

2014

# Senior Leaders' Response to Multi-Source Feedback: An Interpretive Multi-Case Study

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Senior Leaders' Response to Multi-Source Feedback: An Interpretive Multi-Case Study  
of Leaders' Perceptions of and Reactions to Feedback from Others

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

MINNEAPOLIS, MN

By

Julie M. Loosbrock

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

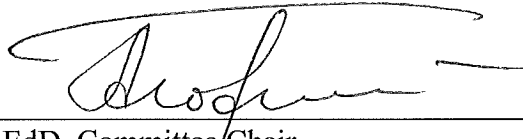
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

September, 2014

UNIVERSITY OF ST THOMAS

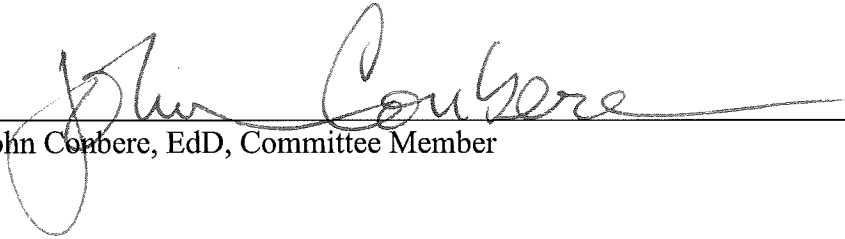
We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

Dissertation Committee



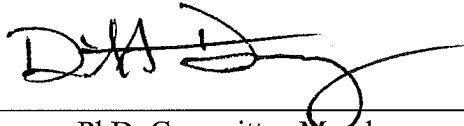
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## ABSTRACT

Senior leaders play impactful and important roles in organizations they lead. Being a CEO or senior leader in an organization can sometimes be the “loneliest job” in the entire organization. They carry a significant burden on their shoulders; ensuring that the organizations they are leading continue to improve, grow and flourish. While they are “on the hook” for those outcomes, how do senior leaders ensure that they get the insight needed to grow and improve themselves? Do colleagues surrounding these leaders provide feedback on how they are doing as leaders in their respective organizations? If so, how do leaders respond to that feedback? Does it provide insight they need to become better leaders?

This was an interpretive, multi-case study seeking to understand senior leaders’ perceptions and responses to feedback from others. Four senior leaders and some of their colleagues, representing different industries participated in this study. Interviews were conducted to understand not only the senior leaders’ experiences with feedback, but also the experiences their colleagues have as they provide their leader with feedback.

Analysis across the cases revealed four major themes around leaders’ early experiences and their beliefs about feedback, how creating trust enabled constructive feedback to occur, leaders’ association of feedback with “needs improvement,” and how the disposition of the leader and the internal environment of the organization impacted the feedback leaders received. This study also provides some insight about the topic of senior leaders and feedback from current literature and research.

To grow, an individual needs to understand self. Receipt of feedback provides an opportunity to gain insight that may allow a leader to get to know self better. As Oscar Wilde said, “Be yourself; everyone else is taken.”

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my two wonderful children; my daughter, Bryn and my son, Ian. Both are sources of joy for me. Their presence, love and support kept me forging ahead to reach this goal. They are lights in my life and I am deeply proud of both of them.

I would also like to mention two other members of my immediate family, Jersey and Kirby, my two miniature dachshunds. While I diligently worked on this dissertation in my home office, they kept me company. They lay in their dog bed right beside my work station; providing unconditional love, as only pets can do, during my much needed breaks. They are important members of the Loosbrock Clan too!

Finally, I would like to mention my sister, Marilyn. She encouraged me through this journey. Mary has always stood by me, no matter the circumstances, and for that I am truly grateful.

So, thank you Bryn, Ian, Mary, Jersey and Kirby – I love you all!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When embarking on this journey, I truly did not know what I was getting myself into; perhaps that was good! Along the way, I not only learned about this field of practice, Organizational Development, but I also learned so much about myself and have grown in ways that I never dreamed possible. Dr. Alla Heorhiadi, my committee chair, has taught me so much. She introduced me to new concepts and ways of thinking that have transformed my life. Her guidance and counsel were illuminating and key for me in discovery of my true self. I am so grateful to her for her guidance, belief in my abilities and encouragement on this dissertation journey. She will be forever my friend, mentor and teacher. Thank you Alla!

I also wish to acknowledge and thank my dissertation committee members, Dr. John Conbere and Dr. David Donnay. Thank you both for your time, support and insight. I know how busy both of your lives are and I feel honored that you agreed to participate on this journey with me.

In addition to my committee, I would like to thank Eugenia Canaan, my editor. Her discerning eye, skillful approach, quick turnaround, encouragement and insight were key. Her support helped me get through these final stages of this dissertation. Thank you, Eugenia!

I would also like to acknowledge, my boss, Lee Schram, CEO of Deluxe Corporation. Thank you for being supportive of my endeavors, for your coaching and your belief in me. It truly means a lot and helped me get to the finish line.

To the HR Function I lead, thank you for being my best cheerleaders and supporters – I truly appreciate all of the encouragement I received from each of you.

I want to thank the four senior leaders and their colleagues who agreed to participate in this study. I am grateful for their willingness to participate and share their stories. I felt privileged and honored for the trust each bestowed on me in this endeavor. This would not have been possible without each of you – Thank you!

Finally, I would like to share a story about a brief conversation I had with my mother while she lay in hospice not long before her death on October 18, 2013. It was a Sunday afternoon, about one week before my mom died. During that day, she was in and out of consciousness for much of the day. At one point, she awoke and said to me, “Julie, you are getting your doctorate, right”? I replied, “Yes, mom.” She said, “That is a lot of work, isn’t it?” I said, “Yes, but I am glad I am doing it.” Then my mom said, “Julie, when you finish your doctorate, you will be on Sunny Street!” I would like to say to my mother and all of you reading this dissertation, “I am now on Sunny Street!”



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## Chapter 1

Appraising performance for development purposes and effective job performance seems to be a common element of human resource management in organizations today. Feedback from multiple sources (e.g. managers, peers, subordinates) and upward feedback can be a valuable source of information about performance, as well as enabling participants to gain insight about self. Insight is needed for growth and change. To be successful, leaders need perspective on how their behavior is impacting those around them. People can learn, grow and change to become better leaders. When successful leaders look back over their careers, they are able to point to key experiences and insights, and what they learned from those experiences and insights that changed the way they managed (McCauley & Moxley, 2013).

Multi-source feedback allows leaders to see how they are viewed by their boss, peers, direct reports, others, etc. and then compares those views to their own. Thus, feedback may seem to enhance insight by encouraging better alignment of self-views with the views of others (McCauley & Moxley, 2013).

The prevalence and popularity of multi-source feedback has had the effect of causing varying viewpoints from researchers and practitioners. There is much research on the topic and much has been published at an ever increasing rate of speed. Upward feedback and multi-source systems are being implemented at an unprecedented rate in both the UK and the USA (van Dierendonck, Haynes, Borrill, & Stride, 2007).

One of the reasons for its increased popularity is that active feedback-seeking is based upon the idea that an effective manager is good at self regulation, as well as a manager who seeks feedback about his/her performance on the job is assumed to be more effective in his/her



job than one who does not (Asumeng, 2013). Yet, Asumeng suggested that studies on the feedback-performance association have yielded inconsistent findings. Some studies suggest a positive impact, while others have found a negative or no impact.

### **Researcher Background and Interest**

As an HR Executive working in Corporate America for approximately 30 years, I have known senior leaders who have been open to feedback and those who have not been open to feedback. I have also worked with senior leaders who have demonstrated varying degrees of openness to feedback and were not aware of how their behavior was affecting those around them. Some senior leaders with whom I have worked have been reluctant to share feedback that they received from others, specifically if this feedback was not aligned with their self image; in other words perceived by the leader as negative. The leaders' response to negative feedback was discounting it. The leaders thought that they must have been doing something right to get to the level of leadership they achieved today, and thus the feedback was not accurate.

Conversely, I have worked with senior leaders who were open to feedback. Specifically, as the senior leaders became more confident in their abilities and achieved success in their role, their willingness to receive feedback and openness to feedback changed. Particularly, if the senior leaders developed a deep, trusting relationship with a colleague or someone in their support system their desire for more honest feedback from that trusted partner heightened.

Through my experience, I have also witnessed the phenomenon that the higher one climbs in an organization, the less regular, honest feedback one gets on an ongoing basis. Additionally, when leaders at this level get feedback from others, I have witnessed the leaders act "suspect" of the feedback that they have received. Thus, concluding that for a leader to be less suspect of the feedback, the leader must receive feedback from a trusted source.

Because of this varied experience, I was interested in deepening my understanding of how senior leaders perceive and react to feedback from others. I was not only interested in the perspective of leaders, but also in the perspectives of those who surround them.

### **Problem Statement**

Multi-source feedback is becoming more popular in organizations. It claims to provide leaders with better alignment of self-views and the views of others; which in turn would then lead to better performance. While multi-source feedback may be a method for creating change in individual behaviors and organizational change, Bracken and Rose (2011) suggested that research results demonstrating its effect have been mixed. Little is actually known about leaders' reactions to feedback and whether it helps developmentally. Instead of asking if the multi-source feedback process works, Bracken and Rose (2011) stated that it is important for researchers and practitioners to ask, "Under what conditions and for whom is multi-source feedback beneficial" (p. 184). Studies on the benefits of feedback are inconsistent and thus more understanding of how senior leaders perceive and react to feedback is needed.

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

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how leaders perceive and react to feedback from others, as well as to explore if feedback from others enabled the leader to gain insight about self. Therefore, this study's research question was, "How does a senior leader perceive and react to feedback from others?"

### **Significance of the Study**

There are many studies that have been published on the topic of multi-source feedback. A large number of those studies have looked specifically at the effectiveness of multi-source feedback tools, as well as the impact that multi-source feedback has had on contributing to a

leader's development. However, much of the research on this topic has focused primarily on low-and mid-level managers. Additionally, most of the studies have been positivistic.

The first significance of this study is, its interpretive case study methodology which allowed me to look deeper into the phenomenon of receiving feedback by leaders. Second, it focused on leaders at the top of their organization or business unit. Finally, this study focused on understanding a specific component of multi-source feedback; specifically, the senior leader's perception of, and reaction to, feedback from others. Findings from previous studies in my literature review (Chapter II) suggested that more insight and understanding were needed in this area.

This study adds to the body of knowledge in that it helps researchers, practitioners, and organizations understand in depth the experiences of senior leaders with receiving feedback from others, along with their perceptions and reactions to that feedback.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

For this study, there were six key terms that needed to be defined to remove any confusion. Those terms are listed below.

**Senior Leader.** Leader within business at a CEO (Chief Executive Officer) level, a direct report to the CEO, or a direct report to the leader reporting to the CEO level.

**Feedback.** A conscious effort to get/receive information about one's skills, abilities, competencies, etc. (Asumeng, 2013).

**Multi-Source Feedback.** Receiving/getting feedback from various sources. This feedback comes most typically from the boss, peers/colleagues, direct reports, or others with whom feedback recipient is familiar. Feedback providers in the "other" category were colleagues within the organization where the feedback recipient works, or outside of the organization, such

as consultants, customers, coaches, mentors, family members, etc. (Greguras, Ford, & Brutus, 2002).

**Insight.** The power, act or result of seeing into a situation (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2004). For purpose of this study, insight was the senior leader's ability to see into or understand one's own personality, preferences and abilities and how these elements contributed to how they "showed up" on a day to day basis.

**Perception.** An awareness derived when a stimulus (feedback) is present; an ability to understand (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2004).

**Reaction.** A bodily, mental, or emotional response to some stimulus (feedback) (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2004).

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

There are many studies that have been published in the area of multi-source feedback, most being positivistic in nature. In order to provide the conceptual framework for this study, I focused primarily on two topic areas; first, the use of multi-source feedback in organizations and second, the feedback recipients' perceptions and their reactions to the feedback they received from others.

#### **Use of Multi-Source Feedback in Organizations**

The use of upward and multi-source feedback has continued to increase in popularity in organizations. One of the reasons for the increase is the belief that this type of feedback can improve the insight of the feedback recipient and also improve performance. Multi-source feedback is primarily used for managerial development. Multi-source feedback systems assume that as a result of the feedback, the person increases her insight and self awareness by viewing "self" and "other" rating discrepancies (Brett & Atwater, 2001).

Another reason for the increase in popularity of multi-source feedback systems is the complexity of organizational structures and the global nature of business today. Organizations recognize the multi-dimensional nature of jobs, and as a result, a leader's impact across different constituencies within the organization. Therefore, organizations value the perceptions that these constituencies provide to the leader for the purpose of guiding a leader's insights and development. Thus, multi-source feedback is seen to provide the feedback recipient with feedback that is not readily available from their direct manager (Smither, London, & Reilly, 2005).

Traditionally, the person to whom a person reported was the primary source of feedback. However, because of the increasing complexity of business today and a leader's reach and influence being more virtual, cross-functional and cross-organizational, many direct managers are not able to provide all of the feedback because they do not have an opportunity to observe the leader in all of these realms. Therefore, there has become a growing reliance to ask subordinates and peers to provide feedback to the leader (Heslin & Latham, 2004).

Despite the proliferation of upward and multi-source feedback programs, there are few longitudinal studies to show impact and improvement in performance for leaders and organizations over time (Heslin & Latham, 2004). Even though there is a belief that multi-source feedback can create behavior change and insight in the leader, Bracken and Rose (2011) would suggest the results of multi-source feedback are mixed. Some studies suggest that multi-source feedback creates measurable change and development for the leader. Other studies suggest that multi-source feedback creates no change. There are even studies whose conclusions suggest that the multi-source feedback provided to the leader may have caused negative effects.

A perplexing issue for organizations is determining if there is an association between feedback and performance. Even though there are mixed results of studies, it is still believed, however, that multi-source feedback can create change under the right circumstances. However, according to Bracken and Rose (2011), for this to occur there need to be four characteristics present to create successful change. Those are: 1) relevant content, 2) credible data, 3) accountability, and 4) census participation.

Feedback-seeking behavior is an important and inherent part of attaining insight and more interpersonal acumen. Climbing up the hierarchy in an organization does not render a performer immune to the need for feedback. However, in the realm of multi-source feedback,

more attention has been given to lower and mid-level managers on this topic. Little to no attention has been given to the feedback seeking dynamics of those at the top of the organization or business unit. As leaders climb up the ladder in an organization, there is a significant need for displaying emotional intelligence and social competencies versus purely technical competencies on which leaders previously relied. Even though this is the case, senior leaders must contend with the problem of receiving little feedback from others (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003).

### **Feedback Recipients' Perceptions and Responses to Feedback**

Typical multi-source feedback processes bring together performance information from supervisors, peers, subordinates, and others. Having an understanding of how the feedback recipient processes this feedback is important because the way they process the data will influence how they respond to the feedback. Feedback-seeking and feedback-responding behavior is important and plays a role in the feedback recipient's ability to gain insight about self. However, studies suggest that the perceptions and reactions of the feedback recipient impact the response and what the feedback recipient will actually do with the feedback that they receive (Heslin & Latham, 2004).

In the following section, I will focus on three specific areas of impact the feedback recipient experiences upon receipt of feedback: a) the feedback recipient's perception of the accuracy of the feedback received, b) the feedback recipient's reaction to the feedback received, and c) the role of the feedback provider and the feedback recipient's perception of the feedback provider's ability to rate them in that respective dimension.

### **Feedback Recipient's Perception of Accuracy of the Feedback**

Brett and Atwater (2001) proposed four stages in understanding how feedback relates to behavior change: 1) feedback is perceived, 2) feedback is accepted as accurate, 3) if the feedback

recipient sees the feedback as accurate, there is a desire to respond to the feedback and the feedback is seen as useful for development, and 4) behavior change may occur. The authors suggested that individuals assess the accuracy of feedback they receive and thus, the perceived accuracy relates to their reactions to the feedback. These reactions also include affective reactions to the feedback.

Feedback, which is perceived as inaccurate, will be associated with negative reactions, whereas feedback, perceived as accurate, will be related to more positive reactions. Subjects who received feedback that was more negative than expected, valued the feedback less than those whose feedback was more positive than expected. Additionally, negative feedback that was not seen as accurate did not result in insight or awareness, but in anger and discouragement (Brett & Atwater, 2001).

Another dimension of the perception of the accuracy of feedback has to do with the agreement or discrepancy between the feedback recipient's self view and the view of others. Feedback recipients may interpret feedback as negative when the rating is lower than their self view. When self view and other view of feedback is in agreement, the feedback recipient's satisfaction is at its highest, regardless of the ratings (Bono & Colbert, 2005).

Brett and Atwater (2001) suggested that a discrepancy between "self" and "other" may evoke the need for the feedback recipient to bridge the gap between the different views. Therefore, feedback recipients may discount the feedback and seek additional feedback that is more in line with their self view. Instead of perceiving discrepant views as an opportunity for insight and enlightenment, negative reactions were reported. Brett and Atwater also found that if there is a discrepancy between self view and view of others, and the feedback recipient has



difficulty accepting the difference, the likelihood of insight, awareness and performance improvement is not likely to occur.

### **Feedback Recipient's Reaction to the Feedback Received**

Several characteristics of multi-source feedback are likely to influence initial reactions and subsequent behavior. Most obvious is whether the feedback is perceived to be negative or positive.

Brett and Atwater (2001) found that reactions to negative versus positive feedback may include more affect intensity and arousal. For example, low ratings may evoke emotional arousal such as anger, shame, or a defiant opposition. However, it is less likely that high ratings will evoke joy or glee, but may evoke a positive affect that is less intense, such as pleasure or inspiration.

Unfavorable feedback does not lead to performance improvement when a recipient rejects the feedback. Smither, London, and Reilly (2005) have shown that leaders, who received negative feedback, reacted with anger and discouragement, but leaders, who received positive feedback, did not react with significant positive affect. Smither et al. also stated that the way a feedback recipient reacts (positive or negative) can depend on the source (feedback provider). If the feedback recipient perceives the source as credible, they are more likely to act positively, even if the feedback is positive or negative.

Brett and Atwater (2001) found that leaders, who expressed more motivation and had more positive emotions immediately after receiving feedback, actually increased/improved their direct report scores and peer ratings when feedback was solicited again one year later. However, leaders who reacted negatively to their feedback, experienced a decrease in scores from direct reports and peers when feedback was solicited one year later.

## **Role of Feedback Provider and Feedback Recipient's Perception of Provider's Ability to Assess Performance in Measured Dimension**

Understanding how a feedback recipient attends to feedback from various sources is important because reactions to this feedback may impact subsequent behaviors. Additionally, understanding how feedback recipients process this feedback may influence how they respond to the feedback.

Greguras, Ford, and Brutus (2002) have conducted research on the reaction and response to feedback based upon the role the feedback provider plays to the feedback recipient and their ability to rate performance in a specific dimension. For example, their research indicates that recipients of feedback prefer using the immediate supervisor as the main source of information and weigh this feedback more heavily because of the supervisor's influence in performance evaluation and career progression. Additionally, peer ratings have been seen to be considered more heavily by the feedback recipient for development purposes because peers have ample opportunities to observe relevant behavior of the feedback recipient. Finally, Greguras et al. (2002) also indicated that leaders do find subordinate feedback useful for development purposes based upon the leader's concept that if a subordinate is successful, then the leader will also be successful.

Also, the "acceptability" factor of the feedback recipient to the feedback is based upon the "dimension" on which the feedback provider is rating. A degree of the feedback recipient's attention to the feedback provider's comments is likely contingent on the particular dimension that the rater is evaluating. The acceptability of feedback from a source increases as the dimension being evaluated is more relevant to that source. Results indicated that feedback recipients weigh more heavily a manager's rating than a peer or subordinate's rating. Feedback

recipients seem to attend to peer ratings more than subordinate ratings for the “general administration” performance dimensions. Finally, feedback recipients will attend to subordinate ratings more than to peer ratings for the “ability to lead others” performance dimension (Greguras, Ford, & Brutus, 2002).

