I have begun to wonder if this is not partially a function of the narratives we create, revise, and adapt to transform personal stories of failure into more palatable narratives of learning and success—an approach that shapes and preserves our identity; this framing and reframing of failure or success requires a form of "doublethink," to borrow Orwell's term (1949).

As referenced in this project, it seems an innate human need to maintain a sense of control—and I would propose that this extends to the need to make sense of and control

our own narratives surrounding failure and success; the performative nature involved in telling our stories, to ourselves or to others, allows us to engage in another form of control—that of impression management. I would argue that while definitions of success transform based on a variety of factors, so do our interpretations of failure—and these interpretations and re-interpretations serve to preserve our own identities and personal narratives. If we must be malleable and adaptable in today's unpredictable organizations, we may at least provide ourselves with a sense of agency by choosing to create and revise our own narratives. Defining and redefining success and who determines those definitions, related power relations, struggles with identity and recognition—all of these are topics I would like to explore further in the context of my work at Pharma.

I agree with Alvesson, who states,

> I see the raison d'etre for social science as critically examining dominant institutions and broadly shared assumptions in order to point out how they constrain our ability and willingness to think through social issues and personal choices in order to arrive at conclusions grounded in reflective reasoning and sensitive ethical considerations. This often means struggling, not only with what appears to be repressive and bad, but also with what seems attractive and good. (2013, p. 2)

and I look forward to peeling back the next layer in my explorations on the topic of success.

Project 3 – The Performance of Success: Image and Emotion Management, Authenticity, and Modernity

Introduction

Overview

Recently, within a short period of time, I found myself in several rare situations at work in which I was in a position to speak publicly. As a Learning & Development professional, I am quite comfortable *facilitating*, *teaching*, or *directing* groups of all sizes, but public speaking is—in my experience—a different ballgame; it is often a far more personal experience that can leave one feeling vulnerable, anxious, and exposed. The fear of making a fool of oneself, being negatively judged or misunderstood, or perhaps even simply being cast in a damaging light are significantly heightened, particularly in a professional setting. As I lived through these experiences, it became clear to me how closely tied these inherently vulnerable situations are to the themes of success and failure that I began to explore in Project 2.

In this third project, I will share one of these recent public speaking experiences, examining the anxiety it produced along with some of the underlying influences and dynamics involved in its unfolding.

Throughout my experience, multiple important questions related to success and failure hovered just below the surface of my consciousness, emerging more clearly as I reflected later: "Will I be good enough? Who decides? And who decides what 'good enough' is? What is the difference between appearance and reality? What methods do I and others employ to ensure we are seen as acceptable? What will success or failure mean for me in this situation?" Questions such as these are pervasive in all our lives, especially in relation to the organizations in which we work.

Approach

The inherent complexity of both personal experience and organizational life make the narrative approach a highly appropriate choice in allowing researchers such as myself the opportunity to deeply explore complex questions, such as those listed above (Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001). My crucible example demonstrates a concentrated representation of everyday life in organizations in which the compounding pressures of and expectations for

appearance management, authenticity, and the context of modernity were applied simultaneously—and the resulting side effects of obsession, anxiety, and narcissism were magnified, spotlighted, and intensified under the fixed gaze of others—and my own subsequent self-reflection.

Utilizing my subjective experience as a lived example, I will explore how performance collides with trends calling for enhanced positivity and authenticity in organizations. Additionally, I will illustrate how these factors relate to, contradict, and reinforce each other in a vicious, downward spiral, which is further exacerbated by the sense of speed and acceleration that predominates today's culture, with its inherent and continuous demand for reinvention of the self (Bauman, 2007; Bauman & Donskis, 2013; Brinkmann, 2017; Rosa, 2013, 2019, 2020).

In the first part of the paper, I will focus primarily on laying out my narrative; in Part 2, I will explore my experience more deeply from a theoretical perspective. Let me begin, however, with a brief review of the circumstances of my employment.

Context Refresh

I work in Human Resources (HR)—focused on leadership development—at the headquarters of Pharma, a global pharmaceutical company, which, like many companies today, is in the midst of massive, ongoing restructuring projects stemming from globalization and the digitization of the workplace. More specific to my personal situation, the HR function of the company, which includes myself and approximately 2500 colleagues worldwide, has recently embarked upon a multi-year restructuring initiative, designed to improve agility within HR—and thereby our efficiency and effectiveness. This context of ongoing instability and uncertainty, as I will illustrate, strongly colors the views and daily experiences of myself and others within the organization.

Part 1: Risky Business: Public Speaking in the Workplace
Introduction

Shortly after transferring into the Global Human Resources organization three years ago, I recall attending my first "Quarterly HR Networking Luncheon." This is an event which all

members of HR—from the most senior HR executives to frontline HR employees—are encouraged to attend. The stated intention of these sessions is to build connections among the HR community, first by spotlighting two members of the group and then by providing lunch and an opportunity for all present to mingle and network.

The session was held in a large, window-lit auditorium in the center of campus. As the event got started and the first presenter approached the stage, I remember whispering to the person next to me, "Oh my God—that is my worst nightmare!" The situation, when viewed from the perspective of a presenter, was extremely vulnerable and exposed. A large, empty platform was set up at one end of the space, with no podium to stand behind, no table for notes, and no screen for slide projection—essentially disallowing presentation crutches of any kind. To make matters worse, microphones and a video crew were employed to capture the whole event and broadcast the success or failure of each speaker globally. About thirty cocktail tables were arranged in front of the stage, around which we (the audience of about 150 people) were gathered, waiting for the event to start.

As with most presentation situations, many of the normal sources of stage fright were present (e.g. possibilities for tripping on stage, flubbing words, microphone issues, etc.); landmines for public embarrassment are inherent to the circumstance. However, compounding the vulnerability of the situation, the two featured speakers at each session— rather than discussing a specific area of expertise or presenting an update about the latest HR initiative—were expected to "introduce themselves" to the global HR network, providing insights into their personal and professional lives, potentially including vignettes and anecdotes from their life stories, while cleverly and engagingly illustrating their path to the present day.

I was struck by the risk and opportunity the circumstance created for the speakers—and by the power and potential embedded in this type of visibility. I was simultaneously repelled by and attracted to the situation; I felt nervous on each speaker's behalf, while at the same time excited to hear what they would say. As each speaker took the stage, I was curious to see what they would be able to make of the opportunity. Would I feel more or less esteem for them when they left the stage than before they stepped onto it? Would they say or do something that would catch someone's interest and lead to an exciting opportunity down the road? Which of the speakers would be deemed "better"? The fact that there are only

two speakers at each event naturally leads the audience to draw a comparison—judging which performance, story, or person they like best or resonate with most.

I observed my fellow HR colleagues speaking at these events over a period of about a year before I decided to volunteer myself. I lay in bed one Saturday night and considered the opportunity. Immediately, in a fearful response to the mere thought of volunteering, I could feel my heart start to race as my body reacted to what I apparently interpreted as the possibility of putting myself at risk. Hochschild (2012) describes the role of emotions as preparing the body for action; she elucidates,

> Anger, Darwin suggests, is the pre-act or prelude to killing, and love is the prelude to copulation; and we may add that envy is the prelude to stealing, gratitude the prelude to giving back, and jealousy the prelude to excluding. Emotion, therefore, is our experience of the body readying for an imaginary action. (p. 229)

Building on Hochschild's argument, and aligning with claims outlined in my second project, I would further propose that fear and anxiety may be preludes to our innate "fight or flight" instincts, as originally explained by Walter Cannon a century ago (Cannon, 1915). As my heart pounded in my chest, I believe I was deciding which of these divergent paths to take: Would I step up and take a chance, or continue to hide among the crowd of my colleagues?

It seemed to me that this was the kind of situation that could make one's career…or be career limiting…or have no significant impact at all; if I signed up, I would obviously be hoping for the first or last result. As I lay in my bed, I fantasized about the potential outcomes and experienced a range of emotions—from excitement to despair—and my thoughts correspondingly fluctuated from aggrandizing to catastrophizing. No doubt I was locating anxiety from other areas of my work life on this particular speech (I will say more about this later); conscious and unconscious concerns about success and survival related to being perceived as likeable and easy to work with were ever-present. Additionally, as Alvesson, a Critical Management scholar, explores in his work on grandiosity, highlighting our human susceptibility to be drawn toward images of greatness (2013), visions of escaping the banal aspects of my current job through the delivery of an exceptional presentation— and the subsequent praise/recognition—thrilled and enticed me. On the other hand, the riskiness of the second outcome (a career-limiting experience) was concerning. Would this

be my Jerry McGuire moment[4]? The equivalent of drafting an amazing memo in the middle of the night…only to find myself sacked the next day? However, as I reflected further, I started to wonder: Was my worst fear actually the third outcome—that nothing at all would happen? According to William James, pragmatist philosopher and psychologist, humans want to be recognized—ideally positively—by others; he states,

> …no more fiendish punishment could be devised…than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. (1961, p. 46)

Charles Taylor considers recognition a "vital human need" (1995, p. 226) and Axel Honneth expounds on this idea, summarizing and synthesizing ideas of key thought leaders in this area in his work *The Struggle for Recognition* (1995). Based on the views of these theorists, it is likely that both the possibility of exceptionally good press and the opportunity to be seen—and hopefully validated—by my peers and superiors was driving me forward.

Increasing the Odds of Success and Survival by Controlling the Narrative

In Project 2, I pointed out that people have a tendency to control or avoid in times of uncertainty; at Pharma, in the aforementioned context of the ongoing restructuring, uncertainty is omnipresent. Sociologist Peter Marris, whose work I leveraged extensively in Project 2 when writing about the precarious employment environment at Pharma, claims that, "…freedom of action is the most valuable asset in dealing with uncertainty" (2003, p. 93).

Clearly I was leaning toward control (loosely: fight), rather than avoidance (loosely: flight), in this situation—I would take an active role and endeavor to manage people's perception of me, a task I realized even at the time was futile, but nevertheless could not resist attempting. Being able to shape my own narrative was a form of power; I did not want someone else to box and label me; if boxes and labels are inevitable, I at least wanted the opportunity to create my own proposal/version.

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[4] Reference to the film "Jerry McGuire". A "Jerry McGuire moment" is a situation in which a person is up late at night and is suddenly struck with a radical idea that will change life within a company—usually accompanied by regret the next morning after realizing the foolhardiness of the idea (Urban Dictionary).

Erving Goffman, a sociologist who writes comprehensively about how we present ourselves to others, contends that we always act with an eye to control the narrative. He states,

> …when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey. (1959, p. 4)

I assumed that controlling the narrative would enhance the likelihood of my success and survival at Pharma—even if potentially only in a minor way. Therefore, in my case, I was attempting to shift power in my favor by influencing the senior leaders (and others) in the audience, casting myself in a favorable light and perhaps giving myself additional positive visibility in a time of turmoil. Based on the ongoing massive restructuring within HR, I felt I had good reason to be obsessing about this particular performance and was aware that how others perceived me could have an impact on my career prospects; exposing myself publicly at this point in time was either an exceptionally stupid idea—or an exceptionally great one.

As Barbara Ehrenreich explains in her work *Bait and Switch* (2006), which explores the politics of corporate life in the United States, in Western society we expect individuals to take control of the situation and manage their own destinies. She states,

> It's a long-standing American idea, in other words, that circumstances count for nothing compared to the power of the individual will. (Location 1036)

As an American myself, this sentiment certainly resonates with me. I have always been determined to influence my own fate; I was clear that I would not be signing up for this session for fun; my presentation would serve as an active attempt to shore up my chances for success and survival—another drop in the bucket that might tip the scales in my favor when new opportunities presented themselves at Pharma.

I finally made up my mind to sign up. Feeling flooded by a rush of adrenaline at my decision, I lay awake for some time before finally managing to calm myself enough to get to sleep. I rationalized that the next event was still months away and I would have plenty of time to prepare. I sent an email to the organizer the following morning; it was done—I was committed and there would be no backing out.

Image Management: Never Let Them See You Sweat

On Monday morning, I mentioned to my manager that I had volunteered. His anticlimactic and blasé response, "Oh good, I think you'll be great," signaled that he was clearly unaware of the psychological gymnastics I had been performing that weekend to finally commit to the presentation. It was also an indication that what felt like a big deal to me might not carry the same weight for others—and that perhaps I might want to be careful about how—and with whom—I shared my level of nervousness and anxiety, as well as the amount of energy and effort I would ultimately dedicate to my performance. I intuited that maintaining a positive, upbeat image of relaxation and ease were critical to my success. According to research I will further explore later, my intuition was correct (see, for example: Alvesson, 2013; Ehrenreich, 2010; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 2010; Jackall, 2009). In addition to this concept bearing out in academia, examples can also be found in popular culture.

For example, the phrase "never let them see you sweat" originated from a series of 1980's Gillette Dry Idea deodorant commercials and encapsulated my ambitions for the preparation and delivery of my speech. The underlying idea behind the extremely successful and resonant ad campaign was that there are certain rules for success in a variety of situations; but one rule is consistent across the board. The television ads featured professionals working in high-pressure jobs (football coaches, fashion designers, actors, comedians, and others), each of whom would list three "nevers" for their profession (e.g. "There are three 'nevers' in comedy: Never follow a better comedian. Never give a heckler the last word. And, no matter how bad a joke bombs, never let them see you sweat.") The final rule, as in the example above, was always articulated as "…never let them see you sweat."[5]

A more recent example of this expectation for image management in action are TED Talks, a public-speaking phenomenon, which have come to represent a widely accepted standard for excellence in presentations. In preparation for my big event, I read Chris Anderson's (Head of TED Talks) book, *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking* (2016). While appearing smooth and graceful when the final presentations are viewed on one's computer

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[5] An overview of and highlights from the Gillette campaign can be found at:
http://www.thisdayinquotes.com/2010/06/never-let-them-see-you-sweat-was.html

screen or live on stage, TED Talks are actually engineered and scripted down to the exact words, corresponding gestures and facial expressions, and represent many, many hours of planning and rehearsal—but generally portray a final product that implies a natural, effortless perfection. I could imagine Chris Anderson's Dry Idea commercial, articulating his "three nevers" as something along the lines of: "Never forget who might be in the audience, never come across as canned…and, no matter how petrified you feel on stage, never let them see you sweat." This idealized image of onstage authenticity and ease, backed by a perfectly crafted performance, became my goal and measure of success.

Thus, I adopted both the Gillette and TED Talk philosophies and, as I fretted and practiced ahead of the event, I reminded myself that it was important not to expose how much time and effort I was putting into the final performance. If I came across as too nervous, or as obsessed as I actually was, this would defeat the purpose of my signing up. I might not be considered "successful" or "authentic" if the amount of effort ultimately required from me was revealed. As Goffman states,

> …in those interactions where the individual presents a product to others, he will tend to show them only the end product, and they will be led into judging him on the basis of something that has been finished, polished, and packaged. (1959, p. 44)

Like someone preparing for a TED Talk, I was willing to put in the work (read: sweat) to ensure the final outcome appeared as natural and effortless as possible. Goffman goes on to say,

> Commonly we find that upward mobility involves the presentation of proper performances and that efforts to keep from moving downward are expressed in terms of sacrifices made for the maintenance of front. (1959, p. 36)

Of course, Goffman is referring to moving up in social class, but in a business setting, it seems to be a very similar situation—I would put significant effort into setting up a front with hopes of controlling others' perception of me with the ultimate intention of either maintaining or elevating my position in the organization. I wanted as many people as possible (especially senior HR leaders) to know that I am exceptionally qualified for my job and that I am a key person to consider for future opportunities.

While Goffman generally refers to how people present themselves in everyday life, I would argue that an actual, formal presentation such as mine only heightens the premeditated aspects of control and reduces the likelihood of spontaneity and authenticity. The bottom line for me was that no one—except perhaps a trusted inner circle—would be aware of the amount of perspiration this performance required.

Attempts to Control the Outcome: Over-Preparation Begins

At first, I plotted on my own. I created a mind map on my computer, starting to outline key points, possible stories, and a general flow for the presentation. I quickly found myself stuck and unable to formulate anything lucid, understandable, or relatable, and I realized that ultimately two things were bothering me: the content and my delivery. In other words, the entire situation was a problem for me. The whole thing felt fraught with risk. In alignment with my grandiose visions for success, the content needed to be compelling, engaging, and interesting. And in the delivery I needed to come across as positive, authentic, and articulate.

Alvesson and Gabriel state that the concept of "grandiosity" is,

> …a persistent attempt to give yourself, your occupational group/organization, or even the society in which you live, a positive if somewhat superficial, well-polished and status enhancing image. (2016, p. 467)

This was indeed my goal. In order to accomplish this, I considered: What should I talk about? How should I frame myself? Which stories should I tell—or avoid telling? And how would I tie it all together, creating smooth transitions and a coherent flow for the speech? How could I shape my narrative to be accepted and admired? I wanted people to know me—who I am and what I do…but maybe not *really* know me.

Perhaps, more accurately, I wanted people to know the version of me that I wanted them to know…the one that would represent the ideal HR/leadership development professional at Pharma: successful and full of passion and potential. Evolutionary theorist Christopher Boehm talks about how we have evolved to be hyper-aware of and highly able to assess the motives and mindsets of others (2012); I was utilizing this ability to craft my presentation for maximum benefit—to tailor the presentation of myself to the target audience. As Robert

Jackall, a sociologist who investigated how managers survive and succeed in corporations, states, "…success becomes contingent on others' interpretations of one's performance…" (2009, p. 237).

As I planned my approach, I indulged a temporary fantasy that there is a self that can be held in isolation from others; this is the self I would showcase in my presentation. Of course, in terms of Complex Responsive Processes of Relating, this scenario of presenting myself as an individual, frozen snapshot of a person, is indeed a fantasy; freezing and/or isolating the self from the influence of others is not possible; we are social beings in constant co-creation/re-creation of ourselves in collaboration with others (Stacey & Mowles, 2016). As inherently social beings, the self is emergent, evolving in relation to other individuals and society (Elias, 1970; Mead & Morris, 1934/1962). *(Note: I will return to this topic of co-creation later in the text.)*

Brown and Coupland point out that this desire for stability is common. They note,

> …the search for a treasured, secure, stable, pristine self may be an imaginary, illusory goal associated with narcissistic preoccupations and symbolic ambitions; and yet its pursuit is individually and collectively utilitarian as it is these processes of identity work that sustain narratives of the self which in turn promote goal-directed action, coherence and livability. (2015, p. 1332)

During this planning stage, for practical purposes, I needed a clear and stable target at which to aim.

To prepare for the presentation of my imagined and static perfect self, as the date drew closer, I decided to engage support—in multiple forms. First, I met with two coaches: one internal to Pharma and the other external to the company. The internal coach asked me how I wanted to come across. I was clear on this: credible, competent, positive, and professional. She emphasized the importance of speaking from the heart—which she said would guarantee authenticity. "When you speak your truth," she said, "it has to pass through your heart." I had my doubts about whether or not this would help me come across as credible, competent, positive, or professional—especially when "my truth" these days was focused on keeping my job, as well as saying and doing the right things to ensure a

bright future—and therefore might not come across as particularly appropriate to articulate in a public setting. Authenticity (which I will speak more extensively about later) felt like a dangerous double bind; on the one hand, I was eager to be open and authentic, yet, on the other hand, I recognized that it could be potentially very risky to reveal my thoughts and feelings if they were not upbeat and adequately aligned with the company line. As Baruch and Vardi, researchers who explore the topic of career success, state,

> In reality, many if not most working people need to suppress their need for authenticity in order to make a decent living. (2015, p. 366)

Jackall adds,

> Bureaucracies place powerful premiums on certain behavior, and reward those able to recognize those premiums and behave accordingly. (2009, p. 237)

Researchers Fleming and Sturdy consider the authenticity/"just be yourself" discourse to be a method of "normative control and identity regulation" (2011, p. 182). For example, in their study of one corporation, they point out that,

> While individual authenticity was celebrated, *only certain expressions of it were permitted*—those that supported the collective vision communicated in the [company] slogan…[company] unsurprisingly favored only a certain type of authentic identity. (2011, p. 191, emphasis in original)

This was similar to the situation in which I found myself—encouraged and expected to be authentic, yet wary of expressing anything other than what I knew would garner favor and praise in the organizational culture in which I was entrenched.

The second, external, coach, who specializes in working with leaders on courage, guided me in an exploration of worst-case scenarios—I believe with the intention of putting my "irrational" fears in perspective. Instead, this resulted in me portraying, in great detail, my vision of the ultimate worst-case scenario which culminated in me losing my job, being deported, and living with my family under a bridge, transporting all our possessions throughout the long, cold days in a broken-down shopping cart. She counselled me not to catastrophize—and then we were out of time.

To these coaches, success was understood as being publicly courageous and authentic. For me, however, embedded in Pharma's corporate image of effortless perfection and culture of high expectations, this expectation of courage and authenticity felt just as unrealistic, unlikely, and impossible to me as my ending up living under a bridge probably sounded to them.

As time passed, I continued to prepare. I practiced in front of my husband, a former Madison Avenue copywriter with an overly creative streak, who encouraged me to be provocative and theatrical in my approach; again, I doubted my ability to pull this off in a credible, competent, positive, and professional manner. I watched the videos of those who had gone before, and, as previously mentioned, read the TED Talks book about public speaking. The amount of angst I felt about this situation was somewhat shocking to me, as I normally tend to be quite tranquil and moderated in my approach to work. In my busy life, I really did not have time to indulge my anxiety and spend so much time on preparation for a fifteen-minute speech…and yet…I almost could not help myself. My desire to do well (and not to fail publicly) was overwhelming.

Finally, I landed on a flow and content with which I felt comfortable. The content was "safe" (i.e. light, upbeat, politically correct, and on message), yet interesting, and would allow me to share my life's story in a way that highlighted how my interests aligned with the expectations and needs of the senior HR leaders at Pharma—both now and in the future.

I practiced every day—at least twice per day—for two weeks leading up to the event. I commandeered my son's plastic toy microphone so I could practice in front of the bathroom mirror. I adjusted the stories and key phrases for maximum effect. The whole thing started to take on an air of narcissism, but rather than being in love with myself, I was obsessed with how I would appear to others. At the root of this obsession, of course, was fear, and while I was aware that my anxiety was perhaps somewhat overblown and irrational, I also believe I had good reason to be nervous; let me now share some background information that served to compound my apprehension…

Some Additional Context

I should provide some historical context to give additional insight into why this event felt like such a big deal to me. I am sure that many people in a similar situation would find themselves feeling nervous and might even experience a few sleepless nights leading up to an event like this, but, in addition to the threats of restructuring and job loss lurking in the back of my mind, I had a specific issue and history that was concerning me.

Throughout the past several years, during periods of great pressure, I have found myself in tears at work, unable to control my emotions, sometimes in fairly public settings. It was not a frequent occurrence—happening perhaps every 12-18 months—but the main issue was that it was somewhat unpredictable. Sometimes I could talk about topics and have no reaction—nothing would happen; other times, my voice would quaver unexpectedly or I would start to cry and would struggle to be able to get myself back in check. Most of the time, these outward displays of emotion came as a surprise, even (especially?) to myself. As Burkitt, a sociologist who studies emotions, explains,

> …we are not always aware of exactly how or why we inhabit our performances in relationships in the way we do, or why they may be animated with certain emotions. (2008, p. 78)

I attempted to find a pattern to these incidents so that I could predict and control when the tears might appear, but this evaded me. My manager had even thoughtfully provided me with a "resilience coach" who, after more than six sessions, was also at a loss to get to the heart of the matter or resolve the issue. We did, however, uncover that the incidents seemed more likely to occur when I was speaking about myself. Or when I felt passionately about something. Or when the stakes were high. Given the expectations and setup of the HR Networking Luncheon speech I was preparing to deliver, all three of these aspects would likely be present and it looked like the trifecta was in place for a possible disaster. And, while one or two well-placed, dramatic tears could be highly effective and even appropriate in a situation like this, I certainly did not trust myself to come anywhere close to the edge, given my tenuous history in this area. I knew, based on past experience, that once I started crying, I would not easily be able to stop or quickly compose myself.

As I will further discuss later, emotions—and specifically authenticity, as mentioned earlier— are often expected and desired from leaders—but within "appropriate" limits. As in most

work environments, which thrive upon self-control and resilience, to demonstrate or articulate one's real, deep, or disturbing feelings is culturally taboo at Pharma. As a company founded and headquartered in one of the more culturally reserved countries in Europe, the situation is likely more extreme than in other organizations in that the culture at Pharma often reflects the stereotypical habitus of moderation and emotional detachment. Additionally, in the pharmaceutical industry, perfection (or at least the image of it)—with only minor "human deviations"—is expected; no one wants an emotionally volatile person involved in the creation of drugs that will be injected into human bodies. At Pharma, everything—including emotions—aspires to be controlled, clean, and appropriate in all situations—from the offices, to the marketing, to the managers and employees themselves. Indeed, I hold myself to this standard and, as can be inferred, this often creates a challenging environment in which to work.

Leaving aside the possibility of ending up living under a bridge with my family, the more probable and realistic worst case scenario would be that I would start to cry during my presentation. Should crossing this invisible line of emotional professionalism occur, there was a possibility the event could impact my future career opportunities. All the preparation I was going through, I hoped, would shore up my chances for a successful outcome and ensure my speech would remain tear-free. Unfortunately, in the midst of my rigorous preparations, I had an experience that further shook my confidence to control my emotions during the rapidly approaching performance.

