Who We Are Is How We Lead: Storytelling as an Intervention in a Manager Development Program

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TITLE OF DISSERTATION:  WHO WE ARE IS HOW WE LEAD: STORYTELLING AS AN INTERVENTION IN A MANAGER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM  

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ABSTRACT

Leadership development programs (LDPs) have long been recognized as a means for organizations to develop their leaders, yet studies on their efficacy or use of creative interventions are limited. Despite the plethora of leadership studies that exist today, research is still seeking to answer the question: what is the best way to develop leaders? This qualitative study sought to investigate how storytelling can be used as an intervention for leadership development in a manager development program (MDP), an LDP for entry-level to midlevel managers at a biotechnology corporation. Using storytelling as an Indigenous model for knowledge cocreation as a framework, this study used a narrative inquiry approach to highlight the voices and lived experiences of the participants in the MDP through a cohort-based focus group, individual interviews, and the analysis of leadership maps created during their leadership journey.

Three themes emerged from this study: (a) storytelling allowed participants to engage in deep reflection and individual meaning-making for increased self-awareness; (b) storytelling created a collective process for mitigating fear, establishing trust, practicing empathy, and thus fostering a sense of belonging among the cohort; and (c) graduates felt confident in their ability to build brave spaces, create connection among their team members, and affirm their own leadership identity in the organization.

Findings revealed that storytelling in an LDP reinforces leadership that calls for engagement at work on a deeply human level that humanizes direct reports, colleagues, and managers across the organization. In the context of LDPs, storytelling can act as a vehicle for meaning-making for participants to better understand their own individual
identity and their leadership identity, along with leadership behaviors in the context of the organization.

Finally, this study contributes to literature on leadership theory in practice by using storytelling as an intervention for leadership development. This study adds to existing scholarship surrounding the benefits of trust, empathy, and community in leadership. In summary, findings from this study suggest Indigenous ways of knowing, such as storytelling, can prove to be effective behavioral interventions for leaders participating in LDPs.

Keywords: Leadership, leadership development, leadership development programs, storytelling, meaning making
DEDICATION

I first dedicate my research, PhD, and dissertation to my grandmother, Margaret Choy. Grammy, you would be so proud of this accomplishment. Some of my earliest memories with you are reading together, asking you to help me spell a word, or every morning when you quietly completed the daily crossword puzzle from the paper. You cultivated my love of reading and writing at such a young age—if only you could see me today.

I also dedicate this work to the Learning & Development professionals who are committed to transformational learning interventions around the world. Together, we will help others find meaning in their work and in return, find ourselves.
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Alex: When we first met, I was a recent graduate of a master’s program. During my time as a doctoral student, our relationship transitioned from dating, to fiancés, to husband and wife. There have been many moments where I struggled to balance working full-time, being a full-time student, and our robust social life. Despite the challenges, you have been there to champion and support me through it all. I could not be more proud to graduate with our last name as Mrs. Brittany Grieb, PhD.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Leadership has long been understood as a trans-relational phenomenon, in which “its essence is to move others (e.g., followers), the organisation, and the leader to another level of functioning by means of relationships” (Branson et al., 2019, p. 49). Because leaders in an organization are appointed to leadership positions, they are often responsible for managing and building relationships with the people on their team to optimize performance and drive organizational success. Therefore, leadership development must also define leadership as a relational process involving multiple people (Clarke, 2013; Day et al., 2015; McCallum & O’Connell, 2009; Yukl, 2002). Although leaders are consistently involved in the relational process of leadership, organizations need to invest in leadership development that helps leaders improve on those processes. Most commonly, leadership development programs (LDPs), are formal training programs used as an opportunity for leaders in an organization to grow and develop on a professional level and sharpen their leadership skills. However, the concept of LDPs is relatively new, and therefore, is a new area of research. It is difficult to find an industry standard for programming, implementation, delivery, and interventions that directly correlate to program outcomes for LDPs. Additionally, a “one size fits all” approach to leadership development does not address the unique challenges faced by certain diverse industries, specifically for the fast-paced and rapidly expanding field of biotechnology.

In 2019, Harvard Business Review published an article on “The Future of Leadership Development” that confirmed “traditional approaches to leadership development no longer meet the needs of organizations or individuals” because:
1) Organizations, which pay for leadership development, don’t always benefit as much as individual learners do, 2) Providers aren’t developing the soft skills organizations need, and 3) It’s often difficult to apply lessons learned in (LDP) class to the real world. (Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019, p. 4)

The article concluded more creative solutions to leadership development programming were needed, such as an assortment of online or formal classes, leveraging technology, and using both traditional and innovative interventions to bridge the learning gap. Moving forward, LDPs must carefully consider how to best meet the needs of individual leaders and their organizations. Thus, more creative interventions for leadership development are needed. For biotechnology organizations, this means slowing down to create more intentional spaces for leadership development with more creative interventions that foster sensemaking.

Additionally, scholarship supports the importance of identity development in the context of leadership (Day & Harrison, 2007). The challenge, then, becomes how LDPs can operationalize embodying participants’ own stories to foster self-awareness, change, and personal growth. Customized LDPs in the field of biotechnology that tailor an identity-centered approach allowing leaders to self-reflect, become more self-aware, and make meaning of their lived experiences offer a useful framework for leadership development. When individuals view leadership as a process of storytelling, they can better understand themselves to better understand their role as a leader, create a community, and foster self-awareness.

For the purpose of this study, I used the framework of identity development as a process through storytelling as a process for leadership development in an LDP. Because
of the fast-paced nature of the field of biotechnology, measuring the effectiveness of such program interventions is critical to contributions both in leadership development and leadership in biotech.