Brett and Atwater (2001) showed that a lower rating given to a manager from subordinates may tend to decrease the manager’s “liking” of the subordinates and decrease their level of loyalty and commitment to the subordinates after they receive the feedback.

### **Summary**

While there are many studies in the area of multi-source feedback, there seems to be a limited number of studies that specifically examine the effects of upward/multi-source feedback on changes in management behavior. It is often taken for granted that discrepancies between self ratings and ratings of others provide insight, raise self awareness and improve the performance of the leader. Previous research conducted suggested that this is not always the case.

Practitioners should not expect large, widespread improvement after receipt of multi-source feedback. Actually, some recipients will improve more than others (Smither, London, & Reilly, 2005).

There continues to be much more to learn about how to optimize multi-source feedback and how feedback is received so that feedback recipients and organizations are able to achieve the greatest benefit from this practice. Therefore, additional research is needed to understand this topic in more depth.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Design & Methodology**

The epistemology that guided my study was interpretivism. The researcher's intent in employing interpretive research is to interpret or make sense of the meanings others have about the world; that is why this type of research is often called interpretive (Creswell, 2007). This research approach allowed me to interpret meaning that individuals have about the issue of receiving feedback.

The focus of this study was to understand how senior leaders within organizations responded to feedback from others. Specifically, the purpose of my study was to gain a deeper understanding of how senior leaders perceived and reacted to feedback from others. Thus, an interpretive approach was better suited for my study.

### **Research Methodology**

Interpretive case study research methodology shares characteristics of other interpretive studies in the search for meaning within a context. The distinguishing characteristic of an interpretive case study is that it is clearly bounded and delineates what is in and what is excluded from the case. Interpretive case studies focus on discovery and gaining insight from the perspective of the participants for the purpose of understanding.

Case study is a research methodology that examines the uniqueness and complexity of a single case, and brings understanding of the activity within its particular context and circumstances. Case study research is defined as “the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a ‘bounded system’ (i.e., a setting or context) (Creswell, 2007, p. 73).

I chose the framework of Stake (1995) to carry out my research. Stake stated that case study is used when it is of very special interest and the case study is expected to catch the complexity and particularity of a single case. Particularization is an important aim of case study methodology which means to know one case well.

In this research, I studied how senior leaders within organizations perceived and reacted to feedback from others. Each case consisted of a single senior leader and colleagues who provided feedback to this leader.

My interest in conducting this research was to understand how senior leaders perceived and reacted to feedback from others; as well as to understand how those surrounding the senior leader experienced providing the senior leader feedback and how they experienced the senior leader's reaction to the feedback they provided.

The research question that guided my multiple case study was: How does a senior leader perceive and react to feedback from others?

## **Methods**

Interpretive case study research does not claim specific methods for data collection, rather the approach draws upon multiple sources of information such as interviews, focus groups, archival documents, and observations combined in multiple implementations to obtain the richest collection of data (Creswell, 2007). The research methods for data collection used in this study were individual participant interviews (senior leader), secondary data from interviews with those surrounding the senior leader, and my observations during my interactions with both the senior leader and those surrounding the leader.

## **Participants**

For this research, I studied four separate cases. Each case included one senior leader and four to five secondary participants who had an experience of providing feedback to the senior leader. My rationale for having a minimum of 4 secondary participants for each case was to collect enough robust data. A bigger number of secondary participants might not have added more value, but rather could require too much of the organization's resources and time. Thus, my study of four cases included 21 participants in total, both senior leaders and colleagues surrounding the senior leader.

### **Primary Participant Selection**

I began the process of participant selection first with the primary participants for the study; the senior leaders. My goal was to have three to five senior business leaders participate in this study. The definition of a senior leader for this study was either a top leader of an organization, business unit or function or a leader who reported to the top leader of a business unit or function. It was my goal to find participants for this research among people whom I did not know well or with whom I did not have a direct business or personal relationship. By employing this approach, I attempted to ensure that I was open to understanding each case in depth, while limiting my bias.

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval to commence with the research, I proceeded to identify the primary participants for my study. I decided to recruit potential participants for this study using my business and personal contacts. I sent an email outlining the parameters of my study to 15 contacts asking each of them for introductions to senior leaders, who fit my definition of a "senior leader," and who might be interested in participating in this study.

My contact's role was to provide me an introduction to the potential primary participant(s) of the study, the senior leader. My contacts were very interested in my study and believed they would have no problem finding participants for my study. Seeing their enthusiasm, I felt I would not have any difficulty with recruitment. Indeed, my contacts provided the names of 12 senior leaders.

Once the introduction was provided by my contacts, I sent an email to the potential participant describing the nature of my study. In this introduction letter, I indicated the next step for potential participation was their response to my email indicating their potential interest in participating in this study. Once I received their email, I reached out to each potential participant via phone and/or email (based on their desire) to discuss the study in more depth. My goal was to ensure they understood all of the parameters of the study and were comfortable participating. I indicated to the senior leader that there were two phases of their participation in the study. The first phase included a face-to-face interview with me that would take approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The purpose of this first phase was to discuss their beliefs about feedback, their experience receiving feedback, their perceptions about the feedback they received, and if feedback they received ever prompted any action on their part. Then I explained the second phase of the study, which for them meant providing a list of approximately 8 people with whom they have worked, from which I would choose only 4 to 6. These secondary participants had to be able to provide insights about giving feedback to the senior leader, as well as, the senior leader's response(s) to their feedback. After my explanation of the study, I encountered different reactions from the senior leaders.

The initial reaction was always to be interested in participation. However, when I explained to the senior leader that I was also interested in experiences and perspectives of people

providing “feedback to them,” I experienced multiple reactions from the leader. First, and most common, was to discontinue contact with me. Second was to follow up with me via email articulating one or more of the following reasons for not participating: the senior leader’s schedule was too busy; the senior leader did not believe colleagues had enough contact with them or knowledge about them to provide feedback; or the senior leader believed that their and their colleague’s schedules were too busy to allow participation. Third reaction was to reach out to me several times via email and phone to discuss the study. After each discussion, the leader committed to participate but never got over the hurdle of complying with all parameters of the study. The most difficult hurdle for the leader was providing the names of the secondary participants.

The reactions of those leaders who chose not to participate in the study led me to believe, first, that the topic of feedback is sensitive for many and that possibly the vulnerability and courage a leader needed to display to participate in this study on feedback caused the leader difficulty. Second, the leaders’ reactions caused me to wonder about the depth of experience senior leaders may actually have receiving full constructive feedback.

### **Secondary Participant Selection**

Once I received signed consent forms from the senior leaders who agreed to participate in this study, I asked them to provide the names of their potential secondary participants. Each leader provided the names of approximately 8 colleagues. The criteria given to the senior leaders for the secondary participants were: a boss, peers or colleagues, and direct reports. Initially, I planned at least one participant in each of these respective categories. However, practically, it was difficult to ensure representation in each category. The senior leader also had the option to



choose one or two participants in the “other” category. The definition of the “other” category was a friend, mentor, coach or significant other/spouse.

It was the senior leader’s responsibility to reach out to each individual that he/she included in the list of “potential secondary participants” prior to providing me with the names. Once the senior leader made the initial contact with the secondary participant, I received an email with the names, titles and email addresses of each potential participant. At that point, I reached out to the named individuals and provided them with an overview of the parameters of the study and a request for them to follow up with me via phone or email if they were interested in participating in the study.

I was encouraged by the immediate response which I received from many of the individuals named by each of the senior leaders as participants for their respective case. After receiving the consent form from the secondary participant, I followed up with each individual to determine possible dates and times for the interview.

Most of the secondary participants who initially contacted me to participate did follow through and I interviewed them. However, a couple of secondary participants were at the CEO level within their organization and could not meet due to scheduling conflicts. Ultimately, even though I had several individuals who were not able to participate due to time constraints, I was able to interview a minimum of 4 individuals for each case.

While most of the secondary participants were enthusiastic about participating in the study, there was one individual who was concerned about confidentiality. After I had several conversations with this individual, this person decided not to participate in the study. However, this participant stated that if I did not get my quota of participants needed for the respective case, this individual would reconsider participation.

## **Data Collection**

To collect my data, I used semi-structured, open-ended interview questions. I created two sets of questions. The first set was for the leader, the primary participant and second set was for the secondary participants, colleagues of the senior leader (see Appendices C and D).

I initially intended to schedule interviews by case. However, after beginning the scheduling process, I realized this approach was not feasible. Thus, I scheduled interviews with both the primary and secondary participants at a time that fit both of our schedules, not in the order of cases. I interviewed all of the participants for all four cases within a three month timeframe.

Whenever possible, interviews were conducted face to face. Face to face interviews took place in a setting that was selected by the participants. Allowing the setting to be selected by the participant ensured that each participant was in a comfortable, relaxing atmosphere of their choice.

Before each interview began, I spent time building rapport through small talk, reviewing the parameters of the study with the participant and going through the consent form. The consent form was signed by the participant and me before the official interview began. I shared with each participant that I would be recording our interview and that I would be transcribing all of the data. Thus, no one else would have access to the recording. For those individuals, with whom I had a phone or a Skype conversation, the consent form was scanned and emailed to the participant prior to the interview being conducted.

Most of the questions I received from participants were about the anonymity of the data. I assured each individual that no information disclosing an individual's identity or work location would be documented in the dissertation. I also assured each person that if quotes were used, they would not be attributed to an individual by name or location and that a pseudonym would

represent the leader in the analysis and the data reporting. Additionally, I committed to sharing the summary of their interviews, so I could ensure the accuracy of the data.

The conversations with the senior leaders lasted about 60 – 90 minutes per session. The conversations with the colleagues surrounding the leader lasted about 30 – 60 minutes per session. Each interview was recorded on a personal digital recorder. Interviews were scheduled to accommodate participants' preferences of schedules and locations:

- five interviews were conducted in the participants' offices;
- seven interviews were conducted in conference rooms at the participant's office;
- four interviews were conducted in a coffee shop;
- two interviews were conducted via conference call;
- one interview was conducted via Skype;
- one interview was conducted in a conference room at my workplace;
- one interview was conducted in my office.

I began each conversation by thanking participants for their participation in my study. Before beginning the official recorded interview, I engaged the participant in small talk to create a comfortable atmosphere and build rapport.

Once I believed that the participant felt a level of comfort with me, I began conducting the official interview. Before I asked my first question, I stated to the participant that “the recorder is on.” I shared with the participant that during the interview process, I would take some notes, but would primarily be listening to them and engaging them in conversation.

During the conversations, I took notes to mark observations, as well as to write down a particular concept or phrase that came up during the interview. I asked probing questions to encourage participants to go deeper into the discussion. At the conclusion of the interviews, I

invited participants to share anything further that I may not have asked, but that they wanted to include. In some instances, this revealed additional, relevant data and insights.

### **Data Analysis**

Stake (1995) stated that there is no particular moment when data analysis begins. Analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions, as well as to final compilations. It is a matter of taking researcher's impressions and observations apart. Analysis goes on and on. The primary task is to understand the case. Stake was adamant about remaining true to the uniqueness and priority of the case and that the nature of the study determines categorical aggregation or direct interpretation and occasionally both, and the reader decides the interpretation.

For purposes of this study, I analyzed data initially within each individual case and then across cases. Within-case analysis was used to understand and describe the feedback experience of each of the study participants in the individual case. Cross-case analysis was used to understand and describe the broader experiences of participants and themes across all four cases.

During the interview process, I took notes and audio-recorded the sessions. Additionally during the interview process, I documented my thoughts, reflections, and observations in my note book. Once the interview was complete, I transcribed all of the data.

The transcription process was an important component of my data analysis process. While the transcription process was arduous, it allowed me to relive the interview experience again, recalling the mood and emotion that occurred during my time with the participant. I took great pains to ensure I transcribed each word and quote accurately. Additionally, transcribing the interview myself allowed me to incorporate more thoughts, reflections and impressions in my notebook for each case. The data were helpful as I began to review content for each of the interviews included in each case.

I created a binder with data for each case. The data within the binder included:

- my notes from each interview, including my reflections, thoughts and “aha” moments;
- my email correspondence with each participant;
- all consent forms for the respective case;
- transcripts of each interview within the case.

After all data were transcribed for each case and all copies of all information noted above were created and collected for each case, I began my review and analysis of the information for each participant.

I read all information, line by line within the binder, for each study participant in detail. I recorded themes and thoughts in the margins of each document, including quotes and key words. I highlighted key thoughts and responses by each participant for each question to ensure I included that information in my case analysis, as well as to alert me to emerging themes. The transcripts became a key document and reference tool for my individual case analysis. Through the process of listening to the recordings, transcribing the notes, and re-reading the transcripts, I immersed myself and became integrally involved with the data. I wanted to understand in depth the feedback experience of each individual within the case. Reviewing the data in this way helped me to write a detailed description of the case and uncover the themes for each individual case.

Next, I re-read each transcript line by line, using color to highlight and categorize the data. I color coded the data by topic area. For senior leaders, I color coded information for each topic as follows:

- Beliefs about feedback – yellow

- Feedback experiences – orange
- Perceptions about feedback – green
- Responses to feedback received – pink
- Actions based upon feedback received – blue

For secondary participants, I color coded information for each topic as follows:

- Feedback culture of company – green
- Experiences providing leader feedback – orange
- Leader's response to feedback – pink
- Leader's action based upon feedback – blue
- Leader's management style – yellow

After I color coded each transcript, I captured the highlighted data, by topic, onto flip charts. This view of the data enabled me to begin to understand the case in more depth and begin to see emerging themes.

After I analyzed each individual case, I wrote a detailed description of the case. The written case includes a description of the participants in the case (senior leader and colleagues), key points from the discussion with the senior leader and themes and key points from discussions with all of their colleagues. I was open to adjusting this approach based upon the data collected and the knowledge gained. Once I analyzed each case individually, I began the process of cross-case analysis.

### **Cross-case Analysis**

To analyze the data across all four cases, I re-read each of the individual case analyses, as well as my notes for each case. My focus during reading was to capture first, those items that were consistent across the four cases and second, those items that were not consistent across the

four cases. This approach enabled me to glean additional insight that was used to establish themes that were emerging across all four cases.

Once I established the themes, I reread and reviewed each individual case. My goal was to pull information from each case that was pertinent to the theme so that I could further elaborate on the theme.

Additionally, part of my process was to reflect on what I read from each case so that I could capture within each theme the essence of all of the data I discovered. The rigorous approach I used for within-case analysis, allowed me to have deep insights into each case. This process was also helpful as I embarked on my cross-case analysis.

### **Researcher Bias**

As I embarked on this study, I was extremely aware of a number of biases I needed to bracket while conducting this study. Additionally, I was also very conscious of self-as-instrument during the research and writing of this case study. I have been practicing in the Human Resources profession for approximately 30 years. During my tenure in Human Resources, I have created and implemented many feedback programs in organizations for which I have worked. It was important to ensure that the attitudes or biases I have about the effectiveness of leaders' experiences with and reactions to multi-source feedback, did not cloud my views and insights while I conducted this study.

During my time in Human Resources, I have also worked with leaders, who I believed, were very open to feedback. These were leaders who built strong relationships with employees within their functions and across the broader organization. I also worked with leaders who displayed behaviors that were the exact opposite. Many of the leaders were not open to feedback, but had the "misconception" that they were open to feedback from others. At times, these leaders

behaved like the emperor in the story, *The Emperor's New Clothes* by Hans Christian Andersen. Because of these varied experiences and having witnessed many leaders who were not open to feedback, I held preconceived ideas about senior leaders' openness and ability to receive feedback from others.

To keep my biases in check, I employed a participants' selection process in which I did not know, nor work with any of the leaders who participated in my study. I was able to get to know and experience the leaders and their colleagues through the data collection phase of the study. Initially, when I started the data collection phase of this study, I wanted to be very methodical in my approach for scheduling interviews. I desired to complete all interviews for one case before moving on to the next case. I also desired to interview the leader first and the colleagues surrounding the leader after my interview with that specific leader. However, based upon the schedules of my participants, as well as my own, I realized that my preferred approach was unrealistic; so, I settled on scheduling interviews based on our respective availability rather than my desired sequence.

During this phase of the process, I became aware of another bias that I needed to keep in check. In instances when I interviewed colleagues before I interviewed the leader, I realized that I held some preconceived notions about the leader before the interview with the leader ever occurred. I constantly reminded myself to allow each interview to stand on its' own. I reflected and cleared my mind before each interview so that I entered the experience limiting my preconceived ideas. Additionally, because I transcribed all of the data myself, I was able to relive, hear and experience each interview a second time. This process was helpful so that I could hear the data again with a clear mind, without the presence of the individual with whom I was conducting the interview.



I kept separate written records of participants' opinions and my opinions, to keep my biases "in check" during this process. Separate notes allowed me to bracket my experiences, thoughts, reactions, etc. during the data collection and data analysis phases. While it was challenging sometimes not to assume prior knowledge, I focused on listening and learning from the participants. It was a wonderful opportunity to see some things I knew through their lenses.

Finally, another bias that I needed to manage while conducting this study, was bias about my own personal experience as a leader and my experiences receiving and responding to feedback from others. I, like the leaders I interviewed, have been on a personal journey of growth. The paths I have taken are neither the only paths nor better paths than those of the leaders I interviewed. The paths I have taken are my paths. I was very conscious of this bias during my data collection and data analysis phases. During the data collection phase, I ensured my personal thoughts were captured in the margin of my notes, so that I did not cloud my views with the views expressed by the leader. Additionally, during the data analysis phase, I checked myself many times to ensure that I was not putting "my spin" on the data and finding themes that were based in my reality and not in the data that was presented.

During the course of this study, I was acutely aware of all the aforementioned biases. I worked very hard to ensure that I captured and reported on the leaders' and the colleagues' experiences, not my own.

### **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality of the data and privacy of the study participants was my first priority. I did not want any participant impacted in a negative way or harmed as a result of participating in this study. In order to maintain participant confidentiality, participants were not asked to reveal any personal data. Also, no names were used in the recorded interviews, except if a participant

inadvertently mentioned a name. However, I was the only person with access to the recorded data, thus confidentiality was preserved.

Additionally, all data from the personal digital recording device were downloaded onto my computer and the data were encrypted. Once the recording was downloaded, the data were erased from the personal digital recording device. All transcribed data were stored on my personal laptop in my home office and password protected. Additionally, a flash drive was created for each individual case and kept in a locked drawer in my home office.

To reduce the risk of participant identification, I used pseudonyms for all interviewees even in my notes. Additionally, in reporting my findings, I compiled the data from the secondary participants and shared only themes and quotes that could not identify a specific participant.

### **Validity**

After I wrote the individual case analysis for each case, I sent the leaders and the secondary participants their respective sections via email. In the email, I requested that each individual review the data for accuracy and provide feedback regarding the validity of the data within one week. Upon receipt of their feedback, I reviewed and adjusted content within my document as appropriate.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how leaders perceive and react to feedback from others, as well as to explore whether feedback from others enabled the leader to gain insight about self. The research question for this study was, “How does a senior leader perceive and react to feedback from others?” Interpretive case study methodology was best suited for my study. To collect data, I interviewed senior leaders and their colleagues.

### **Chapter Organization**

In this chapter, I first describe each case in depth. Each case includes a senior leader and four of his/her colleagues.

The senior leader segment includes a description of the senior leader, stories that describe the senior leader’s beliefs about feedback, types of feedback the leader received, the senior leader’s reaction to feedback received, perceptions about the feedback received, and if the feedback led to any insight or action.