A Concerning Episode: Panic Sets In

Shortly before the luncheon, my manager scheduled an offsite workshop for his team and a team we have been planning to merge with for some time. We were about ten in total, most of us working together regularly and in close proximity, plus two external facilitators. I felt quite comfortable and safe with the members of this group; I know most of them well and believe them all to be highly trustworthy and caring colleagues. The theme for the day focused on building trust through vulnerability; these days, authenticity and vulnerability are strongly encouraged in the workplace. Of course, this is ironic given the paradoxical expectations for perfection and containment of emotion mentioned earlier. I will come back to this.

One of the activities planned for the offsite was for each of us to present a "Fuck Up Story"—an anecdote highlighting a significant mistake we had made—and its impact on us. In most organizations, we tell many stories about how things are going well—because that is what we assume is needed to keep going and feel successful. However, Fuck Up events have become trendy at Pharma and are touted to support the transformation of the workplace into a more agile environment. They are said to provide an opportunity in which we all learn from each other, build trust, and practice "failing fast" and recovering quickly in an attempt to enhance overall productivity. Goffman cites a similar phenomenon occurring in everyday life, but with a slightly different intention, describing the scenario and its outcome in the following way:

> A sinner…stands up and tells to those who are present things he would ordinarily attempt to conceal or rationalize away; he sacrifices his secrets and his self-protective distance from others, and this sacrifice tends to induce a backstage solidarity among all present. (1959, p. 204)

These small, safe acknowledgements of reality allow for a sense of reassurance that all will be okay and one can still be successful even if harboring doubts and occasionally experiencing failure. In the form of scheduled, mandatory Fuck Up events in the workplace, however, these affairs can become an instrumentalization of human vulnerability and an attempt to force authenticity.

In any case, one of the external facilitators launched the session, sharing a fairly raw and intimate account of a recent setback—which was accompanied by self-doubt and shame, but resulted in a big contract for his consulting business. When he finished, he asked for the next volunteer. As I sat in my seat, I could feel my heart starting to pound. When the next person stepped up to the front of the room, he told a heartbreaking story about his best friend, who had died of a heart attack and whom he felt he had let down as a friend; as my colleague relayed the story, he was open and expressed his sadness and regret, but maintained dry eyes. Looking around the room, however, I noticed that the rest of us were all either in tears or on the verge. This was not a good situation for me. As I mentioned, once I start crying, I sometimes have difficulty stopping. I felt hot and sweaty and concerned that if I spoke next, I would not be able to "keep it together," so I waited for a few more team members to speak—telling stories with varying levels of emotionality—until I felt

composed enough to share my experience. From the moment I opened my mouth, I knew I was in trouble; having been on the verge of tears earlier proved enough to tip the scales toward disaster.

The story I told, about unexpectedly and unknowingly overspending the department budget by 1.5 million in the last fiscal year, was not a particularly negative experience overall, and was no longer a charged topic for me. In fact, I felt it was a clear-cut example of a Fuck Up which, now that time had passed, I felt essentially fine about. There was no emotional nuance to the story aside from a small sense of chagrin or embarrassment; it was simply a black and white major failure, with the department balance sheet to prove it. I had hoped that by staying far away from a deep or emotional issue, I would be safe from my Achilles heel.

Unfortunately, however, the floodgates broke as I stood in front of the group and related my story between my own gasps for breath, nervous laughter, and tears. It was horrible. My colleagues' heads tilted in sympathy and eyes filled with compassion as I spoke, but their kindness only made the situation worse. I was able to tell my story, but was unable to control my tears and, as I spoke, I was becoming more and more distracted by the seemingly increased likelihood that this scene would be repeated soon—on a much larger and more visible scale—at the upcoming HR Luncheon.

My co-workers were extremely kind and supportive, praising me for my authenticity and consoling me during the break and after the session; however, the overall impact of this experience was that it added to my anxiety about the impending event. Once again, I could not identify what exactly it was that led me to cry. What if the same thing happened to me during my HR Luncheon presentation? If I could not contain myself in front of this small group, what would happen in front of a larger audience, sharing more personal stories and topics? I sensed a new Fuck Up Story in the making—this time in the form of my upcoming speech.

Final Preparations

I requested to speak second at the luncheon. I wanted time to read the room and build on any momentum or connection the first presenter created with the audience; she would be my warm-up act. Unfortunately, just prior to the day, she shared a brief outline of the

themes of her speech with me and it sounded incredible—an uplifting story about a girl who overcame all the odds and, through the kindness of strangers, the help of friends, and a loving family, was able to realize her dreams. A true "hero's journey;" you could have made a best-selling movie about her life. HR professionals, stereotypically, tend to love to have their emotions touched; her sentimental story would no doubt tug at heartstrings. I knew, with a sense of resignation, that my own life's story would pale in comparison.

Nevertheless, I continued my preparations according to plan. I visited the auditorium space several times, practicing my speech in a whisper or in my head, concerned about what passers-by might think and committed to keeping my preparation efforts private.

As one of the final steps in the process, the organizer contacted me to deliver a final briefing on what to expect. He mentioned that they had recently decided to stop videotaping the sessions. I could not decide whether I was relieved or disappointed at this news. My ego desired the visibility—especially in light of having spent so much time and effort preparing; I wanted the reward to balance out the risk. As Alvesson and Gabriel note, "Grandiosity is linked to the widespread 'narcissism' of our times…We all, it seems, want to be in the public eye…"(2016, p. 465).

On the other hand, I must admit that I also felt a measure of relief that the audience would be contained to those in the room, should things go the wrong way. Ultimately, I was satisfied with the fact that many of my colleagues and several members of the top HR leadership team would be physically present, and it did relieve the pressure a bit to know that my success or failure would not be captured and available for eternity.

The day before the event, I did a final walk through of my presentation at home with my husband. As I got to the part in which I started to talk about my wonderful family, I burst into tears, causing my husband to laugh and exclaim, "Why are you crying? We're not dead!" This made me smile, but my late-in-the-game tearful outburst only served to further increase my anxiety. By this point, my sole criteria for success was to get through the speech without crying, and it looked like I was destined for failure.

Outcome: The Triumph of Emptiness

The day of the event finally arrived…and then the appointed hour. As the first speaker took the stage and launched into her well-formed and touching presentation, I started to feel weak and faint, but I took some deep breaths and steadied myself. As the applause for my colleague died down, at long last I stepped onto the stage, took a final deep breath, and delivered my entire presentation as planned—with humor and humility and a bit of a shaky voice at times, but with no tears.

The general gist of the content was that I spoke first about my nervousness, then introduced myself by sharing: some things that I love, how I got to where I am, and a few things that keep me up at night. I wove in red threads around risk-taking and hope, and included some humorous facts and anecdotes to help illustrate my journey and personality.

Stepping off the stage and back into the safety of the crowd, I gauged my success through reading and interpreting the bodily gestures of others; I could tell I performed well because no one avoided me or eye contact with me after the event. As historian and social critic Christopher Lasch states in *The Culture of Narcissism*,

> All of us, actors and spectators alike, live surrounded by mirrors. In them, we seek reassurance of our capacity to captivate or impress others… (1991, p. 73)

Using my colleagues as reflectors of my achievement, I was relieved to find that, on the contrary, they seemed genuinely impressed and pleased with my presentation. Many people approached me after the session to congratulate me on a job well done—and several specifically mentioned resonating with my admission of nerves. Also, several members of the executive team commented favorably—I guessed that this is their regular practice, but it felt genuine.

While I was on stage, I made an audio recording of the speech on my phone so I could review it later. Listening to myself that evening, I was surprised at how polished and articulate I sounded. I believe I came across as credible, competent, positive, and professional after all.

Following the speech, I felt satisfied with the result and proud of myself, but also, surprisingly to me, somewhat empty. The outcome, after so much buildup, was anticlimactic. I had achieved my goal, but it only took a matter of moments before I was

asking myself, "Now what?" Once again, I had proven the point (highlighted in Project 2) that success is temporal and sociologically constructed; upon reaching a goal, I had been socially conditioned to automatically seek the next challenge.   Han contends that in an achievement society, narcissistic behaviors increase and,

> "…*the feeling of having achieved a goal never occurs*. It is not that the narcissistic subject does not want to achieve closure. Rather, it is incapable of getting there."
> (2015, p. 39, emphasis in original)

This incapability, Han explains, is due to society's inability to create definitive forms of closure (e.g. clear and stable definitions of success and completion). While I felt I had successfully conducted my speech, I did not yet feel like a success overall and I certainly did not believe that my success endured beyond that specific situation. Alvesson explains the emptiness of focusing on image-enhancing achievements, stating,

> In particular, there is a strong tendency to be continually uncertain and never really satisfied with what you have achieved…you have a feeling of inadequacy in working life… (2013, p. 191)

He continues,

> …[the accumulation of high-status achievements] involves an uncertain fluctuation between envisioning oneself as fantastic and a depressed sense of emptiness coupled with the realization of the hollowness of all this. (2013, p. 216)

This was certainly my experience.

Part 2: Further Reflecting on the Experience: Ties to Image and Emotion Management, Authenticity, and Modernity

Introduction

In the particular example related in this project, everything turned out fine for me in the end—while perhaps not a resounding success, then at least not a complete, unrecoverable or detrimental failure. It was a risk (given my previous mixed experiences), but also a great opportunity; I believe no damage has been done to my reputation—and time will tell if my performance will pay greater dividends.

Throughout the experience, however, I would occasionally stop to ask myself the question, "What is really going on here?" I knew on some level that I was over-thinking the entire episode, that this was not a big deal in the larger scheme of organizational life, that my anxiety was well out of proportion to the event itself, and that perhaps I was making things more difficult than they needed to be. Public speaking happens on a daily basis in organizations. The situation is commonplace, and yet it is richly embedded with organizational dynamics and undertones.

In general, I was a bit disturbed and unsettled by the whole experience. I considered, Why had I been so obsessed? What is it about public speaking that causes our hearts to race— and that caused me to spend so much time preparing? What is it about organizations that creates fear among their members? That requires performance? And how, in the context of organizations, do we act to create our own sense of safety, security, and success?

Related to the questions above and the concepts of performance, anxiety, and emptiness briefly explored in Part 1, I would now like to explore what I feel are three interrelated themes that underpin and influence the answers to these questions, including our resulting behaviors and their relation to success. Specifically: expectations for positivity and an appearance of effortless perfection, calls for authenticity (and the inherent conflict with the former topic), and, finally, the modern, capitalist society in which we live, with its requirements for constant change and self-reinvention—all of which work in contradiction to each other and in opposition to any real or enduring sense of achievement or success.

I will begin with an exploration of appearance management.

Appearance Management

As I prepared for my presentation, as mentioned previously, I endeavored to keep up an appearance of positivity and ensure it looked easy, despite the fear and hard work that infused the experience from end to end; in other words, I tried not to reveal the actual amount of anxiety the presentation was causing me. As I will explain, it was critical to align my appearance and emotions into an acceptable and appropriate package in order to achieve success. In fact, Lasch states that professional success has come to depend,

…less on craftsmanship or loyalty to the firm than on "visibility", "momentum", personal charm, and impression management… (1991, p. 239)

Indeed, Alvesson and Gabriel build on this, pointing out,

More than for their competence, employees are now liable to be judged for their looks, their manners, and their "personalities." (2016, p. 469)

I wanted to be judged favorably.

Elias, in his extensive sociological work, *The Civilizing Process*, explains how over time, "…the distasteful was *removed behind the scenes of social life*" (1939/2000, p. 103, emphasis in original). He states that this movement, segregation, and hiding "behind the scenes" all that has come to be considered unpleasant or unbecoming is, in essence, the process of civilization. This "civilizing process" has served to create an acute awareness of appearance and self management in Western society (1939/2000, p. 103). We are all now expected to present ourselves as a complete, aligned, and agreeable package in the workplace. As Jackall summarizes,

A person's external appearances, modes of self-presentation, interactional behavior, and projection of general attitude together constitute his public face. (2009, p. 49)

This "public face" is, in no small part, what we are judged upon in the workplace. As Elias points out, since the times of court society in Western culture, public image has become something that must be managed—and the higher the stakes, the more critical image management becomes (1939/2000). While we no longer have many actual courts, kings, or queens with significant power or authority left in the world, these roles have been replaced in modern civilization—and particularly in the modern workplace—by the extremely powerful CEO, his or her executive team, and, with diminishing power, the senior leaders situated beneath them; in essence, these "corporate royalty" have become the central dominant structure shaping culture and behavior in organizations today.

In the remainder of this section, I will explore the various ways in which we have been civilized to make ourselves acceptable and attractive to others—particularly the corporate royalty—in the work environment. I will begin with an exploration of how physical image relates to success and will then integrate emotion and behavior management as they relate to overall appearance regulation.

Let me start with an exploration of how physical appearance relates to success.

Physical Image Management

As Alvesson states,

> In today's society, a strong emphasis on "it must look good," and preferably even shine, is vital for the success of individuals, occupational groups, and organizations. (2013, p. ix)

This sentiment certainly applies not only to the broader contexts of business and society, but also directly to physical appearance; when speaking of image management, personal appearance is a key aspect of the package.

Broadly speaking, we all tend to adapt our own appearance to present an image of ourselves that we believe will influence others, creating for ourselves an aura of success by making ourselves look how we think a successful person should look, and adjusting based on the social and cultural cues we are given (Ford et al., 2017). Building on Elias' work regarding the civilizing process, Ford et al. note that our clothing and physical appearance "forms a visual discourse encapsulating norms, histories, cultures, economics, class, gender, and so on…" (2017, p. 1566). Physical appearance can therefore be understood as a "…*materialization* of norms, cultures, histories, economics, legal systems, and so on…" all of which coalesce into an unwritten set of rules about how one should look (Ford et al., 2017, p. 1567, emphasis in original).

While I did not mention my own physical appearance in the context of my presentation, for the sake of brevity, let me simply state that, in a manner similar to that of a courtier dressing to appear before royalty, I selected my clothing and groomed myself carefully that day, choosing an outfit and curating an appearance that matched the overall image I was trying to project.

One might wonder, Why does physical appearance matter so much? One reason appearance matters, as Elias explains, is that there is an assumption that,

Bodily carriage, gestures, dress, facial expressions—this "outward" behavior with which the treatise concerns itself is the expression of the inner, the whole person. (1939/2000, p. 49)

This alignment of outward appearances leads others to believe that a person can be trusted. In interpreting another's appearance, Ford et al. explain that,

…appearance is a material signification of a person's "character"; people possess the skills of being able to read another's visual presentation of itself; when people meet they judge each other through extrapolating from appearance to character. (2017, p. 1561)

In other words, we unconsciously rely on and default to a "what you see is what you get" assumption.

Additionally, adhering to organizational norms regarding image also indicate a propensity to align with other corporate expectations. As Jackall states,

Proper management of one's external appearances simply signals to one's peers and to one's superiors that one is prepared to undertake other kinds of self-adaptation. (2009, p. 51)

In today's workplace, a high value is placed on flexibility and adaptation (I will return to this later); dress and appearance conformity may be one indication that demonstrate such willingness to change and transform according to organizational need.

In the context of corporate success, not only is one expected to look good (or, preferably, "shine," as Alvesson notes above)—ideally, there is also coherence between one's physical image and the image or values of the organization itself. Brannan et al. (2015) point out the tendency, which I aspired to at Pharma, for employees to align with the brand of the company for which they work. They state that employees will tend to position themselves within corporate narratives. This supports the attraction, retention, and promotion of idealized types of workers that convey an image in alignment with the company—that is "the sorts of workers who work here," which may be extended to "the sorts of work done here and the way that work is done here" (Brannan et al., 2015, p. 33). In the case of Pharma, the ideal appearance of workers aligns with the sterility and perfection of the

pharmaceutical products. In other workplaces, one might be expected to dress creatively, casually, or sportily—all depending on the organizational culture and environment.

Building on physical appearance management, let me now turn to an exploration of two additional components of image management: the regulation of emotions and behaviors.

Emotion and Behavior Management

An important component to overall image management is the regulation of emotions and behaviors—which, along with physical appearance, are also recognized as keys to success in the modern workplace (Boehm, 2012; Hochschild, 2012; Jackall, 2009). As Jackall points out,

> All bureaucracies require varying degrees of self-rationalization of their members. Wise and ambitious men and women ruthlessly tailor their public faces—that is, their personal appearances, their vocabularies, and their expressed worldviews—to suit the fashions of the moment. They also tailor their habits of mind to match the institutional logic of their organizations. (2009, p. 238)

This management of attitudes and actions at work to ensure they are appropriate, pleasing, and pleasant is what Hochschild calls "emotional work" (2012). Emotional work demands effort and attention and may extract a toll, particularly when demanded for extensive periods (Hochschild, 2012). Indeed, over time, it may come to feel that alternate points of view and/or out-of-line emotions (such as crying, in my case) are unacceptable to the extent that we ultimately convince ourselves that we should not be feeling—and certainly not expressing—any undesirable emotions. Boehm refers to this concept as being "culturally docile," describing an individual's ability and willingness to take on any behavior expected by the culture (2012, p. 217).

Brinkmann highlights the prevalence of this expectation, stating,

> This kind of emotional work has now spread from the service industries to virtually every other sector. In organizations with flat management structures and plenty of teamwork, it's seen as crucial that you're able to be positive, cooperative, and flexible in your human interrelationships. (2017, p. 64)

Hochschild even proposes that emotional control has become weaponized—a tool used against corporate employees to control and shape behavior, as organizations survey not only behavior, but also feelings, to the extent that people "actively manage feelings in order to make their personalities fit for work" (2012, p. 229).

In my case, I both worked hard (though not always successfully) to maintain an image of polished professionalism, ease, and positivity and I actively attempted to suppress my fears and adopt a spirit of upbeat optimism and self-assurance.

In the next section, I will delve more deeply into one specific and increasingly common example of emotion management mentioned earlier: positivity.

Emotion and Behavior Management Case In Point: Expectations of Positivity

Demonstration of a positive attitude is perhaps the most widely expected management of emotion required for success in today's workplace (Ehrenreich, 2010). Barbara Ehrenreich, in her book *Smile or Die* (2010) which criticizes the rise of the "culture of positivity," summarizes the expectation for a positive demeanor in the workplace, stating,

> The trick, if you want to get ahead, is to simulate a positive outlook, no matter how you might actually be feeling. (p. 52)

Thinking positive—and repressing doubt, fear, and anxiety—is touted as critical to success, regardless of circumstance. Jackall notes, speaking of the ideal employee,

> Even in dark times, he keeps a sunny disposition and learns always to find the bright side of bleak news. (2009, p. 60)

Upon reflection, one may be reminded of George Orwell's concept of "doublethink" (also referenced in Project 2), which he introduced in his dystopian narrative *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). In the novel, the population is subjected to a process of indoctrination in which they are expected to accept as true that which is clearly false, or to simultaneously accept two mutually contradictory beliefs as correct, often in opposition to their own memories or sense of reality. Somewhat disturbingly, doublethink has become a valuable skill in today's organizations.

The culture of positivity can be traced back to the time of the launch of several well known self-help books, such as Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936)—the first major text on how acting positive translates into personal and professional gain—and Protestant minister Norman Vincent Peale's 1956 work, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, in which he elucidates the merits—and resulting personal and financial benefits—of keeping a positive mindset and eliminating doubts and negative thoughts. As a Protestant, Peale's work dovetailed nicely with the already well-established Protestant work ethic in Western society, which extoled the virtues of hard work, and built upon Carnegie's upbeat instructions for success.

This combined mindset of hard work and optimism now permeates Western culture. My efforts in preparation for the HR Luncheon were grounded in a mindset shared with many of my fellow Americans brought up with the aforementioned individualistic expectation that hard work and a positive attitude will be rewarded with success and security (Weber, 1905/2012; Lasch, 1991). Demonstrating a blindness to the reality of social interdependence, I was determined to combine hard work and preparation with the maintenance and projection of a positive attitude, as I believed anything less would be detrimental to my success.

Interestingly—and with some measure of surprise—in researching the themes regarding success for this paper, I came across and was reminded of counter philosophies from other, non-Western cultures, in which success and failure are not considered primarily a function of individual will and effort, but rather ultimately come down to the will of God, fate, or other larger, uncontrollable forces (see, for example, Jalan et al., 2014). Given my strongly engrained Western, empowered, and individualistic mindset, however, my career success strategy has always been to rely upon hard work and an optimistic attitude; I would leave nothing to chance, fate, or the Gods to decide.

In their study of Western executive women, Baker and Kelan frame this mindset, in today's world, as highly individualistic, echoing the common assumption that "…if one works hard enough and perseveres, one shall be successful…" (Baker & Kelan, 2019, p. 71). From this perspective, the individual is not limited by traditional constraints and structures and is able to become an independent agent of his/her own success. Individuals "perceive themselves to have agency to navigate changing economic structures, obstacles, and inequalities" and

the focus is on the "self" as an enterprise (Baker & Kelan, 2019, p. 72). By focusing on the self, persevering, and maintaining a positive mindset, one can achieve some sense of relief and temporarily ignore systemic unfairness and injustice.

Exemplifying this attitude, Jackall describes the modern-day manager,

> He dispassionately takes stock of himself, treating himself as an object, as a commodity. He analyzes his strengths and weaknesses and decides what he needs to change in order to survive and flourish in his organization. (2009, p. 63)

In my case, adopting this detached philosophy of independence allowed me to feel a sense of agency in an inherently uncontrollable situation.

The self-determinism embedded in positivity and an individualistic mindset has, of course, downsides. For example, the combination of the culturally-expected components of hard work and positive thinking have ultimately created what Han (2015) refers to as our current "achievement society," in which individuals ceaselessly strive for additional achievements and successes. He states, "The positivation of the world allows new forms of violence to emerge," (2015, p. 6) and goes on to explain the outcome: "Excess work and performance escalates into auto-exploitation" (2015, p. 11).

In other words, positivity coupled with hard work and determination creates a potentially toxic, self-blaming cocktail. Brinkmann explains,

> The message is that everything is possible if you believe in it enough and want it enough. If things don't work out, it's because you haven't mobilized enough will and motivation. The consequence of this is that you automatically criticize yourself when something is problematic: you internalize external social critique and transform it into inner self-criticism. (2017, p. 78)

In her later work, Ehrenreich adds to this view, stating,

> The flip side of positivity is thus a harsh insistence on personal responsibility: if your business fails or your job is eliminated, it must be because you didn't try hard enough, didn't believe firmly enough in the inevitability of your success. (2010, p. 8)

Building on this, she suggests a "deep helplessness at the core of positive thinking" (2010, p. 59). The positive/ individualistic mindset perpetuates the illusion that the individual has total

control over his/her destiny and that social, economic, or other forces have a secondary or irrelevant role in our lives (Ehrenreich, 2010; Baker & Kelan, 2019). In essence, the message is, "…it's your own fault if you're not happy" (Brinkmann, 2017, p. 38).

Baker and Kelan reinforce this point, stating,

> Rather than acknowledging unfair structures as impediments to individuals, this implies that individuals just have to make themselves useful and, if they fail to do so, they only have themselves to blame. This suggests that individuals who do not 'get on' and 'make it' are to blame for their own failure. (2019, p. 73)

Brinkmann points out an additional detractor regarding positivity, stating,

> …one fear is that the positive approach encourages a cultural requirement for positivity and happiness. In the accelerating culture, this paradoxically causes suffering, as people feel guilty about not feeling constantly happy and successful… (2017, p. 37)

He summarizes, stating,

> Life is hard. But this isn't our real problem. The real problem is that we are forced to pretend that life isn't hard. (2017, p. 39)

Additionally, as Marris points out as he explores how people cope with uncertainty, self-blaming in such circumstances is a natural tendency. He shares,

> This tendency to blame oneself for the world's ills is itself a strategy for mastering uncertainty. To change one's own behavior, to learn to fit in better, is less daunting and more immediately practical than to reform the structure of social relationships: and to mistrust oneself is less frightening than to see clearly how dangerously untrustworthy the societies we inhabit may be. (2003, p. 10)

While, as mentioned, I was somewhat aware that I was obsessing over my presentation, by doing so I was, in a sense, reassuring myself that I tried my best and held nothing back; I would be the only one to blame if my presentation was a flop and I believed it was—to a very great extent—within my control to avoid this happening. Focusing on this myopic task (a single presentation) allowed me to distance, soothe, and distract myself from larger concerns in my environment. Rather than worry about the shifts in power and politics

playing out at Pharma, I was focusing on what I believed to be my own sphere of influence. In doing so, I was also able to distract myself from larger issues outside my control, such as the globalization of economies and digitalization of the workplace that are at the root of Pharma's restructurings, layoffs, and culture of employee uncertainty.

Finally, in addition to the self-exploitation and self-blaming mentioned above, the downside of positivity can be further expanded to include what some consider to be a means of social control in the workplace—a way to ensure increased performance. Ehrenreich explains,

> With "motivation" as the whip, positive thinking became the hallmark of the compliant employee, and as the conditions of corporate employment worsened in the age of downsizing that began in the 1980s, the hand on the whip grew heavier. (2010, p.100)

She adds that,

> …despite the personality tests, which rest on the assumption that personalities vary from person to person, only one kind of personality seems to be in demand, one that is relentlessly cheerful, enthusiastic, and obedient… (2006, Location 2800)

Exemplifying Ehrenreich's statements, at Pharma, as in many corporations, positivity is systematically rewarded and negativity is suppressed. Had I not tailored my content and tone to align with expectations for positivity and optimism, I would not have received the praise I garnered following my speech; one is more likely to be rewarded for resonant—not discordant—sentiments.