**Background of the Study**

Despite the plethora of leadership research that existed in 2024, leadership research was still seeking to answer the question: what is the best way to develop leaders? A simple Google search of “best leadership development programs” produced over 1.6 million results. Search results included Ivy League university programs, research institutes, conferences, academic institutions, and more. Program formats also varied widely including hybrid, remote, in-person, weekend camping trips, and corporate retreats. Program interventions, the methods used in the program to foster development, ranged from coaching, 360 feedback, assessments, action learning, and simulations. Mainstream thought leaders like Brené Brown, Adam Grant, and Simon Sinek also offer a merger between academia and practice through dialogue in the form of podcasts, TedTalks, or articles. Although LDPs merge academic theory and practice by using a classroom-like container for leadership learning and development, creative interventions are limited. Experiential or hands-on learning are effective methods for leadership development, but it is impossible to prepare leaders for every possible situation that could arise. This makes it difficult for organizations to intentionally invest in their own leadership development that prepares leaders for the reality of a nuanced volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world (Questad, 2022; Rimita, 2019).

Large-scale vendors, like the Center for Creative Leadership, have been successful at implementing large-scale LDPs. For organizations looking to develop their
leaders, hiring external vendors to customize a program can present some challenges. External vendors, although experienced in producing leadership programming, may not be familiar with the unique internal challenges, underlying mindsets, or culture of the organization. For this reason, some organizations choose to hire an internal position for a full-time employee, typically someone from the field of learning and development (LD), to customize an LDP tailored to the needs of the organization. When this happens, the LD professional can design a program in complete alignment with the leadership design, format, and curriculum needs of the organization’s leadership. Such coherence allows the organization to continue to shift and adjust the needs of the LDP to the needs of the organization over time. Unlike external vendors, an internal LD professional does not leave the organization once the program ends; instead, they can continue to monitor, measure, and adjust the program as needed. However, a handbook for designing and implementing an LDP in an organization does not exist, and with 1.6 million different search results for the “best leadership development programs,” it can be difficult to determine the best way to develop leaders (Day et al., 2014; McCauley & Palus, 2021).

This study highlighted my experience as an LD professional working in a biotechnology organization to customize an LDP for entry to midlevel managers. Although I leveraged some best practices in the field of LD in the customized LDP design, one creative intervention I used to humanize the leader experience of participants was storytelling. In addition to industry best practices like Gallup Clifton Strengths, DiSC communication styles, and others, I used the creative intervention of storytelling to assist leaders to engage in critical self-reflection. Not only were participants asked to share personal aspects of their own lives in a group setting, but they created a visual map of
their lived experiences. This map served as a creative outlet for leaders to reflect on their lives and which experiences impacted them the most and contributed to who they were at present. Through the creation of their maps, participants were provided a vehicle for meaning-making, sometimes for the first time in their lives, to reflect on impactful experiences and how those experiences contributed to their identities. Scholarship surrounding LDP interventions included storytelling, but in the context of public speaking (e.g., how to tell a good story as a leader). Storytelling in this program referred to the lived experiences of the program participants and allowed them to be the authors of their own stories.

This study sought to understand the phenomena of storytelling to foster leadership development as it related to participants’ own experiences. Through individual critical reflection (i.e., creation of the leadership map) and collective storytelling (i.e., sharing those maps in a group setting), leaders referenced their own experiences to contextualize and make meaning of new experiences when they occurred. The coherence of their leadership maps and vulnerability through storytelling also supported their leadership development. This intervention allowed leaders to use their own lived experiences to better understand themselves and, in turn, better understand who they were as leaders. This study contributed to the vast leadership scholarship that exists, while highlighting the need for creative interventions in LDPs, specifically in the biotechnology sector.

**Leadership Development in Biotechnology**

Although leadership development has been a long-studied phenomenon, leadership in certain emerging industries, such as biotechnology, is a considerably newer field. Biotechnology, or biotech, is “technology based on biology” that:
Harnesses cellular and biomolecular processes to develop technologies and products that help improve our lives and the health of our planet. Modern biotechnology provides breakthrough products and technologies to combat debilitating and rare diseases, reduce our environmental footprint, feed the hungry, use less and cleaner energy, and have safer, cleaner and more efficient industrial manufacturing processes. (Biotechnology Innovation Organization, 2007, para. 1–2)

In 2007, Biotechnology Industry Organization (now Biotechnology Innovation Organization, BIO) cited nearly $19.8 billion was spent in biotech on research and development (R&D), and the 1,415 biotech companies in the United States exceeded revenue of $51 billion.

Nearly 20 years later, there is less research than desired on leadership in biotechnology. Today, modern biotechnology organizations often consist of diverse departments: research and development (R&D), human resources, sales, marketing, information technology (IT), and production and operations, to name a few. Some studies have focused on leadership in R&D organizations (Elkins & Keller, 2003; Hirst & Mann, 2004; Sapienza, 2005; Shim & Lee, 2001). With organizations pioneering the biotech space, the focus has tended to be on R&D, funding, and then production to increase sales.

Technological advancements in biotech can lead to groundbreaking healthcare innovation to improve everyday life; however, urgency to get these potentially life-changing products to market means that these organizations move at a rapid pace. Many of these organizations can begin as startups. With rapid growth and success, biotech companies can fall behind on developing systems and processes that create the
foundation for organizations to scale their employees, products, and sales. Leadership becomes paramount to effectively deal with rapidly changing environments typical at a growing biotechnology organization, yet there is less research than desired that focuses on leadership in the biotech sector (Johnson Langer, 2009).

**Identity, Leadership, and Storytelling**

One of the biggest challenges facing leadership practitioners and LDPs is how to develop effective leaders. An identity-centered approach to developing leaders reframes leadership development as a process of self-understanding, rather than as an outcome-based process. Therefore, it is imperative for a leader to understand themself to relate with others and build meaningful relationships. Additionally, Drucker (1999) understood to manage others, one must first manage oneself. Eriksen (2009) asserted, “To effectively lead oneself one must possess self-knowledge, and consciously and deliberately choose who one wants to be” (p. 751). For leaders to possess self-knowledge to shape their identities, they must first engage in the process of self-reflection and self-examination (Quinn et al., 2000).