The colleague segment follows, including a description of the colleagues surrounding the senior leader, stories that describe the colleagues’ perceptions of the feedback culture of the company, their experience providing feedback to the leader, the leader’s reactions and responses to their feedback, and if their feedback caused the leader to act. Each case concludes with a summary of my thoughts.

The final section of Chapter IV is comprised of a cross-case analysis. The purpose of the cross-case analysis is to show the patterns across the cases and present my analysis.

## Primary Participant Profiles

Eventually, four senior leaders out of the initial pool of 12 candidates participated in this study as primary participants. The study included leaders whose age ranged from 47 to 57. The table below describes attributes of the primary study participants (senior leaders). In each case, all primary participants were open to the interview, as well as to contacting colleagues for participation. However, in one case during the discussion phase about the study, the leader indicated being nervous about participation. Despite the nerves, this leader found the prospect of getting insight about self from others outweighed the nervousness.

Table 1

### *Professional Profiles of Primary Participants*

Case	Participant Pseudonym	Age Range	Degree/Education Level	Industry	Years in Leadership Roles	Years in "Senior Leader" Role
1	David	55-64	BS, Accounting MBA, Finance Executive MBA	Business Services	26	8
2	JK	45-54	BS, Computer Science and Mathematics Mini MBA	Enterprise Software	25	19
3	Alex	45-54	BS, Accounting Licensed CPA	IT/Mgmt Consulting and Sports Entertainment Industry	25	7
4	Matt	45-54	BS, Accounting Licensed CPA	Steel	23	16

## Secondary Participant Profiles

I interviewed a minimum of four colleagues for each leader. In the case of one leader, I interviewed five colleagues. The table below describes attributes of the secondary participants (colleagues).

Table 2

### *Profiles of Secondary Participants*

Case	Participant Role	Gender	Age Range
David	Peer	Female	55-64
	Direct Report	Female	35-44
	Direct Report	Male	45-54
	Direct Report	Male	45-54
JK	Peer	Male	35-44
	Direct Report	Female	35-44
	Direct Report	Female	45-54
	Direct Report	Male	35-44
Alex	Direct Report	Female	25-34
	Direct Report	Female	35-44
	Direct Report	Female	45-54
	Direct Report	Male	45-54
Matt	Direct Report	Female	55-64
	Direct Report	Male	55-64
	Direct Report	Male	55-64
	Direct Report	Male	35-44
	Other	Male	55-64

### Case 1 – Senior Leader – David

#### Meeting David

I conducted David's interview on a sunny October, Friday afternoon at my office. David lives in another state, having recently left the organization where he worked as a senior leader.

Initially, upon meeting David, I noticed that his style was engaging. I felt comfortable with him. During our entire time together, David was very open, warm, and collegial. I felt I had known David for many years. He made consistent eye contact, smiled and injected humor throughout our time together. We started our visit over lunch and talked about how each of us was doing. After lunch, we engaged in our discussion on the topic of feedback. We spent 2 ½ hours together that afternoon. I became very drawn into the conversation; the 2 ½ hours we spent together passed very quickly. At the end of our conversation, I felt as if I had a deep sense of who David was and how he approached his work. I was intrigued by the way he described his interactions with people. The examples he shared showed that David made true connections with those he met. During our time together, David recounted stories of role models and mentors that impacted him deeply and forged the type of leader he became.

When I asked David why he wanted to participate in this study, he stated that he was not only interested in the topic, but he also saw it as “free consulting.” David shared that he wanted to understand how others viewed him so that he could keep getting better. This statement was affirmed as I listened to both David’s stories about what drove him personally and professionally, as well as the way David’s colleagues described his management style and their working relationship with David.

**David’s relationship with his father, grandfather and a mentor early in his career influenced his attitude about feedback.** David has had a long, successful career working in many capacities and at different organizations. He consistently found himself in roles that required managing change, and in businesses that needed to get back on track. In fact, it seemed he was drawn to those types of roles.

David witnessed how relationships with people drove deep connections. David credited both his father and grandfather with informing his point of view on building relationships; thus, his openness to feedback. Growing up, David watched the interactions that both his father and grandfather had with people. Whether at work, church, sporting events, etc., David saw how wherever his father and grandfather traveled, they built strong relationships. Growing up, David's father and grandfather shared many words of wisdom with him. These words of wisdom made a significant and lasting impression. David recalled his father's statements, "Your legacy is how people feel about you when you are not there," and "A lot of truth is said when you are not in the room." Additionally, David mentioned that his grandfather told him,

You want to make as many mistakes as fast as you can because everyone has a certain amount of mistakes they will make in a lifetime. If you can make them when you are young in age, you will be more effective later in life.

This advice spurred David to build strong connections with people, try as many things as he could and live with an adventurous spirit.

David also credited a leader, for whom he worked early in his career, with contributing not only to how he accepted feedback, but also to the leader he was today. David was hired by this leader to do Profit and Loss analysis in several divisions of financial service organizations. This specific role helped David understand how businesses ran, as well as methods to uncover issues within the business so that processes could be improved resulting in improved profitability within the business.

David admired and respected this business leader. Watching this business leader in action taught him to focus and ask questions. David stated, "I thought he was a master; everything was so focused and he asked such insightful questions."

As a result of David's nurturing family and business mentor, he made it a habit to get to know the business, people who worked directly for him, and the people in the broader organizations he led.

**Connecting with the people who did the work drove opportunities for feedback.**

Projects, on which David worked early in his career, helped him understand how businesses ran. In several of David's early roles, he was an entry level staff person who interacted with presidents of business units and shared his thoughts on the financial health of their operations. This placed David in uncomfortable situations because he was early in his career, yet he was coaching business unit leaders.

To be successful in these assignments, David learned that he not only needed to connect with the business unit leaders, but also with the people who were doing the work, so that he could better understand the business processes. David believed it was good to perform all of the functions in the businesses he was leading. As a result, he sat side by side with the people who were performing various functions. The people who were doing the work provided David feedback and insight along the way that caused the projects to be successful. Through this approach, he learned the business, built relationships and received much direct feedback about the business, tools and resources that people used and needed to get their jobs done. At the end of these assignments, the information he gathered and gave to the leaders resulted in savings and improvements in the millions of dollars.

The relationships David built with employees, resulted in nurturing employees, who felt comfortable providing him feedback. He believed that if one gets insight and feedback from employees, it is the responsibility of the leader to respond and follow up so that those who provided feedback know that you heard them. David's concern was that as leaders became more



senior within the organization, they became more insulated from feedback. Therefore, he strived to stay connected to people at all levels within the organization so that he continued to receive feedback.

As David reflected upon the roles he had early in his career, his “aha moment” was, “I could never have been successful without building relationships with the leaders and with the people who were doing the day-to-day work.” Those experiences made a significant impression on him and impacted the way he grew as a person and business leader.

**Feedback helped him to become a better person and stronger leader.** David believed that feedback was critical to his success no matter what role he was performing. He believed that everyone should be comfortable providing insight and feedback. David stated, “If people are willing to share their opinion with you, it is your responsibility as a leader to listen, sort through the information, and filter the feedback in a way that is productive.” He stated, “If someone takes time to give me feedback and I never get back to them, there is nothing worse than an employee thinking that feedback went into a black hole.”

However, David made it clear that he did not incorporate every piece of feedback he received. He stated that he felt it was important to take the feedback in, ask questions for clarity, be thoughtful and show respect by responding to the feedback giver, even if he was not going to incorporate the feedback moving forward. Through this approach, trust was built and people felt that he listened. David attributed feedback he received throughout his career to his success as a leader.

David mentioned that he “Loved when people had opinions.” He also stated, “I loved feedback when it was honest.” If he thought the feedback might not be honest, he mentioned that he always asked, “Why?” If he believed that the feedback may not be totally honest, David

took the “Columbo” approach, and asked the feedback provider to, “Tell me more.” He wanted everyone to feel comfortable providing him feedback. He believed that feedback he received enabled his success.

**Stronger relationships equated to more feedback.** One of the stories that David shared, depicted his experience receiving feedback very early on in his leadership role. David was the senior leader of a division within the broader company for which he worked. The business was experiencing some challenging times and David was hired to improve the business’ performance.

On the first day of his new role, David called a meeting of his new team to review the expectations that had been given to him by his bosses, the CEO and the Board. This was a meeting about goals and objectives; specifically, the numbers within the business plan. While David was new to the team, many on the team had been together for a longer period of time. Initially, the team was reluctant to provide feedback as the team members did not know him. The type of feedback he received from his team at this meeting, and at other meetings early on in their relationship was about the business plan, expectations, and business numbers. David stated, “My team felt the goals I initially established were unrealistic.” However, as David continued telling his story, he described the growth of the team over time, under his leadership, as it related to the team’s ability to provide him more direct feedback about the business plans he established. Additionally, as David and his team’s relationship grew, the team began to provide feedback about strategy and work product on an ongoing basis.

David also shared that, over the course of his career, he had been provided feedback about his style. Interestingly, most often such feedback came from subordinates of his direct reports. The type of feedback he heard about his leadership style was, “He is a good listener; he is interested in what I have to say; he is positive; and he has a sense of humor.”

**Sought to understand feedback.** When I asked David about his reactions and perceptions to feedback he had been given, he stated,

I am, most of the time, accepting of feedback given to me. However, I do certainly enjoy feedback that is positive more than negative. When I get negative feedback, I have to bite my tongue and not say anything at first. I usually just say, “Tell me more”; “Can you provide me more context”.

Regardless of the feedback, David’s reaction was to thank the person who provided the feedback. David shared that he most often contemplated what he had heard before he provided a response. Also, when given feedback, he would ask the feedback provider for context so that he could more fully understand the individual's perspective.

David stated that he tried to really look in the mirror and he asked himself questions so that he fully reflected on the feedback given. This approach helped him determine what, if anything, he could have done differently. David described his approach in the context of, “I am always trying to understand so that I can do better.” Another behavior that David was adamant about displaying was following up with the person who provided him the feedback. He believed following up enabled the loop to be closed.

By demonstrating the behaviors cited previously, David believed he would continue to get feedback. David mentioned, “One of my biggest fears is that I will be in a position too long, get complacent and stop asking questions.” David believed that if this occurred, he would stop gaining insight and would no longer grow as a leader. This fear drove him to continuously interact with others ensuring they felt comfortable providing him feedback.

**Admitted making mistakes.** David shared a story about a time he conducted an employee town hall meeting at one of the companies for which he worked. During the town hall meeting, a specific group of employees made some comments and jokes that offended several

other employees in the audience. At that moment, David did not handle the issue. After the town hall, David was confronted by several employees within the business about their disappointment in how he handled the situation. He reflected on the feedback he was given and realized that the employees were right; he said, “They are right, we are at work, I cannot let this pass, this is an opportunity for me to deal with the situation.” David stated that he thought about the situation and it bothered him so much that he was not able to sleep. He realized that this situation was a teachable moment and he realized he needed to address the situation. As a result, at the next employee meeting, David admitted his mistake and apologized.

Recalling this experience, he stated how humbled he was and mentioned, “I was disappointed in myself that I did not handle this situation better.” However, he chalked this up to a learning experience and how humbled he was as a leader. David also recognized the importance of his apology to the employees. As a result of his admission of this mistake, the employees respected and trusted David even more.

**Driven to learn something new daily.** David was passionate about his growth and learning new things. In fact, he shared a habit that he embedded early in his career. He used the principles he learned through his Franklin-Covey training. These principles required reflection at the end of each day. The purpose of the reflection was to write down 10 things learned that day. Before David left the office each day, he was very serious about ensuring that he reflected about the day and on the feedback he received. Weekly, he reviewed and summarized his learning so that the learning was embedded. David emphasized the importance that this practice of seeking feedback from people within the business, and then reflecting on that feedback, had on his development.

## **David's Colleagues**

As much as I enjoyed talking with David, I also experienced a lot of pleasure connecting with his colleagues. Three of the four individuals with whom I spoke, were direct reports to David. The fourth was a peer. When David reached out and asked colleagues for participation in this study, I was amazed at how quickly each responded. First, the warmth of the email David sent requesting his colleagues' support followed by their quick, warm, and affirmative responses indicated to me that these individuals felt very connected to David and desired to help him in any way they could. The responses I received from David's colleagues showed much respect and caring for him.

The sections that follow are comprised of all David's colleagues' stories. I did this for two reasons. One reason is to add an additional level of protection to participants' anonymity. The other reason is that in many instances, the colleagues' stories highlighted the same things, thus it made sense to combine the stories and present a holistic view of David through the eyes of his colleagues.

At the time of my interviews with David's colleagues, all had either moved into new roles at different companies or had moved on to new phases of their life. As a result, the meeting places were either current places of employment or coffee shops.

I experienced each colleague as very warm, engaging and open. Each also made it abundantly clear that the reason they participated in this study was because David asked. All of them articulated how much they cared about him and desired to do what they could to provide him support.

**Informal feedback culture.** When meeting with each of David's colleagues, I asked them about the feedback culture of the company in which they worked with David. The company was described as having some financial challenges during the time David was their boss. Because of the financial issues within the company, the culture was described as very challenging. The company had been taken over by a private equity firm. At the time, cost cutting and headcount reductions occurred. Feedback was informal and unstructured. It was stated that the company had formal feedback processes (performance review, 360 degree feedback, etc.), but those processes were not fully embedded within the culture of the organization.

During the time that David was in his leadership role, other leaders within the company were not inviting feedback. There was also a sense that the type of feedback that occurred within the company was more critical than positive. Some of David's colleagues stated, "If a leader wanted feedback, the leader needed to seek it out." One individual stated, "I think the more senior you got, the less feedback you received." Another shared that leaders were required to do annual reviews; but ongoing daily type of feedback was somewhat non-existent. Unanimously, all of the colleagues stated, "Meeting David, we could tell immediately by his demeanor that he was the type of person to whom one could provide feedback."

As it related to feedback provided within their specific team, some stated that it occurred, but it was primarily about goals, objectives and work plans. It was also mentioned that during each of the annual reviews conducted by David, he asked each of them how he could better support them. David opened the conversation with each of them during their annual review and asked for feedback about his leadership style. However, David's direct reports stated, "It just did not occur to us to provide feedback to David about his style or how he interacted with us or others within the organization."

**Direct report and peer feedback differed.** Each of David's direct reports had experience providing him feedback. However, the feedback provided was primarily about strategy, work plans and projects within the functions that each led. To a person, each of his direct reports stated that they did not provide David feedback about his style or how he showed up as a leader. When probed further about this, each stated things like, "I don't think my feedback was about "Hey, you should think about how you do this", or "Hey, I think you should do this better." Additionally, it was stated by some of his direct reports, that they did not recall giving David feedback about how he was doing. The feedback provided was more educational about their specific function and what they wanted to accomplish. Even though David asked his direct reports for feedback about his leadership style as a part of his approach to conducting their performance reviews, they consistently only provided feedback about their goals, the business, and the strategy.

Conversely, the peer with whom I spoke stated that feedback provided to David was not only about the business, but also about his style. David's style was described as, "So open and sincere that there was a comfort level providing feedback to him about his style."

Several examples were shared to illustrate the type of feedback that was provided to David. In one instance, David asked for feedback surrounding a personnel situation. David used the feedback provided and incorporated it into his future approach. Another time, feedback was provided to David about the tough environment and culture of the company for which they worked. This peer warned David to be, "Careful and not so open, polite and nice." The feedback was given for fear that David would "crash and burn" in the current culture. However, it was soon realized, that although David was warm, polite and sincere, he could also be very dominant and was definitely not a pushover. Additionally, David was provided feedback regarding his

communication style. Specifically, the feedback given was, “Provide more clear direction and goals to your staff.” Action was taken from that feedback. At David’s next team meeting, he provided specific dates for deadlines on objectives given to his direct reports.

**Thanked people for feedback.** David was described as very open and approachable when feedback was provided. One person stated, “I had no angst about providing him feedback because of who he is.” This quote came directly from a person who described an experience where he went into David’s office when he was not present, and wrote ideas on David’s white board to be considered as part of the plan to move the business forward. The action demonstrated by this direct report came within the first week of knowing David. The next morning, David approached this direct report and asked if he provided the feedback on the white board. The direct report responded affirmatively. David’s response was, “I agree, let’s roll it out!” This reaction was demonstrative of David’s style; he contemplated the feedback he was given and if he agreed with it, incorporated the feedback into plans. However, even if David did not agree with the feedback he was given, he always responded to the person providing feedback. It was stated, “No matter if David does not agree, he never puts the person who provided the feedback in less stead.”

All of the situations described by David’s colleagues recounted a comfort level in providing David feedback because of his demeanor. All described David as open and authentic. Each stated they felt comfortable with David almost upon meeting him.

It was also stated that David received all feedback with a happy face. As one person recalled, “He would always thank you for the feedback and then he would process it.” It was described that there were times David received suggestions that were incorporated into his



approach, while at other times suggestions were not incorporated into David's approach. However, at no time anyone felt slighted if the feedback they provided was not incorporated. David created an environment of openness, comfort, camaraderie and coaching toward the business goal. Through his leadership, his team over-achieved against the stretch objectives created and all received the maximum bonus payout.

### **Summary Thoughts About the Case of David**

David believed in the importance of learning the business, connecting with people and responding to feedback, not only to make things better for the people, but also for his own growth. He believed that leaders did not consistently receive feedback as they rose in the organization; or if they did receive feedback, the feedback was filtered. This belief drove David to continue connecting with people at every level, so that he continued to receive feedback. He strived to get better. He was a lifelong learner who wanted to grow through all of his experiences and have fun while doing it.

David's leadership style was described by others using words like, humility, EQ, authentic, coach, respectful, cares about people, special man, wonderful human being, he saw people as not just business but the totality of who they were as a human being, comfortable, and approachable.

David valued communication, trust, and integrity. He lived and displayed the values he espoused. I found David to be a very seasoned and mature leader who was comfortable in his own skin. I also found this leader to behave in ways that I felt were very authentic.

## **Case 2 – Senior Leader - JK**

### **JK and His Company**

I met with JK on a sunny October morning. The business campus driveway leading up to JK's office was lined with beautiful trees. All were striking and colorful in the fall sunlight. The entire business campus was situated in a very serene setting. Upon arrival, I was warmly greeted by the receptionist. While I waited for JK, the receptionist provided me with historical information about the company, internal structure, architecture and layout of the building. She explained that the design of the building was created by the business' CEO. The layout, décor and structure of the campus and building were contemporary and edgy.

After a brief wait, JK arrived at the reception area and greeted me. My meeting with JK was conducted in a large glass encased conference room, located close to the reception area. Initially, JK's demeanor appeared to be somewhat anxious. However, after he and I spent some time in light conversation, building rapport and talking about this study, he began to relax. From that point on, he seemed to enjoy our conversation and connection.

JK shared with me that he was interested in being involved in this study because he felt he would gain insight about his style. Additionally, he was interested in understanding if perceptions others had of him matched up with his perception of self. He also mentioned that the concept of executive level feedback was very interesting to him. Over the years, he had realized that if an executive was interested in feedback, the executive needed to seek it out. Additionally, JK believed that he rarely received direct feedback, in its original state. Thus, he believed that the interested executive needed to seek feedback from trusted sources to understand "the real, unvarnished truth."

JK's educational background was a double major in Computer Science and Mathematics. After graduating from college, he began working for a large company in the computer department. Approximately one year after graduating from college, JK moved to the Twin Cities and began working for smaller organizations, but still in the computer industry.

Based upon his knowledge of the computer and services industry, JK was able to influence his CEO to form an organization that provided technical consulting. He continued to work with that CEO in those companies for some time. This experience influenced him to create other business opportunities for himself as an entrepreneur. Early in his career, he both started and sold businesses. The last business JK started was subsequently sold to the organization for which he currently worked as the Chief Knowledge Officer (CKO).