Appearance Management in Summary

Elias, a sociologist with a special interest in power structures and relational dynamics, speaks about how we often would like to consider individuals as "free" from the constraints of the configurations in which they find themselves (1965). However, he states,

> …whatever our wishes may be, looking simply at the available evidence, one cannot get away from the recognition that configurations limit the scope of the individual's decisions and in many ways have a compelling force even though this power does not

reside as it is often made to appear outside individuals, but merely results from the interdependence between individuals. (1965, p. 172)

Reinforcing this stance, Boehm, in his examination of the evolution of emotions and how they impact our decisions and behaviors in contemporary life, confirms, "…the influence of the social environment on how we behave should not be underestimated" (2012, p. 10).

Applying this to my own situation, I can now see that my corporate socialization to maintain an air of positivity, joined with norms at Pharma as to what is acceptable and appropriate in the workplace, strongly shaped the appearance I attempted to present at the luncheon. I adjusted my image and attitude accordingly, as I was aware that my success was, in part, determined by my ability to control and manage my appearance, behavior, and emotions.

The Unachievable Expectation of Authenticity in the Workplace

I previously referred to an enhanced desire for authenticity in the workplace. In order to be considered successful in most organizational environments, one must come across as authentic and trustworthy. In this section, I will explore this aspiration by addressing some of the complications in achieving it. Let me start by exploring why authenticity is so strongly desired in organizations today.

Why Do We Desire Authenticity at Work?

I believe this drive for authenticity indicates a hunger to correct for the extreme trend toward positivity, perfection, and the appearance of effortlessness. Being authentic and making statements such as "this is hard" or acknowledging that "I am sweating" opens a release valve of sorts.

A desire for authenticity may also be an attempt to simplify a complex situation. Achieving an idealized state in which everyone could "just be themselves" would, theoretically, simplify the interpersonal landscape, eliminating the need to identify and decipher the motivations, fears, and desires of others. I mention earlier that our external image implies a corresponding inner self; realizing the ideal of authenticity would allow for further reassurance and relaxation of concerns regarding hidden agendas or feelings.

With all of these potential benefits, there is a desire for things to be more "real" and authentic in the workplace. The Fuck Up events I mentioned earlier are an example of this

longing, intended to function as an opportunity to expose vulnerability and build trust among a team through the public airing of mistakes.

Unfortunately, there are barriers to authenticity in the workplace, including appearance management and evolving identities; I will explore these now.

Barrier: Acceptable Image and Behavior

As mentioned earlier, tasks involving appearance management and other preparations must be conducted behind the scenes in order to project an air of ease and natural grace. The aforementioned taboo "never let them see you sweat" bars the acknowledgement that we all have fear at times, and that we all have to work hard to do difficult things. In fact, this taboo directly contradicts the demand for authenticity by creating an unachievable ideal in which one must simultaneously adhere to a mandate for positive thinking and maintain an appearance of effortless achievement—while paradoxically ensuring we are genuine in our interactions with others.

In both the brief I was given by the event organizer to guide my planning for the speech and in one of my preparatory coaching sessions, I was encouraged to be authentic. Ironically, I ended up completely engineering my speech (with the intention of attempting to control people's perception of me) to come across as authentic. In practice, therefore, authenticity must sometimes be performed, but must not be seen as a performance. Additionally, the expectation for authenticity in interaction assumes that there is a non-performative way of being, when, in reality, as soon as we make any sort of gesture it could be interpreted as a performance (Mead & Morris, 1962).

Brene Brown is a sociologist whose work is prevalent in today's corporate HR departments. Her bestselling books, including *Dare to Lead: Brave Work, Tough Conversations, Whole Hearts* (2018) encourage leaders to be more authentic and courageous at work, breaking down the transition from guarded, inauthentic leadership to courageous, "whole-hearted" leadership into simple steps, techniques, and guidelines. Of course, this is an extreme oversimplification of the challenge (and ultimate impossibility) of achieving complete authenticity in the workplace and represents the limits of this type of simplified, systems thinking, in which "tools and techniques" are introduced with the false expectation that they

can be employed to resolve complex issues (Mowles, 2016; Stacey, 2012; Stacey & Mowles, 2016).

In juxtaposition to Brown's call to "just be yourself," Jackall points to the heart of managerial work, which he proposes includes careful assessment and a molding of the self to the circumstance. He states,

> Managerial work requires a psychic asceticism of a high degree, a willingness to discipline the self, to thwart one's impulses, to stifle spontaneity in favor of control, to conceal emotion and intent, and to objectify the self with the same kind of calculating functional rationality that one brings to the packaging of any commodity. (2009, p. 217)

This need to monitor the environment and select appropriate personas clearly inhibits authenticity. Ironically, there are wrong ways to be authentic. For example, being too authentic in public (e.g. crying or confessing to career anxiety, as in my case) is unacceptable and will lead to failure—or worse. It is desirable to present the self with flaws, but not too many—and not the wrong kind. In other words, it is risky to be authentic—especially given the likelihood that one's authentic self is rarely (if ever) in complete alignment with the company line.

I mentioned previously that I struggled to determine which stories to include in—and which to omit from—my presentation to project an idealized version of myself. This struggle reflects recent research on identity and image work in leaders. Petriglieri and Stein state, "…leaders must manage their identities to gain the right to influence others" (2012, p. 1219). My selective choice of stories from my past were an attempt to share narratives that would shed me in a good light and allow me to influence others. As I selected, practiced, and refined these stories, I was taking part in a form of identity work for, as Petriglieri and Stein note, "Identity work entails crafting, experimenting with, and revising identity narratives or stories about the self" (p. 1220).

Runciman (2018), who writes extensively about hypocrisy in the field of politics, highlights, similar to Jackall (2009) and Goffman (1959), how we all play parts in our interactions with others, noting that the idea of hypocrisy originated in the theater and that the Greek term "hypokrisis" meant the playing of a part. Additionally, in Roman culture, the notion of

"persona" referred to the masks people donned in public ceremonies (Burkitt, 2008, p. 5). Runciman goes on to state that,

> People who play a part are potentially unreliable, because they have more than one face they can display. (2018, p. 8)

We all must adopt various parts and masks as we move through our lives; I would argue, therefore, in agreement with Runciman, that we are all unreliable and false to a certain extent—often because there is no other option; there is no one real, true, stable self to consistently present. In fact, as part of living in society, we must be able to produce different faces and regulate or adjust our emotions in the presence of others (Elias, 1987/2001; Goffman, 1959). I will come back to this topic with relation to the context of modernity later on.

In my case, I tried to stabilize and control the narrative and the audience's perception of me by carefully considering the spectators and determining what they should know or learn about me. Which mask should I wear in this situation? Much of my frustration at trying to find the right content to convey was due to my attempt to please the "generalized other." This term reflects a concept articulated by George Herbert Mead in the 1930s in which one attempts to imagine what is expected of them in a particular situation by taking on the perspective of the idea of collective, societally constructed viewpoint (Mead, 1934/1962).

In my particular situation, there were too many *actual* others in the audience with too many different perspectives; I struggled to find a general enough other to plan for. Trying to manage my own judgments and assumptions of what these various others might be thinking and how they might respond to my available masks only served to increase my anxiety.

Burkitt, explaining my difficulty, states,

> In the modern world, we are engaged in so many activities that take place in a variety of contexts with a mixture of people, we become many different things to different people. We can also be many things to ourselves. There might not be a single answer to the question of who we are. (2008, p. 1)

In my situation, there was not a single answer to which version of myself to present to the audience for maximum influence and impact. With the various power structures inherent in organizations, along with the need for rapid re-invention of the self to address

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organizational needs and maintain relevance, the difficulty of settling on a singular self to portray is not possible. My aforementioned fantasy of presenting a frozen, isolated, perfect self collapsed in the face of reality and the complexity of human relationships. As Burkitt points out, in the contemporary world we are all,

> …trying to create an identity without a clear idea of what the end result will be and attempting to do this in a world that fragments our lives into disconnected episodes, or that reflects back to us diverse images of who we are in the eyes of the many disparate and disconnected people that we know. (2008, p. 175)

Which leads me to another barrier to authenticity: identity instability.

Barrier: Identity Instability Inhibits Authenticity

The concept of authenticity often presumes that an individual must be true to one fixed and stable identity, while in reality identities are fluid and in constant evolution. This is one of the great difficulties regarding the expectation for authenticity in the workplace.

We all have multiple identities, including "possible selves," "provisional selves," and "alternative selves" (Moore & Koning, 2015, p. 31). We discover these selves by asking questions such as, "Who am I?" "Who do I want to be in the future?" and "Who am I to you?" (Brown & Coupland, 2015; Moore & Koning, 2015).

Additionally, identities are continuously shaped and refined in social interactions, thus rendering them inherently unstable (Brown & Coupland, 2015; Petriglieri & Stein, 2012). As Brown and Coupland state,

> Processes of identity construction are fluid and dynamic: while we may be spurred by narcissistic preoccupations with establishing a secure, stable identity, identities are never "finished" but continuously worked on in soliloquy and in conversation with others. (2015, p. 1329)

Taylor elaborates on the perpetuity of this conundrum, noting, "…the making and sustaining of our identity…remains dialogical throughout our lives" (1991, p. 35). It is therefore impossible to maintain and portray a truly stable persona, thus making a complete sense of authenticity difficult to achieve beyond the current moment. Nevertheless, as in my fantasy

for a perfect, stable self to portray at the presentation, there is an "…aspirational identity narrative which harnesses societal injunctions to be 'successful' and to 'achieve', and sustains the fantasy that permanent, substantial selves can be realized" (Brown & Coupland, 2015, p. 1328).

Authenticity in Summary

Authenticity, like success, is elusive, contextual, and temporal. To be completely authentic assumes a stability and unconditional social acceptance that does not exist. Additionally, image management directly contradicts the expectations for (or possibility of) anything beyond momentary authenticity—and the continuous transformation of our identities further compounds the complexity of the task.

Burkitt highlights the difficulty we face, stating,

> This places modern people in something of a dilemma, because in order to relate to others we must have something about our selves that is relatively substantial and unchanging, so that people can know us; yet we also must be prepared to change quickly in a fluid world that demands adaptability. (2008, p. 174)

This demand for continuous adaptability and flexibility is embedded in my final focus area: the context of modernity.

A Final Layer of Complexity: The Context of Modernity

In this section, I will explore how the challenges to one's ability to achieve a sense of success mentioned above (namely image management and authenticity) are further compounded by the characteristics of the age in which we live.

Let me start with a further explanation of what I mean by "modernity".

Modernity: Our Current State

In my research, I use the term "modernity" as described by sociologists/political scientists such as Hartmut Rosa and Zygmunt Bauman to refer to the current era.

Rosa describes this state of "modernity" as characterized by three main types of acceleration: technical acceleration, the acceleration of social change, and the acceleration of the pace of life. These mutually reinforce each other in what he calls a "circle of acceleration" and generate the experience of a "runaway world" (Rosa, 2013, location 304), characterized by a state of perpetual anxiety at both the individual and collective level (Rosa, 2020).

As Rosa explains,

> "A modern society, as I define it, is one that can stabilize itself only dynamically, in other words one that requires constant economic growth, technological acceleration, and cultural innovation in order to maintain its institutional status quo…This game of escalation is perpetuated not by a lust for more, but by the fear of having less and less." (2020, p. 9)

Bauman has coined the term "liquid modernity" to refer to the state of perpetual change characterizing the time, noting that this liquidity does not allow for stable foundation and creates a great deal of exhaustion, uncertainty, anxiety, and confusion (Bauman, 2007; Bauman & Donskis, 2013). Given the temporal and contextual nature of success, the pace of modernity is incompatible with even a passing sense of completion and achievement, let alone a lasting sensation of success. For how is one to remain positive or portray an image of effortless achievement in the face of an ever-increasing volume and frequency of change?

Modernity in the Workplace

As mentioned in the introduction of this project, the business world is changing rapidly, to a great extent due to increased globalization and digitalization. As a result, corporations need to be able to adapt to changing demands and, correspondingly, the workforce must do the same (Brinkmann, 2017). There is an expectation for people today to reinvent themselves on an ongoing basis to match organizational needs (Rosa, 2013, 2019, 2020; Sennett, 2011) and there seems to be an unstated expectation to "manage" the multiple changing expectations in organizations—to be everything to everyone. As in my case at Pharma, it is difficult to know which is the right person to put forward today and whether or not that same person will be needed and expected tomorrow.

As a result of this volatility, Jackall points out that,

> People feel that they could be rewarded for doing a good job, but they also realize that despite doing good work, their careers could be terminated in a minute. (2009, p. 67)

And, according to some, the future looks dark and the situation likely to intensify (Baruch & Vardi, 2015; Taylor, 1991). For example, Baruch and Vardi, in their exploration of contemporary careers found that,

> …contemporary labor markets and workplace conditions reflect lurking threats and bleak opportunities as well as mutual commitment decline and rising job insecurity. Labor markets within the new economy pose a high risk of involuntary unemployment with major redundancies influencing more and more firms. (2015, p. 356)

Over time, these changes have started to create a new type of workplace, which demands flexibility and rapid reinvention of its workers. As Brinkmann states,

> We work in "learning organizations" in which the only constant is endless change, where the only thing we can be sure of is that what we learned yesterday will be obsolete tomorrow. (2017, p. 1)

Years ago, the responsibility for employees' careers resided with the organization. By the end of the 20th century, however, this responsibility had shifted in many ways from the organization to the individual employee (Baruch & Vardi, 2015). The common expectation for workers today is to embrace a "protean career" model in which the individual, rather than the organization, takes on the responsibility for his or her career and develops according to emerging organizational needs (Hall, 2004).

The adjective "protean" means to be "versatile," "mutable," or "capable of assuming many forms." In the current work environment, there is a premium on being flexible, adaptable, independent, and unattached (Brinkmann, 2017; Jackall, 2009; Rosa, 2013, 2019, 2020). As Han explains,

> …a human being without character is flexible, able to assume any form, play any role, or perform any function. This shapelessness—or, alternately, flexibility—creates a high degree of economic efficiency. (2015, p. 40)

He goes on,

> The more often one changes one's identity, the more production is dynamized. Industrial disciplinary society relied on unchanging identity, whereas postindustrial achievement society requires a flexible person to heighten production. (2015, p. 44)

This view, of course, has implications for us all. Today's ideal employees are those who consider it their own responsibility to constantly monitor, develop, and optimize their skills. Brinkmann explains,

> Standing still is the ultimate sin. If you stand still while everyone else is moving forwards, you fall behind. Doing so these days is tantamount to going backwards. (2017, p. 2)

And summarizes this sentiment, stating,

> Mobility trumps stability in an accelerating culture. You need to be fleet of foot, "liquid," changeable, able to dance to multiple tunes and set off in any direction at any time. (2017, p. 5)

Burkitt (referring to Bauman) confirms,

…it is those who are incapable of mobility and who have a relatively stable identity imposed upon them who are the most powerless members of liquid modernity…whereas it is those who can instantly move and respond to changing conditions that are the powerful. (2008, p. 175)

Like the Greek sea-god Proteus, however, the protean career suffers from certain limitations. According to Greek mythology, even the Greek god Proteus only changed his shape when faced with severe threat and, while Proteus could initiate changes in his shape and form, he did not do so in a planned and skilled manner, but rather randomly and desperately when in crisis and grave danger (Baruch & Vardi, 2015).

Illustration of Proteus by Andrea Alciato from *The Book of Emblems* (1531)

This unplanned and chaotic approach may also be the case for many of today's organizational employees. As Lasch states, "'Growth' has become a euphemism for survival" (1991, p. 50). However, one may not know in which direction to develop or act. I recognize this random casting about in myself to a certain extent, as I attempted to highlight the multifaceted aspects of my skills and the flexibility of my mindset. At Pharma, many of my colleagues are pursuing multiple certifications and qualifications, updating their skills in the internal workforce database in an attempt to build an attractive resume.

Marris points out that,

…it is bothersome, often worrying and sometimes acutely distressing to have to choose our actions when we are unsure what will help or harm us, or simply waste our energies. (2003, p. 8)

Sennett reinforces this stance, stating,

> It is quite natural that flexibility should arouse anxiety: people do not know what
> risks will pay off, what paths to pursue. (2011, location 57)

Of course, all of this uncertainty has a significant downside. Christopher Lasch, writing about the "culture of narcissism" that has emerged in America and other Western countries, states that people today are, "Plagued by anxiety, depression, vague discontents, a sense of inner emptiness…" and seek "…peace of mind, under conditions that increasingly militate against it"(1991, p. 13). This is a good representation of my experience; all of these symptoms were evidenced in my preparations for the HR Luncheon presentation.

Modernity: Coping in a Culture of Heightened Uncertainty and Anxiety

Modernity perpetuates individualization, isolation, narcissism, hysteria, and exhaustion (Han, 2015; Rosa, 2013, 2019, 2020) and can generate boundless anxiety in the face of its inherent uncertainty; as Jalan et al. explain,

> The emphasis on success, particularly *continued* success is a characteristic of modern
> work culture. In such an environment, failure is often not tolerated, and repeated
> failures or underperformance can also lead to job loss. This generates a deep sense
> of anxiety in many employees, as fear of failure or continually striving to guarantee
> success can be very troublesome. (2014, p. 412, emphasis in original)

Additionally, I would argue that in the situation at Pharma (as with other organizations' restructurings and layoffs) you do not even need to fail for your job to be in jeopardy.

Burkitt also notes that this constant need for reassessment and redirection can have a personal impact. He states, "…constant reflexivity could, for example, create chronic anxiety over one's performances and a preoccupation with bringing them off successfully" and could create a state of "chronic doubt or ontological insecurity" (2008, p. 173). Laing, who coined the term "ontological insecurity" in his work, *The Divided Self* (1990), argues that many individuals struggle with the tension between two personas within us: one our private, authentic, real identity and the other false self that we present to the world.

Lasch goes on to state,

Narcissism appears realistically to represent the best way of coping with the tensions and anxieties of modern life, and the prevailing social conditions therefore tend to bring out narcissistic traits that are present, in varying degrees, in everyone. (1991, p. 50)

Unable (or unwilling to attempt) to influence the larger trends that have created our current state of liquid modernity, we tend to cope and defend against uncertainty by focusing on ourselves (think hard work, positivity, image management, etc., as described earlier) to displace our anxiety surrounding the changing external environment (Marris, 2003). As Marris states, "…we retreat upon ourselves, substituting self-mastery for mastery of our circumstances" (2003, p. 82).

Conclusion

With reflexivity, much can be learned about oneself and the broader issues that are common in organizations today; by closely examining my specific narrative, I was able to uncover and highlight several key learnings. People naturally strive for success and attempt to avoid failure, and an explicit performance (such as a speech) magnifies our desires for success and exacerbates fears, hopes, and insecurities related to failure.

Success, in the context of my presentation, required the performance of three main components: appropriate levels of authenticity (revealing a version of myself and having that version accepted—and ideally praised), looking and acting the part (projecting an image in alignment with the norms and expectations for the idealized version of a successful person at Pharma), and presenting the most current and flexible image of myself I could achieve (competent today, tomorrow, and forevermore).

As I prepared my presentation, I grappled with the cultural expectation to be positive and polished, while at the same time attempting to reconcile the conflicting expectation to be authentic. All the while, time marched on and definitions of what success looked like— before, during, and after the presentation—were in flux.

Looking back, I am struck by the amount of mental energy and physical discomfort the situation elicited, highlighting the fears we all have of public failure, our hopes for public

success, and the potential dangers, rewards, and related consequences of enhanced visibility in organizations.

By the time the ordeal was over, I was exhausted from the effort of trying to manage all of these factors, only to find myself almost immediately looking for the next challenge, well aware that "time waits for no man." A sense of success makes us feel safe and secure. However, unfortunately, this sense expires almost immediately in the pace of the modern world.

Deep examination and reflection have clarified for me the impossibility of my situation—and the futility of the overall situation I believe we all share. By normalizing and requiring people to be unfailingly positive, project an image of perfection, and maintain the façade of being capable of achieving difficult outcomes effortlessly, we make authenticity impossible to achieve—and, furthermore, the whole situation (achievement of a sense of lasting success) in these modern times is particularly frustrating and unattainable, as expectations for continuous self-reinvention only serve to exacerbate the paradox.

In essence, through iterating this project, I have come to realize that the achievement of success is ethereal and fleeting at best—perhaps experienced and savored for a moment and then almost instantly reframed. In a way, it is freeing to notice that it is impossible to succeed in perpetuity—and to allow the possibility that, as in my situation, striving for success can create more misery than value.

Project 4 – Co-Creation of Success through Relational Recognition and Validation

Introduction

Overview

In this fourth and final project, I continue to explore the question: What does it mean to be successful in organizations today?

In this piece, I examine the social/relational aspects of success, considering how our relationships with others enable and constrain us in our pursuit for and sense of success.

Specifically, I investigate:

- How are our aspirations for and definitions of success shaped by our relationships and interactions with others?

- What is the role of social validation or recognition in relation to the concept of success?

These are critical questions and concepts, as many individuals and groups ignore, downplay, or are unaware of the importance of interpersonal influences on the concept of success; this lack of attention and awareness leads to a limited understanding and truncated view of what is truly going on in today's organizations when we speak about success.

To ground this inquiry, I begin with an overview of the contextual framework of my organizational situation and then examine two narratives from my own recent experiences at work.

Context

As mentioned in previous projects, I work in Human Resources (HR)—focused on leadership development—at the headquarters of Pharma, a global pharmaceutical company, which, like many companies today, is in the midst of massive, ongoing restructuring projects stemming from globalization and the digitization of the workplace. The HR function represents one of these ongoing restructuring projects; as a result of our multi-year reorganization, we expect to improve our efficiency and effectiveness while reducing HR headcount by nearly 30% (~700 people) globally.

The process put in place to accomplish this task requires many HR employees to re-apply for their jobs, generally starting with the re-selection of the highest-ranking roles in the function and working outward from there. The multiple rounds of interviewing and rehiring have resulted in a situation that some have described as similar to the children's party game "musical chairs," a contest of elimination in which participants walk in circles around a group of chairs while music plays in the background. When the music stops, the players each scramble to find a seat; those left standing are removed from the game. The "chairs" in this large restructuring process are, unfortunately, people's jobs, and the music playing in the background is less like "Pop Goes the Weasel" and more akin to a dirge.

Unfortunately, like many people today, our HR employees are juggling numerous concerns in addition to maintaining employment. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in most of Pharma's HR professionals globally working from home for extended periods, adjusting to physical separation from colleagues in an attempt to keep themselves and their families safe. Additionally, as a result of the pandemic, in many countries economies are shrinking, unemployment is rising, and there are disagreements about how best to keep both populations and economies healthy. Furthermore, in the United States and elsewhere, protests are erupting in response to recent racial injustices, unsettling societies, and forcing individuals and institutions to examine their relationships to systemic racism, oppression, and inequality. A sense of apprehension and scarcity seems to pervade daily life for many. All of these factors serve as the backdrop to the following narratives, both of which highlight the social/relational aspects of success, though from different angles.

Unfortunately, throughout this period, the Covid-imposed isolation allowed only remote interactions, utilizing technology which limited access to informal interactions and feedback; most exchanges had to be conducted via email/chat and/or scheduled in advance.   The truncated Zoom-only environment for live interactions cut down significantly on casual exchanges, enforced politeness by curtailing the possibility of interruptions and side conversations, minimized visibility to body language, and eliminated access to off-screen behavior. As a researcher, this led me to pay even closer attention to my own experiences, and more deeply examine/mine the access I did have to others in a minute manner. As a result, the following narratives are detailed in their relaying in Part 1 and, in Part 2, I strive to make clear ties to external theories, extrapolating and testing key learnings in an ongoing

manner as I iterated the project. Conclusions are drawn together in the final section, providing key insights into the dynamic theme of success in organizations.

Part 1: Narratives

Narrative 1: The Fragile Nature of Success

As part of the reorganization referenced above, I recently accepted a new position on one of the senior HR leadership teams as the Head of Leadership Development for Pharma (a big promotion for me as I increased my scope of responsibility from my prior focus on the development of ~800 executive and high potential leaders to ensuring the development of all leaders at every level across our large global organization).

The application and interview process was lengthy and proved to be an emotional rollercoaster as I wrestled with reconciling my hopes and aspirations for myself with how I might be perceived and accepted (or not) by others.

With encouragement from my former manager and colleagues, I put great effort into my application for the position and was gratified to be accepted into the interview process (which involved leadership potential assessments and interviews). This progression from application to interview process felt like validation that I was seen as having the potential to fill the role. I felt buoyed by the sense that I was recognized as "executive material," and I began to allow myself to entertain the possibility of successfully obtaining the role.

This affirmation immediately, yet subtly, began to change my behavior at work; I noted how the recognition translated into a slight elevation of confidence and led me to start acting differently. I began speaking up more in meetings and stating my opinions more clearly and directly. In my daily work, as I attended meetings and responded to emails, I started to imagine and "practice" how it might feel to already inhabit the role, essentially beginning to conduct myself as I imagined an executive would behave. As a result of these shifts in my thoughts and behaviors, I noticed how people responded differently to me—looking to me more often for direction and decision-making.