In terms of leadership development, self-reflection and identity development would, in turn, foster leaders who come to know themselves better and to be better leaders. Holland et al. (1998) defined identity as socially constructed and developed in practice over time through experience. By this definition, Holland et al.’s conceptualization of identity understood leader development as a practice that took place over time and leadership as a process of self-discovery, such as an LDP. Gee (2011) argued the development of leader-selves in practice over time was a helpful way to frame leadership development and practice. There is a strong relationship between leadership
and identity development, where “other people play an essential part in the construction of an individual’s identity” (Vidaillet & Vignon, 2010, p. 222). The construction of the self in an individual’s identity formation is not enough; it is the construction of the self in relation to others that also takes part in this formation of one’s identity. Watson (2008) suggested identity “is simply the notion of who, or what, a particular person is in relation to others” (p. 136). By this definition, identity is constructed in contexts such as environment, social interactions, peers, and culture.

Stories are a means for sharing experiences with one another. Storytelling as an oral tradition has existed for thousands of years (Goody, 2006); however, it is underused as an intervention in LDPs. Storytelling, the narrative action of telling one’s own story, can offer a helpful framework for individuals to construct meaning of their own identity in a group context. Storytelling can also be used as an intervention method for leaders to better understand their personal journeys and the experiences contributing to their own identity development to help them better understand themselves as leaders. Storytelling typically occurs with one individual sharing in the context of the collective, or group setting. Meaning-making occurs when individuals of the collective (i.e., audience) make sense of their own personal experiences in relation to the storyteller (i.e., speaker). Not to be confused with storytelling in leadership development that focuses on how to tell a “good story” (e.g., public speaking with a beginning, middle, and end), storytelling as a process focuses less on how to structure a good story and, instead, allows the audience to sit in self-reflection in relation to the story of the storyteller (Iseke, 2013).

Storytelling can assist individuals with making sense of their own lived experiences and grounding participants by understanding themselves as individuals and
as leaders in the context of an organization. Boje (1991) described storytelling in the context of organizations as “the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders” (p. 106). Stories are what bring individuals together to create collective understanding, serving as a powerful tool for organizational alignment. Furthermore, Salicru (2018) wrote, “Stories are sensemaking devices that create points of stability within the emotion of organizational life. They assist people to make sense of change by locating the self in context, time and space” (p. 133). Thus, storytelling offers practitioners in the field of leadership development an effective tool to foster self-awareness and behavioral change for leaders in LDPs.

**Summary**

The present literature has illustrated that LDPs can be an effective tool for leadership development, but there has been limited research that focuses on the biotechnology sector. Additionally, it is rare that studies highlight an internally customized LDP by an LD professional in an organization. Furthermore, with biotechnology startups relying on leaders for their success in a highly volatile market, it is critical that organizations invest in their leaders. To invest in leadership, LDPs offer a helpful framework for organizations to promote this development. However, creative interventions do not always center the human experience of leaders, which is integral in the relational process of leadership. Understanding leadership as a process and highlighting the lived experiences of leaders through storytelling can promote sensemaking that transcends beyond the classroom and into daily leadership practice.
Problem Statement

Although LDPs are frequently implemented as an opportunity for professional and leadership development in an organization (Day et al., 2014; Kirchner & Akdere, 2014; McCauley & Palus, 2021), little time has been spent experimenting with creative interventions. It is also important to note organizational needs for leadership; a “one size fits all” LDP may not work for all organizations. With organizations investing large sums of money into designing, contracting, and managing these programs, it is paramount that their success is measured and innovative techniques match leadership trends for leaders today. In this narrative inquiry study, I analyzed the benefits of using storytelling as an intervention for identity coherence and meaning-making in an LDP tailored for managers (i.e., manager development program [MDP]) at a biotechnology corporation. I explored the effectiveness of activities centered around storytelling as a vehicle for leadership development. This study contributed to the limited existing literature measuring the effectiveness of leadership development interventions in an organization, specifically in the biotechnology sector.

Significance of This Study

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the limited body of research that focused on leadership development in the biotechnology sector. Specifically, the study highlights both storytelling as a humanizing and sensemaking intervention and leadership development in biotechnology organizations. The challenge of designing and implementing intentional LDPs that cater to the diverse needs of biotechnology leaders in various departments is one reason leadership development research has been limited.
Another challenge in leadership development research in biotech is the comparability of corporations and their unique product development; for example, biotechnology can encompass pharmaceuticals to medical devices. Because of the diversity of biotechnology organizations, future research that focuses on case studies can be most useful for scholars (Johnson Langer, 2009). There remain minimal case studies specific to biotechnology corporations and leadership development that study the efficacy, design, intervention methods, or implementation of such programs.

The thematic analysis generated by this study using storytelling interventions supported existing scholarship surrounding leadership learning and development in biotech and the limited research on storytelling as a leadership development intervention. I used qualitative data to outline LDP best practices and evaluate the effectiveness of storytelling interventions.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study for me as the researcher and for the current or graduated program participants in the MDP:

1. How does storytelling foster individual self-development?
2. How does storytelling create collective meaning-making in a group setting?
3. How can storytelling support leadership development in an organization?
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is organized into three sections: (a) Leadership Development Programs (LDPs): Past, Present, and Future; (b) Leadership in the Biotechnology Sector; and (c) An Identity-Centered Approach to Leadership Development. The first section focuses on the background, context, and current literature surrounding leadership development programming. To understand why a radical intervention like storytelling can be used for sensemaking in an LDP, it is first important to understand the literature surrounding LDP design and implementation; why leadership programs fail or are ineffective, different types of LDPs (e.g., MDPs); and current interventions being used by organizations to develop their leaders.

Because this case study focused on an organization in the biotechnology sector, the second section focuses on the limited research that exists regarding leadership in the biotech and startup space. This section highlights the challenges currently facing biotech startups and how a fast-paced culture can hinder an organization’s ability to slow down and measure professional development programs like an LDP. The section closes with the challenges currently facing leaders in the biotech field.