As a result of the work experiences he had after college, JK realized that he was better suited to work for smaller, entrepreneurial organizations versus large companies. He stated,

I did not feel like I fit well in a big company environment. I did not navigate politics very well. I was too straightforward with my feedback. I did not intend it to be mean; I intended it to be honest. I always got that "side-eyed" look; like, I cannot believe you just said that in this meeting!

JK's current organization was an entrepreneurial organization experiencing growing pains. In the last several years, the number of employees had grown from seven to approximately 350. As a result, leadership now realized that things could not be done as they were in the past. Much change was occurring on an ongoing basis.

The culture was evolving. The organization was recently restructured to a more product focused organization with a flat reporting structure. This represented a significant change for JK and his colleagues. JK shared that this change, made by his CEO, was one of those feedback moments when he struggled. JK stated, "I struggled more emotionally than logically." JK led the

services organization in the past and now, as a result of this change, he led the product organization.

As a result of this structure change, JK now had 22 direct reports. He not only managed those direct reports but was also a “working leader,” as was described both by him and his colleagues with whom I spoke. There were now employees on JK’s team that, in the past, were separated from this executive leadership level by one or two layers. Finding themselves reporting directly to an executive, represented a significant change for those employees who were just learning to navigate this structure.

Not only had JK’s company been on a journey of growth, but JK recounted that he too had been on a personal journey of growth. JK and I talked about his self-growth from his younger years to present. He stated,

When I was younger, I was worried about how the outside world saw me and felt about me. I am less worried about that now and more worried about being true to my own “moral code”. JK described his self-image from his younger years as being a “physically imposing person”, self-conscious of his size. As he grew older, he began to know and accept himself. He now had a better realization of what made him tick. The outcome of this growth and introspection was a more confident person and leader. JK stated, when you have been at this a while, you become more comfortable in your skin.

In addition, the executive leadership team at his current organization had grown and begun to build deeper relationships with each other. They continued to find ways to work better together and run the company more effectively.

**Early negative experiences with feedback.** JK shared stories of how, as a young leader, he experienced feedback as threatening. JK believed his negative thoughts about feedback were fostered by his childhood school system. He believed that when teachers provided feedback, it was typically because a student did something wrong. JK shared that, to him, the feedback felt

like, “I did not know what I was doing.” He recalled, “It felt like the feedback I received was more about challenging my abilities versus helping me to improve.” During our discussion, JK used words like, “tongue-lashing” and “being called out” as synonymous with feedback.

**Feedback could actually help.** Over time, and as JK matured as a leader, he mentioned that his views on feedback have changed. When JK was in his 30’s, he realized that feedback could actually help him improve. He now realized that in order to improve, he needed to receive feedback.

Looking back, he realized that it was at that time, (in his 30’s), that he began to feel more self-confident in his abilities and more comfortable in his skin and also became more comfortable receiving feedback. However, he admitted that sometimes the old negative feelings about feedback came back to haunt him. But, he began to believe that the purpose of feedback was not necessarily to challenge his abilities; even though JK had been a successful business person, it took him some time to realize that feedback was not meant to be a bad thing. He realized that openness to feedback could actually help him grow and become better as a person and as a leader.

During that same time, JK also realized that it was okay to ask for feedback. JK stated that even though he was now more comfortable asking for feedback, old negative visions and thoughts of feedback came back to him from time to time. For example, at times when someone provided him feedback, he perceived this as a “finger shake” or he heard phrases in his head like, “You are an idiot.” While this occurred at times, JK still forged ahead and tried to maintain positive thoughts about feedback. As a result of this growth and change in his beliefs, JK had begun to think differently, not only about how he received feedback, but also about how he provided feedback to his colleagues and direct reports.

Another realization JK had was that some of his continued sensitivity to feedback may have been the result of his work with educators on a daily basis, as this is his business. Additionally, three-fourths of his staff were comprised of former educators. Thus, his staff had dealt with younger minds in their past careers and had tried to understand how to get them to receive and incorporate feedback. As a result, JK was very conscious of how he approached receiving feedback from his staff and how he gave feedback to them. Because JK was sensitive to how feedback may be perceived, he attempted to provide feedback to his direct reports in a way that was more constructive.

**Feedback about style was received only from the boss and wife.** JK mentioned that the only people who provided him feedback about his management style were his boss, namely, the CEO of the company, and his wife. Although both provided JK feedback on his management style, he did not elaborate on feedback he received from his wife. JK stated that feedback provided from his boss was rarely very detailed. The CEO's feedback had a tendency to come in bursts and was a type of "big picture" feedback. The feedback from his boss was not in succinct, straightforward messages. JK mentioned that his boss would state, "When you are doing your presentation you need to be "crisp and clean" as opposed to the content you are talking about." As a result of the way his boss provided feedback, JK ensured he first listened to the feedback and then went away to process the feedback so that he could attempt to understand what the feedback meant. Once JK had gone through this process, he determined what components of the feedback he would incorporate into his future behavior.

JK shared that even at his current career stage; feedback from superiors could be intimidating. He shared that at times when he received feedback from superiors; it felt like a finger shaking at him versus helping him to improve his abilities. JK mentioned that receiving

feedback from his boss still felt intimidating merely because this was feedback from authority. While JK's boss provided ongoing and in the moment feedback, JK mentioned that he had not received a formal performance review in 10 years.

**Open door approach and peer meetings were a way to build trust.** Our conversation then turned to a discussion about his leadership style in more depth and the way he showed up at work. During that part of our discussion, JK focused on feedback he received from his direct report team. JK mentioned that feedback he got from his direct reports was never about his style. He did, however, get feedback from his direct reports on an array of other information such as the tools and resources they used to perform their jobs, the projects on which they worked, team members they did not believe were “pulling their weight,” etc. JK stated that he had an open door policy. If his direct reports had any issues or concerns, they knocked on his door and came in to discuss the issue. JK had a large direct report team; mixed in terms of tenure with the company and tenure on the team. JK believed that those who had worked for him a long time were comfortable with and used the open door approach. He mentioned that he was not sure if those who were new to the team were comfortable yet with his open door approach. JK believed those who were new to his team were still trying to “feel out” the environment. He thought those employees may have wondered, “Does he really have an open door policy; who is this gruff guy; do I want to go into his office; how will he react?”

During this part of our discussion, JK also divulged his approach to develop stronger bonds and build deeper, more trusting relationships with his peers. In the recent past, JK recommended that he and his peers have regular monthly meetings to discuss the state of the business, as well as goals and project status in the functional areas each led. He said that not only had this helped them run the business better; especially in light of the fact that the business was

growing very rapidly, but also the peer team had realized that they needed one another to be successful. These meetings have increased the peer group's level of trust with one another. The positive outcome of building trust had helped each of them feel more comfortable giving and receiving feedback to and from one another. JK realized that as his trust had grown with his peers, he had begun to receive feedback about himself and his team's work with a more open mind. During the peer team's monthly working sessions, they provided feedback to each other. This feedback had enabled JK to gain insight about himself and his team's work that actually made the overall company more successful. It was described as a "Win/win experience."

**Reflected on feedback before responding.** As JK and I began to discuss his feedback experiences in more detail, he mentioned that the venue in which feedback was received made a difference in his reaction and response to the feedback. JK stated that he appreciated receiving feedback in a one-on-one setting, versus being, "Called out," in front of others.

As it related to JK's direct reports, he mentioned that his reaction to their feedback depended on the work mode he was in, what he was working on and who else was in the room. Over time, JK stated that he had learned not to react immediately to the feedback, but took time to process. He realized that if he reflected, thought, and asked a couple of questions, he had a better chance of not upsetting people in the process. When JK received feedback or questions from his direct reports, he also posed his own questions to them about the topic. This process had helped his direct reports begin to solve problems on their own versus being brought to JK for resolution. He realized that this approach had been more helpful vs. making snap decisions, as may have happened in the past. Additionally, this approach had helped him adjust the way he responded to concerns and resolved issues. As it related to JK's peers, he mentioned that in the past when he got feedback from his peers he thought, "I have work to do," but the more he



matured as a leader, he realized that the feedback was meant to help. Presently, when he received feedback from his peers, he internalized and reflected on the feedback first. This enabled him to assess the context within which the feedback was provided. Further, this approach helped JK respond in a more constructive fashion.

JK admitted that in the past, he had a tendency to act upon feedback right away without all of the facts. Today, JK contemplated before he acted. He stated, “To others, this approach may not seem fast enough at times. However, I find this approach overall provides the best outcome.”

**Valued feedback from a respected person.** JK added that when it came to his peers, the trust and respect he had for the peer and the value he assigned the peer’s contributions to the company, determined his response to the feedback provided. If he valued, trusted and respected the individual, he listened to the feedback, tried to understand the context, and then determined what, if anything, he did with the feedback. JK stated, “It takes me time to get to a point where I respect them enough to where I listen to what they are saying.” JK spoke of an experience where he and a peer had conversations regarding the previously mentioned restructure of his position. This conversation was difficult. He shared that he struggled with the conversation and specifically, with changing the structure of his position. While, logically, he knew the restructure made sense, it caused him emotional struggles. But, as a result of this challenging, candid conversation with this peer, a deeper, more trusting relationship was built. He was now able to listen more openly to feedback from this peer.

Finally, JK mentioned that when the customer provided him feedback, he always listened intently and tried to understand the underpinnings of the customer concerns. He stated that he listened to the customer in this way because, “They are paying the bills.”

**Acceptance of feedback led to self-awareness and growth.** JK opened up to me about a nickname he was given in his early days with the company. I will not provide the nickname to preserve JK's anonymity. JK mentioned that at a past company gathering, he was given an award in the form of a specific "article" that depicted this nickname. JK was aware that he was given this nickname and received this award because of his past perceived management style, which he described was "In your face," and "Hard driving." Mention of this nickname at the company gathering and receiving the award, provided JK self insight. He stated that because of this insight, he had worked on softening his management approach, response and reactions to feedback. He had worked, and continued to work, on modifying his management style. This event provided JK an "aha moment" and helped him grow as a leader. This was an example of JK "getting more comfortable in his skin."

### **JK's Colleagues**

My discussion with JK was very enlightening. JK opened up to me about his beliefs and challenges surrounding the topic of feedback. Because of the great conversation I experienced with JK, I looked forward to meeting his colleagues.

I enjoyed meeting JK's colleagues. However, each was very different in terms of their demeanor and comfort level with participation. For example, two of the participants requested the meeting be off site, while others were comfortable conducting the interview with me at the company. Even though there was this difference in each of JK's colleague's demeanor and approach, it was clear to me that each person with whom I spoke respected JK. When I asked why they participated, each person stated, "Because JK asked."

When I reached out to colleagues whose names I received from JK, the response was direct, quick and affirmative. Nevertheless, in the end only four were able to schedule time to speak with me. This section is comprised of themes that emerged from four individuals surrounding JK. Three of the four participants were direct reports to JK; the fourth was a peer.

**Casual feedback culture.** All described the feedback environment of this company as very unstructured, informal and relaxed. Some stated that the type of feedback one received depended upon the personality of the feedback seeker and the venues wherein one was seeking feedback.

This company was growing rapidly. As a result, the company had tried various methods of providing feedback to employees; including conducting performance reviews. Currently, the formal review process was non-existent. In fact, no one within the organization received performance reviews. However, JK's direct reports mentioned that if one wanted a formal review, one needed only ask their manager and a review would be provided. However, it was rare for someone to ask for a formal review. As the company continued to grow, different performance review and feedback approaches were being tried. It was also mentioned that there was a difference, both culturally and in feedback style, between the process side and the creative side of the business.

JK's colleagues mentioned that positive feedback may come sometimes from customers, other managers, one's own manager, or at quarterly one-on-one meetings. But, negative feedback, (if one did not do something right), came pretty quickly.

The company was founded by a leader who was a genius high school graduate. His style of providing feedback was to casually walk into an employee's office to discuss anything about the company that was on his mind. So, it was with this feedback style that the company was

founded and currently operated. This style had also trickled down to others. It was an environment where anyone could “pop in” to other people’s offices and say what was needed to be said. The approach to feedback and problem solving with JK’s peer group was to meet in a room, or someone’s office, and work on problem resolution in the moment.

**Feedback was provided through various mediums and was typically about work plans, projects, ideas and issues with team members.** Each of JK’s colleagues had experience providing feedback to JK. All stated that they provided feedback on work projects and products, etc. None of JK’s direct reports provided JK feedback on his style or approach. One direct report stated, “I never say, I don’t like how you handled that.” To this direct report, providing that type of feedback seems like “attacking the person.” However, while feedback was not provided on JK’s style, at times, feedback was provided on the team dynamics of their direct work group.

Direct reports also commented on JK’s open door policy. Each had taken advantage of this opportunity. However, it was mentioned that even though JK had an open door policy, each of them, including JK, were very busy. As a result, using this venue to provide feedback was approached very purposefully and thoughtfully. Some of JK’s direct reports preferred to and most often provided JK feedback via email. It was stated that this approach allowed insights to be shared in a logical way, along with supporting evidence for consideration. Providing feedback via email also provided JK time to contemplate and respond. JK’s response was typically via email as well. Similarly, it was mentioned that JK also sought insight from his direct reports on projects, work approaches, etc. via email. One direct report suggested that JK wanted feedback and it was a good practice to provide JK insight or feedback. It was stated,

He actually will get upset if we do not come to him with an issue and he finds out through the grapevine. Our set-up is very casual and informal. We can say what we need to say; share what we need to share or send an email. No matter what,

you will always get a response. It may not be the response you want, but it is very open.

In addition to JK's open door policy and email, direct reports shared that JK conducted one-on-one meetings with each of them. During those meetings, each was free to talk about anything that was on their mind. Some of JK's direct reports joked, "These meetings are like our very own "therapy sessions." Yet, each added that even though JK allowed them to share what was on their minds, he also required them to think through the issue or problem and try to solve it before he provided them the answer.

The peer with whom I spoke talked about the significance that the monthly peer meetings that JK established had on creating more trust within the peer group. The monthly meeting included all of the peers and excluded the CEO. During this meeting, peers were comfortable providing feedback to one another and having open dialogue about each other's functions, the function's results, and each of the peer's direct report teams. As mentioned previously, these meetings were credited with facilitating deeper levels of trust being built.

**Feedback response was logical, factual and even keeled.** JK's typical response to feedback was described as non-emotional. It was stated, "JK asks for facts, he does not get snippy." Direct reports shared that JK did not typically react outwardly to feedback. It was suggested that JK took time to think about the feedback he received. However, one direct report mentioned, "You can tell by the body language and the posture, basically how he looks at you and you think "OK we better shape up and put our big people pants on and be professional now."

Another direct report mentioned that the best approach to provide feedback was via email vs. challenging JK in an open forum. If emails were sent to JK, he took time to process the email and always responded with his thoughts. It was stated, "Based upon the time stamp on the email, one can tell that the feedback had been reviewed and absorbed."

JK's response to feedback was described as very process and results oriented. A direct report stated,

If JK believes facts and evidence are provided for the approach you suggest, there is a high probability that he will support and agree with the approach. However, there are times when JK does not agree with the approach suggested, even though evidence was provided. But, because JK is the leader, we choose to adhere to the approach JK ultimately decides to take.

It was mentioned by another direct report that if JK was provided feedback on a team dynamics issue within the group, most of the time you saw action. JK did follow up and deal with issues that were raised.

### **Summary Thoughts About the Case of JK**

I was most struck by JK's openness and willingness to describe his journey of personal growth. The stories he shared about his struggle with feedback from an early age and his ability to overcome those struggles, were self-revealing, enlightening, encouraging and authentic. I was touched by his emotional descriptions of his experiences and thoughts about feedback from the early negative perspective and the challenge that occasionally posed for him still today. But, I also experienced JK's feelings of triumph and accomplishment through stories he shared about how he overcame sensitivities and challenges with feedback.

JK was able to find humor in, and laugh at, the nickname he was given early on in his career. As a result, it served as an impetus for JK's growth. Through this exchange, it was clear to me that he reflected upon the behavior responsible for acquiring that nickname, and that he made a conscious effort to adjust his leadership style and grow from the feedback.

Finally, based upon the demeanor and reactions of JK's colleagues who participated in the study, and even the reaction of those who did not participate in this study, I was reminded of

the sensitivity surrounding the topic of my study (feedback), and the courage it took for those who participated.

### **Case 3 - Senior Leader - Alex**

#### **Getting to Know Alex and Her Background**

Prior to meeting Alex face to face, and before she agreed to participate in the study, we had a telephone conversation to discuss the study in more depth. The conversation was very focused and productive. Approximately 15 minutes into the conversation, Alex decided to participate. During the conversation, Alex mentioned, “I am nervous about participating,” but that nervousness did not stop her. She stated, “Even though I am nervous about participating, getting insight outweighs my nervousness.”

Our face-to-face meeting occurred at Alex’s office in late November, 2013. Alex’s assistant ordered lunch for our meeting. Alex and I began our meeting by visiting briefly over lunch to get to know one another. This approach allowed us to build rapport and discuss the study again. At the beginning of our meeting, I experienced Alex’s style to be very businesslike and focused. Based upon my initial experience, I wondered whether Alex was going to be guarded in her approach to the interview. However, during our time together, Alex’s comfort level increased. Alex became warm, welcoming, engaging, funny and thoughtful in her responses to my questions. She interacted with me in lively conversation and storytelling about her beliefs and experiences. Alex was noticeably reflective before responding to questions. She was also self-revealing about her feedback experiences and leadership style.

Alex enjoyed a successful career. Her degree was in Accounting. She was a licensed CPA. Alex had worked for both large and small companies. She had held roles as a CPA/tax advisor, Accounting Manager, Controller and now a CEO/co-owner of an IT Management Consulting firm.

**Two notable but distinct leadership experiences.** Alex's most recent leadership experiences at two companies was included as part of this study. In her previous company, Alex was the Controller for an organization doing business in the Sports Entertainment Industry. Currently, Alex was the CEO/Co-owner of an IT Management Consulting firm. Alex mentioned that her feedback experience in each of those roles was very different. She stated, "The frequency and type of feedback I receive as an owner seems much more limited and very different than the feedback I experienced in my Controller role."

Alex articulated that she wanted to participate in this study first, because she was interested in the topic of feedback; second, she thought it would be interesting to hear how other leaders received constructive feedback and third, Alex thought it would provide her the opportunity to grow as a leader. Through our discussion, it became clear to me that Alex was driven to perform well and become a better leader. Alex provided examples of feedback she received that caused her to look in the mirror , as well as, altered her behavior.

**Two distinct feedback cultures.** During our discussion, Alex contrasted the feedback cultures of the two organizations. After being in the role of CEO/Co-Owner for 2 years, Alex mentioned that trust and deeper relationships were being built between her and the leadership team. Alex stated,

I am the new kid on the block and that is a bit more challenging. I came into this organization as the owner and employees treat you differently from day one. I think that for the most part we are getting to a level of comfort. It has taken a good year



before we have gotten to the level where we are honest with one another. I have noticed that some of my executive leadership wants to protect me from employee feedback; so, I think there is filtering going on. I am currently the CEO/CFO – two very big roles, but sometimes they contradict each other. With that, owning the company is a very different approach for your subordinates and the way they treat you; the feedback they are willing to give. I sometimes think of the feedback I get at my current organization as “organization feedback”. People will give me feedback about the organization versus direct feedback about my behavior.

As a result of this phenomenon, the feedback Alex received at her current organization was somewhat limited. Alex’s current organization conducted an employee survey.

Although this was an organization-wide survey, Alex viewed it as her personal feedback. Alex stated,

People are careful when they complete the survey because there are open ended questions and I think they are concerned that the responses in this section of the survey would reveal them. I do not know if I am getting 100% honest feedback, but I hope it is fairly close.