Upon completing the interview process, I was unsure of how I had come across or where I stood in relation to the other applicants. In typical fashion, the reactions and feelings of the selection panel and assessment results were hidden until the final verdict was revealed. As

the days passed and I heard nothing, I began to fret and doubt myself. At one point, when I viewed a meeting on someone else's calendar that looked suspiciously like an appointment to tender an offer for the position, I fell into the depths of depression, convinced the role was going to another candidate. I was disappointed, but more than that, I felt discounted and unseen—unrecognized and invalidated. I lost focus on my work, I was more tentative in meetings, and, as more time passed with no additional information, I began to consider my options for alternative jobs/companies. All the negative or constructive feedback I had ever been given revisited me, reinforcing my overall conclusion that I had been deemed "not good enough." I debated whether I agreed with this (yet to be confirmed) conclusion and felt unsure of where I stood—did I really believe I was fit for this job, or not? I felt trapped in purgatory, my confidence and hopes for my career dwindling by the day, as I waited for the decision of the selection committee.

When I finally received the call and was offered the job, I was understandably relieved and excited. I realized that a long held professional goal had been achieved: as a leadership development professional, I had reached the most senior position in the company. From a fairly objective standpoint, this felt like success. Perhaps more importantly, I felt valued, seen, and validated; others saw the potential that I hoped for in myself. I celebrated privately with my husband and family that evening, toasting the promotion and looking forward to the future.

In the days following my acceptance of the job offer, I was surprised to observe how quickly I shed the angst, anxiety, and lack of confidence I felt leading up to the offer. I had gone from being fraught with uncertainty and insecurity to experiencing a sense of serenity, safety, self-assuredness, and ease. With my place secured and an accompanying sense of validation, I was ready to move forward, focus, and show up in a way that would have proved a struggle weeks before.

At the same time, I was aware that, while the interview panel and hiring manager had validated me, there were still many others I hoped would also affirm my selection for the role—namely my peers, former colleagues, and the organization I was meant to lead. How would they react to the announcement? Would they agree with the selection committee, have reservations, or both?

Soon, announcements regarding the appointments of the new leadership team members (including my own) were posted. While many affirming messages arrived, it was fewer than I expected. My former manager remarked, "Your inbox must be full of congratulatory emails!" Feeling a bit ashamed, I smiled vaguely and demurred, murmuring, "Mmmm-hmmm…," wondering at the gap between our expectations and the reality I was experiencing.

I considered possible reasons for the relatively quiet response. Was it due to the unusually high volume of announcements (approximately twenty all at once)? The lack of publicity (the announcements were not pushed via email to the HR community, as was customary in the past; they were merely posted on a website)? A general lack of enthusiasm for/agreement with my appointment?

Perhaps it was simply an exceptionally difficult time to acknowledge the success of others. As Gore Vidal once said, "Every time a friend succeeds, I die a little."[6] I am sure many of my colleagues were simply preoccupied with their own situations; after all, the new leadership team (me included) had just taken several of the ever-reducing number of spots in the game of musical chairs while the rest of the HR organization was still circling the seats—and would be for some time.

While I was beginning to settle into my new role, many of my colleagues were not yet feeling safe, seen, validated, or valued, and the sense of anxiety was palpable. For example, shortly after my appointment was announced, invitations for virtual coffee meetings from HR colleagues started appearing on my calendar. Later, when I requested a group of volunteers to help think through the evolving leadership development strategy, I was flooded with emails highlighting skills, experience, and capabilities. This all appeared to be evidence that others wanted to be seen and recognized, and possibly attempt to shore up their chances for maintaining employment.

As I met with various colleagues, it felt as though they interpreted the fact that I accepted their meeting invitations and interacted with them as additional assurance that they were visible to someone "important" and stable in the chaos of the transformation. In the course

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[6] 1973 February 4, New York Times, Section: Book Review, *Writer as Wretch and Rat* by Wilfrid Sheed, Quote Page 2, Column 1, New York.

of our conversations, many people made statements such as, "I just wanted to make myself known to you," or, "I wanted to make sure you know who I am and what I do," expressing their fear and sense of invisibility. I felt worried that they were leaving these meetings with a false sense of security; I was careful not to make any commitments or promises, or to mislead anyone.

Once the announcement was released, a "publicity tour" of sorts began, starting with the opportunity for some new leadership team members to introduce ourselves at a global HR webcast. We had a briefing call ahead of time, at which we were coached regarding questions that would be asked, and appropriate responses vetted. We were encouraged to be sensitive to the situation of others (Black Lives Matter, Covid-19, general uncertainty and unrest, etc.); the communications lead summed it up, stating, "Don't come across as too happy or excited." During the webcast, as per custom, an anonymous polling tool was open for attendees to post questions; throughout the session, these would be voted up or down by attendees and the top questions would be answered in order. When I finished my introduction and turned to the dynamic list of questions, I was shocked at the content of the questions and comments that were being voted up—some felt like direct attacks on the qualifications of the new leadership team members (though no one was mentioned by name); others were critiques of the selection process itself (e.g. Why was there not more diversity on the new leadership teams? Was it really a fair process? Could these people effectively lead HR?—all of which seemed a bit ironic, given HR was using its own hiring practices). Clearly, however, there was at least some sense of doubt that the "right" people had been selected for the roles.

I felt unsettled and concerned, but came away with a deeper understanding of the collective perspective of the HR community. It was a poignant reminder that my fellow leadership team members and I could not rely on position alone to indicate success or create effective relationships in our new roles. Later in the webcast, as additional details regarding next steps in the transformation and ongoing hiring process were covered, the prioritized questions began to shift, highlighting the fears and anxieties of my HR colleagues (e.g. Who will assess our capabilities and whether or not we are deemed "fit" for the next round of hiring? How will this happen? Why are you continuing to progress at such a rapid pace with this reorganization—as though nothing else is going on right now [a global pandemic, wide-spread protests, etc.]?).

I left the webcast humbled by the critical nature of the feedback and the reminder of the stark contrast between my "safe" situation and the uncertainty being experienced by the rest of the HR organization. I met later that day with my new colleagues on the leadership team, where we determined, in spite of the ongoing game of musical chairs, to find ways to connect with the broader HR community to help them feel more seen, valued, and understood.

The above narrative highlights the fragility of the sense of self, demonstrating how behaviors and thoughts are not immune to social influence; rather, they shift as a result of social validation—or its absence. The example also draws attention to how our sense of and aspirations for success are shaped through our relationships and interactions with others. Before further examination (which will take place in Part 2 of this project), I will provide an additional example, which further highlights the social/relational nature of success.

Narrative 2: Power and Politics at Play—Allyship

The Pharma Women's Network (PWN) is an internal organization focused on supporting and advancing the interests of women at Pharma globally, and is comprised of several regional women's groups. The PWN is led by three women from one division of Pharma's American affiliate and is heavily populated by American members, with a smaller representation of members from Western Europe and other regions of the world. This reflects, to a certain extent, the felt importance of Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) across the company, with American grassroots organizing efforts passionately leading the charge and the rest of the organization showing varying levels of interest—and significantly less tangible commitment—to the cause, often due to perceived lack of relevance and/or priority.

In recent months, unbeknownst to me (or anyone in HR?) the PWN had formed a small team and had begun working with a large consulting company to develop an "allyship"[7] program for leaders. The choice of allyship as a topic was based on research the team conducted

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[7] Allyship is a topic/term that currently has no consistent definition. The draft definition proposed by the Women's Network is as follows: "Allyship is the intentional practice of using our unique position to equalize opportunities for an individual or group of people who face systemic barriers to accessing those opportunities."

(mainly in the United States) to determine an area of need which the Network could target on behalf of its members.

Funding for the development of the program had been provided by the American affiliate and the initiative was being sponsored by one of the (very powerful) affiliate heads. Mirroring the financial situation in the pharmaceutical industry as a whole, the American affiliate at Pharma (and thereby the affiliate heads) is especially influential because pharmaceutical revenue from sales in the United States far exceeds that of any other part of the world. In addition, the American affiliate at Pharma has been the main driver of successful innovation at the company, further compounding the power and status of this part of the organization.

While the US affiliate head paid for the development of the allyship program, she had not allocated additional funds for the actual implementation of the recently designed program, likely assuming the rollout of such a program would be managed by/in conjunction with Leadership Development (my organization) and/or D&I (the responsibility of my new colleague and fellow leadership team member, Noah).

A few days prior to officially starting in my new role, the three PWN leads sent an email approaching Noah and me with a request to meet to discuss support for implementation of the allyship program. Shortly thereafter, the five of us gathered via Zoom to talk about the goal of the PWN, which, the leads explained, was to roll out the program they had designed as soon as possible, targeting the most senior leaders in the organization.

As the meeting progressed, I tried to maintain an open mind, but I was wary. I listened as the leads explained how the new allyship program should be mandatory for all executives and how they expected implementation of the program to create accountability for senior leaders to demonstrate allyship on behalf of minority groups (including women) at Pharma. Additionally, the leads were proposing that leaders' annual performance reviews include an evaluation of their allyship activities and impact. Essentially, they wanted to use the allyship program to force the validation and recognition of disempowered groups at Pharma; through the implementation of the program, they hoped to compel a change in the hearts, minds, and behaviors of executive leaders, transforming them from a constraining factor in the careers of women and other minorities at Pharma to enablers of opportunity and success.

As we discussed their proposal and the content of the program itself, I identified several major concerns. From my point of view and prior experience as a leadership development professional, the red flags surrounding this initiative were both abundant and significant: a stand-alone program, inadequate sponsorship to drive attendance or application, an expensive vendor with more interest in invoicing than impact, a requirement for mandatory attendance, a lack of integration into business priorities, implications for executive performance management, and more. Without going into detail here, as it is not the focus of this project, there are limitations to the programmatic aspects of the field of leadership development (see, for example, Mowles, 2016; Stacey, 2012). The PNW leads' proposal hit all the major assumptions embedded in the instrumentalization of leadership development in which people often have false expectations, ridiculous aspirations, and unrealistic fantasies about how tips, tricks, tools, and training can "fix" organizational ailments (see, for example, Stacey, 2012). It was clear to me that such a program would likely change nothing and would have little, if any, lasting impact; in fact, it might have a detrimental effect to the intent of the Women's Network as many leaders (particularly those outside the US) would likely resent being forced to attend such a program and would question the prioritization of such an initiative without seeing a direct connection to broader business and/or leadership development strategies.

Furthermore, I was personally irritated that the group had not previously connected with anyone from the Leadership Development or D&I functions (e.g. my predecessor or any others) who could have helped earlier on to determine whether or not (and, if so, when) to pursue the development of such a program. In my view, the scenario being presented was exactly the type of situation we attempt to avoid in the field of development (i.e. initiatives that waste time and money—and ultimately accomplish very little). My irritation was compounded by the fact that, since stepping into my new role, my inbox was full of similar requests from both within and outside the company. Within any given week, I typically receive at least a dozen passionately proposed leadership development initiatives/ideas, often based on the latest book, trend, or viral TEDx video. The PWN leads' appeal was but one of many from a variety of "special interest groups" trying to shoehorn their agenda into the lives of leaders at Pharma, all accompanied by a sincere belief that their proposed solution would resolve the world's (or at least Pharma's) ills. This request felt like more noise

as I was struggling to clarify priorities and—just a short time into my new job—I was already tired of saying no.

The meeting with the PNW leads ended on a noncommittal note and I quickly scheduled a private follow up Zoom call with Noah. I vented to him, sharing my frustration, and noting that, in the same way I, as someone with minimal scientific background, would not waste time and resources by entering a lab and attempting to cure cancer, I would not expect these people, with backgrounds in fields such as science, engineering, and sales, to be designing D&I/leadership development interventions—can we not agree that we should leave the work to the experts? I did not feel that the PWN leads were trying to usurp my territory and did not feel threatened; mainly, as mentioned above, I was simply annoyed and frustrated at the time and resources this particular initiative had already taken. As is typical in such situations, the PWN leads had fallen in love with their solution; I, however, knew it was not viable in its current state—and would require significant effort and resources (that I was not currently willing to allocate) to get there.

Noah, who was new to the company, pointed out, giving the PNW leads the benefit of the doubt, that the organizational structure of Pharma is large and complex and it can be difficult to know when and with whom one needs to consult/partner. We agreed that, like the others pushing their programs and initiatives, their intentions were good and these missteps were likely not calculated, but simply naïve.

Via the video screen, I continued my rant, stating that I was confident that the vendor involved was not naïve and was taking advantage of the women's organization, the current social/political climate, and the transition in leadership within the HR function; they were out to profit as much as possible in whatever way they could and were likely adding pressure to the PNW leads to "strike while the iron is hot."

As he worked to calm me down and put things in perspective, Noah agreed that this was all likely true, however, he emphasized that we needed to exercise diplomacy and tread carefully. Noah concurred that the initiative was immature and unrealistic, but pointed out that we could not be perceived as running away from it, given the intent of the program — who would not agree that women and minorities need more organizational support at Pharma? — and taking into account the broader context of recent social protests regarding the systemic oppression of minorities. By not promoting the program, he pointed out, we

could be seen to be signaling that women/minorities were not worth supporting, which was certainly not our intention; we would need to carefully decline to promote the program.

In addition to paying attention to how our disapproval of the program might appear, as both Noah and I were new in our positions, we shared a heightened awareness that we needed to show up with our best foot forward to build our credibility, our reputations, and our relational equity during this period of transition. Both of us wanted our first months in role to be marked by successful initiatives and interventions that would create lasting and significant positive impact in the organization, rather than by something as ineffectively conceived as this allyship program. In this way, both of us felt our identities as plausible professionals were at stake.

Noah's situation was somewhat more tenuous than my own, which seemed to influence his particular desire for caution; in my case, both I and the function of Leadership Development are fairly well established at Pharma, whereas Noah was a newcomer stepping into a recently-created position (formerly, Pharma had a handful of regional leaders in the D&I space, with no Global Head of D&I formally in charge). Therefore, Noah was particularly focused on making strong first impressions and positioning himself well with the senior members of the organization, whom he would need to influence over time as he pressed for global/comprehensive D&I-related changes at the company (preferring, for example, to prioritize more high profile or critical topics such as gender parity in compensation or minority representation in patient clinical trials).

Politically, in light of this context and because we were working at and talking about the highest levels of the organization, we both felt a need to actively manage the situation. Noah and I were very aware that our key stakeholders were our new manager (Peter), the US affiliate head (who would receive updates via the PWN leads), and the other senior executives (the target audience) throughout the organization; we needed to keep them all happy to ensure our success as individuals. Noah and I were gatekeepers in a way— protecting the reputations and interests of both ourselves and these key stakeholders, ensuring the executives were not bothered by the trivial behind-the-scenes details of how leadership development programs/D&I initiatives are selected and, in this case, that they— as senior leaders—continued to be perceived (individually, if not collectively) as supportive

of women and other minorities—all while ruffling as few feathers as possible throughout the process.

The constrained email/video-only environment mentioned earlier limited my direct access to information regarding the feelings or reactions elicited of the PWN leads as a result of these meetings, though I have no doubt that these were more fully revealed in private discussions they held among themselves. Speculating, however, I sensed that the three PWN leads felt that they had momentum and they did not want to lose it. From their perspective, the allyship program remained a top priority for the organization.

I felt that the PWN leads pushed the program—which, during our conversations, they partially acknowledged was unlikely to have anything close to the desired impact if it were to be implemented in its current state—disproportionally hard, almost with a sense of desperation. They were (initially, at least) practically demanding implementation, stating that senior leaders must begin to stand up for and acknowledge the aspirations and capabilities of minorities at Pharma. At one point, as voices began to rise and statements became more clear and direct, I could sense that they were on the verge of threatening to escalate the conflict to the US affiliate head and claim that Noah and I were standing in their way; this would likely have created an uncomfortable and time-consuming situation which would ultimately achieve the same result (i.e. with Noah and I making the final decision).

Concerned about the politics and optics involved in the situation, I arranged for a short meeting with Noah and Peter. We agreed upon an aligned strategy and approach—our united response would be to acknowledge the request and the work that had been done—without providing any concrete or immediate commitment for further support or funding. This alignment session also helped prepare us all for any escalation that might occur should the US affiliate head (or any other senior leaders who caught wind of the situation) object to our stance.

During this period of time, Noah and I patiently endured two additional meetings with the PNW leads in which they continued to advocate for the rollout of the allyship program. In both sessions, I voiced my concerns, and between the meetings I sent a strongly-worded email (vetted first with Noah and Peter) clearly articulating my reservations regarding the program. I re-emphasized my firm belief that we would be wasting money by investing any further time or resources on the initiative at this point in time, especially given the fact that

Noah and I were both tasked with refreshing the Leadership Development and D&I strategies as one of the first priorities in our new roles. I stressed that, if the topic of allyship does not align with either/both strategies and/or is not determined a priority, the program would not move forward. In the meantime, I offered some flexibility: should they be able to come up with funds locally, they could feel free to pilot the program regionally in the United States, and we would use the feedback to inform the possibility of a broader rollout, pending strategic alignment.

Eventually, however, realizing Noah and I were not willing to fully support their proposal, and knowing that they would not be able to proceed without our buy-in and financial backing, they agreed to pause their efforts until we had a chance to more fully flesh out and articulate the D&I/Leadership Strategies. We would then evaluate the idea of how the concept of allyship would (or would not) fit into these frameworks and then whether the program should be advanced (in its existing or an altered state).

Since this time, we have had a few follow up conversations, discussing updates to the D&I and Leadership Development strategies, but with Noah and I continuing to reinforce the lack of impetus to launch the program broadly. In these meetings, the PWN leads continued to advocate for program implementation, though more deferentially over time. We found a way for them to utilize some of the content in initiatives such as "D&I Week" and U.S.-based D&I workshops; these concessions, I believe, helped the PWN leads to justify some of the time and effort already invested in the program and provided an opportunity for them to save face with their constituents and sponsor, while relieving pressure on Noah and me to initiate a global rollout.

This example, which is typical of everyday life in organizations, looks simple on the surface; a common example of negotiation—in this case about whether or not to implement a leadership development program—takes place. As evidenced in the relaying of the narrative, I initially bought into this guise of simplicity, focusing mainly on the flaws in the program itself. One can also fairly easily recognize that the narrative is an example of a minority group attempting to gain recognition/validation and increase opportunities for success, a perspective in which Noah and I were deeply embedded and hyper-aware of in our conversations regarding how to reject the allyship program with minimal disruption. Both of these (and other) surface themes, however, were running parallel to deeper, more

intricate forces at play involving personal agendas, history, power, and organizational politics—all shaping how we related to each other, and how we thought about and attempted to negotiate success.

As I reflected more thoroughly with each iteration of this project, I became increasingly curious about our conversations and exchanges as each person or party vied for their version of success. I began to further understand the dynamics of the situation, including how my unique role as a leader in the organization—a leader who had been recently promoted and was trying to find her footing (power and purchase)—influenced the interactions and outcomes. Furthermore, I came to recognize the fractal nature of how such local interactions, which ultimately enable and constrain possibility not only for the individuals directly involved, but also impact the broader organizations, communities, networks, and societies those individuals inhabit.

I will further explore these topics in Part 2 of this project.

Part 2: Exploring the Relational Nature of Success

In this section, I will demonstrate that, due to the social nature of organizations, our relationships with others inform what we attempt to achieve at work, how we try to achieve it, and how we feel when we succeed or fail. I use the narratives above to illustrate how success is a fluid concept that is continuously co-created through our relationships and the validation or invalidation of others.

I build a case founded on the work of pragmatists such as George Herbert Mead, who believed that humans are inherently social beings, sociologist Norbert Elias, who reinforced the idea of the inescapable interdependence of individuals, and sociologist Ian Burkitt and philosopher Charles Taylor, who both emphasize the influence of the social environment on how we think, feel, and behave. All of these thought leaders (along with others I will reference) agree that we co-create meaning and select our behaviors through our interactions with each other.

Additionally, I incorporate the theory of Complex Responsive Processes of Relating into my argument (see Griffin, 2003; Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2012; Stacey & Mowles, 2016). This perspective also acknowledges our inexorable interconnectedness and posits that all aspects

of our lives are informed by others. By considering our daily lives in organizations as being comprised of complex responsive processes of relating, we can see that via our communication and interaction with others, we both form and are being formed by individuals, groups, and societies. This ongoing contention and negotiation creates a situation that both enables continuity and allows for potential transformation as the emerging future is constructed through our everyday interactions.

With this sense of dynamic evolution in mind, I will now apply these concepts to the topic of success, exploring relevant research and utilizing the context of my narratives to deepen the investigation. Reiterating my core questions from the introduction, I will now consider:

- How are our aspirations for and definitions of success shaped by our relationships and interactions with others?

- What is the role of social validation or recognition in relation to the concept of success?

Let me begin with the first question. To start, I will discuss the common Western individualistic view of success, and then explain why I believe this is a misconception, arguing the case that our ideas and definitions of success are, instead, powerfully shaped by others.

Individualism and the Social Formation of Success
Masters of Our Own Destiny?

In Western society, it is common to say (and even believe) that the opinions of others do not matter. From this individualistic perspective, we are each independently responsible for our own success or failure (Baker & Kelan, 2019; Beck, 2000; Scharff, 2016).

Capitalizing on this way of thinking, the business sections of bookshops today are full of bootstrapping anthems encouraging us to come up with our own, unique, and individualized visions for, and definitions of, success, and to take responsibility for its achievement. We are expected to have "internalized the perspective of the self as a 'business,' completely agentic, productive, and separate from others" (Baker & Kelan, 2019, p. 71). According to psychologist/professor Svend Brinkmann (who critiques this line of thinking), we are taught,

…[the] individual is responsible for their own destiny and success in life…They're left to find their own direction in life—and to quantify success in that endeavor in their own way—because all answers come from within. (2017, p.113)

In addition to the business literature, there is a whole bestselling genre of books, aptly termed "self-help," reinforcing the independent/individualistic mentality surrounding success. The implied message in most of these tomes boils down to the idea that you can (and should) help yourself—and that you alone are responsible for your own success or failure (Brinkmann, 2017; Ehrenreich, 2010). As Brinkmann summarizes,

The message is that everything is possible if you believe in it enough and want it enough. If things don't work out, it's because you haven't mobilized enough will and motivation. (2017, p. 78)

The benefits of such positive and aspirational thinking are not entirely unfounded—a positive attitude has been shown to have an advantageous impact on one's career (Ehrenreich, 2006; 2010). Indeed, this is the message of writers such as Norman Vincent Peale[8], grandfather of the self-help movement and author of the iconic book *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952), a guide to developing an optimistic outlook in order to clarify and reach your goals. Peale, through his writings and speeches, is well known for his role in instilling and reinforcing this individualistic, positive way of thinking in Western culture. In his work, he enumerates a multitude of examples of how individuals have seemingly independently secured their success—often in the face of numerous daunting challenges— through the virtues of hard work and a positive attitude.

Historically, the ideal of independently charting your own course and becoming the master of your own destiny is a relatively recent phenomenon that has become deeply embedded in modern consciousness. This movement toward individualism and instrumental reason is

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[8] Note that while Peale was known for his work popularizing the concept of positive thinking, he was also the pastor of Marble Collegiate Church in New York from 1932-1984, which twice-impeached former President Donald Trump attended in his childhood and where Trump married his first wife, Ivana. Peale was also a personal friend of former US president, Richard Nixon, the only US president to have resigned from office (Peale, 1952/2019, Location 40).

partially a byproduct of societal changes such as industrialization, greater mobility, and urbanization (Han, 2015; Rosa, 2013, 2019, 2020; Taylor, 1991).

A Tendency to Deny External Forces

With this self-oriented view, it is common to discount the role of outside variables that may support or inhibit our aspirations or achievements. For example, built into the idea of "allyship" (the focus of the program in the second narrative)—and perhaps partially behind the pressure for the program rollout—is the assumption that if an ally simply opens the door to opportunity, once inside, the oppressed minority will be able to succeed (through hard work and a positive attitude), regardless of other barriers.

Indeed, research on career success shows that individuals tend to acknowledge, but significantly downplay, the societal constraints working against them (Baker & Kelan, 2019; Crozier, 1999; McDonald & Hite, 2008). For example, researchers Baker and Kelan found, in their recent work examining how female executives explain their success, that many executive women remain emotionally invested in upholding the individualistic ideal that if they persevere, they will be successful regardless of significant social, political, or historical factors that constrain the ability to succeed (2019).

Indeed, this was (and still is, to a certain extent) true in my case. Along with many Americans of my generation, I was brought up according to the doctrine of independence (see Project 1), leaving me with a deeply instilled sense that success comes down to me—in spite of larger trends. For example, in applying for my new role, I viewed the restructuring as an opportunity to chart a new course for myself; I was determined that I would not fall victim to external forces. Instead, I would proactively seize the opportunity embedded in this reorganization to find a good—nay, *better*—place for myself; I would not sit back and let the chips fall where they may—I would try to remain positive and work hard to ensure my success. While I recognized that the interview panel would ultimately make the decision regarding whether to hire me or not, I felt fully responsible for painting myself in the best light possible: highlighting my skills and abilities, speaking inspiringly and with authority and passion, and clearly demonstrating my value and worth. Ultimately, to the greatest extent of my ability, forcing a decision in my favor.