The final section outlines the primary focus of this research: storytelling as a vehicle for meaning-making in an LDP. Starting with a focus on individual identity development in the context of leadership, this section emphasizes the importance of storytelling for meaning-making in LDPs. By understanding leadership development as an individual and collective process, storytelling as an intervention can provide a
meaningful vehicle for learning that transcends the classroom and offers a helpful framework for the purpose of this study.

**LDPs: Past, Present, and Future**

Before exploring the ways in which LDPs are implemented in an organization, it is first important to emphasize why such programs are needed and why organizations invest in leadership development. Leadership development has been defined as “every form of growth or stage of development in the life cycle of a leader that promotes, encourages, and assists the expansion of knowledge and expertise required to optimize one’s leadership potential and performance” (Brungardt, 1996, p. 83). Leadership development is critical in today’s volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (i.e., VUCA) world. The interest in leadership development is vast and includes a multitude of publications. For example, McCauley et al. (1998) wrote the *Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Leadership Development* highlighting leadership development over several decades. Additionally, Carmichael et al. (2011) included the perspectives of many organizational sectors to blend critical and practice-based approaches in their publication, *Leadership Management and Development*. Although other comprehensive literature reviews have been published more recently (Ardichvili et al., 2016; Day et al., 2015; Day & Harrison, 2007; Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004; Iordanoglou, 2018; Kirchner & Akdere, 2014), scholarship for leadership development is always changing based on the needs of current leaders and followers.

**LDP Research and Implementation**

According to Avolio et al. (2010), even though leadership has been a long-studied phenomenon, LDPs have not been the focus of research. A variety of fields leverage
programs like LDPs for leadership development, including education at all levels, healthcare, biotechnology, business, and more. LDPs can be a method to intentionally create space for leadership development in the organization to implement effective change. This commitment from organizations to enhancing leadership skills invested in leadership potential (Conger & Benjamin, 1999) was often used as a strategy to create leaders who were “capable of helping the corporation shape a more positive future” (Fulmer, 1997, p. 60). However, LDPs have not been widely studied for their efficacy, despite organizational implementation and commitment to them (Kirchner & Akdere, 2014). Despite little attention given to the evaluation of and research on LDPs, they still play a crucial role in the professional development, training, and skill enhancement of organizational leaders (Ely et al., 2010).

Kirchner and Akdere (2014) produced a comprehensive review of the literature surrounding LDPs to discuss major issues inhibiting the effectiveness of such programs, including evaluations, return on investment, who should be a leader, and gaps in the literature for the future of LDPs. Who hosts, designs, and produces LDPs varied from organization to organization, catering to a variety of managerial levels. For example, some organizations hired an internal employee to facilitate and manage the program and others hired an outside contracted consultant or sent participants to attend third-party delivered LDPs off-site. Participants could be managers, executive leaders, or C-suite-level personnel. Despite LDPs gaining in popularity, a standard template for the length, content, or mode of delivery did not exist in the broader field of learning and development (L&D). It was not enough for organizations to simply implement an LDP, especially with high associated costs. Without a standard practice, it was critical that
organizations curating LDPs internally carefully considered who participated, the learning outcomes, organizational alignment, method of delivery, content, and the duration of such programs. Although it was known in the field of L&D that LDPs were needed, “actual progress towards understanding why they are important appears limited” and “research demonstrate[d] correlations between LDPs and their effectiveness but is rather limited in scope” (Kirchner & Akdere, 2014, p. 145). As Kirchner and Akdere highlighted, although some research on LDP efficacy existed, there was not a large pool of scholarship available. Further, as noted by Avolio et al. (2010), it was difficult to study LDP training efficacy when approximately 201 articles had been published specifically focusing on leadership interventions. However, without further research on the efficacy of how LDPs created lasting impact, it remained unclear how they could support leaders to further impact employee satisfaction, job productivity, and organizational performance, especially with ascendant generations of leaders and followers (Kirchner & Akdere, 2014). The risk, then, became ineffective LDPs that could not help prevent organizations from experiencing lower employee morale and higher turnover rates (Kirchner & Akdere, 2014).

With billions of dollars invested in leadership development, organizations cannot afford to implement ineffective programs. To invest in leadership development, organizations implement LDPs as formal training programs for leaders in performance-driving skills such as communication, business acumen, finance, and performance management. Historically, LDPs have been effective for the leaders they aim to develop, but with newer generations entering the workforce and ascending into leadership positions, it is important for organizations to continue to tailor programs based on the
changing needs of leaders and followers. Leaders must be prepared to manage their teams in meaningful ways to positively impact recruitment, retention, and employee engagement. When one of the primary reasons employees leave is management (Smet et al., 2022), it is up to organizations to develop leaders through LDPs that prepare them for the unpredictable and changing landscape of the workplace. Additionally, previous theoretical frameworks, which posited transactional leadership practices are most effective to develop leaders, do not align with changing leadership trends (Bass, 1990).

Current leadership scholarship has supported effective practices that centralize leadership as a relational process. This scholarship has found relating and engaging with others could be done through authentic (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003) or transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006, 2010) and catered to the preferred management style of upcoming generations in the workplace. Thus, recent approaches to LDPs have pivoted to prioritize authenticity as a vehicle to develop more self-aware leaders.

Additionally, Day et al. (2014) reviewed 25 years of leadership scholarship that highlighted advances in leadership development. Their article examined intrapersonal and interpersonal research and theory and how development emerged. One way in which leadership development emerged was through process over time. What could be challenging about LDP design was that organizations did not always invest in the process of leadership over an extended period. Day et al. (2014) noted the importance of leadership as a process that “can shape the rate or pattern of development over time. In general, these factors can emerge through organizational practices such as mentoring and coaching, 360-degree feedback, leadership training, job assignments, and action learning.
among others” (p. 70). In leadership development as a process, several factors are identified to support this process such as feedback, self-other agreement, and self-narrative. Feedback allows leaders to self-reflect in their leadership style and heighten their levels of self-awareness (Crook et al., 2021). Self-other agreement allows them to understand how they impact those around them. Most interesting is the self-narrative as a process of development, where leaders reflect on the meaning they ascribe to their own lived experiences. Day et al. (2014) found this practice also fosters identity reflection in leadership development because leaders “gain self-knowledge, self-concept clarity, and person-role merger, which are necessary elements in their development as authentic leaders” (p. 73). The idea of storytelling is revisited later in this literature review, but it is included here as another point of research on the process of leadership development.