Alex described her feedback experience in her previous organization as very different. Prior to Alex’s arrival at that company, an employee survey was conducted and the results of the survey unveiled that the organization’s culture was not viewed as “family oriented,” as previously thought. In fact, the opposite was discovered to be true. So, when Alex joined the organization, the culture was undergoing change. Upon taking her role as Controller, she walked into an environment that she described as “very chaotic and dysfunctional.” Alex said,

I walked into a hornet’s nest situation almost to the extent of a war zone. We had multiple crisis points occurring at the same time. It was one of those situations I walked into and knew immediately that I had to do something about my team members. So, I had very difficult decisions to make very quickly. So, it was immediately a very stressful environment, to say the least; and one where there was not a lot of collaboration. There was a lot of protecting themselves and the turf rather than share information about their role.

Thus, Alex not only needed to perform well in all of the technical components of her role, but she also needed to build a more stable and engaged team and lead with an open door management style. Alex mentioned,

I myself have actually always been an open door individual. I have thick skin and I am very analytical; so, I am very open to this type of management style and the feedback that results. I believe operating with an open door approach helps me to become a better leader. I state in all performance reviews that this isn't just their performance review, it is my performance review at the same time. So, when I actually sit down with them, it is an exchange versus one sided. It helped to rebuild a team that was completely dysfunctional because things came to light about which people were resentful. Dealing with those issues helped to rebuild the team.

**Feedback provided insight about self and the team.** Initially Alex talked about the need to protect self from the feedback process. However, over time, Alex realized that it was important to bring self into every feedback experience. Through this approach, she believed she could gain insight about her persona and leadership style. Also, through the feedback provided by her team and her responses to her team as a result of the feedback, Alex was able to gain insight not only about self, but also about her team.

Alex believed that feedback was important because it helped one build confidence and become more aware of how one showed up. Additionally, Alex stated that regardless of the direction of the feedback (from colleagues to her or her to colleagues), she believed it contributed to a two way dialogue and thus, deeper communication within the work environment. Alex believed that this type of communication built stronger connections and relationships. Therefore, Alex believed that feedback helped her connect with employees, which ultimately contributed to stronger performance for the overall organization.

Alex also learned that leaders needed to discern the intent of feedback being provided by others. She described discernment as a two way street; the leader needed to understand the feedback being provided in more depth and the colleague providing the feedback needed to

understand the context of the situation. Alex stated that context provided rationale for a leader's response. Alex mentioned,

They are bringing some of their life experiences to the situation versus understanding your life experiences. So, you have to somewhat protect yourself. Some of their reactions may be prejudiced based on not completely understanding why you made some of the decisions you did or why you behaved the way you behaved.

**Feedback was varied and came through a variety of mediums.** In Alex's current role, she owned feedback provided about the broader organization and saw it as synonymous with feedback about her persona and leadership. As the CEO of the organization, Alex took responsibility for all feedback. Alex joked, "I have hundreds of bosses. This is the challenge of being a leader of an organization." But, in the end, Alex believed that this feedback helped her become a better leader.

Alex received feedback numerous ways in her current organization. First, she mentioned that she received feedback through the annual survey. Once the survey was completed, the survey was reviewed by the leadership team and the results were shared with the entire organization. Second, Alex received feedback online from customers and employees. Alex found this medium to be somewhat frustrating because she was not able to respond directly to the feedback provider. Thus, she stated, "I believe what I see online is one sided." Third, Alex received feedback from her leadership team. However, Alex mentioned that her current leadership team provided her feedback from their direct reports, (two levels below Alex). Alex said, "I believe this feedback is filtered." She stated that her leaders specifically requested that their employees provided feedback through them versus going directly to Alex. Then, the respective leader relayed the feedback to Alex. Alex stated, "I've noticed that some of my executive leadership wants to protect me from feedback; so I think there is filtering going on."

Alex mentioned that she does not have much interaction with employees at levels below her direct reports. The reason was that first, many of the employees within the organization do not spend the majority of their work time in the office, as they are consultants and worked off-site at other organizations.

However, in an attempt to prompt feedback from employees, Alex stated that she walked around the office and conversed with employees who were working in the office. She mentioned that the only way she received direct feedback from employees usually began by Alex complimenting an employee about something she heard surrounding the employee's performance. At that time, the employee may open up and provide Alex feedback about the organization, or a specific situation. Again, Alex reiterated that she was always the one to initiate the conversation with the employee, not the other way around. Alex stated, "I don't get a lot of people initiating the conversation, walking in here saying, "Hey I've got to tell you this."

While Alex shared this example with me, I sensed her frustration because she was a leader who wanted and welcomed direct feedback but rarely got it in the current organization Alex leads.

In Alex's previous organization, the environment was chaotic. The department she was hired to lead had experienced much turnover, and the previous leader had been demoted. Upon hearing the stories of upheaval in that environment, it was notable to me that employees within the environment, amidst all of the upheaval, were willing almost immediately, to provide Alex feedback directly on her leadership style and decisions made.

Several examples of feedback Alex received are provided. First, Alex left town for a work conference, and did not inform all of her direct reports of her travel. Alex's uninformed direct reports were upset. Upon her return from the conference, Alex was confronted by her

team's spokesperson who relayed the team members' frustration stating, "The team was taken aback that I left town without telling them thinking I felt that they were not important enough for me to let them know." Second, several of Alex's direct report team felt as though Alex was favoring two employees within the group. As a result, the other members of the direct report group felt as though Alex was treating them unfairly. They felt Alex was providing more attention and perks to only a couple employees within the group. Again, Alex was given that feedback directly. Alex mentioned to me,

They were right. I realized that after she said that to me. But, I had some legitimate reasons why. We were in a crisis mode, and the three of us were working until 3:00 AM in the morning together and had to because of the priority of some of the projects that needed to be completed. The team understood some of that too. So, I was rewarding them because of the number of hours they were working. There was some legitimacy to what I was doing, but I definitely also had to realize that I had more team members than just the two of them. So, even though I was a bit defensive at first, I let them know they were right too and that I would try to do a better job to reward everyone equally.

Third, Alex's direct reports told her directly that they each needed more individual one-on-one time, so that she understood the work they were performing. The spokesperson also stated, "The team needed more interaction with me to feel more open." As a result of this feedback, Alex provided each team member with more of her time.

Alex's feedback experience was notable, specifically, because Alex was a brand new employee in that organization and a brand new leader as well. Even so, Alex's direct reports were willing to immediately provide her sensitive feedback about her decisions and leadership style. I wondered if this was as a result of the attention and focus she paid to each one of the direct reports through one-on-one time, her visibility in the department and her open door approach, during a time where there was much upheaval within the organization. I wondered if the attention Alex paid each of her direct reports made them feel safer.

**A trusted source provided Alex insight on her leadership style.** In Alex's current organization there was one member of the leadership team with whom she was close. This person was the other co-owner. Alex stated that the feedback she received from the co-owner was blatantly honest. This person provided feedback on how Alex showed up as a leader, comments she made to employees and he provided his opinions and shared the ramifications of decisions she made. Alex shared that when she received feedback on her style from this trusted source, at first she may have felt defensive. However, about 80% of the time, Alex mentioned that she reflected on the feedback provided and realized that the feedback was accurate. Alex stated that while this type of feedback was difficult to hear, she believed the feedback helped her continue to develop as a leader. Ongoing development was very important to Alex.

To illustrate, Alex shared a situation where her trusted source provided feedback about a comment Alex made jokingly. The feedback was difficult to hear. Alex shared,

I just had no idea that sometimes the simplest comment I make has a huge impact to someone. Understanding that has made me very careful about those types of comments. So, situations when I have jokingly said, "I am going to take a certain benefit away", then before you know it, the comment spreads like a wildfire. In situations like that you have to be very careful because of the rumor mill. When I heard the feedback, I got defensive immediately because I stated that I made my comment in a joking manner. But, in hindsight I realized the type of reaction received was because the comment came from an authority figure and that will have a huge impact. So, I learned I have to be careful about what I am going to say.

**Reaction to feedback varied based on perceptions of accuracy.** When Alex received feedback she believed to be inaccurate, her initial response was anger. However, Alex stated that she did not outwardly show her anger. Alex, in those instances, responded to the feedback provider giving rationale and context for her decision or the behavior she displayed. Conversely, when Alex received feedback she believed to be accurate, she mentioned, "It feels like a light

bulb goes off and I have an “aha moment.” Alex responded to the feedback provider in those instances by saying, “You are right!”

At her previous organization, Alex stated that when she received feedback from her team, she was careful not to react outwardly. Most often, Alex mentioned that her behavior was to receive feedback, reflect, and if she perceived the feedback was accurate, she stated, “You are absolutely right. I will not do this again.” Also, if Alex believed the feedback was accurate, but her direct reports did not see the entire context, Alex not only stated that they were right, but she also took additional time to provide context to her team about her behavior and the decision. Alex’s rationale for this approach was to help her direct reports see the bigger picture.

Alex noted that she realized that not each piece of feedback received required a solution or response. She stated, “This was a lesson I learned over time.”

**Insights were incorporated into future behaviors.** Alex stated that she has learned many lessons over time from feedback she has received. She shared that she incorporated many of these insights into her current behavior; specifically, Alex was now very mindful of what she said, how she responded and how she behaved. As an authority figure, Alex realized the need to be more aware of ramifications when she made “off the cuff” comments. Alex also learned not to react emotionally to feedback, openly admit mistakes and explain the context and rationale for her decisions. However, another lesson Alex learned was that she does not have to respond to every comment or every piece of feedback given. Finally, Alex has learned the importance of treating employees consistently and equitably.

## Alex's Colleagues

I thoroughly enjoyed meeting Alex. Through my interaction with her, I gained respect for her style and leadership presence. Then, I met Alex's colleagues. It was clear through my interactions with them, the impact Alex had on them both personally and professionally. All colleagues with whom I spoke remained connected with Alex to this day, even though many of them did not work directly for her or in her current organization today. Through my conversations with Alex's colleagues, I felt the deep resonance each continued to have with Alex. This was a testament to Alex's leadership and the bond established.

The following summary is a compilation of themes and thoughts from four individuals. All four were direct reports to Alex. Several worked with Alex at her previous company. It was clear to me that each person was eager to share their experiences about Alex as their leader. I am basing this conclusion on their quick, affirmative responses to my meeting requests, and the enthusiasm with which they shared their stories and experiences of connection to Alex.

**Informal feedback culture in current and previous organization.** The feedback culture of the current organization was described as very informal. In Alex's current organization, feedback was provided through meetings, as well as just walking into Alex's office and providing feedback about business problems or her leadership. In fact, it was stated, "Alex continually opens the door to me and I can ask questions or provide feedback."

Alex's direct reports from her previous company stated that the environment was informal and lacked a real formal review process. The environment of this organization was not perceived as one that was safe for purposes of providing feedback. However, those direct reports stated, "When Alex joined the organization, we could tell immediately that things were going to



be different.” Alex’s style was described as refreshing and her direct reports believed that things would be different with Alex leading the group.

Within the department Alex led, the feedback culture ultimately changed. Both formal and informal feedback and processes were incorporated into the environment. It was stated, “Alex conducted formal reviews and during those reviews, Alex asked for feedback on her leadership.” Alex also created a culture that nurtured communication and collaboration among team members. Alex scheduled one-on-one time with each direct report. Initially, when Alex first started, the one-on-one time was used for each direct report to describe their role to Alex. Those one-on-one meetings caused deeper relationships to be built between Alex and each individual on her team.

Direct reports also stated, “Alex had an open door policy. We knew that we could have instantaneous discussions with Alex at any time.” Even though they were all very busy, no one ever felt like Alex was too busy to listen to them or assist them in any way they needed.

As a result of this dramatic change in the environment and culture of Alex’s team, other leaders and employees outside of the department commented on changes that they noticed in Alex’s organization. In fact, Alex’s team was not only communicating during the work day, but they were also spending time with one another in the evening as well. This was a 180 degree change from the protocol that existed before Alex became the leader!

**Open to feedback.** Direct reports felt comfortable providing Alex with feedback. They stated, “Alex is very open to feedback.” All of Alex’s direct reports experienced and commented favorably on Alex’s open door policy. Direct reports were comfortable going into Alex’s office impromptu to discuss any situation. Direct reports stated, “Most of the time Alex took the time

immediately to listen. However, sometimes Alex would ask if the situation could wait until she finished some immediate work.”

Direct reports shared experiences of providing feedback to Alex on work projects and issues, as well as Alex’s leadership style and decisions Alex made. There were many examples given about feedback provided to Alex on her leadership style. Some of the examples given were feedback about her communication approach, behaviors displayed, rewards given that caused hurt feelings, ways that Alex addressed the team at a group meeting that may have caused one employee discomfort, and differing opinions on decisions that Alex made. Although, this was tough feedback to provide their leader, direct reports stated, “We are able to walk into Alex’s office and share these types of concerns with her and have no concern of retaliation.”

Alex listened to feedback provided and stated, “You are right,” or “Let me see how that will work.” Direct reports felt heard when they went to Alex with feedback. All stated, “Alex never got angry or offended.” In fact, it was stated that she was encouraging and would say, “It was good you came to me regarding this situation.” All direct reports stated that Alex made them feel “listened to and affirmed.”

One direct report mentioned that Alex liked to immediately fix things if there was an issue. So, many times Alex wanted to act immediately on situations brought to her attention. However, if this direct report stated, “No action is necessary at this time”; Alex listened and waited for an appropriate time to act. Another direct report mentioned, “Alex very much respects confidentiality.” Based upon that trait that Alex displayed, direct reports felt comfortable sharing both personal and extremely sensitive matters with her.

**Feedback was applied and action was taken.** All direct reports spoke about situations in which Alex took feedback and applied it immediately; whether she adjusted her leadership style based upon feedback received or resolved work related issues. Direct reports stated,

Alex is a go-getter. She deals with issues and as a result, Alex has built a better team. Alex is a good listener. She looked me in the eye when I raised issues, dealt with the situation, and then followed up regarding her response or the approach she took to resolve the issue.

### **Summary Thoughts About the Case of Alex**

I experienced Alex as very open about her leadership journey and the insights she had gained along the way. Alex was very passionate about her growth, her team, the business for which she worked and wanted to “do the right thing.” While Alex’s style was very business focused and driven, she was also a very charismatic, engaging, warm and caring leader.

Alex described her leadership style as “hardworking.” She stated that she had high expectations of herself and her team, but she was also very willing to help, develop, and mentor each of them to achieve their potential. Alex’s direct reports described her style using words like, smart, mentor, willing to teach, funny, forward thinking, professional, self-driven, motivated, magnetic, trusted, role model, rolls up sleeves, and advocate, etc. The examples given throughout discussions with direct reports exemplified the words each used to describe Alex. It was clear to me, through my discussion with Alex and her colleagues, that Alex was a lifelong learner and strived to be the best she could be.

Even though Alex mentioned that getting feedback could be tough, she consistently received feedback on an array of topics, including her leadership style. Notably, Alex received this type of feedback from her direct reports. Alex was a teacher. She worked hard to be successful, but also wanted all of those around her to be successful. She was very willing to take

the time to develop and mentor her team. This was stated by all direct reports with whom I spoke. There was a consistency between Alex's sense of self and how she was experienced by others. Truly, Alex showed up as a very authentic leader.

#### **Case 4 - Senior Leader - Matt**

##### **Matt's Background and Psyche**

Matt went to college for accounting. He completed an accounting degree and was also a CPA. Matt began his career by working in the Corporate Accounting function for a publicly held company. However, early in his career, Matt was given many opportunities to work in, and experience, the operations side of the business. As a result, Matt knew that he did not want to be in a staff role. He wanted to be very involved in the business. Matt had high aspirations for himself and he began holding high level leadership positions at an early age, mid to late 20's to present.

Matt was enjoying a very successful career. For most of Matt's career, he has worked in the steel industry. Working in various leadership roles within the steel industry, he had an opportunity to be involved in many areas of the business; the commercial side, operations, data and infrastructure and technology. In fact, this made Matt realize that he preferred roles that got him very involved in the operations of the business.

Matt was very process oriented and believed that when he can improve the process within a business, he empowered employees to do their best and to work on meaningful tasks. He mentioned,

I've always operated under my 20 minute rule. If something takes you over 20 minutes to do, there is a real good opportunity for process improvement. If we

have the process correct, it makes it easier for people to learn and be more secure because it will make the rules easier to follow.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I knew Matt for approximately 2 years, 20 years ago, before he became a participant in this study. Matt and I worked in the same organization, but for different departments and for a relatively short period of time. Matt left the organization to move to another state and led an organization in a similar industry. After Matt left the organization, we did not maintain contact. Therefore, Matt still fit the parameters for my study, as he and I did not know one another well when we originally worked together and we did not remain in contact with one another after he and I left the organization in which we worked together.

Matt was promoted into his current role of president of his organization approximately two years ago. He replaced a leader who retired after holding that position for many years. Prior to assuming the role of President, Matt was promoted to the role of Chief Operating Officer (COO) so that he was groomed for his current role. As a result, most people within the organization knew Matt long before he moved into his current or previous leadership role. In fact, many of his current direct reports were also, at one time, Matt's peers.

I interviewed Matt at his company in Houston, Texas in early November, 2013. We met in a large glass encased conference room in the front office. We started our visit by catching up since we last saw each other approximately 20 years ago. Next, I reiterated the study parameters, and then I began recording our conversation.

Upon meeting Matt again, after not seeing him for almost 20 years, I found his style to be very collegial, engaging and comfortable. Matt consistently injected humor into our conversation. We spent about 1 ½ hours together. The time passed very quickly.

The current organization that Matt led was going through tremendous change. Matt's style of leadership was very different than that of the previous leader. Matt was a hands-on, roll up your sleeves type of leader. He was visible in the organization, not only at the corporate headquarters, but also in the field and out on the plant floor. This was a marked change for this organization, and has taken the employees some getting used to. In fact, Matt mentioned, "I have people in the branches tell me that they saw me in their branches more in 6 months than they saw the previous president in 21 years."

Matt stated that he wanted to participate in this study because he stated, "I think I will gain insight about my organization." As a result, he hoped that this insight would provide him ideas on how to continue to move the organization and business forward.

Throughout our conversation, it became very evident that Matt truly loved his work, his company and the people at his company. He told me, "My work is fun. I would consider it a punishment if someone told me that I could not go to work." In fact, Matt spent at least 12 hours a day at work. Matt has a desire to make the organization better and worked almost 7 days a week with that goal in mind. He believed that he was creating a stronger organization. Even though Matt was the leader of the organization, he stated,

I like to be liked. I know that about myself. I don't like to do this as the boss, I like to do it more as this makes sense; we have all agreed to it, we leave and we do our roles and we do it together. I don't like to interact by myself. I like to work in a team. I know myself. I enjoy that. I don't enjoy isolated work.

Whenever possible, Matt preferred to work side by side with people and make decisions through consensus.

**Elicited feedback through building relationships.** Matt's style was very participatory. His focus was to try and make people comfortable. He worked hard to build relationships with

people while he worked alongside them creating better work processes. Matt believed that if he was involved in day-to-day work, working side by side with employees, they would realize he was part of the process, not overseeing it. He stated, “I look at it as, it is not me making the decisions; it is us making decisions. So, I value feedback a tremendous amount.” Matt believed his work style and approach made it possible for him to elicit feedback from people, particularly about work processes and improvements.