It is important to closely examine this independent belief system because it can lead us to assume we exclusively own our success. In fact, I found myself somewhat puzzled—both surprised at and frustrated with myself—as I noticed and described, during the writing of my first narrative, how my thoughts and feelings shifted based on my interactions with others throughout the application, interview, and announcement phases of the selection process. I did not like the idea, even retrospectively, that I was not fully in charge of how I felt throughout the unfolding situation. Specifically, I recall feeling that having achieved this highest position in my field at Pharma should have entitled me to finally be free of the potentially constraining impact of others' opinions; I did not like to admit (or document!) that I still needed the initial and ongoing approval of others to feel successful, and was disappointed to find that this was the case. As Burkitt aptly states,

> …(through) the ideology of individualism, self-made individuals and self-interest can make our need for other human beings seem like a weakness to be denied, rather than a basic condition of human existence. (2008, p. 82)

This approach to life, however, does not adequately acknowledge the systemic and socially-created structures guarding the boundaries of success. As sociologist C. Wright Mills points out,

> …men do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction. The well-being they enjoy, they do not usually impute to the big ups and big downs of the societies in which they live. [They are] seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history… (1959/2000, p. 3)

Unfortunately and predictably, some individuals, regardless of their hard work and positive attitude, get lost in the fray of larger contexts or events.

In the metaphorical game of musical chairs at Pharma it is a fact that there will be 30% fewer chairs at the end of the HR restructuring process. Not everyone, no matter how positively they think or how hard they work, will be successful in finding a place in the end—clear evidence that there are forces beyond the self that enable/constrain our ability to succeed in a given context.

In the second narrative, part of the rationale for my dismissal of the allyship program likely stems from this socially common behavior of disregarding the influence or prevalence of significant obstacles and constraints, often resulting in a general disinterest in, detachment from, and denial of the plight of others. Being deeply steeped in the individualistic ideal and having recent, personal evidence that it can work (it did for me, anyway!) likely contributed to the fact that I had little patience for prioritizing the request to support the program or the need for a focus on allyship to play a key role in increasing opportunities for women and other minorities at Pharma. My own experience as an exception to the rule—finding ongoing immunity to broader trends—only served to further reinforce my denial; a familiar experience among many executives who have, almost by definition, navigated against the odds to achieve their positions.

An Individualistic Way of Thinking Can be Harmful

While an individualistic perspective may inspire action and hard work, there are also downsides to this mentality. Held, an award-winning professor of psychology, criticizes this mode of thinking and the recently emerged field of positive psychology, calling it "the tyranny of the positive" (2002). Philosopher and cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han also points out the negative outcomes of our typically self-centered, distorted worldview, the product of which is what he calls a "burnout society"—a culture in which people drive themselves to burnout through an incessant focus on individual achievement and aspiration (2015). Historian and social critic Christopher Lasch, in his work *The Culture of Narcissism* (1991), correlates the trend toward extreme individualism with a rise in narcissism; sociologist/political scientist Hartmut Rosa (2013, 2019, 2020) and philosopher Charles Taylor (1991) both point to increases in depression and despair due to this isolated way of thinking and living.

Expounding on the down side of this trend toward individualism, Taylor speaks critically about how the narrowing of focus to such a singular perspective has led to a loss of greater purpose and creates a world in which we are "enclosed in our own hearts" (1991, p.9). He notes,

> …the dark side of individualism is a centering on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society. (1991, p. 4).

In the context of success in the corporate world, the denial of the influence of others means we become highly focused on ourselves and our own individual successes, rather than a greater success (even the success of a department or a company—or, in the case of Pharma, the health of the patients we serve). While organizations are constantly trying to get employees to more deeply "buy into" the organizational mission or vision, from an individualistic standpoint, this aim becomes a distant shadow—a "nice to have"—for anyone who is focused on their own independent aspirations for success, recognition, or survival.

We see the impact of an individualistic way of thinking playing out in the above narratives. In each situation, each individual (myself included) was primarily focused on his/her own success in the given situation/moment. The bigger picture (e.g. the company, minorities, impact to society or patients, etc.) was taken into account to varying degrees, but most often as a secondary objective.

The corresponding emotions and behaviors of individualism were also evident. In the case of the first narrative, I was undoubtedly narcissistically focused on myself, directing my energy toward obtaining the position and receiving social validation and approval. According to the research mentioned above, it now comes as no surprise that when I was briefly convinced I had failed the interview, I felt a strong sense of isolation and despair and began berating myself with negative feedback—reviewing my shortcomings, considering what I should have done to ensure a better outcome, and disregarding other factors that may have been at play.

In the second narrative, as the PNW leads pressed for program implementation and Noah and I sought to establish ourselves in our new positions, our individual aspirations came into conflict and the larger goals/purpose (such as improving opportunities for women at Pharma and spending Pharma's money wisely to ensure maximum benefit to patients) faded even further into the background, becoming collateral as the discussions played out. Setting aside the fact that the allyship program was not well designed, Noah and I could have taken up the mantle to improve it and shore up its chances for a broad implementation and significant impact, but chose not to do so at the time. In my case, in addition to rationalizing/justifying

the minimizing of the need for such a program to myself (as mentioned above), the pressure for individual recognition and approval forced me into a "heads down" mode and a primary focus on my own success.

The Fallacy of Independence

While an individualistic perspective, including the idea that we are responsible for our own destinies, can provide a sense of control in what can feel like a chaotic world, this is too simplistic a view. In this way, individualism masks the social process of identity formation and transformation. The context in which we live cannot be overlooked; there are strong societal forces that shape us all. Burkitt summarizes this fact, stating,

> We are elements of our culture, time and place, and can never be abstracted from the social world. (2008, p.16)

Upon deeper examination, we may recognize that the situation is thoroughly social. In fact, paradoxically, we can only think of ourselves as highly individualized if we have been socialized to do so (Rosa, 2019; Taylor, 1991). Taking a step back, one can observe that we have been socially coached and guided to adopt an individualistic way of thinking; in other words, we have actually been *culturally conditioned* to believe and act as if we are *autonomous and independent thinkers*, responsible for our own success and happiness.

Indeed, our thinking itself, though commonly considered isolated in our minds, is not at all independent of the influence of others. Physician and biologist Ludwig Fleck, in a related vein in his book *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (1935/1979) which explains how scientific ideas change over time, talks about how—even in the case of scientific facts— we do not come to or create these truths individually. Fleck introduced the idea of "thought collectives," to which we all inherently belong as part of our membership in societies, families, groups, and organizations, and in which we create shared understandings and further reinforce, challenge, and evolve our thinking, both individually and collectively. The Pharma Women's Network, for example, represents a "thought collective." In an attempt to clarify the notion that we are *always* influenced by others, Fleck cites sociologist Ludwig Gumplowicz, who stated,

What actually thinks within a person is not the individual himself but his social community. The source of his thinking is not within himself but is to be found in his social environment and in the very social atmosphere he "breathes." His mind is structured, and necessarily so, under the influence of this ever-present social environment, and *he cannot think in any other way.* (Gumplowicz, 1905, p. 268—emphasis in original)

An individualistic way of thinking, in which one operates independently and is solely in charge of one's own ideas and destiny, also runs counter to the idea behind complex responsive processes of relating I touched on earlier. From this perspective, rather than operating as independent agents, we are all continuously emerging through our social interactions and are enabled and constrained by each other (Griffin, 2003; Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2012; Stacey & Mowles, 2016).

Elias, furthering the point, speaks about how we have become more interrelated and interdependent over time, emphasizing the ways in which we are inextricably linked to each other. To reinforce the inherent, interconnected nature of human society, Elias (1987/2001) reminds us of the object (a net) from which the concept of a "network" is derived. He states,

In such a net there are many individual threads linked together. Yet neither the totality of the net, nor the form taken by each thread in it, can be understood in terms of a single thread alone or even all the threads considered singly; it is understood solely in terms of the way they are linked, their relationship with each other. This linking gives rise to a system of tensions to which each single thread contributes, each in a somewhat different manner according to its place and function in the totality of the net. (1987/2001, p. 32)

Foulkes, a key figure in the foundation of group analysis, presented a similar idea in his concept, which he termed the "matrix," noting how the network of multiple relationships changes patterns as individuals negotiate acceptance, inclusion, and recognition in groups (1975).

Specifically regarding the topic of success, it has become clear to me that we are not only *not* solely in charge of our destinies and the achievement of our wishes, but our wishes themselves are also shaped by others; indeed, others are highly influential in shaping what

we aspire to and believe is possible for ourselves. Furthermore, as our identities and aspirations are formed through others, so are our tastes, opinions, and desires (Taylor, 1991). Moreover, the drive for fulfillment, without regard to our ties with others, makes a sense of individual achievement and fulfillment impossible (Han, 2015; Taylor, 1991). In other words, there is no individual recognition without social recognition, since we are socialized as to what is valuable—and what it means to be successful. This is highly applicable to the workplace, in which our interactions and relationships in organizations play a key role in this shaping.

Taylor, reinforcing the pervasiveness of social influence, points out the flaws in assuming we can create our individual aspirations in isolation, noting the fundamentally dialogical and relational character of human life and the fragility of our identity. He describes the lifelong, inescapable enigma:

> We are expected to develop our own opinions, outlook, stances to things, to a considerable degree through solitary reflection. But this is not how things work with important issues, such as the definition of our identity. We define this always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the identities our significant others want to recognize in us. And even when we outgrow some of the latter—our parents, for instance—and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live. (1991, p. 33)

As Taylor notes in the above quote, in addition to direct feedback provided by others (as in the case of verbal statements, observable gestures, etc.), we are also shaped by indirect or imagined feedback. Mead (1934/1962) developed the concept of the "generalized other" which represents our ability to take the attitude of others in society, based on our previous experiences and socialization, and imagine their responses to our actions. Concerned about what others might do or say, we attempt to anticipate interactions in an effort to achieve our desired outcome (Griffin & Stacey, 2006).   The "generalized other" is not always a homogenized whole or single individual; rather, the idea can take a plurality of forms, representing an individual, a group, or even a subgroup. From this standpoint, the conflictual nature of different groupings is highlighted and one can see how complexity may emerge in balancing these relationships and their potentially competing interests. The extent to which one values and identifies with these different groupings, along with our individual

aspirations, will inform our actions; and while some influences may be stronger than others, in reality, we are shaped by a plurality of voices (Burkitt, 2008).

For example, in the allyship narrative, based on my nearly 15 years at Pharma, including several years working directly with Pharma's top leaders, I had an augmented sense of the "generalized other" as it represents the executive population; based on my prior experiences and interactions, I was well versed in their typical expectations and interests. Without any direct contact or conversation with any of them on the allyship topic, I could predict their disapproval, frustration, and annoyance should they be confronted with a mandate to attend the proposed allyship program. This sense of the "executive generalized other" heavily influenced my thoughts and actions as I interacted with Noah, Peter, and the PWN leads. Based on my new position, this was an important subgroup to whom I should pay attention; I needed to affirm my membership in and allegiance to this new and powerful group more than I needed to engage with the subgroup of the Women's Network, even as a woman.

Another grouping of a "generalized other" also came into play in the form of "everyone else/society" as Noah and I contemplated how to handle the proposal for the allyship program. In addition to a desire to appear successful, reasonable, and in control in our new roles, the opinions of others were present in our thinking as Noah and I attempted to navigate the situation (e.g. How would it look—both internally to the employees of Pharma and externally to others outside the company—if the Heads of D&I and Leadership Development were perceived to be unsupportive of minority groups at Pharma? This would be career suicide).

Additionally, from an alternate perspective, the PWN leads were concerned about the opinions of their own "generalized other"—namely their members and their sponsor, who would likely be—to varying degrees—disappointed with anything less than an outcome indicating approval and a timely path forward for global program rollout. The "voices" of these "generalized other" groupings were present as we all worked toward defining the outcome of the allyship program.

In both my narratives, in spite of conditioning to believe comprehensively in our independence, there is an underlying awareness of these social forces. Interestingly, however, even with a modicum of awareness and acknowledgement of the influence of

others, the idea that we are not fully in control of or responsible for our own career fate (let alone our own thoughts) is particularly difficult to grapple with in Western culture due to our individualistic indoctrination (Ehrenreich, 2006). For example, as noted earlier, it remains deeply engrained that it is up to me alone to navigate the individual and societal barriers placed in my way; I have been taught that with hard work, a positive attitude, and a little luck, I can set and achieve my goals. It is only through deep exploration and reflection, as this project illustrates, that I have begun to acknowledge that there is more to it than I originally thought and have started to hold the concept and achievement of success more loosely, incorporating the social and relational into my aperture.

I recognize that I have been repetitively reinforcing the influence and importance of our socialization and relationships, however this is in an attempt to impress a sense of the strength and magnitude of this social conditioning. It is also, I realize, in part to remind myself of this fact as, while I have become more aware of this idea through writing this project, I find that I continue to struggle to maintain a grasp on an objective view of my own socialization. This is, in fact, evidence of and a demonstration that mindset is not something we can choose. I am caught in a paradox of being socialized to believe I am independent and can independently choose how I think about success and my ability to achieve it, when this, as I have pointed out at length in this paper, is not possible, given the inextricably social nature of the human experience. In my narratives, in my day to day, and in the documentation of this project, I find myself caught up in these individualistic notions of my independence: trying to isolate and protect myself—and believing that I am responsible for my own success—while coming to understand and accept the paradox that possibilities for success are both co-created with others and are dependent on our individual agency at the same time.

What Does it Mean to Achieve Career Success? A Socially Constructed Definition

An individualistic way of thinking is also pervasive in research conducted on career success, as evidenced by how career success is typically measured in academic studies. In most studies focused on career success, the definition of success is measured in two simple categories: objective success and subjective success. Objective success typically includes indicators such as salary and promotions, while subjective measures of success usually

attempt to gauge an individual's level of satisfaction or happiness in their job or career (Gunz & Heslin, 2005).

Reflecting upon my own experience in the first narrative, these two measures do reflect my experience/the way I was thinking about success, at least initially. I was pleased to have been promoted and given a higher salary, and I felt happy and "successful" in my new executive role.

The research literature generally neglects, however, to examine how Western society has shaped these two sets of indicators; looking closely, it is clear that we are viewing both objective and subjective measures through a socially conditioned, individualistic lens (Heslin, 2005).   The objective measures of success (e.g. salary, promotions) are socially defined ideals indicating capitalist values linked to the attainment of financial resources and individual power. The subjective measures, which seem (at least at first glance) comparably more personal (e.g. satisfaction with career), are also heavily influenced by the opinions and values of our families, peers, and the society in which we live (Gunz & Heslin, 2005).

Critiquing the narrow views career researchers typically take for granted, Gunz and Heslin (career researchers, themselves) expand upon the flaws in most research attempting to measure career success, asking such questions as,

> How much success does it take to constitute success? Where do the scale calibrations come from? Even if one were to adopt completely a subjectivist position and assume that the focal person alone decides on their success criteria, we have said nothing about the processes by which they make the selection. Are they guided purely by internal standards, such that they decide what matters to them, or do they derive their standards by comparing themselves with others? How easy is it for people to develop their "own" standards in the face of pervasive social influences? (2005, p. 107)

Reinforcing my argument that success is a socially constructed concept, Gunz and Heslin (2005) go on to observe that we tend to collude with others to adjust our views of success so that we can come to terms with and favorably make sense of our career accomplishments (or lack thereof). In other words, as we navigate our careers, we validate or negate each other's sense of career success—and a lack of validation/recognition from others can mean not being able to achieve a sense of success.

This more nuanced examination of success also reflects my experience. After the initial sense of achievement and excitement at having landed the new position passed, I was left to grapple with many of the above questions—and to attempt to navigate and negotiate an ongoing sense of success through reconciling my own perspective with the continuously fluctuating and unreliable validation and recognition of others.

This leads to a key topic: the importance of external recognition. I will now turn to my second key question, "What is the role of social validation or recognition in relation to the concept of success?"

The Social Shaping of Success

Building on the notion that we are both individually and socially formed, our view of ourselves and our assessment of having achieved success is determined by both ourselves and others. The validation of others is important because it informs and affirms our identity; we have an innate human need/universal desire to grow, to succeed, and to be recognized by others (Burkitt, 2008; Honneth, 1995; Mead, 1934/1962; Rosa, 2019; Taylor, 1991).

As Burkitt declares,

> The way we value ourselves depends on the dialogical relations we have to others and the level of recognition and respect we get from them. (2008, p. 150)

In fact, this need for affection, reassurance, and ratification of ourselves and our achievements from others has become a requirement in modern society (Lasch, 1991).

Taylor reinforces the importance of recognition as a key aspect of the social shaping of our identities, stating,

> My discovering my identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internalized, with others. That is why the development of an ideal of inwardly generated identity gives a new and crucial importance to recognition. My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others. (1991, p. 47-48)

Burkitt echoes this sentiment, stating,

It is in this mutual interaction and identification with others that a view of our own self is possible, because we judge our own conduct by viewing it as through the eyes of other people. Society, then, gives us a mirror to ourselves. (2008, p. 10)

Researchers McDonald and Hite (2008) provide a specific example of the influence of others on our ambitions. In their study regarding younger generations' ideas about career possibilities, they found that many young professionals' aims for success were fostered by teachers, bosses, and family members who encouraged them to strive for higher aspirations than they held for themselves.

In addition to specific individuals who may play a critical role in shaping our expectations for ourselves and/or validating our success, we also internalize the broader values of our society as we make our assessments for ourselves (and others). Mead's aforementioned concept of the "generalized other" comes into play here as we preemptively modify our actions with a preconceived set of societal responses in mind (1934/1962). In other words, both our aspirations and achievements are conferred and co-created through the attitude of the group toward us.

As Brinkmann states, the outcome of this dependency and how we come to internalize the "generalized other" can expand possibilities; however, it can also be considerably constraining. He explains,

The consequence of this is that you automatically criticize yourself when something is problematic: you internalize external social critique and transform it into inner self-criticism. (2017, p. 78)

This reinforces Han's (2015) previously mentioned concept of the "burnout society," which demands a constant and continuous drive for achievement based on the conviction that one is never "good enough."

In my first narrative, I recount how I applied for the position, but awaited validation and recognition from others that they saw my aspirations as reasonable and appropriate. I felt vulnerable and worried that I would be rejected, and then felt fortunate when I was validated and recognized, at least by the selection team.   I recognized on some level that this feedback would be important to how I thought about myself and my own potential.

Of course, recognition from others is in constant flux as we continuously negotiate our relationships with each other. Returning to the first narrative, I relate how my success was initially informed by the approval of those involved in the interview process. I soon came to realize, however, that it was not just my primary definition of success (landing the job) that mattered; my success would also be subject to the opinions of a broader community. In this way, my own opinion of whether or not I am succeeding will continuously be influenced by others.

In the second narrative, the Women's Network leads were speaking on behalf of groups that have been systemically invalidated and unrecognized over time. They represented a community that is actively attempting to negotiate further opportunities for success. By closing the door (at least temporarily) on their proposed allyship program, they may have felt Noah and I were not validating the worth of this community—ultimately perpetuating the ongoing constraint of minority career aspirations at Pharma.

An Evolutionary Perspective on the Socialization of Success

Pausing now to take a (rather large) step back, we can consider why success is important to us as a species. There is a connection between the social aspects of success and our evolutionary history. The drive for success is so engrained in life itself—among all species and living things—that success, as noted in my second project, is indeed correlated with survival, both within and outside the workplace.

Darwin's theory of evolution is based on the concept that we evolve to survive and thrive; he encompassed all of nature, including humans, in this theory (1859). To Darwin, the ultimate definition of success is *survival* and *reproductive* success; in other words, the ability to stay alive and to produce offspring.

Success in day-to-day matters, from an evolutionary standpoint, can be viewed as an advertisement of fitness. It implies increased access to resources, status within a group, and opportunities for sexual partners and reproduction; in today's corporations, the situation is strikingly similar.

Evolutionary theorist Christopher Boehm speaks about how we have been both socially and evolutionarily conditioned to exhibit appropriate behaviors that help the larger group. In his

work *Moral Origins* (2012), he speaks about how humans have developed a code of ethics, which includes an expectation to share, that enhances our collective chances for survival. Success puts us in a position to be altruistic, sympathetic, and generous to others—all traits that enhance our fitness through their value to our peers.

Speaking of humans as a social species able to work cooperatively to survive, we can see how individual success can translate into group success through an evolutionarily engrained desire to behave according to a moral code of ethics/behavior. In a system of indirect reciprocity,

> …this meant that others were being helped on the general assumption that "if I'm generous to someone today, someone will be generous to me in my time of need."(Boehm, 2012, p. 166)

In other words, success allows for a generous approach—and increases the chances that such generosity will pay off handsomely for all of us in the long run.

Additionally, Boehm reinforces the idea that we have been conditioned—not just socially, but evolutionarily—to strive for success and to have that success recognized/validated as valuable by our peers. He points out that we keep each other in check socially, including with regard to success and pride, noting, for example that,

> All over the world, mobile hunter-gatherers use social control guided by moral rules to see to it that when a successful hunter kills a large mammal, his ego is held in check. (2012, p. 37)

The group will determine whether—and to what extent—to validate and recognize success. "Thus, even though the successful hunter's chest may be quietly swelling with pride, he'll shape his words very humbly…" in order to gain the respect of his peers (Boehm, 2012, p. 43).

When we were coached "not to appear too happy" on the webcast announcing our success, our evolutionary history was most certainly at play. The lack of emails acknowledging my appointment, whether intentional or not, also served to keep my ego in check. And, of course, the general context of the situation in the background throughout both narratives as referenced in the introduction (e.g. people dying due to the pandemic, rioting regarding racial injustice, etc.) brought the human need to survive (as in the game of musical chairs in

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HR) and obtain power and purchase (as in the allyship request) in these extremely uncertain times to the fore.

A Significant Complicating Factor: Power Relations

Underlying the questions regarding how aspirations, opportunities, and feelings of success are shaped through our relationships, are the power structures embedded in our relationships, organizations, and societies. A discussion and close examination of power is critical to understanding what influences our sense of success and our ambitions—and how our interactions with others with more/less power shape these.

Reflecting on my narratives and acknowledging that we all have dreams and ambitions, several questions arose in my mind: Who gets to pursue their dreams? Who decides? How are our goals and ambitions shaped (enhanced or diminished) through power dynamics in our relationships with others? As Burkitt states,

> …who we are, or can become, is often a political issue involving rights and duties fought over within society. Becoming who we want to be, if that is possible, often involves a political struggle. (2008, p. 4)

When speaking of validation, the recognition of some groups or individuals is more important than the recognition of others. Griffin and Stacey note,

> …as we enter into relationships we constrain and are constrained by others and, of course, we also enable and are enabled by others. Power is this enabling-constraining relationship where the power balance is tilted in favor of some and against others depending on the relative need they have for each other. (2006, p. 5)

The power structures embedded in our relationships, in other words, play a significant role in the recognition we seek; this, therefore, is the focus of the following sections.

Socially-Constructed Opportunities/Influences of Power and Recognition on Career Success

Returning to the topic of career success, researchers Ng et al. (2005) conducted an interesting study regarding the influence of relationships on career success (defined according to the traditional objective and subjective measures outlined earlier, but

specifically focused on upward mobility). Ultimately, Ng et al. found that career success is largely a function of two important factors: working hard and receiving sponsorship (2005). Depending on the society and/or organization, one may have more importance than another, but both are critical factors. They note that expecting that one can get ahead solely on the basis of one's own abilities and contributions is naïve. The assumption that we are competing with others in an open and fair contest for advancement/favorable career outcomes, with victory coming to those who are the most skilled, most willing to put forth the effort, and who demonstrate the greatest accomplishments, is only part of the story. Ng et al. note that, in addition to hard work and skill,

> Winners are those who receive greater sponsorship from the elites in their
> organizations. (2005, p. 369)

This recognition from powerful people, whether public or private, is important not only in socially validating individual aspirations for achievement, but in enabling and providing opportunities to obtain better career outcomes.

In their aforementioned study on future generations' ideas regarding career success, McDonald & Hite (2008) found that early-in-career employees are well aware of the power structures in organizations and how these may help or hinder their career success. Participants noted that "who you know" (including mentors, role models, and a significant professional network) is critical to career success and the ambitious among them took steps to ensure these important relationships were in place, on par with my recent coffee chats. This was also the idea behind the allyship program, which was specifically designed to force the creation and fostering of such relationships between those with more/less power at Pharma.

Robert Jackall, a sociologist who investigated how managers survive and succeed in corporations, reinforces the opinion that we must never underestimate the power of relationships, and—in particular—the power of relationships with the powerful (2009). These relationships require both access to the powerful and political skill on the part of the individuals seeking sponsorship. Looking with a somewhat cynical eye at power relations in the workplace, he states,

> For most managers, especially for those who are ambitious, the real meaning of
> work—the basis of social identity and valued self-image—becomes keeping one's eye

on the main chance, maintaining and furthering one's own position and career. This

task requires, of course, unrelenting attentiveness to the social intricacies of one's

organization. One gains dominance or fails depending on one's access to key

managerial circles where prestige is gauged precisely by the relationships that one

establishes with powerful managers and by the demonstrated favor such

relationships bring. (2009, p. 217)

This standpoint mirrors both Noah's and my own efforts to pay close attention to Pharma's

executives with an eye to building and maintaining key relationships for future success.

While, as a result of my promotion, I desired validation from colleagues throughout the

company, I quickly placed the highest priority on aligning myself with the top tier of the

organization, feeling the need to protect these relationships above all others. It was

imperative that I orient myself toward the power elite, identifying most closely with the

powerful executives who had recognized and promoted me in order to ensure my ongoing

success.