Although leadership development is an integral part of any organization, research focused on leadership development programming interventions has been limited. To understand what a successful LDP can look like, it is first important to highlight the pitfalls that can cause an LDP to fail.

**Why Leadership Programs Fail**

LDPs have grown in popularity with organizations understanding the need for leadership development and training; however, not all LDPs are successful. Despite LDPs being widely implemented, there has been little time spent assessing the efficacy of such programs (Sogunro, 1997). Every year billions of dollars are invested in developing leaders in an organization (Westfall, 2019). With nearly 60% of new managers failing in the first 2 years (Miller, 2017), many companies acknowledged their leadership programs
were failing to achieve their desired outcomes (Ardichvili et al., 2016; Kaiser & Curphy, 2013).

In 2014, McKinsey released a report outlining ways in which LDPs failed. The report included several pitfalls, including overlooking context (i.e., program goals, desired outcomes, and overall purpose), decoupling reflection from real work (i.e., aligning deep reflection with action-oriented, hands-on experience), underestimating mindsets (i.e., implementing behavioral change by challenging personal assumptions or biases), and failing to measure results (i.e., not drawing a relationship between LDPs and program outcomes). The responses from 500 executives in the McKinsey (Gurdjian et al., 2014) study indicated “both successful initiatives and ones that run into the sand” (p. 2). A major flaw in the study, however, was that McKinsey only included executive-level perspectives and not those of managers or their teams.

Another failure of LDPs has been that organizations may be reluctant to address root causes needed to change the behavior of their leaders, thereby contributing to a lack of measured results. Collins and Holton’s (2004) meta-analysis of managerial LDPs covering studies from 1982–2001 found:

Organizations should feel comfortable that their managerial leadership development programs will produce substantial results, especially if they offer the right development programs for the right people at the right time…it is important to know whether a 6-week training session is enough or the right approach to develop new competencies that change managerial behaviors, or is it individual feedback from a supervisor on a weekly basis regarding job performance that is most effective? (p. 240)
However, few organizations took the time to measure the efficacy of the delivery methods of their LDPs, further emphasizing how little was known about which knowledge, skills, or processes in managerial leadership development interventions contributed to improved organizational performance (Campbell et al., 1970; Fiedler, 1996; Lynham, 2000).

In a recent review of leadership development literature, Crane (2022) highlighted the assumptions and pitfalls organizations fell into in managerial development: first, that effective individual contributors would make successful managers (Glazer, 2019; Rubin et al., 2002); and second, behavioral change could occur by focusing on skillset development instead of including mindset development, as well (Gurdjian et al., 2014). Organizations often assumed high-performing individual contributors (i.e., high-performing employees) would be effective leaders, but research suggested the mindset of high-performing individual contributors was different from that of effective leaders (Dewar et al., 2019). In one example, whereas leaders were focused on the development of others, individual contributors focused on their own development (Zenger & Folkman, 2018). This individualistic perspective was not typically one associated with effective leadership practices, emphasizing leadership as a relational process.

The second assumption organizations made, as noted previously, was focusing on skillsets instead of mindsets. Although skills were important, LDPs were ineffective when they only focused on skills to correct behaviors instead of the root causes, which required change in mindset, too (Crane, 2022). It was not only important to analyze the skills managers needed to develop, but also why they did what they did with the skills they already had. This cause-and-effect relationship could not be corrected unless the
why was addressed in terms of why leaders did what they did and thought like they thought. This reframed LDPs as less reactionary (i.e., bad leader behavior required leadership training) and more proactive (i.e., what caused the bad leader behavior?). Crane (2022) stated, “Leadership programs can fail to recognize this obstacle of ineffective leadership mindsets to help individuals transition from an individual contributor mindset to the mindset of a leader” (p. 448). As Crane noted, identifying a change in mindsets was necessary to promote changed behavior.

In terms of a manager-specific LDP, Anderson (2010) concluded management development activities need to focus “not only on what managers need to know . . . but also on who they need to be” (p. 288). With a future-focused mindset, LDPs could not only train, but also shape and mold the future leaders of any organization by focusing on who they would become as leaders through greater self-awareness, not just what they needed to know as managers. It would, therefore, be beneficial for organizations to not only select new managers based on their efficacy to lead others, but for LDPs to focus on behavioral changes that shift individual mindsets along with skill development.

Manager Development

LDPs typically focused on certain levels of people leaders in an organization. There were numerous studies done on leadership development, but there was less scholarship than desired for management development programs (MDPs) that focused specifically on manager-level leaders. If organizations were looking to quickly invest in a large pool of individuals and their development, managers were often one of the first positions included in the training because of their high impact on organizations due to managing multiple employee teams. Organizations were quick to invest in management
development to enhance organizational performance, but there was little research to support the specific interventions, delivery methods, and evaluation for manager-specific programs that were most effective for managers (McGurk, 2010). Specifically, organizations needed to pay attention to the different levels of management, organizational contexts, and approaches to develop individual competencies to address organizational problems (Bolden & Gosling, 2004; Salaman, 2004).