Matt mentioned many times, “I love to get feedback and see feedback as an opportunity to make things better.” He enjoyed the process of feedback because he saw it as providing him interaction with people. He truly enjoyed the two-way dialogue it brought. Matt mentioned, I enjoy the banter of back and forth with people during the feedback process.” He stated that, whenever possible, he truly wanted decision-making in the organization to be a consensus. He wanted people invested in the decision. Therefore, Matt wanted people to feel like they were part of the decisions being made versus making all of the decisions himself. However, Matt acknowledged,

Now, I’ve had critique from people I’ve worked for before that they think I’ve abdicated my authority because I look for consensus and they want a decision. But, I’ve tried to build a consensus, not a dictatorship.

**Character mattered.** Matt believed his character was established by how he interacted with people and how he received feedback. He disdained backstabbing. He wanted feedback to be directly provided. Early in Matt’s career, he worked for an organization where he witnessed and experienced senior leaders who were guilty of backstabbing. To that end, Matt stated that he was most comfortable receiving feedback from people who were not trying to further their own agenda. He mentioned,

I don't have an agenda or malicious intent; so, if I am being "overbearing" and someone says, "You are overbearing", I am good with that. I don't like the backbiting you have to try and track down; that is a cancer in the organization.

Matt's goal was to strive for all in his organization to understand that if there is a mistake, the goal was to fix it and learn from it, not to fire the person who made the error. Matt believed, with that philosophy, he would be able to address issues and improve the organization, its processes and employees.

**Feedback about process and style was received from direct reports, trusted sources and deep within the organization.** Matt got involved in all aspects of the business. At times, he mentioned that he may get involved with types of issues that should be handled by others within the organization. As a result of Matt's work approach, he received emails from people on the production floor, as well as entry level employees within the office.

Matt stated, "Initially my style and approach caused issues and was somewhat intimidating to people because my direct involvement and work style were very different from my predecessor." However, now Matt had been in the President role for almost two years and people came to expect this type of interaction from him.

Matt stated that he got feedback on his style and about business processes from people throughout the organization. This feedback came from all levels; from entry level employees up through his direct reports and consultants working on projects within his organization. A few examples of feedback Matt received about his style were (a) he was abdicating his authority because he preferred making decisions through consensus, (b) he was overbearing and at times acted like an "ass," (c) he needed to slow down and recognize all that has been accomplished



before moving forward on the next goal, and (d) he needed to celebrate and recognize people and their accomplishments.

Matt believed that people were beginning to become more comfortable with him and his leadership style as he has been in his role for almost two years. He also stated, “They are feeling safe and providing more feedback.”

**Mistakes provided a path for improvement and should be acknowledged.** Matt suggested that if he received feedback that issues arose as a result of a process he created, he took ownership and stated, “I could have created a better process.” Then, he worked on creating a better process. He also mentioned that if someone provided him feedback about his style because they believed he “showed up” in a negative way, and if he believed they were right, he acknowledged the behavior by saying, “I am sorry.”

Matt also shared with me that, at times, after reflection on his responses to feedback from others, he realized he was “short” with someone. When this occurred, he acknowledged the behavior to the person with whom he was short.

At times when Matt received feedback, he stated, “I like to “spar” and dialogue with the individual providing me the feedback or their point of view.” However, if Matt believed in the accuracy of the feedback or the point of view received, he accordingly altered his own behavior or point of view.

In the end, Matt believed that his character made the difference. He believed that people knew that he cared about them and the organization. He stated, “I don’t believe that people are necessarily afraid of me. I believe they are afraid of change.” The organization was going through tremendous change and Matt was specifically creating much change in the organization.

**Learned from feedback.** Matt reflected upon the *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey. He received the Covey Seven Habits training when he was 26 years old. At that time, he was a new leader and did not feel the training was valuable. However, as he matured as a leader and experienced various significant life events and failures, he realized that Covey's Seven Habits and Principles were one of the best things he was taught. He has put that knowledge to use and incorporated what he learned from that experience into his life.

Matt also shared that he has recently reflected upon feedback that he has received about his work style. Specifically, Matt has received feedback that he was too involved in the day-to-day tasks and as a result was crossing barriers and boundaries that should not be crossed. After reflection, he stated, "I believe that in the short term this behavior is not causing a problem, but in the long term it could." Matt realized that he was not be equipping his leadership and staff with the necessary skills to best handle organizational challenges. Thus, Matt contemplated the behaviors he needed to change to ensure a more self-sustaining organization.

### **Matt's Colleagues**

It was really a joy for me to connect with Matt again after all these years. I appreciated his candor about his leadership style and approach. I was also struck by his thoughtfulness surrounding what changes he needed to make to his style to ensure he was developing leaders that could sustain the organization. While getting reacquainted with Matt was marvelous, getting to know the people within Matt's organization was truly delightful. I met with five of Matt's colleagues. Four of the five were direct reports to Matt. The fifth was a consultant who worked closely with Matt.

This summary is a compilation of themes and thoughts from the five individuals associated with Matt. Securing Matt's colleagues' participation was easy. All Matt's colleagues responded quickly and affirmatively to my request for participation. Each participant appeared to be very comfortable participating and I met with most on site, at the Houston headquarters building. However, two participants were not located in Houston. Therefore, I met with one via Skype and another at an alternate location.

Some of the participants had been Matt's peers in the past or had known and worked with him previously for many years; so, they had long, deep relationships. For many, the relationships were not just business, but had also developed into friendships outside of the office.

It was very evident, through the conversations, I had with each participant, that they respected Matt greatly and cared deeply for him as well.

**Unstructured, informal feedback culture.** Many talked about the informal nature of feedback within the company; particularly, within the management group. It was shared that for both management and the office staff, formal feedback processes such as performance reviews had not been prevalent. However, within the production environment, more formal processes existed. Currently, Matt was working to implement changes such that more formal feedback processes would occur consistently across the company. Some stated, "When Matt became the leader of the organization, the culture was more apprehensive, but now it is getting better because people are becoming more used to Matt's involved style." There was consensus that the culture was changing rapidly. Matt had a vision of where the company needed to go. However, one direct report stated,

About a year and a half ago people were more apprehensive and untrusting. They thought why are we doing this change, what is the purpose. People did not understand all of the business reasons behind all of the changes. There wasn't a lot of time spent talking about

it. Today it is much better and people are understanding that there is a “method to the madness”. People are starting to see the benefit of the changes that were made and they can do their jobs better. Now they trust what is coming from above.

One participant shared that, because of Matt’s leadership, things were better between the office and the production floor, “People are beginning to talk with one another and not operate in a silo.” It was stated, “Communication now flows back and forth between the office and the production floor.” It was also shared that if people on the production floor were apprehensive to share, Matt tried to “snub [*sic*] that behavior out.” Matt encouraged people to share issues based on process, not based on emotion.

**Feedback was provided on an array of topics.** All the participants had experience providing Matt feedback about business issues and processes. Most who participated had experienced providing Matt feedback about his style. Because many of the participants had known Matt for many years, as friend, peer or former colleague, they felt comfortable offering him feedback about his personal and leadership style. It was also stated that Matt was available via email, phone or in person at any time. Additionally, Matt had an open door policy. It was mentioned, “If you feel like you want to take 5 minutes to “BS” with him, he will take 5 minutes to “BS” with you; even if he is busy. I have never seen him refuse anyone, no matter how busy he is.” One direct report stated,

Anything you want to tell him at any time is welcomed. I mean this sincerely, anything or everything. It can be personal or business related, especially business related. If there is anything you need him to know or you would like him to know you just have to go tell him.

Some examples of feedback that had been provided to Matt about his personal style are:

(a) his language was seen as offensive at times, (b) he was a very technical person but needed to learn to be more of a people person, (c) his style, phrases and the choice of words he used when

interacting with employees may be too lax at times, and (d) he cannot be the shining star – he must develop his people within the organization to be shining stars.

Some examples of feedback that had been provided to Matt about his business approach and style are: (a) he moved too fast at times; he needed to bring people along with him, (b) he could be intimidating, (c) he needed to hit the brakes at times, (d) he was taking on too many things and this could be overwhelming for people, (e) he needed to more effectively and more often communicate the vision and business strategy to all employees, and (f) at times he could seem to be disconnected from employees.

**Didn't shoot the messenger.** It was stated that Matt was open to feedback and not defensive. Usually, Matt took a logical and non-emotional approach to feedback. One person mentioned, "I have never seen Matt vent with the messenger. Now, there are times when people come in and he hears them; and then he shuts the door and reacts. But, I've never seen him vent with [*sic*] or shoot the messenger."

At times, Matt wanted to explain his rationale for a decision or action so that his direct reports communicated that rationale back to their subordinates. Matt wanted employees to understand why something was done. It was mentioned that Matt stated, "What I am trying to get them to understand is this." He does not get defensive, but he wanted employees to understand why specific decisions were made.

Some mentioned that Matt listened to feedback provided, and thanked people for feedback brought to him. He was interested in understanding how the company could get better and, primarily, what people were thinking about the company. Matt responded to feedback with humor, but sometimes he got upset or angry about feedback. Particularly, if Matt felt that the feedback was not accurate.

It was added that if feedback had to do with an employee performance issue, it was difficult for Matt to deal with this directly and quickly. There were times when Matt let a performance situation languish too long before dealing with it directly.

**Took feedback to heart.** Matt wanted to be a good leader. He also wanted people to like him and to get along with one another. It was shared that when Matt originally moved into the role, people in the plant knew him better than people in the office. However, now that he has developed deeper relationships with people in the office, they have become less “freaked out” about his leadership style and are more comfortable interacting with him.

It was further suggested that Matt reflected upon feedback received and if he felt it was accurate, he would change over time. To this point, it was stated,

Matt is very interested in what people say about him. He wants to improve and come across as a professional person. He understands that he needs to lead this organization in the right direction and that is what he is trying to do.

It was also stated,

Matt does a good job of being direct without being threatening. That is why he is able to get feedback, whether positive or negative and make changes to processes or the business. I think that is one of his strengths. He is able to relate to people and ask them questions. He makes them feel truly involved.

### **Summary Thoughts About the Case of Matt**

Throughout my discussion with both Matt and his team, all were very open about the environment, culture and Matt’s leadership style. Matt was described as forward thinking, genius, innovative, driven, visionary, hands-on leader, process oriented and big on self-improvement. Matt consistently described himself as very committed to both the organization and its people. Matt wanted the company to continue to improve, but was also emphatic about

everyone being involved in the decision-making. Matt shared that he really did not like to be considered the “boss” and wanted to be liked. He strived for consensus decision-making, possibly to a fault.

Most secondary participants were Matt's former peers; therefore, comfortably provided him feedback on business leadership and his personal leadership style.

Matt saw himself as a “servant leader.” The diligence and passion he had around the work he did to improve the processes were a means to provide work that was meaningful and empowering to all employees. In fact, Matt stated, “I find it disrespectful when we make people do mundane tasks.”

Employees cared about this leader and were beginning to see the benefit of his vision, style and the change he was bringing to the organization. Simultaneously, Matt was now beginning to contemplate how he could be less involved in all day-to-day tasks, yet still empower and develop his people to do the day-to-day work, which would ultimately lead to a stronger organization.

### **Cross-Case Analysis**

The purpose of the cross-case analysis was to identify themes across the cases. The process I used to identify themes across all four cases was to read, reread and highlight topics and comments within each case that were similar. Initially, after I reread and highlighted information, I reflected on all of the cases. Then, I began to capture themes that emerged.

My first iteration culminated in identifying four broad themes and three subthemes for each broader theme; 12 themes in all. I quickly realized that I was merely recreating a summary of highlights or an outline for all four cases; not discovering deeper meaning or themes. Therefore, I went back to the “drawing board” with the purpose of discovering deeper nuggets of insight within and across the cases. Ultimately, I identified four themes with one subtheme.

**Overview of four themes.** The first theme, specific responses and attitudes toward feedback were shaped in early years, highlights experiences of leaders either in their formative years or early in their business career. These experiences impacted the leaders’ responses and attitudes; sometimes the experiences created an immediate positive approach to feedback and at other times, the leader was challenged by feedback and worked through the issues so that they could ultimately use the feedback for positive growth.

The second theme focuses on leaders’ intentional approach to building trust through relationships and connections with people. Building trust with employees in the organization was foundational for the leader to continually receive meaningful feedback. Additionally, the subtheme contained in the second theme highlights how leaders more readily accepted and processed sensitive feedback from trusted and respected sources.

The third theme focuses on taking a deeper look at the definition of the word, “feedback” as defined for this study and describes the psyche of the leader relative to his/her response to the



word and subject of feedback. Study participants consistently shared stories about feedback from a “need for improvement” perspective versus the perspective of “what was done well.”

The fourth and final theme attempts to understand the level of change occurring in the organization and compares the level of change occurring within the environment to the type of feedback provided to the leader by their colleagues. All leaders’ organizations were going through change; some at a more significant level than others. The qualities and characteristics of the leader within the change environment, the intensity of the change and the employees’ need for security seemed to impact the type of feedback that was given to the leader, as well as the way that feedback was delivered.

**Outline of themes with subthemes.** I identified four themes; only one theme contained a subtheme. The themes and subtheme are listed below.

**Theme I:** Specific responses and attitudes toward feedback were shaped in early years.

**Theme II:** The need for meaningful feedback drove leaders to work on intentionally building trust with employees.

1. Feedback on sensitive issues was most likely accepted if provided by a trusted source.

**Theme III:** Leaders associated feedback with “the need for improvement.”

**Theme IV:** In times of turbulent change, employees may find security in providing feedback to a trusted leader.

### **Analysis of themes and subthemes**

**Theme I: Specific responses and attitudes toward feedback were shaped in early years.** As I reviewed each leader’s story, I noticed that all leaders recounted certain experiences or times in their life that contributed to their attitudes towards, and responses to, feedback.

Specifically, they uniformly shared stories or experiences from early in their life or early in their business careers that had a profound impact on how they showed up as a leader, interacted with employees and processed and responded to feedback.

David's beliefs were shaped by the interactions and experiences he had with both his father and grandfather. They were positive role models who displayed deep connections to people and cared for all those with whom they came into contact. These interactions were very memorable and impacted David in his early, impressionable years. David also shared stories about a business mentor for whom he worked early in his career. This mentor had a deep effect on the type of leader David became. David observed as this business mentor also created deep connections with all employees, demonstrated deep business knowledge and asked insightful questions about the business. The stories of David's father, grandfather and business mentor were representative of positive experiences David recalled that made powerful impressions on him and created the type of person and leader he was today. These positive experiences also impacted his approach to, and acceptance of, feedback.

While the case of David focused on positive role models and how those experiences impacted David's beliefs, both JK and Matt encountered negative experiences that similarly affected how both thought about and responded to feedback.

JK shared a powerful story from his younger years, about experiences with feedback, from teachers in the educational system. Those experiences had both a memorable and initially negative impact on JK. As a result of those early experiences, JK associated feedback with fear, threat and feelings of "not being good enough." However, JK shared stories regarding how hard he worked to combat those negative feelings. JK continually reminded himself that feedback was meant to help versus hinder. JK had grown and become more "comfortable in his skin," and as a

result, he has been able to rise above the haunting memories of feedback and replaced them with a growth mindset; not only for himself, but for those who worked for him as well.

Matt spoke frequently about a leader's character. "Character" was critically important to Matt and was something he thought about often. He strived to demonstrate strong character and be a person, a leader, and friend who respectfully interacted with those around him. Matt believed that how he showed up as a leader and how he responded to those around him defined his character. Thus, the whole concept of character was foundational to Matt's persona.

Early in Matt's career, he worked for and witnessed leaders who demonstrated honesty and integrity in the way they communicated with people and led their functions. Matt admired those leaders and strived to be like them; but Matt also described leaders for and with whom he worked that were, "malicious," "backstabbers" and "had hidden agendas." Matt was disturbed by those leaders' behaviors and had a visceral reaction to their leadership style. These encounters made a significant impression on Matt. He vowed he would not display those behaviors. As a result, Matt strived to be a leader with integrity and strong character. Those negative experiences impacted the leader Matt was today and how he responded to the environment around him.

Alex described her experiences in a more subtle way. While Alex did not share specific stories of role models and mentors that shaped her beliefs about feedback, she consistently mentioned the need to protect oneself from feedback, the importance of dialogue and two-way communication, so that a leader was able to describe rationale for decisions made. Alex also expressed being nervous about participation in the study. Additionally, Alex spoke about the high standards to which she holds self and stated that she strived constantly to "be the best she can be."

While Alex did not mention specific early experiences she encountered that drove these beliefs about and responses to feedback, I believed that there were formative and foundational experiences Alex encountered that drove these qualities because of the passion with which she described the aforementioned concepts. Regardless of whether her formative experiences were positive or negative, Alex had taken these beliefs, behaviors and her high need for achievement and has grown as a person and a leader with the outcome being a positive experience for self and for those she led.

While the stories and experiences from leader to leader varied, each story pointed to some occurrence in their past that impacted the behaviors each displayed. Whether positive or negative, each leader capitalized on both experiences. All leaders replicated positive experiences and learned from negative experiences, so that their leadership style would not be negatively impacted, but enhanced.

**Theme II: The need for meaningful feedback drove leaders to work on intentionally building trust with employees.** Each of the leaders' work styles could be characterized by using words such as visibility, open door approach, working leader, deep business knowledge and an understanding of employees' roles. Those behaviors drove deep relationships and connections with employees throughout the organizations each led. The connections with employees made by each leader created trust between the leader and the employees. As a result of trust being developed, each of these leaders consistently received feedback, not only from direct reports, but also from peers and others within the organization. Each leader consistently mentioned their desire to receive feedback and their concern that feedback was filtered as leaders rose in the organization. Each leader also consistently mentioned the behaviors that they were intent on displaying, such as working side by side with employees, being visible in the organization, and

having an open door management style, so that they would have a connection to employees and as a result they hoped would open the door for employees to continually provide them feedback.

David spent time building deep relationships with employees and understanding the business because he felt that he could not be successful without those connections. He believed receiving feedback equaled success; so he always listened to feedback, reflected on feedback provided, and responded to the person who provided him feedback. David always ensured he followed up so the feedback provider did not think the feedback went into a “black hole.” Sometimes David incorporated the feedback provided and at other times David chose not to do so. It was mentioned that even if David did not incorporate the feedback provided, the person never felt as though they were thought of in “less stead.”

JK believed the interested executive needed to seek out feedback; so, he created an approach and an environment that enabled feedback to be provided. JK was a working leader, working side by side with his employees on similar projects. JK also managed with an open door approach and scheduled one-on-one time with each employee. Employees used both of these approaches to discuss issues about projects and social dynamics within the work group. Trust was created and established as a result of those practices. Additionally JK was credited with establishing monthly meetings with his peers. Those meetings drove deeper relationships and understanding about each other’s functional areas. Deeper camaraderie and connections were established and thus, peers felt comfortable providing each other feedback. In the end, as a result of JK’s style of leadership, trust was built and feedback was provided.

In Alex’s current organization, she was in the process of building relationships and connections to ensure she ascertained feedback not only from her direct reports, but also from others within the broader organization. Alex walked the floor and talked to employees, with the

desired end result that through these connections, she would build stronger bonds and feedback would occur.

In Alex's previous organization her leadership style was truly characterized by visibility, open door, one-on-one meetings, team meetings, etc. Alex focused all of those approaches with the intention of building deeper communication and connection not only from her to the employees, but also from the employees to each other. Because of her approach, Alex received feedback both on business issues and on her leadership style. She forged deep relationships and built a stronger team. In fact, the changes Alex made were noticed by other leaders within the broader organization. Those leaders made comments to Alex about the dramatic changes in the behaviors of her team and the connections that seemed to be present, which had not been noticed in the past.

Matt's leadership approach and style were similarly characterized as the other leaders; visibility, connections and working side by side with employees. Matt's style was markedly different than the previous President of his organization. Even though Matt's style was very different, it had begun to be accepted, expected and embraced. Employees believed that Matt cared about them and the organization. He worked to ensure creation of better processes and practices to improve the business and the jobs of each employee. As a result, Matt received feedback from many people within the organization, at all levels.