Returning now to the broader discussion of power:

Exploring the subjective weighting of some relationships versus others, philosopher Axel

Honneth states that recognition is valid only from people you recognize or respect yourself,

such as power groups in which you are or would like to be included (1995). When we are

acknowledged by those we perceive as powerful or important, this carries far more weight

than recognition by those we care less about or respect less. In other words, we place

different levels of importance on recognition from different groups; this, in turn, influences

how we interact with and respond to others.

For example, in the first narrative, I recall how I was hyper-aware of my speech and

comportment in the webcast. In this case, I cared very much about the recognition of my HR

colleagues (senior leaders from outside HR were not invited to the webcast) and thus I

attempted to present an "executive" identity that I hoped would be recognized and

validated by others. As political scientist/anthropologist James C. Scott mentions,

Being on stage in front of subordinates exerts a powerful influence on the conduct

and speech of the dominant. They have a collective theater to maintain which often

becomes part of their self-definition. Above all, they frequently sense that they perform before an extremely critical audience which waits in eager anticipation for any sign that the actors are losing their touch. (1990, p. 50)

This sentiment certainly reflects my experience as I watched the critical questions and comments being up-voted during the webcast. Though I was formally in a position of power, I needed to be recognized by subordinate groups. I was in a vulnerable position as I awaited their reactions, and the anonymity of the questioning tool left me and the other senior leaders vulnerable and exposed.

At the same time, the virtual coffee invitations that subsequently appeared in my calendar were often undergirded with overly polite and deferential comments. Scott points out:

On a daily basis, the impact of power is most readily observed in acts of deference, subordination, and ingratiation. (1990, p. 28)

In the context of Pharma's significant downsizing and as a result of my newfound position of power, I found that my ability to have an honest two-way conversation had been reduced due to the imbalance in power. Scott explains how power in combination with a precarious situation can converge to create a hyper-synthetic interaction, stating,

…one of the key survival skills of subordinate groups has been impression-management in power-laden situations…the more menacing the power, the thicker the mask. (1990, p. 3)

Perhaps these interactions will become more authentic and transparent when the dust settles and people have found their places, but maybe not, as power structures and the relationships therein are never fully stable and static.

In the second narrative, Noah and I held more power in the interactions with the Women's Network leaders, but this had to be made clear in the context of the conversation. The situation was complex due to the many forces and agendas involved beneath the surface discussion, but as I became more aware of the power distribution and power structures at play over the course of our discussions (e.g. the powerful affiliate, the lack of funding, the absence of any tie to business strategy, the possibility of framing Noah and me—or the

company at large—as unsupportive of minorities, etc.), this knowledge influenced how I handled the situation. With the freedom that a position of power imports, my actions were emboldened and I was able to be fairly blunt and direct about my opinions. In the end, as mentioned previously, I cared much less about the appreciation or recognition of the Women's Network leads and was instead focused on the inadequacy of the proposal at hand and on establishing/maintaining my professional position—particularly by aligning myself with the needs and interests of the senior leaders.

Reflecting back and critiquing my behavior, I see that I fell directly back into a pattern familiar to many leaders, focusing on quieting "distracting" voices that would diminish my ability to achieve my goals and force my own agenda, harkening again toward an independent way of thinking. This mirrors the general pattern of power relating in many companies and organizations, in which requests to do things differently are escalated with building hopes for change…until they are squelched by those with the most power, often for reasons unrelated to the request at hand. As in the case with the allyship program, the collective aspirations of a group often ultimately come down to conversations and interactions that occur among individuals, in particular individuals who hold power in a situation. Outcomes are at the mercy of the unfolding dialogue, subject to numerous influences (power, history, etc.), and enacted in the movement of the living present.

Power: From Courts to Corporations

Because of the power structures inherent to organizations, I am increasingly drawn to the analogy of leaders and leadership teams to the court societies of centuries past. Whereas once kings and queens ruled the land, with members of the court dictating appropriate/inappropriate behaviors, norms, and fashions, in today's corporations CEOs rule the domain, and the descending levels and layers of leadership teams make up the organizational courts and fiefdoms, with continuous vying for positions and status. In applying for the position as Head of Leadership Development, the interview panel represented the court. When I was appointed, I became a member of HR "royalty"—a high-standing position that, in many ways, had power and influence.

In his work, *The Civilizing Process* (1939/2000), Elias notes that the word "courtesy" originates from the court and court life, in which proper behavior and etiquette were

paramount. In this context, people took great pains to make themselves agreeable to royalty in hopes of making their fortune or winning the favor of the most important people of the court; this bears a striking similarity to how organizations function today, in which people observe and tread carefully, taking their cues from and modeling after those with the most power. As ever, remaining in favor is critical to success and allegiances and approval are important.

Additionally today, just as in times of court society, one must continuously be vigilant for organizational dangers—constantly looking out for the potential of poison in the goblet, aware of the location of the dagger in the tapestry, and able to decipher secret messages written with invisible ink. Speaking of the Middle Ages, but mirroring situations that may occur in corporations today, Elias notes, "Fear reigned everywhere; one had to be on one's guard all the time" (1939/2000, p. 164).

Jackall also describes how behaviors in organizations today are often shaped by fear, and advises on the best way to protect oneself and succeed in these highly politicized and volatile environments. His guidance bears great similarity to the counsel one might receive in the days of the royal courts; for example, he states,

> Above all, one must learn to streamline oneself shamelessly, learn to wear all the right masks, learn all the proper vocabularies of discourse, get to know all the right people, and cultivate the subtleties of the art of self-promotion. (2009, p. 78)

In today's corporations, however, with the flattening of organizational structures and reframing of the role of the leader as less hierarchical, it can be confusing who holds the power in a situation (Collinson, 2005). Sennett (2011) explains the confusion created by the trend for flattened organizations, stating that it

> …is a way of conveying the operation of command in a structure which no longer has the clarity of a pyramid—the institutional structure has become more convoluted, not simpler… domination from the top is both strong and shapeless. (Location 749-751)

In light of this, we are all attempting to feel our way through the less-visible power structures of modern organizations in which the autocratic is hidden and the democratic put

forward. Sennett points out, for example, within the compressed and confusing power structure, the role of the leader has become less transparent. As he scornfully remarks,

> …the fiction arises that workers and bosses aren't antagonists; the boss instead manages group process. He or she is a "leader," the most cunning word in the modern management lexicon; a leader is on your side, rather than your ruler. (2011, p. 110)

Jackall reinforces the danger inherent to this situation, reminding us that, "…the corporation is not a democratic assembly; it is an autocracy and one forgets that at his peril" (2009, p. 124).

All of the above is true in the context of organizational functioning and opportunities at Pharma, where the leaders in the organization are expected to be on the side of the employees, while potentially simultaneously and systematically limiting access to their success. The request for the allyship program was, in a way, a request for increased humanity and a rebalancing of power in the workplace. The program was designed to support those less powerful in envisioning and achieving greater goals—to help level the playing field, to be seen and treated equally. Minority groups in organizations, such as the Pharma's Women's Network, are often placated and pushed aside, and are well aware of this. Yet demanding to be seen and acknowledged (e.g. through a mandatory development program) rarely entices the more powerful party to shift their position.

While I was clear on my stance toward the implementation of the allyship program and I disagreed with the PNW leads' approach, I certainly understood their intent. As a woman who founded the local Women's Network chapters in two previous roles and had personally experienced discrepancies in opportunity and expectations at Pharma, I agreed in principle that a shift in how minorities are treated at Pharma is needed. I also recognized that, from our new positions of power, Noah and I were blocking the progress of the PWN leads, but as stated earlier, I was convinced that moving the program forward was the wrong thing to do—both for the company and for my career—but perhaps not for minorities at Pharma.

As discussed in my previous projects and mentioned earlier in this project, success today often still equates with survival. As a member of the court, I needed to act accordingly—creating alliances (e.g. with Peter and Noah) and prioritizing my fellow royalty (e.g. the senior executives) appropriately.

Responses to Social Shaping

In this next section, I will further explore the social/relational nature of success, specifically our responses to the social shaping of aspirations and expectations.[9]

Our choices are the result of the ongoing responsive processes of relating we engage in throughout our lives; because of this, they are temporal and shifting, constantly adjusting through the ongoing patterns of our relationships (Burkitt, 2008; Honneth, 1995; Taylor, 1991). When we feel seen, we flourish and thrive (Taylor, 1991); our confidence is bolstered and our actions are correspondingly emboldened (Scott, 1990).

For example, in the first narrative, my aspirations and sense of success were shaped by others throughout the interview, selection, and publicity processes. Recall how I began to show up differently when I had been selected to take part in the interview process, and again when I was offered the position. Note, however, that this was a temporary sense of elevation, which was diminished in the interim when I doubted my selection for the role, and was once again constrained both when I faced the response from global HR community on the webcast and when I perceived a lack of acknowledgement in my email inbox following the announcement of my position. My colleagues, in turn, were being shaped by

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[9] As I reflected upon this topic, I was reminded of a poem by American poet and social activist, Langston Hughes. Hughes wrote the poem below (emphasis in the original) in 1950, just prior to the civil rights movement in the United States. This was a time when many African Americans were required to reshape, defer, or diminish their dreams and aspirations because of social structures and interpersonal interactions that constrained their opportunities for success—a phenomenon that continues and is coming to light again today.

> **Harlem**
> BY LANGSTON HUGHES
>
> What happens to a dream deferred?
>
> Does it dry up
> like a raisin in the sun?
> Or fester like a sore—
> And then run?
> Does it stink like rotten meat?
> Or crust and sugar over—
> like a syrupy sweet?
>
> Maybe it just sags
> like a heavy load.
>
> *Or does it explode?*

This poem captures the essence of a variety of responses individuals or groups chose when they experience a lack of opportunity to have a strong voice in the negotiation of their own aspirations for success.

the ongoing lack of information and validation they were receiving throughout the reorganization process.

When we are not validated, our choices are constrained by others, or our aspirations do not align with others' expectations, we may find ourselves forced to consider a variety of responses (often in combination or rotation). In many of these responses, there is an embedded attempt to control or manage the situation and/or our reaction to it. I will outline some common reactions below to illustrate the impact of social relationships on the concept of success.

Consider, for example, when I doubted my job prospects due to a lack of communication from the selection committee. I began to consider leaving the company and thus open the possibility for identifying a new circle of influencers who might provide me with more positive reinforcement.   By entertaining the idea of an opportunity to be recognized outside of Pharma, I was attempting to control my thoughts and expand my opportunities for success. As Burkitt states, when we expose ourselves to different groups or alternate opinions,

> Here, there is always the possibility of becoming something different, perhaps more closely approximating an ideal we hold out for our own self. (2008, p. 82)

Returning to the theme of power, however, it must be acknowledged that some people have a broader range of options than others, depending on the situation and the relationships therein. Sociologist Peter Marris, whose work I referenced extensively in Project 2 when writing about the seemingly precarious employment environment at Pharma, claims that,

> Great inequalities of control force people to accommodate to uncertainty in ways which undermine their hopes, their self-respect and their will to challenge their condition. (2003, p. 85)

Marris goes on to speak about power and how our range of opportunities to respond in the face of constraint spans from broad freedom of action, choice, and a strong sense of agency at one end of the spectrum to—at the most constrained point, solely the management of one's emotions—the ability to choose how one feels about a situation. He explains,

> At the end of this chain of protective strategies, there may be no room for maneuver left, except within one's own mind. (2003, p. 93)

Along this continuum, however, there are decision points and options.

When faced with significant constraint based on the opinion of others, one option is to give up or surrender to fate. In both narratives, there are points at which the party with the least power (e.g. me, during the selection process in the first narrative; the Women's Network leads at the end of the second narrative) decides to stop pushing for their desires and determines to wait for others/fate to determine the outcome. As Marris states,

> When events are entirely beyond our control, we no longer face the responsibility of acting, with all its anxieties. We may then think of the outcome as our fate— something that was bound to happen because we could do nothing about it. (2003, p. 13)

In other words, fate (or, to some, the will of God) can serve as the ultimate consolation when things feel out of control (Jalan et al., 2014).

Langston Hughes, in his famous poem *A Dream Deferred* (see prior footnote), uses the image of "a raisin in the sun" to symbolize the option to let our dreams and desires fade and dry up, taking what is offered instead. Building on this metaphor, Elias points out how we constrain each other as a result of advances and increasing specialization in society, stating,

> The advance of the division of functions and of civilization at certain stages is therefore increasingly accompanied by the feeling in individuals that in order to maintain their position in the human network they must allow their true nature to wither. They feel constantly impelled by the social structure to violate their "inner truth." They feel unable to do what best suits their faculties, or to become what they really wanted to become. (1987/2001, p. 30)

In the game of musical chairs at Pharma, I suspect that many people will take whatever seat they are offered, constrained by the notion that they might otherwise end up with no seat at all. Advances in technology mean that bots and digitally-enabled remote call centers in low-cost locations are supplanting a large number of seats, forcing many in HR to wither.

To save face or protect our own egos, another option is to decide to embrace our new, constrained role (i.e. from the self-help genre "play the hand you were dealt like it was the hand you wanted" or—in Hughes' terms, "crust and sugar over—like a syrupy sweet"), adjusting our ambitions to something more socially acceptable or possible. This tactic,

however, if successful in its masquerade, can perpetuate a circumstance which, over the long term, may prove to be unbearable. This may be part of the reason for the insistent and strident attitudes of the Women's Network leads, who were initially exceptionally intent on pushing the allyship program forward, realizing that minorities continuing to make the best of a bad situation has facilitated the prolonging of what some might consider an oppressive environment at Pharma. From this standpoint, it is important to recall the societal forces and constraints mentioned earlier; while we are individually confronted with negotiating the complexities of success in our lives, we also each face additional, nuanced challenges depending upon our membership in various subgroups of the societies and organizations in which we live and work. Minority groups, in particular, often face common struggles for recognition and acknowledgement, which typically result in perpetually constrained aspirations, opportunities, and achievements.

As Scott points out in his examination of public and hidden transcripts, in which the hidden transcript represents our real feelings and desires—often expressed only to ourselves or a small, trusted group of others—perpetuating a distorted public transcript may "create the appearance of unanimity among the ruling groups and the appearance of consent among subordinates…" (1990, p. 55). Thus caught in a double bind, the less empowered group is faced with a lose-lose situation. According to Scott,

> The greater the power exercised over them and the closer the surveillance, the more incentive subordinates have to foster the impression of compliance, agreement, deference. (1990, p. 89)

In both of my narratives, only on-screen behavior and statements made during the webcast/Zoom meetings were available for "surveillance," providing what I suspect was an additional and convenient veil over more deeply held emotions and frustrations on all sides.

Others may choose to resist the constraint, overtly or covertly. For those who are able, open resistance can provide a sense of self-agency, however many will find themselves in a position of limited power. Scott, who writes extensively about the nature of powerlessness, speaks about "reactance theory," which, he states,

> …begins with the premise that there is a human desire for freedom and autonomy that, when threatened by the use of force, leads to a reaction of opposition…Providing the threat is sufficiently imposing, overt agreement and

compliance may prevail but covert reactance will increase. (Scott, 1990, p. 109, referring to Brehm & Brehm, 1981)

Scott notes that when people feel powerless to choose their own course or pursue their desires, they tend to behave in certain (subversive) ways as an alternative to openly resisting oppression, which may be dangerous. As Scott explains,

> In ordinary circumstances subordinates have a vested interest in avoiding any explicit display of insubordination. They also, of course, always have a practical interest in resistance—in minimizing the exactions, labor, and humiliations to which they are subject. The reconciliation of these two objectives that seem at cross-purposes is typically achieved by pursuing precisely those forms of resistance that avoid any open confrontation with the structures of authority being resisted. (1990, p. 86)

Office gossip is a good example of this, enabling the less powerful to influence the reputation and identity of superiors covertly—and hence attempt to hinder their success.

Beyond our actions, we may emotionally process constraint in a variety of ways, becoming depressed, angry, paranoid, hyper-vigilant, or anxious (Bauman, 2007; Bauman & Donskis, 2013; Ehrenreich, 2006; Rosa, 2013, 2019, 2020; Taylor, 1991). When we are not recognized, we may question our value and be met with disregard. Sennett describes this experience:

> "Who needs me?" is a question of character which suffers a radical challenge in modern capitalism. The system radiates indifference. (2011, p. 147)

Additionally, we may develop a deep fantasy life to achieve the sense of validation or success we are missing, in which we live out our dreams and/or fantasize about revenge upon or misfortune against our oppressors. Scott questions,

> Who among us has not had a similar experience? Who, having been insulted or suffered an indignity—especially in public—at the hand of someone in power or authority over us, has not rehearsed an imaginary speech he wishes he had given or intends to give at the next opportunity? (1990, p. 8)

Again, gossip can play a key role here as a somewhat satisfying outlet to these feelings.

In reference to the comments at the webcast, where people may have been feeling slighted or unrecognized by the presenters, I wonder if the anonymous questions were giving a voice to fantasies for a reckoning of power within the organization. As Scott states,

> Fantasy life among dominated groups is also likely to take the form of schadenfreude: joy at the misfortune of others. This represents a wish for negative reciprocity, a settling of scores when the high shall be brought low and the last shall be first. (1990, p. 41)

Considering the underlying tone of all these possible responses to a lack of social validation and recognition, the sense of waste and loss of potential contribution is disheartening. The consequence of this, at Pharma and other companies, is that significant energy is spent positioning, and pretending/performing while individuals and groups grapple for status and negotiate for opportunities and success. Evidence of this is apparent in the two narratives— both in my own attempts to achieve recognition and success, and the request for and negotiation surrounding the allyship program. Rather than dismiss, ignore, pretend it is not happening, I can now recognize that this is an integral/inseparable aspect of working with others.

Conclusion

I began this project by relating two examples of the types of day-to-day negotiations we all experience as we attempt to achieve power and purchase—and a sense of success—in the organizations in which we work. Because such interactions, which typically take place dialogically among a small group of people, are generally fractal in nature, they exemplify the broader organizational and/or societal dynamics. By deeply examining these narratives, along with relevant research, I hope to have created a bridge to a broader understanding of the topic of success.

I have shown, for example, both through my own experience and related research, how our inherently social nature—including the importance of validation/recognition—plays a significant role in how we think about and experience success. In the process of writing about and iterating this project, I have become increasingly aware of how we enable and constrain each other in our thoughts and experiences surrounding success. Our aspirations

for, and experiences of, success are fragile and unstable, as they are closely correlated to the ideas and opinions of others and the society in which we live.

In this project I also closely examined the influences of culture—particularly the Western individualistic way of thinking—and power, both of which are commonly downplayed or ignored in the corporate world when, in fact, these are significant, inescapable forces that shape how we think about and experience the concept of success at work.

As a result of writing and reflecting upon this project, I can see that I was, and often still am, caught up in the paradox of being independent and interdependent at the same time—finding myself frustrated anew each time I realize that I have failed to take into account both the individual and the social nature of success. This mirrors the perpetuation of isolated, individualistic goal setting and strategizing that plays out throughout today's workplaces and leads to an ongoing sense of struggle, frustration, disconnection, and detachment.

The idea of success can become reified in our minds and conversations—we often speak of people as "successful" or "not successful," as if success is a stable characteristic that can be possessed and maintained indefinitely. However, as I have demonstrated in this project, success is a concept that is both socially formed and temporal. Success is not a "yes" or "no;" it is an ongoing, negotiated assessment of a situation in relation with others at a given moment in time.

These realizations have allowed me to identify patterns in my own work life and extrapolate to broader organizational contexts. While there is no quick fix, by building awareness of and paying attention to the individual, social, and temporal aspects of success, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of the workplaces in which we dwell and the struggles/negotiations taking place within them on a daily basis.

These types of situations are everyday occurrences in today's organizations, and, when evidence is presented contrary to the idea that we are independently in control of our fates, it generally creates a disturbing dissonance that is quickly dismissed/swept under the rug and remains, for the most part, unexamined. By deeply exploring my experiences and the relational nature of success, I hope that I have increased the scope of what we can talk about when we discuss the dynamic topic of success.

Synopsis

Overview of the Four Projects

As previously mentioned, "projects" in the Doctor of Management program generally contain a narrative account of an everyday experience in the researcher's workplace in which the researcher figures, and which then serves as a focal point for deep exploration and provides the basis from which generalizations may (following significant rigor and examination) be made.

To facilitate investigation into the topic of success, I provided examples from my organizational experiences that highlight the tensions and nuances among the many intertwined themes surrounding the concept of success at work.

I will now present a brief overview of each of the four projects that make up my research.

Project 1 – Intellectual Autobiography

In this first, foundational, project I endeavored to document my "intellectual autobiography," illustrating the progression and development of my thinking over time. The purpose of this reflexive exercise (an important component of the Doctor of Management program) was to identify and articulate key ideas and significant inputs, paying particular attention to how influences from my culture, education, and professional experiences have shaped my assumptions, actions, and worldview, thus informing the way I have come to understand what I do at work. As a researcher, this exercise helped build my awareness of the biases and lenses through which I view the world, for, as essayist Anais Nin eloquently stated, "We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are" (1961, p. 124).

In the process of composing, reflecting upon, and iterating this first project, I uncovered patterns in my thinking and behavior of which I was previously unaware (but which are common in organizations and in Western society, in general), such as a tendency to accept theories and solutions without question and an affinity for oversimplifying complex topics and situations.

Within the context of the Doctor of Management program, as I progressed in my research and evolved my thinking, this first project also served as a benchmark against which I have

been able to observe shifts in my thinking and deepen my understanding of the context in which I am inseparably embedded.

I began Project 1 by outlining some of the familial and cultural values with which I was raised. In particular, I noted how I was strongly influenced to continuously strive for individual achievement and success. I unconsciously embraced the tireless work ethic of Protestant society, along with the competitive, individualistic, and capitalistic mindset of my country of origin (the United States). Immersed in American culture, I bought into the idea that people can achieve anything they want if they work hard enough (Weber, 1905/2012; Peale, 1956). In essence, my youth served as a first formation into becoming an "achievement subject," disciplined by societal praise and rewards into a compliant mindset and driven to accomplish results in whatever situation I found myself (Han, 2015).

Applying the previously described methodology to my writing, I was able to begin to identify nuances within my experiences, in which I noted, among other things, the situational nature of success. I came to realize that expectations, ability, and the conditions required to achieve success varied by person and situation, as did the definition of success itself. I recognized, for example, that the "American Dream" may not actually be possible for all Americans to achieve (Ehrenreich, 2006). Though I was moderately aware of societal forces at play, I considered these influences as either merely obstacles to be overcome or welcome assistance (depending on the situation) in my chosen path, and maintained the certainty that success could be achieved through hard work and persistence (as, I believed, had predominantly been my personal experience). This mindset, I came to understand, oversimplified the reality of a complicated network of influences and power structures, but is representative of culturally common assumptions (Alvesson, 2013; Brinkmann, 2017; Han, 2015; Stacey & Mowles, 2016).

Following this examination of my youth, I went on to reflect upon my short career as a classroom teacher, a profession rich in assumptions and idealism (see, for example, Dewey, 1968; Erikson, 1950). In viewing my experience as an educator from a distance, I was able to identify the pervasive expectation for teachers to ensure all children succeed and "reach their potential," reinforcing the American Dream idealism mentioned earlier.

In my reflection, I noted that, as a teacher, I continued to ignore the powerful systems at play, such as school funding, politics in the educational system, and other socio-economic

factors. I focused instead on my personal contribution to remedying the situation and supporting my classes of individual students, rather than seeking to decode and tackle the complex system of urban schooling itself (an understandable stance for a young teacher).

Additionally, as an educator, I had come to believe that there was a "formula" for (academic) achievement, which, with the required specific components, would guarantee success. In the course of my teacher education, I was provided with curricula and frameworks for how to effectively teach any subject to any student (see, for example: Bloom, 1984; Maslow, 1943; Piaget, 1970; Skinner, 1960). Later in my career, as I attempted to apply similar "formulas" to my work with leaders in the corporate world with limited success, I would come to recognize the utility (and futility) of this approach to development for people of all ages.

As an additional key influence in the development of my thinking, I pointed to a turning point in my career when I decided to leave teaching and transition to the corporate workplace. It was then that I was first exposed to the prevalent discourse in management and leadership development, comprised of various two-by-two grids, simple steps to success, and techniques to motivate employees and drive organizational achievement and efficiency (see, for example: Covey, 1989/1999; Myers, 1962). I was taken in by the order and uncomplicated guidance professed by these tools (seven habits, sixteen types, etc.) and perceived them to be very useful and practically applicable to the careers of the adult learners with whom I was working. Exposure to traditional organizational development theory further reinforced my understanding of organizations as systems to be viewed objectively, and confirmed leaders as key manipulators of these systems (see, for example: Jones & Brazzel, 2006; Schein, 2010).

These overly-simplistic lines of thinking, prevalent in the fields of leadership and organizational development, do not tend to adequately acknowledge the role and impact of "average" individuals within organizations (nor the impact of groups/organizations on the individual), and instead view *select* individuals (e.g. managers, consultants) as nearly omnipotent external influencers (Griffin, 2002; Stacey & Mowles, 2016). Exemplifying how this type of traditional systems thinking permeated my career, I highlighted how, for the majority of my career in Human Resources, my work has been primarily with leaders, often

focusing specifically on each one's ability to direct and motivate the actions and outcomes of his/her team.