A conventional approach that organizations had for MDPs was to train managers based on organization strategies to produce individual behaviors depending on their respective levels of management (Salaman, 2004). This approach requires managers to learn the skills and develop the knowledge that will help them develop business strategies, plan and control resources, manage employee performance, and promote company goals and values (McGurk, 2010). Much like LDPs, most MDPs teach leadership skills to communicate objectives, despite participants’ level of management in the organization. This framework is clear and simple: organizations train managers and managers train employees, all in the desired competencies of the organization. In this model, managers are viewed as individuals who are willing and able to learn the knowledge and skills that align with organizational goals and values. Training managers to accomplish predetermined outcomes via individualized skill training does not always prepare leaders for VUCA situations when they arise, unlike a program that focuses on tools and nuanced skills to address the unpredictable. Managers need both: the skills to manage employee performance and the tools to relate to their teams and respond when unpredictable situations arise.
Although there are stark differences between leadership development and management development, combining frameworks focusing on individualism (i.e., training for skills, knowledge, and competencies) and the collective (i.e., leadership as relational, process-oriented, and series of interactions between individuals) has been shown to address manager needs in a leadership development framework (i.e., individualized trainings that also incorporated the relational aspect of being a manager to a team; McCauley & Palus, 2021). For example, McGurk (2010) emphasized a combined framework for manager leadership development (MLD), saying:

MLD is seen as an approach to learning, the outcomes of which will be emergent, partly shaped and defined by the process of learning itself . . . is viewed here as a collective process, resulting from interaction with other learners and stakeholders. (p. 458)

In this model, McGurk redefined learning outcomes as a process instead of a set of specific outcomes. In this way, learning outcomes were emergent and participants were in control of their own growth and development. Similarly, Day (2001) outlined the distinction between management development and leader development, where management development follows learning outcomes determined by the organization, and leadership development involves more collective learning activities.

By merging methods for both management development and LDPs, organizations could deploy a more tailored approach for LDPs, addressing both the needs of individuals and their organizations. Moving forward, radical or creative interventions that address shifts in mindsets can prepare leaders for the unpredictable nature of leadership today.
However, it is first important to identify what types of LDP interventions exist today and how organizations use them to develop their future leaders.

**Interventions: How to Develop Effective Future Leaders**

Many leadership models providing the framework for LDPs were developed in an era characterized by more stable and predictable environments (Collins, 2001), not today’s VUCA world. Leadership has undergone a change from a model that was transactional to one that minimized the distinction between leaders and followers, placing a greater emphasis on teamwork and collaboration (McCauley et al., 1998). Collins (2001) predicted this shift to a more collective approach to leadership, saying, “The idea of leadership will no longer be thought of as something initiated by the leader, or by followers, but understood to begin with the reciprocal connections of people working together” (p. 52). With emergent leadership theories that highlight the importance of collective, relational, authentic, and shared experiences, the new models of leadership reflect those leadership characteristics. These collective mindsets and authentic leadership practices provide leaders space to engage in self-reflection to understand why, or the underlying mindset behind what they do. Although most companies recognize this means adjusting their own underlying mindsets, too often organizations are reluctant to address the root causes of why leaders act the way they do. Doing so can be uncomfortable for LDP participants, program trainers, mentors, and leaders, but if there is not a significant degree of discomfort, chances are behavior will not change.

Discomfort is often a catalyst for change and a vehicle for personal growth, neither of which can occur if leaders are stuck in their own comfort zone. The importance for LDPs, then, is to foster an environment where participants feel safe to be
uncomfortable. It is critical for LDPs to encourage leaders in these programs to lean into and engage with the deeper thoughts, feelings, and assumptions that inform their leadership practice to achieve personal and organizational change. For leaders to engage in this important work as a collective, it is first critical they understand who they are as individuals.

Although a standardized list of principles that should be included in a LDP does not exist, there are several best practices repeatedly included in the LDP literature. Specifically, Haskins and Shaffer (2009) identified 12 best practices of a good LDP, including: winning CEO support; conducting a needs analysis; having a clearly defined target audience; and ensuring thorough postintervention review and analysis, to name a few.

Leadership development in contemporary organizations varies greatly because “methodology can be mixed for a richer and perhaps more challenging or holistic leadership experience” (Davis, 2014, p. 108), but not all organizations take the time to experiment with innovative LDP methodologies. As examples of variation in LDPs, Queensland Health in Australia used short or long workshops, self-paced online learning, 360 degree feedback, coaching, and web-based support to develop their leaders (Crethar et al., 2011), and Philips had an LDP that used classrooms, experiential learning through collaborative project work, and coaching and action learning activities (Korde et al., 2011). Davis (2014) compiled what has consistently appeared in leadership development literature in terms of LDP inclusionary principles, identifying the following: assessing learner and organizational needs, delivering the program, measuring return, reviewing outcomes, qualifying personnel, involving senior leaders, aligning and integrating
leadership development activities, facilitating flexibility, partnering with external providers, testing programs prelaunch, ensuring open communications, implementing new learning, reflecting global trends and issues, rewarding desirable behaviors and attitudes, using technology, and financing programs adequately. The actual format and delivery of LDPs have been categorized as formal/informal, planned/unplanned, classroom/experiential, and face-to-face/distance (Carmichael et al., 2011).

In this new age of in-person, hybrid, or remote employees, organizations should consider the delivery method, content, and interventions used in their LDPs. Holtzhausen and Botha (2021) and McNamara et al. (2014) reviewed current LDP interventions and suggested interventions should be combined to create the most effective program, including but not limited to: self-reflection that engages continuous consideration of one’s knowledge or beliefs, along with analysis of one’s past or current experiences, and self-development that encourages asking questions and confronting oneself and others to proactively take responsibility for participant development (Brewer & Devnew, 2022; Holmberg et al., 2016; Mirvis, 2008). Additionally, Mirvis et al. (2010) suggested interventions should provide leaders with opportunities to be comfortable with ambiguity, colearn with peers, and use technology.