Each leader diligently worked to connect with employees, understand the employees' plight and improve the business. As a result of the connections created and the visibility and style of each leader, trust had been established. Therefore, employees felt comfortable interacting with them and providing them feedback.

***Feedback on sensitive issues was most likely accepted if provided by a trusted source.***

Another nuance was uncovered as I spoke to each leader. All of the leaders commented in some way about their desire to receive sensitive feedback from someone they trusted or respected. Additionally, they mentioned that if the feedback provider was someone who was trusted or respected, their level of acceptance was higher.

To illustrate, JK shared a story about the reorganization of his function. He mentioned that while this action seemed logical to him, he felt emotional about the change. After many conversations about this sensitive matter with his peer, he was able to accept the change and move forward. As a result of this encounter, JK's trust and respect for this peer was heightened. Consequently, JK was more willing to accept feedback from him on an ongoing basis. JK also mentioned that the level of credibility he applied to feedback provided equaled the level of credibility and trust he had for the person providing the feedback.

Similarly, Alex and Matt both spoke of receiving feedback from trusted sources. In Alex's case, she received "blatantly honest" feedback from her co-owner. She mentioned that she trusted this person implicitly, thus accepted what he told her. Therefore, when she received his feedback, while she may have felt defensive at first, she acknowledged that "80% of the time he is right." Therefore, she ended up making the recommended change. Matt stated that he most openly received feedback from someone who was "not trying to further their own agenda." If he believed that was the case, he would listen to and accept the feedback provided.

David provided more subtle context in this area. He mentioned that he embraced feedback that he believed was honest. If he did not believe the feedback was honest, he probed for context to discern underlying motivations. Additionally, David spoke of a time when he

received sensitive feedback from one of his leaders, and as a result, David was able to own this feedback and admitted his mistake to the employees.

**Theme III: Leaders associated feedback with "need for improvement."** The definition of the term "feedback" for purposes of this study was, a conscious effort to get/receive information about one's skills, abilities, competencies, (Asumeng, 2013). However, interestingly, each leader spoke about feedback from the perspective of "bridging a gap," "getting better," or the "need for improvement." As noted in the definition, feedback was merely receiving information about skills, abilities, or competencies; neither positive nor negative. Yet, each leader consistently spoke about feedback from the "gap" perspective. Certainly, that was one part of the equation as it related to feedback; while the other was about getting information and insight about what one did well. However, none of the leaders in this study focused on that perspective. While the leaders mentioned that it was great to receive positive feedback, each leader's examples and descriptions were primarily focused on gaining insight into areas where each needed to improve, close gaps and become a better leader.

When I asked each leader about the reason for participation in this study, each responded in various ways that referenced their desire and need for feedback to gain insight on their style, and keep improving. Additionally, leaders mentioned their desire to receive feedback about the business so that they could improve the business. Nonetheless, terms like, "improvement," "get better," "look in the mirror to reflect and get better," "gain insight to become a better leader" were consistently used to characterize the notion of feedback. Each leader desired feedback because it provided an opportunity to learn about self and the business so that they could make changes for the better with the end result being, improvement.



All of the leaders within my study spoke about sensitivity surrounding the concept of feedback, but they also shared their belief that as leaders rose in organizations, feedback became non-existent or filtered. Each leader was very concerned about this phenomenon because each leader ultimately believed that without feedback they would neither learn and grow, nor improve. Each leader realized that to continue to improve, they must receive feedback; so, they were driven to do what it took to gain insight about gaps that existed within their leadership so that they could bridge those gaps.

The leaders consistently spoke about the need to reflect on the feedback they received before they responded. Rationale given for this approach was so that the leader would not show anger or react in a negative manner. This mindset shared by each leader about reflection and reaction to feedback, implied that each leader had the expectation that feedback received was from a negative perspective; a gap versus positive perspective, about what each leader is doing well.

All of the leaders within this study could be characterized by words such as “high-achievers” and “go-getters”; thus their desire to keep growing, learning and improving. While some leaders mentioned that it was nice to hear positive feedback from employees, each was very driven from a growth and improvement mindset. They each discussed their desire and need to receive the unvarnished truth about gaps in their skills, abilities and competencies.

**Theme IV: In times of turbulent change, employees may find security in providing feedback to a trusted leader.** The organizations for which each leader worked were going through significant change; however, each organization was undergoing different types and intensities of change.

JK's entrepreneurial organization was growing rapidly. In the past several years, it had grown from seven to 350 employees. With that kind of growth, the organization's processes and practices continued to change, functions were being reorganized and the culture was evolving. Both leaders and employees were required to "roll up their sleeves" to do the work of the business. JK's organization had also recently experienced restructuring that "flattened" the reporting lines significantly. As a result, JK had 22 direct reports; many of whom had never reported to someone at the executive level in their career. JK's team was mixed; those who had longer tenure with the company and had worked for him in the past, as well as those who were new to reporting to the executive level and new to JK's leadership style.

David's organization was also going through change, although another type of change. The organization that David was hired to lead was undergoing significant financial challenges, cost-cutting and headcount reductions. David was hired to improve the business. The organization was described as a very tough environment and culture in which the type of feedback that was provided was far more critical than positive. If the leader wanted feedback, he had to seek the feedback on his own. The environment was tenuous, at best.

Different yet, the Sports Entertainment organization for which Alex worked was chaotic and dysfunctional. In fact, immediately prior to Alex's arrival, there was a "shake up" in the structure. Alex replaced a leader who had recently been demoted. The organization was in upheaval and the environment was very stressful. Alex mentioned that she walked into a "hornet's nest situation, almost to the extent of a war zone." The culture was undergoing significant changes and there was a directive from the top of the organization to create an environment that was more open, collegial and trusting. Alex stated, "So, it was an immediately stressful environment, to say the least; one where there was not a lot of collaboration. There was

a lot of protecting self and turn rather than sharing information about their roles.” Alex knew that she would have to rely not only on her technical competence, but also on her social competence and emotional intelligence.

Finally, Matt’s organization was also going through change. Matt replaced a President who had been leading the organization for approximately 21 years. Matt’s style was very different than his predecessor. In fact, it was stated that, “Employees saw Matt more in 6 months than employees saw the previous President in 21 years.” However, initially Matt’s style was somewhat intimidating because of his direct involvement with employees. Employees were not used to this connection with a senior leader. Additionally, competition within the steel industry was becoming fierce and therefore, process improvement needed to occur so that the organization could be successful. While the external environment was changing, Matt also introduced change into the internal environment in terms of processes, practices and skill development that were necessary to sustain and improve the organization. Matt stated, “I’ve always operated under the 20 minute rule. If something takes you over 20 minutes to do, there is a real good opportunity for process improvement. If the process is correct it makes it easier for people to do their job, learn and be more secure.”

While all of the organizations for which the leaders worked were going through change, I saw a connection between the intensity of the change, the characteristics of the leader and the type of feedback each leader received. JK’s leadership style was described as non-emotional, logical, direct and straight forward. While JK was growing and maturing as a leader and purposefully “softening” his style, JK’s previous style was considered “hard-driving” and “in-your-face.” In fact, JK mentioned that he wondered if the less tenured employees who worked for him fully embraced his open door approach. He mentioned that he thought these employees

might be thinking, “Who is this gruff guy; how will he react?” Thus, even though JK had softened his leadership style and approach, it was a work in progress. The type of feedback provided to JK from both direct reports and peers was primarily about work projects, status of projects, business ideas, etc., not style. David’s leadership style was described as “Open, authentic and sincere.” In fact, a peer stated that “Immediately upon meeting David you could tell by his demeanor that he was the type of person you could provide feedback to.” David’s direct report team, however, was initially more reluctant to provide feedback. With the growth of David’s team and deeper relationships forged between David and his team, the team provided more feedback, but on work related projects, only. David’s direct report team did not provide feedback on style. In fact, each stated, “It never occurred to provide David feedback on his style.” Yet, notably, David did receive feedback on his style from subordinates of his direct reports.

Alex received feedback on her style from her direct reports almost immediately after she entered the organization. Her direct reports stated, “When Alex joined we could tell immediately that things were going to be different.” Alex’s style was described as refreshing, nurturing and collaborative. Employees felt comfortable sharing sensitive matters with Alex and believed that Alex would respect the confidentiality of each team member. When Alex reflected about her team and her desire to build stronger bonds and collaboration within the team, Alex stated,

I myself have always been an open door individual. So, when I sat down with my team it was an exchange versus one-sided. This interaction helped to rebuild a team that was completely dysfunctional because things came to light about which people were resentful. Dealing with those issues helped to rebuild the team.

Additionally, Alex's direct reports continually mentioned her "connected" leadership style and that it never felt like Alex was too busy to listen to them. Alex's team stated that she created a culture that nurtured communication and collaboration amongst all of the team members. Alex mentioned, "The team asked for more interaction with me because it helped them feel more open." Also, direct reports made comments such as, "No one ever felt like Alex was too busy to listen to them," or "Alex looked me in the eye when I raised an issue and then she dealt with the issue," and finally, "Alex continually opens the door to me and I can ask questions or provide her feedback."

Matt's leadership style was also very collaborative. But, Matt also mentioned that he did not like to "be the boss." In fact, Matt was a peer to many of his direct reports prior to becoming President of the organization. Matt created an organization focused on consensus decision-making so that he did not appear to be making all of the decisions using a top down approach. Matt stated, "I look at it as "us" making decisions, not "me" making decisions." Matt craved connection and teamwork with employees at every level. Matt believed his work style and approach made it possible for him to elicit feedback. When an issue arose, Matt's style was to blame the process, not the employee. Matt was credited with breaking down silos and creating discussion between the production floor and the office. One direct report said, "Because of Matt's leadership style there is better communication between the office and the production floor." Another direct report mentioned, "About 1 ½ years ago people were apprehensive and untrusting. Today people understand the reason for the change, are seeing the benefits of the change and they are able to do their jobs better." Finally, another direct report stated, "I have never seen Matt refuse anyone. Anything you want to tell him is welcomed. He is able to relate

to people, ask questions and make them feel involved.” As a result, Matt too, received feedback on both work related issues, as well as his leadership style.

Both Alex’s and Matt’s organizations were experiencing the most intense change within the work environment. Additionally, both Alex and Matt had very collaborative styles and worked very closely with employees at all levels within the organization. As a result of the intense change and each leader’s style, both experienced feedback on business issues and leadership style from direct reports and employees further down into the organization.

David’s organization was going through the next level of intensity of change in comparison to Alex’s and Matt’s organizations, but the environment was very tenuous and one in which feedback was more “taboo.” Although David’s leadership style was warm, open and authentic, he only received feedback on business issues from his direct reports. However, David did receive feedback on his style, albeit from peers and subordinates to direct reports.

Finally, JK’s organization was going through the least level of change in comparison to the others. JK’s style was more business focused and direct; as such, JK received feedback from both peers and direct reports that was focused primarily on business related issues. JK did not receive feedback on his style.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion of Findings

In the early stages of their career, leaders are most often given plenty of guidance and support by being closely monitored and mentored by others in the organization. However, as leaders move up the ladder, sources of honest and useful feedback become less frequent; and after a point, senior leaders are pretty much on their own (Kaplan, 2007). Also, the more senior the leader is, the more visible the leader is; senior leaders have an opportunity to make a great impact, either positive or negative. As a result, it is wise to go through some self-assessment periodically to step back from the hustle and bustle of the business. One component of a leader's self-assessment should include feedback from others; so they are better able to gain insight about how they show up.

For me, as an HR executive who works in Corporate America, this topic is of significant interest to me. I have worked with many senior leaders throughout my career and have experienced both leaders who are open to feedback, and those who are not open to feedback. Senior leaders play a significant role in organizations, impacting the lives and finances of shareholders and employees. Senior leaders' behaviors contribute to the culture and health of an organization. Thus, it is important to understand this phenomenon so that senior leaders are able to gain the insight needed for continued growth and development.

The purpose of my study was to gain a deeper understanding of how senior leaders perceived and reacted to feedback from others. Additionally, I wanted to explore if the feedback that senior leaders received from others, compelled them to act, reflect or gain deeper insight about self. My research question was: How does a senior leader perceive and react to feedback

from others? To answer this question, I conducted an interpretive multiple-case study by interviewing four senior leaders between the ages of 47 – 57, along with 21 colleagues who surrounded these senior leaders.

At the conclusion of this study, I gained deeper insight into the phenomenon of receiving feedback using the perspectives of senior leaders, who participated in the study, and the colleagues who surrounded them. Not only did I answer the question I posed, but also gained additional insights about senior leaders' beliefs about feedback and the experiences from which those beliefs stemmed. I further learned the role that trust plays in establishing a solid foundation for constructive feedback.

In this final chapter, I will discuss the findings that I believe were the most significant. I will compare those findings to current literature and highlight any surprises that I found. I will also address implications of the findings for the field of organization development, make recommendations for future research, address limitations to the study, disclose my biases, and end with personal reflections and a brief conclusion.

### **Overview of Major Themes**

Four major themes and one subtheme emerged after the cross-case analysis. The themes were:

- 1) Specific responses and attitudes toward feedback were shaped in early years,
- 2) The need for meaningful feedback drove leaders to work on intentionally building trust with employees, and
  - 2a) Feedback on sensitive issues was most likely accepted if provided by a trusted source,
- 3) Leaders associated feedback with “need for improvement,” and



4) In times of turbulent change, employees may find security in providing feedback to a trusted leader.

As I began to search for current literature to compare and contrast with my findings from my research, I found that literature was plentiful on general topics such as leadership, feedback, 360 degree feedback, and authenticity, for example. However, as I honed my search to find literature that more directly compared to themes emerging from my study, I found fewer articles available for my consumption; albeit I did find some. Nonetheless, in some instances, I dissected the general literature and found nuggets of insight for comparison with themes that emerged from my study.

**Specific responses and attitudes toward feedback were shaped in early years.**

Through analysis of the four cases, it was clear that early experiences and the presence of role models and mentors were impactful. Three out of four leaders who participated in the study, mentioned directly they believed that early experiences, role models and mentors shaped their leadership style, reactions to feedback and the person who they became.

One of the leaders discussed at length the positive nature of his role models early in life and throughout his career. He shared the lasting impressions that the character, behaviors and actions of these individuals made on shaping his character and leadership. Another leader spoke of both positive and negative impressions he had as he watched leaders with whom he worked early in his career. He watched the leaders he respected behave with honesty and integrity, while others lacked integrity and led with “hidden agendas.” These experiences had a profound impact on him. As a result, he vowed that he would become a leader who demonstrated strong character. The third leader who spoke directly about his early experiences, shared passionately about his negative experiences with feedback received from teachers in the educational system. However,

as he grew “more comfortable in his skin” and became successful, he has been able to reframe those negative experiences. This leader was now able to look at feedback in a more positive light. At times, however, this leader was “haunted” by those early negative experiences. While the fourth leader did not directly connect her beliefs about feedback to early experiences, she reflected about her challenges grappling with feedback and her need to explain rationale for decisions made. Additionally, she spoke passionately and intensely about consistently striving to “Be the best she could be.” I wondered if those beliefs and reactions were spawned from experiences encountered earlier in her life.

I was not surprised by this finding relative to the impact that early experiences and role models had on shaping our attitudes and responses to feedback and shaping the people we become; in fact, there is a saying, “We are the sum total of all our experiences.” Through my discussions with these leaders, I was repeatedly reminded of this concept. Personally, when I thought about my own experiences and the impact they have had on me, I generally gravitated toward the positive experiences and role models from whom I learned. Throughout my discussions with these leaders, I was reminded of the impact negative experiences created. It took hard work to reframe the negative experiences, learn from them and turn them into a positive outcome, as was successfully done by two of the leaders in my study.

In my literature review, I discovered two of articles that provided some insight into the theme of early experiences, role models and mentors. Coutu’s (2001) interview with Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries focused on putting CEO’s “On the Couch” to explore how their early personal experiences shaped subsequent behaviors, and to understand how these leaders dealt with setbacks and pain. The article referenced Freud’s theory of transference, which posits a continuity between early childhood and adult behavior. This theory stated that people brought to

their current relationships a map of their past relationships and they transferred them onto the present. In this interview, Kets de Vries made connections between Freud's theory, the leader's early experiences, relationships with parents and role models and the behavior of the senior leader today. Kets de Vries stated that this transference could happen in particularly stressful situations or hierarchical situations. He stated that people in positions of authority had an uncanny ability to reawaken transference processes in themselves and others, both positively and negatively.

Additionally, a study conducted by Brown and Trevino examined the relationship between ethical role models and ethical leadership, exploring childhood role models, career mentors and top manager role models. This study found that having ethical role models during the leader's career was positively related to ethical leadership. The study also found that having a childhood ethical role model or workplace ethical role model was also positively associated with ethical leadership. Therefore, this study supported the transference theme that emerged from my study.

Based upon the above findings, I believe it would be safe to state that it can be important to look to leaders' experiences and role models for clues about how they will lead, show up and impact the organization and its people. I believe that this finding is important for organizations not only in the leader selection process, but also in development of leaders as well.

**The need for meaningful feedback drove leaders to work on intentionally building trust with employees. Feedback on sensitive issues was most likely accepted if provided by a trusted source.** The study revealed that each one of the leaders displayed a leadership style that could be characterized by connection to the business and deep connections to employees. All of the leaders spoke in varying degrees about their passion to ensure that they were connected to

the employees. This passion was demonstrated through their open door approach to management, the visibility of their presence, and working side by side with employees on business issues. All of the leaders believed that those connections created trust.

As a result of the trust that was created between the leader and the employee, the leader believed that employees felt more comfortable providing feedback, albeit to varying degrees and of varying types. In fact, even the leaders' colleagues, with whom I spoke, corroborated these beliefs. Each of the leaders was keenly aware of the phenomenon that as leaders rose in the organization, feedback became non-existent or filtered. Each believed that to be successful, they needed continuous feedback. Thus, each was passionate about continued connections to employees within the organization, at all levels, so that they would continue to receive feedback.

In addition to building trust with employees, to ensure continuous feedback, all four leaders spoke about the sensitivity surrounding receiving feedback about their style and persona. In fact, as we discussed this concept further, each leader, in a different way, spoke about being more open to this type of feedback if it was provided by someone who was perceived as honest, trusted and respected. They all concurred that while feedback could be hard to hear at times, it was easier to accept if provided by a trusted source. They reinforced the concept of there being a greater chance for reflection and behavior change if sensitive feedback was provided by a trusted source.

I believe that trust is foundational to every successful, healthy, human relationship. Trust in the business setting looks a lot like trust in a personal setting. Trust needs to be earned through follow through on commitments, showing up on time, and doing what was promised. Lives are not lived in a vacuum. As human beings, we are surrounded by coworkers, friends, clients, bosses, etc. who count on each other; thus necessitating working together in harmony.

It is critical for a leader to earn the trust of all of those in his/her entourage. So, the fact that this theme emerged from my study did not surprise me in the least. To the contrary, I would have been surprised had this theme not emerged in some form or other. Lencioni (2005) stated that through his work he had come to one inescapable conclusion, that no quality or characteristic in team work is more important than trust. Lencioni also stated that there was no quality or characteristic that was as rare, either.

The 2011 Ipsos MORI survey on trust showed that only 29% of people believed business leaders could be trusted to tell the truth, and this was one of the primary virtues that followers said they wanted in their leaders. Additionally, recent research conducted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development (CIPD) stated that, in order to build effective organizations, leaders who displayed personal integrity, humanity and allowed followers to get to know them, were needed (Beddoes-Jones, 2012).

It was encouraging to learn that each of the leaders who participated in my study were passionate and worked hard to make connections with people, ultimately to gain and build trust which enabled open lines of communication and feedback to occur.