I later learned, through my work on the Doctor of Management program, about the origins and evolution of the field of management, which, over time, had developed and elevated the role of the manager to strategist and leader, and produced the proliferation of business schools and management consultancies we experience today (Khurana, 2007). These institutions (and those working for/attending them) often generated and have perpetuated many of today's mainstream beliefs about the role of the manager/leader in organizations; these prevailing views are grounded in methods such as strategic choice theory, in which the primary focus is on the leader who communicates goals, monitors performance, and ensures implementation of strategy (Andrews, 1971/1987; Child, 1972; Porter, 1980).

Looking back, I was able to recognize that these common frameworks/mindsets reinforced my assumption that there must be a "formula" for success: identify the right components or interventions, and the desired outcomes will be achieved. I recognized, through the exploration of my experience, that I was deeply grounded in linear thinking, and my actions and efforts in leadership development mirrored an overly simplistic approach to management (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Griffin, 2002; Mowles, 2016). I came to see that I was too enmeshed in my situation at the time to view it critically. In my writing, I reflected upon how these tools and techniques greatly oversimplified the task at hand, but were commonly considered best practice in the field. In my role as a learning and development practitioner, I had not paused to question these methods or explore the origins and soundness of theories and practices, instead electing to employ them without sufficient examination. I can now see the common tendency in organizations today to press for simplification—aligned with an expectation for an adaption to, rather than a questioning of, such practices—and how this only adds to the allure of simple models to address what can feel like (or actually *is*) overwhelming complexity. Additionally and relatedly, I am now more fully aware of the commodification of the models/best practices/tools/techniques that drives their ongoing proliferation (Antonacopoulou, 2010). Falling into the trap of blindly adopting simple models is a practice I now critique in my work.

In my project, I reflected that, as time passed in my career, I started to feel overwhelmed and frustrated by the large number of philosophies and often conflicting advice found in the

popular business literature I was consuming. I began to rethink my approach to and assumptions about management and leadership development in organizations and started to doubt the efficacy of my work in the corporate world. I relate how I came across the work of Jeffery Pfeffer (2015), who is critical of the industry built up around leadership development. Shortly thereafter, upon learning about the Doctor of Management program, I began reading the work of Critical Management scholars, who often pointed out the limitations of managerialism and systems thinking, particularly the underpinning assumptions surrounding the role of the heroic leader, the application of the scientific model to human systems, and the idea that objective observation and modeling will lead to the achievement of invariable, planned results (Alvesson, 2013; Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Flinn, 2018; Griffin, 2002; Jackall, 2009; Mowles, 2016; Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2012; Stacy & Mowles, 2016). My exposure to these critiques of what had become my daily practice in leadership development resonated with my personal experiences and frustrations, and confirmed my suspicions that the simplistic approaches I had been employing were too narrow and basic to account for the complexity of life in organizations.

As I iterated and reflected upon this initial piece of work, taking into account input from my Doctor of Management colleagues and supervisors, the ever-present pursuit of success and avoidance of failure as a central theme in my life and my work became apparent to me. I therefore decided to further focus my research efforts moving forward on the topic of success; I was determined to loosen my grip on my fairly rigid ideas about success and consider a different approach and way of thinking.

Project 2 – Exploring Success in a Global Pharmaceutical Company

When I selected the topic of success for further research at the end of Project 1, I (naively) did not expect to find so much inherent complexity; even though my intention was to expand my thinking and I was open to new ideas, I was initially unaware of the extent of my blind spots surrounding success as I was deeply entrenched in the common, surface-level understanding of the concept. I hoped to explore questions such as: "How are my colleagues and I constructing the meaning of success?" "How are we already dealing with the absence of a clear definition?" and "How do changing definitions of success influence actions and mindset?" As a colleague in my learning set quickly pointed out, however, my

thinking was flawed. There will never be a clear and stable definition of success, and searching for a static and broadly-recognized definition, even for a specific situation or isolated period of time, not only implied that there is one right answer, but exposed and highlighted my own deeply embedded desire for control. As this second project progressed through the rigorous methodological approach used on the Doctor of Management program, I grew better able to see the many facets of the theme that make the exploration of success rich, complex, and paradoxical.

In my naivety at the commencement of my project, I planned to focus my research solely on the subject of success. However, I soon determined that it was important not to separate research topics which are interlinked; in this case, it would be necessary to reflect upon success as well as its less popular opposite: failure. Furthermore, exploring success along with not only failure, but also with topics such as survival, uncertainty, and control, became imperative in painting a more complete picture in the context of organizations.

In the course of composing and iterating this second project, I began to wonder, when we talk about success today, with constant change and threats of redundancy dominating many industries, do we really just mean survival? Or is success, in fact, merely a strategy for survival? Furthermore, how does the desire to succeed (or survive) relate to uncertainty and the need for a sense of control? These queries and insights caused me to deeply examine my own ways of thinking and led me down an unpredicted path.

I began the project by exploring a narrative from my experience with an employee, Oliver, as we navigated the changing nature of and expectations for his role. As he attempted to transform his skills to meet evolving expectations, I tried to support him through the process while managing my own conflicting roles in the situation; unfortunately, both of our efforts ultimately failed.

Generalizing from this specific example with my employee, I related how Oliver represented a corporate "Everyman," susceptible to unpredictable changes in the workplace, which are shaped by both internal and external forces. Exploring some of these influences, such as globalization and expectations for constant upskilling and relentless personal reinvention (Gratton & Scott, 2016), highlighted today's almost universal sense of insecurity in organizations, reinforcing the concept that success is temporal and socially constructed, thus making it perpetually and inherently elusive.

I then tied this exploration to my work in leadership development, highlighting similar changes to the definition of success and correspondingly shifting expectations of leaders in my workplace (see Laloux, 2014). By examining these changes, seeds of doubt were planted in my mind regarding the utopian vision and unquestioned optimism embedded in today's aspirations for new approaches to leadership (e.g. less hierarchical, more focused on empowering others, etc.). Taking a critical look at what we were asking from leaders at Pharma exposed potential flaws and fallacies in our expectations and caused me to question the true purpose, achievability, and usefulness of the redefined leadership standards which were causing widespread, frenetic activity and insecurity across the organization (including in my own work).

Finally, I noted common human reactions to uncertainty—grasping for control of or attempting to avoid the situation—that underlie our desire for success and drive for survival (Marris, 2003). It was through the iterative and reflexive nature of completing this project that I came to notice these undercurrents of control and avoidance directing behaviors in organizations—and in myself.

Ultimately, what started out as an exciting opportunity to investigate the origins and meanings of success in this project led to a depressing journey into survival assurance, failure avoidance, and the struggles of leaders and employees to adapt and adjust in the face of ambiguity and constantly changing expectations. It became clear that fundamental and unavoidable human desires for power and control are infused throughout our attempts to attain success, and my hope to continue to view success as an achievable destination was extinguished. On the bright side, however, this somewhat meandering path provided me with a rare gift—visibility to some of my own blind spots and constrained thinking.

Project 3 – The Performance of Success: Image and Emotion Management, Authenticity, and Modernity

My focus on success continued in Project 3, which I began by relating a narrative of an important presentation I made to a large group of colleagues; my experience served to provide a concentrated representation of everyday life in organizations and an opportunity for deep examination of personal and organizational dynamics. Such public performances naturally magnify our desires for success and exacerbate fears and insecurities related to

failure; the resulting side effects of obsession, anxiety, and narcissism were magnified, spotlighted, and intensified under the fixed gaze of others—and my own subsequent self-reflection.

In the particular example I related in this project, in which I found myself fixated on each grand and minute aspect of my presentation—including how it would be perceived and the implications of my public success or failure—everything turned out fine for me in the end; while perhaps not a resounding success, then at least not a complete, unrecoverable or detrimental failure. Throughout my experience, however, multiple questions related to success and failure hovered just below the surface of my consciousness, emerging more clearly as I reflected later: "Will I be good enough? Who decides? And who decides what 'good enough' is? What methods do I and others employ to ensure we are seen as acceptable? What will success or failure mean for me in this situation?" Due to the complex and contextual nature of success, I observed that questions such as these are pervasive in all our lives, especially in relation to the organizations in which we work.

As I wrote, I was able to relate and examine my experience from a distance; as a result, I found myself disturbed and unsettled, surprising myself by how consumed I had become during the presentation preparation process with ensuring success (and avoiding failure). As I reflected further, I considered: "What is it about public speaking that causes our hearts to race? What is it about organizations that create fear among their members? That require performance? And how, in the context of organizations, do we act to create our own sense of safety, security, and success?"

As mentioned previously, success involves contextual definition; success, as I defined it for myself in the instance of this particular presentation, required the performance of three main components: appropriate levels of authenticity (revealing a version of myself and having that version accepted—and, ideally, praised), looking and acting the part (projecting an image in alignment with the norms and expectations for the idealized version of a successful person at my company), and presenting the most current and flexible image of myself I could muster (competent and valuable today, tomorrow, and forevermore).

Utilizing my subjective experience as a lived example, I explored the questions above and noted how performance collides with trends calling for the paradoxical expectation of both perpetual positivity and authenticity in organizations. Additionally, I illustrated how these

factors relate to, contradict, and reinforce each other, further exacerbating the sense of speed and acceleration that predominates today's culture, with its inherent and continuous demand for reinvention of the self (Bauman, 2007; Bauman & Donskis, 2013; Brinkmann, 2017; Hall, 2004; Rosa, 2013, 2020). The overall effect of these interacting forces results in the impossibility of any real or enduring sense of achievement or success.

Specifically, in hindsight I was able to observe that my corporate socialization to maintain an air of positivity, coupled with Pharma's norms as to what is acceptable and appropriate in the workplace, strongly shaped the appearance I attempted to present in my speech. I adjusted my image and attitude accordingly, aware that my success was, in part, determined by my ability to control and manage my appearance, behavior, and emotions in alignment with organizational expectations; maintaining a positive, upbeat image of relaxation and ease (while in reality working exhaustively to portray this image) were critical to my success (see, for example: Alvesson, 2013; Ehrenreich, 2010; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 2012; Jackall, 2009).

Additionally, through my reflections, I came to the conclusion that authenticity, while reportedly in high demand in today's workplace, is similar to success: contextual, temporal, and therefore, elusive; to be completely authentic assumes a stability and unconditional social acceptance that does not exist. Furthermore, image management (as explained above) directly contradicts the expectations for (or possibility of) anything beyond momentary authenticity—and the ongoing transformation of our identities further compounds the complexity of the task. In my work, I also observed the dangers of attempting to be authentic; in my organization and many others, authenticity is celebrated only as long as it aligns with the company's image and expectations (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Jackall, 2009; Sennett, 2011). In my case, though I was encouraged and expected to be authentic, I found myself wary of expressing anything other than that which I knew would garner favor and praise in the organizational culture in which I was entrenched. I noted that such situations can encourage a form of socially engineered "deep acting," in which members of an organization (often unconsciously) attempt to make authenticity easier by adopting and internalizing the culturally desired mindset and corresponding behaviors in order to align internal attitudes with organizational expectations (Hochschild, 2012).

In addition, the challenges I mention above regarding image management and authenticity are compounded and amplified by the age in which we live, which is often characterized by a perpetual acceleration and a continuous demand for reinvention of the self (Bauman, 2007; Bauman & Donskis, 2013; Rosa, 2013, 2019, 2020). Expectations to remain positive or portray an image of effortless achievement in the face of a seemingly ever-increasing volume and frequency of change does not allow for a stable foundation and creates a great deal of exhaustion, uncertainty, anxiety, and confusion. Given the aforementioned temporal and contextual nature of success, the pace of modernity is incompatible with even a passing sense of completion and achievement, let alone a lasting sensation of success.

Further examination and reflection clarified my conundrum—and the impossibility of the overall situation I believe we all share in today's workplace. By normalizing and requiring people to be unfailingly positive, project an image of perfection, and maintain the façade of being capable of achieving difficult outcomes effortlessly, we make authenticity impossible to achieve—and, furthermore, the achievement of a sense of lasting success in these modern times is particularly frustrating and unattainable, as expectations for continuous, and sometimes seemingly arbitrary, self-reinvention only serve to exacerbate this perpetual paradoxical situation.

In essence, through iterating this project, I (once again) came to realize that the achievement of success is ethereal and fleeting at best—perhaps experienced and savored for a moment and then almost instantly reframed. I recognized anew the deep social conditioning in our society (and therefore in myself) to automatically seek the next challenge (Alvesson, 2013; Han, 2015). While I felt I had effectively conducted my presentation, and felt "successful enough" in my overall achievements and situation in life, success still maintained the transient quality of something that must be continuously pursued.

Project 4 – Co-Creation of Success through Relational Recognition and Validation

Project 4 involved a continued deepening of my exploration into success, focusing on the social aspects of success, particularly how success is co-created via our relationships with others. I will keep the summary here short, as I relate many of the synthesized insights from this project in the key arguments section below.

I began by relating two narratives from my recent work, both experienced and relayed through the lens of ongoing turmoil such as the global coronavirus pandemic, national and multi-national political and social movements, and the ongoing large-scale transformations and reorganizations at Pharma.

The first narrative, conveying my experience applying for and obtaining a senior role in the organization, highlighted the fragile nature of success, particularly how success is informed by the validation of others. The second narrative imparts the story of a proposal for a new leadership development program by an internal minority-advocacy group (the Pharma Women's Network); the situation illustrates the complexity involved when goals conflict and underscore the important organizational undercurrents of power, organizational politics, and societal norms.

In examining these experiences, I deconstructed the individualistic/independent mindset common in Western societies, exposing the impossible expectations for achievement against all obstacles and pointing out the fallacy of independence. I scrutinized and critiqued the traditional methods for measuring career success that are based on this independent, capitalistic way of thinking, highlighting the resulting tendencies toward narcissism and feelings of isolation and frustration.

Most importantly, I exposed and built a case for the thoroughly social nature of success, arguing that our expectations, aspirations, and experiences of success, while involving individual agency, are integrally shaped by the influence of others in our social networks.

Building on my work in previous projects, I further explored the role of power in relation to success, further articulating how power dynamics influence our actions and how the opinions and support (or lack thereof) of select groups or individuals play a key role in our choices, actions, and opportunities.

From here, I also drew parallels to our evolutionary roots linked to success and the historical underpinnings reinforcing acceptable and rewarded behavior (Boehm, 2012; Elias, 1939/2000).

Finally, picking up on themes introduced in Project 2 where I first explored our reactions to the anxiety created by uncertainty, I examined common responses to the constraints we experience as a result of the social nature of success.

Key Arguments

Introduction

In this section, drawing upon my work and the research of others, I synthesize my key arguments, contending that *success is a dynamic, temporal, and socially informed concept—and is influenced by power dynamics, survival traits, and image management.*

Additionally, I purport that *mainstream thinking about success is overly simplistic,* ignoring the ways in which the aforementioned factors influence how we think about and experience success, while in effect guiding our decisions and actions as we engage in the endless striving that permeates organizational life.

At the risk of reducing my own work into an ironic example of the popular business authors I critique (*"Blackadder's 5 key arguments to unlock the mystery of success!"*), I now offer the following arguments, which juxtapose the prevalent mainstream thinking regarding success with the (more complex) "realities" uncovered in my research.

Following these arguments, I will expound upon the importance of these findings in research and practice.

Argument 1: Success is a Dynamic and Temporal Concept

As previously mentioned, I (like many others who have been steeped in popular business literature) initially believed success to be a fairly straightforward concept with an underlying linear structure. We often buy into minimalistic models that provide the illusion of reduced complexity and the lure of an attainable and stable sense of success[10]. The complexity of our situations drives insecurity and increases the lure of simplified quick fixes, heuristic models, and the appeal of heroic leaders (more on this later). This type of propaganda perpetuates the assumption that there must be a "formula" for success: identify the right components or intervention, and the desired outcomes will be achieved. A simplistic "if…then" cybernetic formula is implied in the prevalent discourse regarding success, which reinforces the idea that "if you do this…then you'll get that" and perpetuates the idea that success is a stable,

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[10] See, for example popular business/self-help literature classics such as "The Success Principles" (Canfield, 2005) or "If Success is a Game, These are the Rules" (Carter-Scott, 2000)

attainable state. This seductive misinformation often provides us with actionable (yet questionable) guidance and offers a (false) sense of security and control.

In today's glossy, consumer-focused, professionally produced, and elegantly marketed world—advertising is built upon the idea of "better" and "attainable" (*"New! Improved! Guaranteed!"*). This extends to the field of personal/professional/leadership development, which is based on the notion that one can always improve oneself and/or one's performance. Specifically, greater success and improved effectiveness are the reason such departments/functions (including my own) exist. The thriving literary genres of self-help and business are similarly built upon these premises—as are their corresponding conferences, keynote speakers, and motivational seminars. When such content is coupled with charismatic authors and/or dynamic facilitators with streamlined, attractive models and materials, the allure of the mirage (including promises for a better, more successful, future and the control of one's individual destiny) is great. The reality, of course, is not so simple.

I am not saying this simplification is all bad; for those of us in development fields, taking a simplistic view of development/success can make our lives (and, arguably, the lives of every manager in the organization) easier—at least in the short term. By literally "buying in" to the latest trends, models, etc. we are able to quickly and easily (though often at great financial expense) provide "value" (or at least the temporary sensation of it) to the businesses/clients we serve, tutoring them on the newest techniques and becoming expert coaches on how to do things "right." I am also not saying that there is no truth or value to such offers; however, while they may offer temporary confidence and even limited success/results/improvement, they are unlikely to deliver in the promised manner in which they are typically offered, even if additional consultants are contracted to help customize and apply the "recipe" to each unique organization and situation. Inevitably, a sense of disappointment and deflation sets in, and a desire for a new method, model, tool, or technique arises.

Further, as outlined in Project 4 in which I explored the common measures of career success, the idea of success can become reified in our minds and conversations—we often speak of people as "successful" or "not successful," as if success is a stable characteristic that can be possessed and maintained indefinitely. However, as evidenced in my Project 4 narrative in which I navigated my success in a new role and in various situations, success is not a binary

and definitive "yes" or "no;" it is an ongoing, negotiated assessment of a situation in relation with others at a given moment in time. Rather than the idealized possibility of the perfect "successful" end state—a static destination upon which we can fixate our desire and ultimately achieve—success is actually a dynamic concept, temporal in nature; success is defined and redefined constantly—both by individuals and society (more on this in the next argument). The understanding of success as something achievable can be harmful, in that it may keep us relentlessly grasping, striving and disciplining ourselves to reach for the next rung on the ladder to an ultimately unachievable destination (Alvesson, 2013; Han, 2015).

As humans, we are temporal beings, continuously changing and evolving throughout our lives in response to the various environments and figurations in which we find ourselves (Elias, 1939/2000; Rosa, 2013, 2020; Taylor, 1991). As a result, our identities—and therefore our goals, desires, aspirations, and definitions of success—correspondingly shift. Consequently, success is perpetually and inherently dynamic; this explains why we may find ourselves reevaluating, reframing, and searching for a sense of success throughout our lives.

While we are consistently reminded that "It's the journey, not the destination," the extent to which we continue to buy into the latest methodologies, models, simple steps, and "quick fixes" exemplifies our inability (and potential reluctance) to grasp the inherent liquidity of the topic; we seem unable to actively demonstrate a true understanding of the reality that we never actually "get there." The messiness and uncertainty of unfinished, complex organizational life can feel uncomfortable and overwhelming and, in a culture addicted to "doing," it is particularly difficult (and often socially unacceptable) to sit still. As a result, we tend to manage our uncertainty through various forms of control or avoidance. As mentioned in Project 3, because we tend to believe we are responsible for our own success, we often cope and defend against uncertainty by focusing on ourselves (in many cases working harder, attempting to maintain a positive mindset and manage our image, as described earlier) to displace our anxiety surrounding the changing external environment, thus contributing to increasing burnout levels at work, depression and a growing community of "losers" (Han, 2015).

Argument 2: Success is Socially Informed

As explicitly explored in Project 4, Western culture leads us to believe success is an independent endeavor. Witness, for example, how the prevalent discourse tells us that with the right mindset and hard work, any individual can overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles and defy the odds stacked against them. This paradox, in which we have been *socially* coached to adopt an *individualistic* way of thinking, leads us to believe and act as if we are autonomous and independent thinkers—responsible for our own success and happiness—and this misconception plays out in the workplace in a variety of ways.

In Project 2, for example, I encouraged Oliver to "upskill" himself and adjust his mindset and skillset to meet the changing needs/avoid the restructuring that threatened his job—I believed that his fate (and my own) were (to a great extent) in our own hands; upon closer reflection, however, I recognized that this was not entirely the case for either of us.

In reality, as demonstrated in my research, *success is a thoroughly social and human construct—both in concept and in practice* (Rosa, 2019; Taylor, 1991). I argue that our inherently social nature plays a significant role in how we enable and constrain each other in our thoughts and experiences regarding success; possibilities for success are both co-created with others and are dependent on our individual agency at the same time. This social influence is evidenced, for example, in Project 4, in which my experience of success fluctuated based on the responses and recognition of others throughout the process of interviewing, being selected, and establishing myself in my new position.

Our relationships significantly impact the way we think—including the way we think about our goals and ambitions. In other words, our ideas about and definitions of success are powerfully shaped by our social relationships and networks; others are highly influential in shaping both what we aspire to and what we believe is possible for ourselves (Ng et al., 2005). As individuals, we inevitably express and are shaped by characteristics of our community/social environment—or at least those aspects of it within our own experience/history (Fleck, 1935/1979; Gumplowicz, 1905).

Additionally, our experience of success is fluid and continuously co-created through our relationships and the validation or invalidation of others. Whether or not we experience a feeling of success is influenced by the recognition we may (or may not) receive from significant others; in other words, we are reliant upon the opinions of others (Han, 2015;

Taylor, 1991). In this way, success is also inextricably linked to recognition. A lack of validation or recognition from others can mean not being able to achieve a sense of success—and therefore, by extension, a threat to our survival/the survival of our identity. In fact, some consider recognition and inclusion essential to our ability to thrive in society (Taylor, 1995).

In a related vein, *the drive for success and social recognition is engrained in our evolutionary makeup*. To ensure our survival, we have been conditioned—not just socially, but evolutionarily—to strive for success and to have that success recognized as valuable by our peers (particularly powerful others, which I will speak about in the next argument). In both natural and organizational settings, success is a demonstration to others of our fitness; it implies increased access to resources and opportunities and potentially heightened status. As noted in Project 2, success in the modern workplace can often be equated with survival. With ongoing business transformations that frequently involve major downsizing (as was the backdrop for all of my projects), merely surviving a reorganization with a job in hand can equate to a significant success. Additionally, stepping away from individualism, this concept can potentially extend to the survival of interdependent others, which may in some situations encompass extensive social networks (e.g. political leaders, organization heads, etc.).

With regard to *how* we influence and shape each other socially, in my research, I build upon pragmatist G.H. Mead's concept of "gesture and response" (Mead & Morris, 1934/1962). Mead explains that we are all caught up in an ongoing dialogue of gesture and response, in which we form and are informed by the words and behaviors of others. This ongoing interaction is at play via multiple gesture/response "conversations" in the workplace as we negotiate our success in organizations (Mead & Morris, 1934/1962).

In addition to the perpetual gesture/response discourse outlined above, expectations for success and cues regarding appropriate aspirations are also communicated through various indicators in our environment, from the physical environment (e.g. Pharma's pristine, spacious offices referenced in Project 3 or New York's dilapidated inner-city schools referenced in Project 1) to the labels and social biases applied to groups and individuals (e.g. "gifted," "high potential," "executive," "worthy/unworthy"), further segregating, enabling, and/or constraining possibilities for success. *This social/environmental meta-layer of*

gesture/response influences how we feel about ourselves and each other—and therefore our thoughts, actions, and expectations related to success.

Argument 3: Success is Closely Linked to Power

How success is defined, who is recognized, and who is allowed to achieve success is often dominated by those individuals or groups that hold the most power in a given situation.[11] Though we all have the possibility to influence each other, the most powerful in a society or organization frequently have the greatest opportunity to achieve or influence their own success—and the success of others (Jackall, 2009).

Further demonstrating the social nature of success mentioned above, *working hard or being good at one's work does not guarantee success* (McDonald & Hite, 2008). Again, running counter to the popular, individualized, self-determining ideology outlined above, my research illustrates that we are not solely in charge of our destinies and the achievement of our wishes; *other people and other forces influence our ability to achieve our desired outcomes*. For example, local and global trends, regulations, and societal movements influence access to and opportunities for success, as do personal agendas, power, and organizational politics. *The idea that you can do, be, or have anything you want as long as you are willing to work hard is a fallacy; circumstances and the influence of others often play a considerable role.*

A prime example in organizations of the influence of power as it relates to success can be found in the role of leaders. Leaders are, by definition, more likely to be in a position of power and are therefore more likely to enable or constrain the success of others in organizations. In Projects 3 and 4, I relate the current workplace to the court societies of the past, in which remaining in favor of those in power was critical to one's success (Elias, 1939/2000). Extending this as a metaphor to today's corporations, leaders can be seen to play the position of the royalty of former times; in a similar way, it is therefore important to bear in mind the relatively enlarged impact of the words, actions, and preferences of leaders

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[11] Note that when I speak about power here, I am referring to it in alignment with Elias (1970)—in a complex relational/situational manner in which power may shift from moment-to-moment and situation-to-situation—as opposed to the overly simplistic understanding of power as something one possesses indefinitely and in every circumstance. In this way, who holds the most power is not always evident, and, in fact is often most effective when masked or invisible (Scott, 1990).

in the workplace. *See Argument 5 below for further exploration of my findings as they relate to leadership.*

Allegiances with and direct or indirect support from powerful individuals or groups (such as leaders) can be key to success (McDonald & Hite, 2008). Recognition from these relevant groups or individuals with power is important in the struggle for success. Decisions regarding our actions and the paths we choose to take or avoid are influenced by what is rewarded/reinforced or punished/sanctioned by significant others. Furthermore, the extent to which one values and identifies with these different groupings, along with our individual aspirations, informs our actions; while a plurality of voices shapes our actions, some influences—due to their positions of power in our lives—are stronger than others (Arendt 1958/2019, Burkitt, 2008; Taylor, 1991). In this way, power plays a critical role in our ongoing quest to succeed.