Along with technological advancements, one of the most recent publications by Day et al. (2021) reviewed 21st-century leadership development, including: theoretical foundations, practices and methods of development, estimating return on investment, the role of time, and remedying biases. Building on theoretical frameworks in leadership development, the article identified four domains in leadership development techniques that remain under-researched: “1) what exactly are we developing, 2) who are we
developing, 3) *how* does leadership develop individually and collectively, and 4) *why* the
digitalization of development programming may potentially introduce a transformational
change in the field” (p. 4). Specifically, there was leadership development through
structural or formal training and informal training or experiences. Formal training
constituted formal education, coaching, assessment, and action learning projects. In terms
of formal or structured training, research suggested “formal leadership training can
improve a variety of outcomes . . . however, formal programming appears to have limited
success as justified by organizational leaders themselves” (Day et al., 2021, p. 4).
Informal training or experiential learning included embedding ongoing developmental
practices in the culture of an organization. For experiential learning, there remained
several questions pertaining to its impact on leadership development. Learning from
experience could be more difficult for individuals to identify and implement, as the
learning outcomes are derived from the individual themself and not the facilitator, like in
structured programming. One issue was that although “they may learn . . . their insights
may not turn into actions, or feedback may come too late thus impeding the learning from
figuring out condition-action links” (Shanteau, 1992, p. 4). Despite significant advances
made on leadership development in the 21st century, Shanteau (1992) concluded research
is still needed to better understand the what, who, how, and why of leadership
development interventions.

LDPs have been shown to cultivate leaders who are emotionally and culturally
intelligent, resilient, and willing to push beyond and across boundaries in unfamiliar
environments through a combination of different interventions and processes (Collins,
2015). Leadership development interventions can and should assist organizations the
ways they can best develop leadership. Combining leadership interventions was an effective method for leadership development (Holtzhausen & Botha, 2021; McNamara et al., 2014), but the research on combined programs did not specify the types of interventions that should be used for leaders in LDPs, specifically LDPs in the biotechnology sector.

**Leadership in the Biotechnology Sector**

Because this case study was conducted at a biotechnology organization, it was imperative to understand the context of leadership in biotech as an industry. Although leadership is a long-studied phenomena, biotechnology is a rapidly growing field. The fast-paced nature of biotech companies, who closely resemble the volatile and high-risk qualifiers of startups, has not offered a variety of scholarship surrounding leadership. This section covers the many challenges that biotech startups may face and the extant literature regarding leadership in biotech organizations.

**Challenges for Biotech Startups**

Many biotech companies begin as startups. There is not a singular definition of a biotech startup, but they have been described as “small, relatively new companies that develop technology and solutions for biology-related issues. Biotechnology startup companies mainly deal with researching, developing, and producing technology for drug treatments and the treatments of disease” (Cabucana, 2022, para. 3). Startups have been categorized based on many factors, such as location, number of employees, and the type of product. Haggarty-Weir (2017) defined startups by three stages: early-stage, mid-stage, and late-stage (see Table 1).
**Table 1**

*Stages of Biotech Startups*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational factor</th>
<th>Early-stage</th>
<th>Mid-stage</th>
<th>Late-stage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Product</strong></td>
<td>Here the preproduct could be a well-studied and understood biomacromolecule of clinical relevance and the intellectual property (IP) can include (but is not limited to) industrial secrets, patents, and expertise of key team members.</td>
<td>This is the growth phase of the company, where a well-defined market(s) has been identified and the company has moved past an initial prototype for the product.</td>
<td>The product should now achieve a level of market penetration and may see end user sales occurring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employees</strong></td>
<td>No customers, employees, or actual product is needed; however, there must be legitimate ideas for a tangible product or products based on a well-defined “preproduct” and its associated IP.</td>
<td>This is the stage where there will be employees (often on short-term contracts based on what you can afford), but not necessarily end-user customers (i.e., a patient).</td>
<td>This is the stage where company growth can accelerate to keep up with production demands, often marked by considerable increase in hiring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Funding</strong></td>
<td>Some may also call this the “seed” stage, which occurs before the early stage technically, and I would put the demarcation at whether you have significant funding yet or not. It is quite normal for this stage to be cash-flow negative.</td>
<td>Funding at this point will usually be from angel investors, venture capitalists (with the funds here increasing into the millions of dollars), and sometimes industry funding. The cash flow at this point would</td>
<td>A level of viability can be attributed to the company, and cash flows should be positive (though there can be rare exceptions to this). This is the stage of a startup where consideration of IPOs and other investment instruments are imperative.</td>
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<td>Organizational factor</td>
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<td>ideally be positive or neutral, though it may still be negative depending on the additional R&amp;D expenditures required or investment in materials, etc.</td>
<td>Funding here may come from the sales of the product in addition to venture capital funding or leverage of IP (i.e., licensing contracts).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Customers</td>
<td>Importantly, one must be able to bridge (at least theoretically) the preproduct with a product and its associated market.</td>
<td>Here the customer focus is on larger, more well-established companies you would be looking to either partner with, sell your IP to, or license your product to.</td>
<td>The product should now achieve a level of market penetration and may see end user sales occurring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational factor</td>
<td>Early-stage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age of startup</td>
<td>An early stage startup is likely to have been in some form of existence for ~3 years and has developed from a combination of government grants, funds from winning competitions (e.g., pitching comps), crowdfunding, potentially angel investors, and possibly small venture capital funding (if very lucky; this is quite rare and the investment is usually going to be around $500,000).</td>
<td>This is the point of a company where equity will be given serious consideration.</td>
<td>To increase liquidity (for investor attractiveness), a company may stay at this stage for some time to strengthen their position (i.e., pay down certain debts, or expand a product range or the level of market penetration of the original product).</td>
</tr>
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Note. Adapted from *What is a biotech start-up?* by C. Haggarty-Weir, 2017 (https://mostlyscience.com/2017/09/what-is-a-biotech-start-up/).

Haggarty-Weir (2017) noted these stages for biotech startups could vary depending on the product type and IP, where “there will be a lot of grey overlapping areas between each stage;” however, this “reflects the exciting, dynamic, and highly risking (but highly rewarding . . . potentially) field that is biotechnology” (para. 6). Although the definition of startups could vary, the success of biotech startups requires leadership that can lead through constant change and risk in highly volatile markets.