Su and Wilkins (2014) suggested that the way a leader showed up not only impacted the organization, but also impacted their effectiveness. They cited important behaviors such as building genuine rapport and engagement with employees, being intentional about where you are seen and how you make contact with employees, getting out of your office and walking the halls and making your “open door policy” a reality for employees, to name a few. These behaviors were consistent with those that the leaders in this study displayed to build trust and connection with employees.

McDonald (2009) stated that “There has been research conducted whose outcome showed that individuals are more prone to ignore data about self from people that we do not know in favor of data about self from those close to us” (p.56). This research supported the notion that senior leaders found it easier to accept feedback from someone close to them, or from a trusted source.

**Leaders associated feedback with "need for improvement."** This study focused on understanding how senior leaders perceived and reacted to feedback from others. I purposefully defined feedback as, a conscious effort to get/receive information about one's skills, abilities, competencies, (Asumeng, 2013). I deliberately chose neither to focus on the positive nor on the negative aspects of feedback. However, interestingly enough, all of the leaders in the study spoke about feedback from the negative perspective; they spoke about feedback being provided to them such that they were able to “bridge a gap,” “get better,” or “improve.” None of the leaders appeared bothered by the fact that they had gaps. All were self-aware and recognized their shortcomings; all wanted to understand the specifics so that they could eliminate the gaps. In fact, gaining insight about self or the company was consistently cited by my study participants as one of the many reasons for participation. All suggested that feedback could help improve either self or the company.

All of the subjects were highly motivated and driven to improve. Each leader was more bothered by the possibility that feedback might be withheld or filtered, than the prospect of receiving feedback about a gap they needed to bridge. While each leader also stated that it was nice to hear positive feedback, their focus was primarily on ensuring the receipt of negative, yet constructive feedback.

Initially, when I analyzed my data, I was somewhat stunned by the fact that each leader focused primarily on feedback from a deficit perspective. Additionally, when reviewing data specifically from the leaders' colleagues, they too focused on providing feedback from a gap perspective. However, even though many colleagues shared stories with me about positive characteristics of each of these leaders; in most instances, the colleagues did not share the affirmative feedback with the leader. When I asked the reason, most colleagues stated that, "It did not occur to provide this type of feedback." At times, leaders mentioned that they heard positive comments about their style, but most often those comments were provided by employees further down in the organizational hierarchy.

I began to search for research about feedback which focused on the negative perspective, and I was surprised to find articles and research that supported this finding. As I began reviewing the data, I was enlightened and now have deeper insight into this phenomenon. Su and Wilkins (2014) mentioned that multiple studies have shown that people pay more keen attention to negative information. In fact, when people are asked to recall important emotional events, people remember four negative memories to every one positive memory.

Kaplan (2007) suggested that most people wanted to get feedback while there was an opportunity to act on it; thus, it was necessary and welcomed to receive constructive, negative feedback. Zenger and Folkman (2014) conducted an assessment and compiled data to understand if people preferred to give and receive both positive and corrective feedback. One of the questions that Zenger and Folkman asked was, "Would you prefer praise/recognition or corrective feedback?" Fifty seven percent of the respondents preferred corrective feedback.

Halvorson (2013) discussed both positive and negative feedback from the perspective of the functions they served. She stated that positive feedback increased the commitment to the

work one did by enhancing both the experience and confidence. Whereas, negative feedback was informative – it informed where one needed to spend more effort and offered insight into the areas for improvement.

Grant Halvorson (2013) also discussed the difference in impact that positive or negative feedback had dependent upon the state at which an individual was in their career. Specifically, if someone was at a novice stage in their career, positive feedback could help the individual with the challenges they were facing; but when the individual was at an expert stage in their career, this individual knew what they are doing; therefore, constructive, negative feedback could help the individual at this stage of their career do what it took to get to the top of their game. This particular article, and the studies cited within, provided me an “aha moment.” I considered that, conceivably, senior leaders could be thought to be at the “expert stage” in their career. Thus, they would not fear negative, constructive feedback. In fact, senior leaders would seek it out because constructive, negative feedback would offer the senior leader more insight to enable the senior leader to get better. This research supported findings from my study.

**In times of turbulent change, employees may find security in providing feedback to a trusted leader.** All of the leaders who participated in this study led organizations that were going through change; albeit each organization was experiencing a different level of change intensity. If I had to rank the participants’ organizational change from most to least intense, I would rank Alex’s organization first, followed closely by Matt’s organization. Next, I would place David’s organization and last JK’s organization, respectively. While, I do not want to minimize the impact that any change could have on an organization and its employees, I believed there was a relationship between the nature of the leader, and the organization’s internal environment, to the type of feedback a leader received.



Each of the leaders established strong connections with their employees, to varying degrees. Additionally, each leader had different, dominant characteristics which set them apart from each other. For example, Alex was described as a caring, social and friendly leader, to whom her direct reports could provide information on sensitive matters. Matt was previously a peer to many of his colleagues and admitted that he did not like to be “the boss.” Matt’s leadership and decision-making style was consensus driven, and he craved connection with his employees. David was referred to as warm, open and authentic, and finally, JK’s style was described as direct, process and results driven, logical and non-emotional.

All of the leaders were respected by their direct reports, peers and the organizations for which they worked. However, I believed I saw some differences in the frequency and type of feedback that the respective leader received, based upon the type of internal change and the leader’s disposition. For example, Alex immediately received feedback on both work related and leadership style issues from her direct reports. Alex’s organization was going through the most significant change. Alex described the organization as “dysfunctional” and likened it to a “war zone”. The employees had experienced significant leadership change and turmoil within the department. Alex’s leadership style was described as “refreshing” and they stated, “We knew things would be different with Alex as our leader.” Therefore, they began to be more open with Alex. Matt’s organization was also going through significant change. His leadership style was very visible. He connected with employees at every level of the organization. This approach was significantly different than employees previously experienced. Matt approached employees for ideas on ways to make the processes and their jobs better. This continued connection and change in employee’s work life led employees to trust Matt and share information with him.

This finding was unanticipated. I searched for literature that could provide insight into this theme. I found it difficult to gather any data that provided insight directly about this topic. I did, however, find some neuroscience research, in Issues Two and Three of the *NeuroLeadership Journals* published in 2009 and 2010 that broached the topic of change, individuals' reactions to change and strategies to be employed that quell the anxiety people experience when things are not stable. Additionally, I read an article, that contained information surrounding a leader's characteristics and the organization's culture that provided some superficial insight into this theme. In this article, Kets deVries stated that there are strong links between the personality of the leader, the leader's style and the general culture of the organization (Coutu, 2001).

Rock (2009) cited research by Gordon in which Gordon opined that the organizing principle of the brain was to "minimize danger and maximize reward" (p. 56). If danger was perceived, the brain's threat response was activated. Change in organizations could be perceived as threat and trigger a threat response in the brain. All of the organizations led by participants of this study were undergoing varying degrees of change.

Every action a leader takes can either support or undermine perceived levels of threat and potentially trigger a threat response. Thus, the leader who was more self-aware and whose style was more inclusive could be more adept at understanding the threats that were presented in environments wrought with change and the threat employees might have felt (Rock, 2008). For example, when change occurs in the environment, uncertainty may occur. As a result, employees may feel fear, threat and the need to protect self. The leader in charge of the respective organization could have a positive impact on employees through their connection and interaction with employees, making the employees feel more secure. Thus, the employees may begin to trust

the leader, feel secure and provide more feedback to the leader because of the connection and sense of safety that was felt.

Therefore, I am suggesting that the neuroscience findings could provide some insight to the differing reactions employees had not only to the change that was occurring in the organization, but also to the connection they felt to the leader and their sense of safety. As a result, the type of feedback provided to the leader could vary.

### **Limitations**

There are several noteworthy limitations. One limitation comes from the nature of the study's methodology. First, the findings from the case may not be generalized to a larger population (Stake, 1995).

Second, this study's participants were all self-selected and have a unique profile. Leaders who chose to participate in this study may have the propensity to be more self-aware and open to receiving feedback than those leaders who chose not to participate in the study. Thus, the data collected in this study reflect only leaders who are open to feedback and were willing to participate in the study.

Additionally, all of the senior leaders who participated in this study led organizations and functions in "for profit" businesses. I did not interview any senior leaders who led "not for profit" businesses. Thus, one might wonder, if there is a difference in the leadership response to feedback of senior leaders leading at the helm of "for profit" versus "not for profit" businesses. The study participants lacked diversity of age, gender and ethnicity. All of the leaders who participated were in the age range of 47 – 57 years old; two leaders were from Generation X and two leaders were from the Baby Boomer Generation. There was no representation from Generation Y. Additionally, three of the leaders who participated were male and one leader was

female. All were Caucasian. Would the findings and themes be different if the participants were more diverse?

All of the organizations represented in the study were experiencing some type of change; some more significant than others. Would the findings be similar if any of the organizations represented in the study were in a more stable or “status quo” type of corporate life cycle?

Finally, my findings are based primarily on participants’ interviews. Data received from leaders is self-reported and represents leaders’ perceptions of self. The other set of data came from colleagues identified by the leader. However, because the colleagues’ names were provided by the senior leader, there may be a possibility that the participating leaders selected only colleagues whose ideas and views were consistent with their own. There is a chance that there may be other co-workers around the leaders who have or had different opinions about the leaders’ response to feedback.

### **Implications for Practice**

The feedback process, regardless of a person’s level in an organization, can be complex and wrought with sensitivity and angst for both the feedback receiver and provider. However, for someone to gain more self-awareness and continue to develop, feedback is important. Additionally, it is important for individuals to understand that feedback need not only be associated with a need for improvement, but also with the provision of insight about what one does well.

Findings from this study have implications for leaders in organizations, HR executives who support leaders in the role of coach, and OD consultants and practitioners working in organizations or their own consulting practice. The findings of this study may help leaders and

organizations become more open to the process and practice of receiving feedback throughout the organization.

One area highlighted in this study was trust. The participating leaders built trust with employees through forging deep connections throughout the organization. These findings may provide insight to leaders who would like to modify or change their behavior, become more visible in the organization, and connect with employees in different ways, so that more trust is created. If trust is built, leaders may receive more feedback, not only in areas where they have shortcomings, but also in areas they show up well.

This study highlighted the fact that receiving sensitive feedback required courage and a high level of trust of the person, who provided feedback. The findings of the study may be helpful to HR leaders and OD consultants who play the role of coach. They may now have a heightened level of consciousness about the sensitivities involved and the courage it takes for a leader to receive feedback. With this heightened awareness, HR leaders and OD consultants may focus on their efforts to establish trust with the leaders they coach. If the HR leader or OD consultant consciously focuses on building deeper trust with the leader, more receptivity of feedback by the leader may occur. Thus, the HR leader or OD consultant, through gaining the trust of leaders, have better opportunities to support them in their growth journey. Finally, this study may be helpful to anyone who is fascinated by the topic of receiving and providing feedback in the workplace. First-hand stories from senior leaders about their response to feedback may provide some interesting insights or inspire more research opportunities.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

This research focused on senior leaders' perceptions of and responses to feedback from others. The leaders involved in this study were Caucasian; there was one female and three males;

two represented the Baby Boomer Generation and two represented Generation X. A more diverse population (gender, age, and ethnicity), etc., could be analyzed in a similar manner. One could see if findings of a new study affirm this study's findings, or if different themes emerge. Also, in my study each of the organizations was undergoing various types of change. Another multi-case study could be conducted selecting leaders of more stable organizations that are not going through significant change in search of contrasting findings.

Future research could be done using a positivistic approach, selecting a broader sample of leaders. One could conduct a correlation study to test a hypothesis that sensitive feedback is only received and acted upon if provided by a trusted and respected source. Similarly, it would be interesting to study whether a leader who is self-aware is more receptive to feedback on style.

The number of leaders in my study was small, only four. A grounded theory study could be conducted. The participants in the study could be a broader group of leaders, dispersed geographically, working for both "for profit" and "not for profit" businesses. The goal would be to ultimately create a theory about leaders' perceptions of and reactions to feedback from others.

### **Personal Reflections**

Engaging in the dissertation process caused me to reflect on my doctoral program journey. I recalled that one of the questions I was asked during the interview stage of the acceptance process was, "Tell me about your ability to reflect." Of course, during the interview, I stated that I was very self-aware and that I reflected often about my circumstances, and life situations I encountered. However, now that I have finished the program and my dissertation, I realized how little I really reflected and understood self prior to enrolling in this program, and how much I have grown as a result of my work in the program. All of my coursework, experiences and interactions with my cohort and instructors had a profound impact on me.

Specifically, my interaction with my dissertation chair, my elective coursework in Energetics, and more deeply embracing and understanding, “use of self” and “self as instrument” all factored into the development of the person I am now, friend, mother, employee and leader. However, I realized that I am still a work in progress. As African-American author, poet, actress, dancer and singer, Maya Angelou, said, “If there is one thing I learned in life, I have a lot more to learn.” I believe and embrace that statement wholeheartedly.

Second, I chose the topic of my study because of my personal interest in self-awareness, reflection and receipt of insight, so that growth occurs. I believe that self-awareness, reflection and feedback are necessary components for growth. Thus, a necessary part of the learning and growth for the doctoral student during the dissertation process is working closely with one’s dissertation chair and receiving much feedback along the way. Throughout my process, I worked very closely with my dissertation chair. When I was in the throes of writing Chapter 4, my dissertation chair consistently provided me with constructive feedback. At one point, I became somewhat sensitive to the feedback provided and reacted abruptly. Immediately, post my email reaction, I reflected and realized my response to the feedback needed to be re-framed. I realized that the feedback provided was for my growth, as well as to ensure a good end product. I reached out to my dissertation chair sharing my realization. During our conversation, I had an “aha moment.” I saw an immediate parallel with my study. Thus, I was even more appreciative of the participants of this study. I too experienced the sensitivity and angst triggered by receipt of feedback. In this instance, I was able to immediately reflect, reframe and move forward. My response affirmed for me that I have grown through this process.

Finally, this topic and the dissertation process have been a real labor of love for me. Knowing the sensitivity and angst that can be caused by the topic of feedback, I took great pains

to ensure that I respectfully and honestly reflected the stories of the leaders and their colleagues who participated. I realized the courage it took to participate and wanted to represent my participants in a way that provided value not only to them, but to others who read this study. To me, this is a very important topic; this is the topic, I believe, that will cause the reader to reflect on their appetite for feedback and their own self awareness. Hopefully, this study will challenge the reader to begin their own growth journey.

### **Conclusion**

All of the leaders that participated in this study were open to receipt of feedback because each was interested in improving and growing. To improve and grow, one needs to be open to looking into the mirror, examining and understanding self. There is much sensitivity and angst associated with feedback. But, in order to really embrace feedback, one must be open and somewhat vulnerable, which takes a great deal of courage. I suggest that what is pleasant or easy may not always be good for people, and what is difficult or uncomfortable may not always be bad for them. I believe that one can look at feedback in that way. To become self-aware is not possible without feedback and reflection because as Socrates once said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”



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## Appendix A

### Participant Recruitment Email

(Date)

Hi (Name)

I hope this message finds you well. As you know, I am currently working on my dissertation to complete my doctorate degree in Organization Development at the University of St. Thomas. I would like to request your help locating potential participants for my study.

My research focuses on senior leaders and their response to feedback from others. The purpose of my study is to gain a deeper understanding of how leaders perceive and react to feedback from others, as well as to explore if feedback from others enables the leader to gain insight about self.

I am requesting your assistance in locating senior leaders to participate in this study. For purposes of my study, the definition of a senior leader is, “a leader within business at the CEO (Chief Executive Officer) level, a direct report to the CEO, or a direct report to the leader reporting to the CEO. Potential participants also must be willing to provide the names of 4 to 6 colleagues, co-workers, subordinates, etc. who I can talk to about their experience(s) providing the respective senior leader feedback.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no financial benefit. Information that is collected as part of the study will be confidential and will be used in a manner that protects the privacy and identity of the participants.

Please think about senior leaders you know who would be willing to participate in this study. Following is the process that I am using for referrals:

- 1) Please contact me via phone or email with the names and contact information for the potential participant(s) by (date). Please include information about their current leadership role.
- 2) If you have an existing relationship with the potential participant(s), I would like to ask you to contact them in advance to provide background information about me and to let them know that I will contact them via email.
- 3) I will contact the potential participant via email describing the study and outlining the expectations for participation. I will inform them that they were referred by you. Additionally, I will let them know that participation in the study is completely voluntary. In the email, I will ask them to contact me if they are interested in participating in the study or discussing the study further.
- 4) To ensure I am able to maintain anonymity of all study participants, I will not be able to inform you if your referral has agreed to participate in the study.

Thank you, in advance for helping me identify potential participants for this study. Please contact me if you have any questions.

I appreciate your support!

## **Appendix B**

### Invitation to Potential Participants (via Email)

(Date)

Dear (Name)

My name is Julie Loosbrock. I am a doctoral student in Organization Development at the University of St. Thomas and I am currently working on my dissertation. My research focuses on senior leaders and their response to feedback from others. The purpose of my study is to gain a deeper understanding of how leaders perceive and react to feedback from others, as well as to explore if feedback from others enables the leader to gain insight about self.

I am currently looking for senior leaders in business to participate in the study. You were referred to me by (name) as a possible participant. For this study, senior leader is defined as, “a leader within business at the CEO (Chief Executive Officer) level, a direct report to the CEO, or a direct report to the leader reporting to the CEO.

If you participate in the study, you will be asked to take part in an interview. This interview will be a conversational interview conducted by me, in person, at a place that you select. You will be asked to talk about your experience in participating in feedback processes, your perceptions and reactions to the feedback you have received from others, and any insights you have gained as a result of receiving this feedback. The interview will last between 60 and 90 minutes. Interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed for analysis purposes.

Additionally, you will be asked to provide the names of approximately 8 individuals with whom you work (boss, subordinates, peers, etc.) that I can also interview. The purpose of this

interview is to gain insight from these individuals about their experience(s) providing feedback to you.

Participation in the study is completely voluntary. There is no financial benefit. Should you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw; any data collected about you will not be used in the study.

Information that is collected as part of the study will be confidential and will be used in a manner that protects your privacy and identity. You will decide what experiences you want to share. You can skip an interview question or stop the interview at any time. To minimize the risk that your identity will be recognized, I will use a pseudonym. In my dissertation and in any follow up reports that I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way.

If you would like to be considered for the study, please contact me at 651 260 0385 or email at [julieloosbrock@msn.com](mailto:julieloosbrock@msn.com) I am available to answer any questions you might have. If I do not hear back from you within two weeks, I will follow up with you one additional time.

Thank you for your consideration.

## Appendix C

### Primary Participant Interview Guide

#### Interview Questions

- 1) Can you share with me your point of view and belief about feedback?
  
- 2) Can you share with me your experiences in how you receive feedback from others?
  
- 3) What were your perceptions of the feedback you received?

**Probes as needed:** Any discrepancies between self-view and view from others? How did you view the feedback? Accurate/Inaccurate?

- 4) How did you react to the feedback you received?

**Probes as needed:** Emotional reaction? What was value of feedback? Did you gain insight about self?

- 5) What did you do with the feedback you received?
  
- 6) How would you describe your leadership/management style?



## **Appendix D**

### Secondary Participant Interview Guide

#### **Interview Questions**

- 1) What is your relationship to (insert name of study primary participant).
- 2) How long have you known (name)?
- 3) How long have you worked for/with (name)?
- 4) Can you share with me the feedback culture of the organization in which you worked with (name)?
- 5) Have you ever provided (name) feedback?

**Probes as needed:** What kind of feedback did you provide (name)?

- 6) How did (name) react to the feedback you provided?
- 7) What did (name) do with the feedback you provided?
- 8) How would you describe (name's) leadership/management style?