Unfortunately, those who hold more power may tend to deny inequities (Marris, 2003); this denial may then undermine understanding, empathy, compassion, and the will to address hardships or acknowledge any responsibility for the co-creation of a difficult situation. As demonstrated in Project 4, minority groups, in particular—as they are frequently in positions of reduced power—often face struggles for a sense of agency, recognition and acknowledgement, which typically result in perpetually constrained aspirations, opportunities, and achievement.

Argument 4: Image Management Correlates with Success

Success is (at least in part) determined by our ability to control and manage our appearance, behavior, and emotions. The desire to be affirmed and recognized by others in order to survive, succeed, and maintain our identity is reflected in our efforts related to appearance regulation and acceptance; therefore, success involves significant components of image management. Sensing what is acceptable in accordance with cultural expectations and what is most likely to receive approval from significant others, our image/appearances are socially informed, as aligning with organizational norms can increase the likelihood of acceptance, approval, and—by extension—the ability to achieve a feeling of success. Much of the popular guidance and literature on success offers "coaching" or advice in this area (e.g. "fake it till you make it," or, as stated in my third project, "never let them see you sweat").

However, underlying image management is the simplistic (and naïve) expectation (both in nature and in the workplace) that "what you see is what you get." In the workplace, there is a projected correlation between our external image and our internal thoughts and feelings; in other words, our appearance provides an initial confidence that what you see on the outside provides insight into inner thoughts and feelings of an individual.

Behind the external facade, however, are the manipulations or management of external appearances one may take on to project a socially acceptable appearance. In the same way animals may camouflage themselves to fit in and survive, humans practice image management, behaving according to socially accepted practices to blend in or demonstrate a desired or accepted demeanor (Elias, 1939/2000; Goffman, 1959; Runciman 2018; Scott, 1990). For example, as demonstrated in Project 3, achievements are often expected to look easy to be considered a success; in order to achieve this expectation, I worked extensively to make my presentation look effortless, thus camouflaging my actual experience to fit a socially desirable image.

Furthermore, paradoxically and regardless of one's actual personal experience, a natural and authentic presence is expected, but must correspond to the socially desired traits in any given situation. Therefore, management of emotion is required for success in the workplace, where positivity tends to be systematically rewarded and negativity is often suppressed (Ehrenreich, 2010; Hochschild, 2012).

In summary, aligning appearance and the performance of emotions into an acceptable package is important to achieving success/recognition. This was certainly the case at Pharma, where the employee image is socially and organizationally groomed to reflect the corporate image of high standards, quality, authenticity, and integrity.

Argument 5: Our Understanding of Successful Leadership is Socially Informed

As both a leadership development practitioner and a leader myself, I have spent significant time reflecting specifically on the implications of my research with regard to leadership. Extrapolating from my research and experiences—and, by extension, the arguments above—I can now see that, just as we are constantly negotiating what it means to be a successful person, we are also negotiating what it means to be a successful leader. Harkening back to my earlier arguments, you would be correct in expecting me to say that

this is a socially influenced definition, negotiated within groups and societies. All of us, including leaders and regardless of position, are striving to succeed and survive, to matter, and to be recognized (Honneth, 1995; Taylor, 1995).

In recent years in Western society, there has been an increasing call for leaders to take on the persona of a "hero"—also often referred to as charismatic leadership (Griffin, 2002; Stacey, 2012; Stacey & Mowles, 2016). This heroic idealization reinforces an individualistic way of thinking, denying team makeup and other forces. As referenced in Project 4, the numerous requests I regularly receive promoting the latest and greatest leadership development panacea indicate that we, as a society, have bought into the idea that leaders can (and should) fix nearly everything; good leadership, in other words, is assumed to be the solution to all that ails us.

The expectation for today's leader is to take on a larger-than-life persona—similar to a superhero; if you are not a hero, you are not a truly successful leader. As Professor of Leadership and Organization, David Collinson, states,

> In contemporary western societies leadership issues are frequently understood in binary terms. For example, leaders are often viewed either as "heroes" or "villains," elevated or blamed, seen as the solution or the barrier to organizational success. (2005, p. 1419)

In the current context of a global pandemic and multiple additional layers of complexity and uncertainty, this expectation is even more sought after as we project our fears and desires for stability and relief onto individuals in leadership roles.

When successful, this mindset benefits the leader, providing feelings of validation, respect, and other reinforcing spoils. However, there is an ongoing negotiation regarding how much responsibility leaders want to take on behalf of others, as some would like to abdicate all responsibility onto the shoulders of leaders, thus allowing them to reap the benefits, but also take the blame, for the respective success or failure in a given situation. As Griffin notes,

> …we adopt a particular view of leadership in which it is individual leaders who are blamed and punished when things go wrong, or praised and rewarded when things go right. The rest of us are allocated to passive roles as victims of "the system", and

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of manipulative leaders, and our salvation lies in the actions of heroic leaders. (2002, p. 3)

In the same way we romanticize picking ourselves up by our bootstraps, when we look to leaders as all-powerful heroes, we once again fall into the trap of an individualistic way of thinking. Furthermore, beneath the polarized perspective of leader as either hero or villain is a shared assumption that complex organizational problems can (and should) be solved by leaders (Collinson, 2005). While leaders do have specific expectations to meet as a function of their role, this exaggerated view of what leaders should be able to achieve once again reinforces the perspective that one person can independently be responsible for individual or organizational success or failure, ignoring broader social, societal, or other important influences at play.

As leaders, we often collude with these impossible expectations, attempting to solve the problems of others. I can see now how I romanticized my own role as a leader in Project 4, raising expectations for myself regarding how I would step up and position myself to save the day and soothe the masses, exemplified by my intention to recognize and acknowledge my suffering HR colleagues following the global webcast.

The Women's Network leads in Project 4 also demonstrated this mentality, both by attempting to roll out the allyship program intended to reduce the suffering of minorities across the organization, and by idealizing the intended audience of senior leaders as the main target for this effort (i.e. the executives attending the program could, once trained, "come to the rescue of" the minorities in the organization). In the eyes of the Women's Network leads (and perhaps others), I became the leader-as-villain in this case, blocking the attempts of the altruistic and heroic network leads to serve the oppressed.

Contributions to Knowledge and Practice

As mentioned in the introduction, I believe my research is primarily relevant for those working in the fields of personal/professional/leadership development. That said, in my work I elaborate on contradictions and paradoxes regarding the meanings of success in organizations and inquire into how these unfold and can be understood as reflecting wider societal trends. Therefore, my research is also broadly relevant and generalizable to all types of employees in organizations, from senior executives to front line employees, given they are interested in exploring the dynamic and elusive aspects of success and are motivated to reflect on their own experience and situation.

In this section, I will outline the status of research on the topic of success in organizations and indicate my fresh perspectives and novel contributions to this body of work. Additionally, I will explain the implications of my research on current practice, particularly in the field of leadership development.

Contributions to Knowledge

By closely examining the popular literature, building on the work of other scholars, incorporating complementary fields of research, and rigorously examining my own experiences in a reflexive manner, I have developed and expanded the aperture for how we think about the complex topic of success in organizations today.

Specifically, my work contributes to the academic literature in several important ways: by extending a Critical Management lens explicitly to the topic of success in organizations, by adding new and detailed research to the field of career success, and by providing a unique set of arguments that shed new light on how common factors (e.g. power, society, image) influence our everyday experience of success at work. What follows is an overview of the current state of research on the topic of success in organizations, along with details illustrating how my contributions augment this body of work.

The majority of existing content regarding the topic of success—and the strongest influence on the dominant discourse—stems from popular literature (such as the business and self-help genres). Unfortunately, the exploration of success in popular literature, while voluminous in quantity, is generally inadequate in depth and rigor. In my work, I have

referenced (and critiqued) several of the more well-known players in this space (e.g. Canfield, Covey, Peale). However, I intentionally avoided referencing other authors individually due to both the volume of pontificators and the underlying similarity in their messages. In essence, the landscape in the dominant discourse consists of a variety of approaches (generally considered groundbreaking and unique by the author) undergirded by a common belief that can be universally summarized as: follow these steps/rules/guidelines, try your hardest, and you will achieve success.

This highly commercialized profit center (in the form of books, consultants, speakers, podcasts, etc.) which prevails in Western society tends to focus primarily on the individual's role in the achievement of success and downplays or ignores the broader context and complexity of the topic; as a result, little is offered to support individuals as they grapple with the difficulties of navigating said complexities of success in everyday organizational life. This dominant body of work tends to oversimplify and overpromise, creating a pattern of initial excitement and buy-in, followed by disappointment and disillusionment, and culminating in a quest for the next promising approach, all of which drives and sustains an ongoing cycle of profits (e.g. for publishers and consultants) along with perpetual striving accompanied by a sense of despair, frustration, and/or self-blame (e.g. for consumers) (Alvesson, 2013; Brinkmann, 2017; Ehrenreich, 2006, 2010; Flinn, 2018; Han, 2015; Stacey, 2012).

Most academic literature, on the other hand, while more rigorous in its approach and significantly more cautious about making claims, promises, or overgeneralizations, has tended to tackle the topic of success in a narrow and siloed manner. Most commonly, the topic of success in academia focuses on either organizational success/failure from a business perspective (see, for example, the countless Harvard Business Review case studies examining and dissecting business decisions and their resulting impacts to financial success, operational efficiency, etc.) or examines individual success from the perspective of one's career arc. Between these two most prominent categories, the more relevant to my research are the many articles in recent years focused on career success (such as Baker & Kelan, 2019, Baruch & Vardi, 2015, Gunz & Heslin, 2005). While helpful in understanding trends in how we commonly think about career success, these studies are often incomplete in their exploration of the day-to-day experience of success in organizations. For example, as mentioned in Project 4, academic literature regarding career success often narrowly

isolates measures of success into terms that may be easier to isolate, quantify, peer review, or address (e.g. salary or level in an organization and/or satisfaction with one's career) but are limited in their broader applicability to our daily efforts to experience a sense of success at work. In fact, in 2005, Gunz and Heslin compiled a collection of articles in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* (Volume 26) in an attempt to address the current state of research regarding career success. In their introduction of the volume, they noted the interplay of how changing definitions of career success both mirror changes in society and are correspondingly played out in changes in the workplace; they also noted the significant gap in academic research exploring such complexity. Calling for further research on the topic and its underlying variables, they stated,

> "If anything stands out from this collection, it is that there is a lot we do not understand about the multifaceted nature of career success." (Gunz and Heslin, 2005, p. 109)

Since then, research has begun to emerge to close this gap (see, for example Hupkens, et al., 2021; Kase, et al., 2020), including my own work, which contributes to exploring the complexity of success through my intricate investigation of success at Pharma.

On another front, scholars from academia's Critical Management field, in their examination of trends in organizations, have provided excellent critiques of the mindsets, tools, and techniques offered in popular business literature (see, for example, Flinn, 2018; Mowles, 2016; Pfeffer, 2015; Stacey, 2012); they have not, however, explicitly focused on the topic of success. My observations and critique of the dominant discourse are novel in their specificity regarding how popular business literature falls short in acknowledging the complexity of what it means to be successful in organizations today. These aforementioned critical scholars, however, by attending to important influences such as power and politics in organizations and indicating the shortcomings of many popular types of organizational interventions, provided foundational thinking upon which I was able to expand into my particular area of interest (success in organizations). For example, while Mowles and others (see, for example, Mowles, 2016; Stacey, 2012) speak about the limitations of tools and techniques in organizations more generally, I looked specifically at how such simplified tools, techniques, and ways of thinking impact expectations for and experiences of success in the workplace on an everyday basis. As a result, I have laid bare the discord between the

mainstream rhetoric surrounding the topic of success in organizations and the actual, lived experience.

Additionally, in light of the dearth of research focused specifically on what it means to be successful in organizations today, I also augmented my work by incorporating ideas and research from other, related fields, such as the thinking of Erving Goffman, James Scott, and Hartmut Rosa, who's areas of expertise (e.g. image management, power/politics, and social acceleration, respectively) enhanced my ability to offer a different, more robust way of thinking about success in organizations—one that allows a deeper look at common assumptions and ways of working and pays attention to the multiple dynamics at play in our day-to-day, ongoing negotiations for a sense of success. For example, I was able to leverage Scott's (1990) and Goffman's (1959) explorations of power and interpersonal dynamics to examine how organizational power structures in the form of leadership teams, reorganizations, or alliances can override individual aspirations and efforts for success.

Finally, while my arguments—that success is dynamic and temporal, socially informed, related to power structures and image management, and influences how we think about leadership in organizations—are built upon accepted premises (e.g. humans are social beings, living in evolving societies, influenced by each other and power dynamics, etc.), my application of such premises to how this plays out in our individual experiences of success in organizations is wholly new. I draw connections between each of my arguments and their implications on the experience of success in today's workplace. Additionally, I explore the cumulative impact of each of these forces, addressing what that means for fields such as leadership development, as well as individuals in organizations (see next section on Contributions to Practice). By breaking down and closely examining these key dominant, yet veiled, influences on how we individually experience success, my arguments shed new light on the assumptions we typically hold when we talk about success.

In this way, my research provides a unique, contextualized, and critical understanding of success in organizations—and offers a more informed perspective from which to view this complex topic.

Contributions to Practice

This expanded understanding has important implications for practice in the field of personal/professional/leadership development. In light of my findings, I have concluded that we can no longer think about leaders or development in the simplistic, straightforward manner that is common in most organizations today; instead, our approach must begin to reflect the complexity in which we live. Specifically, this means moving away from the common, predominant, and over-simplified models and systems thinking that paint the world as controllable and portray success as a stable trait or unwavering status.

In the most generalizable sense, through this work I have enhanced the ability for all of us to understand what is happening in our everyday lives as we pursue success in organizations. For many, if not all, of the reasons outlined in the key arguments above, we find ourselves negotiating our success day-by-day, hour-by-hour, and situation-by-situation. Caught up in the movement of the organizations of which we are a part—like individual birds embedded in a flocking formation—organizational speed, direction, and velocity changes by the second and we must respond accordingly.

Most people today move through their daily lives unaware, or merely subconsciously aware, of the forces at play that influence our actions, choices, and behaviors and impact our ability to achieve a sense of success. This ultimately leaves us lacking a feeling of enduring security or a clear understanding of what is driving our desires. At the same time we believe we are acting independently, we are most likely to fall back on social norms; it is commonplace/human nature simply to imitate others when we lack the time or ability to critically reflect (Alvesson, 2013). In other words, we simply follow the flock, unconsciously mimicking others who appear to be successful.

This general lack of awareness, understanding, and examination as it relates to success allows us to ignore the challenging complexity of the topic and maintain a sense of control in our lives and/or workplaces. When things go awry, however, this mode can be harmful—we may feel left with a sense of injustice, particularly as we are likely to maintain unrealistic expectations for—and then may subsequently blame—ourselves and/or others. While not a panacea, my research provides an enhanced awareness and clarity that comes with deep knowledge and understanding of the topic, which may help to break the cycle of mimicry and allow for increased opportunity for conscious choice, rather than unconscious reaction.

Regarding professional practice, recent shifts in the field of organization development that emphasize the complexity of day-to-day life in organizations are in accord with the implications of my research. For example, in organization development, practitioners are shifting from a diagnostic approach—which reinforces a tendency toward the application of simple models/solutions—toward a dialogic approach, which allows for attention to emergence, fluidity, and acknowledges the inherent, unavoidable complexity of daily life in organizations (Bushe, et al., 2015).

With regard specifically to leadership development practices, my research highlights the need to transform both how we think about leaders and how we approach leadership development. Strategically, this means moving away from and/or reducing expectations of many of the structured, programmatic approaches to which we have become accustomed and moving toward less formulaic, more generative and emergent leadership development interactions.

Additionally and fundamentally, we must also reconsider our expectations of leaders, acknowledging the broader influences at play. For example, as mentioned above, I have built a case that, just as definitions of success and failure are contextual and socially created, the definition of what makes a "good leader" similarly evolves in organizations, and this is important to keep in mind when working with leaders. This means that leaders (like all of us) must manage the expectation of constant evolution and reinvention. Developing the ability to step back and take a critical look, detaching slightly and reading the inherently political situation of the workplace, is important for navigation and survival in organizations—and is also an important skill for leaders and leadership development professionals like myself.

In our ongoing relationships and interactions with each other, I believe all of us (particularly leaders) must become increasingly aware of and pay close attention to how we enable and constrain each other in the environment and relationships we continuously create together. If we choose to go on pretending we are all self-determining individuals on equal footing, immune to forces external to ourselves, we are denying significant factors regarding our experience of success in organizations.

For example, it would be helpful to take time to explore questions such as "Who benefits from each new definition of success? Who does it put at risk for failure? How are shifting

definitions influenced by organizational power and politics?" The ability to recognize the game in which we are involved is an important skill for all of us (and perhaps, especially, for leaders). Moreover, my research indicates that we must take a critical look at the fallible foundational beliefs of the field of leadership development itself—namely, that it is based on the overly-simplistic and idealistic view that the autonomous leader can stand outside the "system" and heroically manipulate that system to predictable ends (Griffin, 2002)—and the notion that it is possible for a leadership development function or practitioner to engineer the development of perfect/successful leaders (Pfeffer, 2015).

While, as mentioned above, I intend to guard against the idealization of leadership as the answer to all that ails us in organizations, my research indicates that by being reflexive, increasing our ability to remain in dialogue with others, and recognizing the ways in which we enable and constrain each other (and ourselves) through our relationships, individuals, leaders (and leadership development practitioners) can begin to deepen their understanding of the multiple dynamic, interdependent forces at play in a situation.

As a result of my research, I have become more critical as a designer of development programs and interventions about many of the taken-for-granted ideas and models in the field of development. I can now see that the common prescriptive, systems-thinking approach has allowed development professionals, such as myself, to isolate and direct learners in a coordinated manner. However, I now question whether such simplification ultimately has served mainly as an attempt to manage uncertainty, control the situation, and alleviate anxiety on the part of both development practitioners and the recipients of such material.

While I do not believe there is anything dramatically wrong with the current development approach at Pharma (and many other organizations), as a result of my research I can now more clearly see the significant limitations of these simple, models-based approaches that do not always allow for deep exploration of such complex topics as leadership and success in organizations. I have also developed an understanding of the ongoing way in which organizational dynamics are co-created—and how this can be difficult to explore in organizations as these forms of inquiry tend to expose power dynamics and other "undiscussables" that may threaten the status quo.

I now find myself with a strong desire to avoid attempting to identify a "right" way to think about success and leadership development. Therefore, despite ongoing requests in my organization to propose a new model or alternate approach, I recognize now that doing so would, by nature of the complexity of organizations, be unsatisfactory and would simply represent another example of an attempt for control in the face of uncertainty. The simple models demanded in corporate organizations, in other words, may at times be helpful, but are not sufficient. The ongoing requests for such tools and techniques—rather than being a task/request I simply agree with and respond to—now represent an opportunity to explore with those asking for these models what it is they think they are getting/hope to garner from them.

My work indicates that the focus of development work in organizations (including Pharma) must begin to orient more toward the living present, allowing time and space for sense making and reflection, paying close attention to the co-creation of our shared futures together, and acknowledging the reality that we are all simultaneously and paradoxically involved and detached, independent and dependent, participants and observers as we grapple with the complexity of a more nuanced view of success in organizations.

Final Remarks – A Further Reflexive Turn

Though I have spoken to how my research may influence practice (including my own practice) above, I realize, of course, that I still have not fully answered the most pressing and common pair of questions I receive when I speak with others about my research, which is, "So what? What are you going to do differently at work as a result of this research?" To me, these questions further evidence the impossibility of reducing complex topics into a simple statements—and I continue to struggle to come up with an articulate response.

I mentioned earlier that the Doctor of Management program had exceeded my expectations—challenging my thinking far more broadly than anticipated. However, people want/expect to hear about a significant and bold shift in my thinking, if not witness a clear and demonstrable change in my behavior. As program director Chris Mowles notes, this type of research "…does not lend itself to producing more tools and techniques of management, but rather privileges deepening understanding" (2017b, p. 233). He goes on to state that "…calling into question what one may have taken for granted often brings about profound shifts in identity and self-understanding" (2017b, p. 234).

As mentioned in the methods section, in this way I feel equally transformed by the research process undertaken to create this thesis. I entered the program curious to explore my work and this topic, and have transformed through the reflexive process. Indeed, the Doctor of Management program has evoked an unsettled feeling in me related to the experience of uncertainty, which I now recognize is an everyday phenomenon in organizational life. Having been through this program (which purports to support managers in coping with the complexity of daily life—by recognizing it and taking it seriously) I find that I am now better able to do so, but I am often left unsure of how to act. This lack of clarity—along with a new tendency to pause before action—is the (meta) point of my work and of my findings/research. My deepened (and deepening) understanding has allowed me to develop a greater level of comfort with uncertainly and complexity, and to improvise more impressively; "knowing" how to act (e.g. following the "right" steps, jumping to action, or unquestioningly applying the model at hand) has become problematic.

Hibbert et al. (2019) propose that, as a result of engaging in reflexive practices, we tend to either avoid or engage—as reflexivity often involves a call to change oneself or one's context. To date, I have preferred to avoid, but now I find myself engaging, attempting to

reconfigure my thinking and make sense of what my research means on a day-to-day basis for my work.

I still live in the paradox of everyday life in an organization, in which I act and am acted upon; I exert power and power is exerted upon me. In an organization that still operates in alignment with dominant thinking (e.g. individualistic mindset, heroic leaders, systems thinking), practicing my newfound understandings/beliefs (or even articulating them) has become a dilemma, a new conundrum for me as I have changed my thinking—and as my thinking continues to evolve—as a result of participating in this program. Indeed, for example, I have become far more aware of power dynamics—along with cultural, societal, and historical influences—and how they show up in my work, my thinking, and the actions I choose to take.

However, as Head of Leadership Development at Pharma, and (hopefully soon-to-become) Doctor of Management, I am expected now, more than ever, to have the "right answer"; to know definitively what we should be doing to effect change in the organization. Before engaging with this work, while I can now see I was naïve, I was able to move with greater speed, purpose, practicality, and confidence through my professional life. Now, instead of acting without question, I find myself reflecting upon (and attempting to explore with others) a seemingly unlimited list of questions such as, "What change are we really trying to effect? Why? What are the various ways a particular intervention could turn out? Who benefits from each possibility? and Where does the power lie in this situation?" Such queries deepen a line of inquiry, thus increasing possible responses in a situation, rather than providing decontextualized prescriptions/formulas for what to do.

As a result of my research and experiences on the Doctor of Management program, I can point to the following as significant changes: I no longer buy into models and simple solutions—and rather see them more as tools or artifacts that are embedded in the larger practice of complex responsive processes of relating; I pay much more attention to power, politics, history, and other influences in any given interaction, and, as a result, of my newfound awareness of the extreme limits of control of any group or individual; I hold things more lightly, with a realization that—while there are things that one can do to influence a situation—there are also many more powerful and uncontrollable factors at play; and I find myself building more offerings for our leaders that include exploration and dialogue, rather

than tools and techniques. Through sharing my research, I hope others will be able to do the same.

I am reminded of the Greek myth of Pandora's box, in which curiosity led Pandora to open a container left in the care of her husband, unintentionally releasing a variety of curses upon mankind. The box represents a present that seems valuable, but is really a curse, and Pandora's opening of the box symbolizes an action that cannot be undone. In this way, the Doctor of Management program has left me grappling with a sense of overwhelm at the complexity of the world that cannot be undone and pondering whether or not I have been left with something valuable (new ways of understanding the world) or a curse (never being able to see the world as simply as I did before).

Ultimately, however, I find myself increasingly in the presence of one emotion: hope[12]. Fleck (1935/1979) talks about how ideas and theories pass through two periods: the first in which everything is in striking agreement (as is the case now in mainstream thinking for how we think about success and personal/professional/leadership development), followed by a second period in which exceptions start to come to the fore (such as those challenges brought forward by myself, colleagues in the Doctor of Management community, and others working in the area of Critical Management studies).   He also speaks about the importance of pre-ideas. My hope, I believe, stems from the idea that I will gradually be joined by others who are able to look critically at patterns and ideas that are presented unproblematically, and we will continue to orient toward new ways of thinking about what we do at work.

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[12] Hope has been characterized as "an anticipatory emotion that supports behaviors focused on bringing about as desired future" (Hibbert et al., 2019, p. 190).

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