Because of the fast-pace and risk associated with startups, a leader’s ability to lead through dynamic and constant change in high pressure environments is critical. Boni (2022) identified several entrepreneurial mistakes that could cause startups to fail, such as
founder and CEO experience, premature launching, overconfidence of success, speed traps, rapid scaling, and overestimating product value. Two of these pitfalls often pertained to biotech startups: speed traps and rapid scaling. Speed traps often led companies to move faster than they were able to push production, quickly get to market, or source funding. The pressure to grow often led startups to skip over important internal processes or policies that could ultimately set them up for sustainable success. Rapidly scaling startups were often playing catch up when they moved too quickly before having the proper personnel or talents in place to manage this fast change. It is important for organizations to have the right talent in the right places, which can mean slowing down to recruit and train top talent. Startups are already associated with high risk, but it is important for these organizations to mitigate risk by ensuring they avoid pitfalls, starting with their leadership.

Prommer et al. (2020) noted, “There is a special need for startup leadership development (SLD) as new ventures often have difficulties in recruiting new employees . . . and often employ young, rather inexperienced staff” (p. 1). Additionally, Prommer et al. argued the high failure rate of startups (Carroll & Hannan, 2000; Singh et al., 1986; Stinchcombe, 2000) could potentially be reduced by SLD measures. However, SLD was “under-developed in practice and research is scarce” (Prommer et al., 2020, p. 1).

From a leadership development perspective, organizations must choose what programs benefit their specific needs and resources (Collins & Holton, 2004). For startups, Prommer et al. (2020) highlighted financial resources (Davila et al., 2003; Ensley et al., 2002; Garavan et al., 2016; Hill & Stewart, 2000; Smith et al., 1999; Stinchcombe, 2000) and time constraints (Bryan, 2006) limited SLD options for
Moving forward, it is important for biotech organizations to invest in leadership development in an intentional and less reactive way.

**Leadership Development in Biotechnology Corporations**

Because biotech organizations are often categorized as startup businesses, leadership is crucial for their success. However, as startups grow rapidly, and the field of biotechnology is relatively new, little research has been conducted on leadership development in the biotech sector. Biotech companies often operate under high financial costs and rapid scaling, which one could argue makes it difficult to focus on or invest in leadership development. This leads organizations to hire external vendors who can quickly customize leadership development programs, and who are not always aware of the culture, tensions, or mindsets in the organization. With most of the financial capital from biotech organizations spent on R&D, few resources may be allocated for leadership development programs, activities, or meaningful team building. Leadership development then becomes an afterthought, which can be detrimental to the organization’s success. This also contributes to the scarcity of research on leadership development in biotechnology.

Finegold and Frenkel (2006) addressed the human resource (HR) needs for a biotech organization. Where success often depended on innovation, biotech organizations had to focus on attracting and retaining top talent. For this reason, HR in biotech needed to satisfy “these needs for effective selection, motivation and development [that] requires a specialist set of skills that has been developed by HR professionals” (Boxall & Purcell, 2003, p. 3). Learning and development professionals were often working in HR at an organization, as HR managers were often expected to build individual and organizational
capabilities for the company to function and effectively manage challenges (Greiner, 1998). HR’s primary challenge was building organizational capabilities while fostering a culture of creativity and organization (Clarke, 2002). When thinking about leadership development needs in biotech:

Achieving the business objectives may require softer skill areas such as managing teams, leadership and effective communication that are often not as developed or valued in professional scientific communities as technical skills. The value scientists place on learning means that employee development and career planning are important considerations not only for meeting business objectives but also for motivating and retaining talent [which means that] these firms have several compelling reasons to adopt a strategic approach to HR and to employ experts with specialized knowledge of people management to guide these activities. (Finegold & Frenkel, 2006, p. 5)

Finegold and Frenkel (2006) highlighted the importance of HR, specifically HR employees with expertise in managerial development, as having a critical role in the success of a biotech organization. As biotech companies consisted of employees from all fields (e.g., R&D, finance, human resources, production) it was crucial to tailor leadership development to the needs of the organization by developing people management skills.

Additionally, Johnson Langer (2009) wrote one of the most comprehensive literature reviews pertaining specifically to biotechnology leadership development. This review provided a number of reasons leadership development in the biotechnology sector remained scarce: “Leadership practices have not, as yet, been explored in-depth in
biotechnology companies. Because most biotechnology companies are founded by scientists, the research should specifically look at those companies with a scientist/founder/leader” (Johnson Langer, 2009, p. 71). Johnson Langer suggested multiple case studies involving interviews and archival data would provide important knowledge for the industry. Allen (1984) stated when doing research on research scientists, one must note that “each piece of work is unique” (p. 12). According to Allen (1984), because there could be no exact replication in the research, it “makes performance more difficult to measure because there is no common denominator among projects to provide a basis for comparison” (p. 12). Allen pointed out this lack of comparability makes the case study method a good choice for future research.

Scholarship has clearly defined important strategies that leaders should use to support a successful organization, such as: “guiding vision, creating a learning organization, excellent communication, active listening, a sense of urgency, embodying the story, viewing the organization as an entire system, and creating an atmosphere or culture that is a holding environment for employees” (Johnson Langer, 2009, p. 71). One of the primary strategies needed for leadership in biotech is the ability for the organization to become a learning organization able to adapt to new problems and challenges (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001; Kellerman, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Langer, 2008; Miller, 2001; Pascale & Sternin, 2005; Priestland & Hanig, 2005; Ruvolo & Bullis, 2003). However, Johnson Langer (2009) explained:

This ability to continuously learn and adapt may be the single most important requirement to lead biotechnology companies to success. Without such a perspective, the leader and the organization will likely fail. To continuously learn,
however, leaders must often suppress their own egos and relinquish control. (p. 71)

Because of the VUCA nature of biotech organizations, the ability to continuously learn and adapt is critical to their sustained success.

Furthermore, Johnson Langer’s (2009) literature review identified a number of important attributes for establishing a learning organization with a leader who was a visionary manager who could articulate their vision, a flexible and adaptable strategic decision-maker, an effective communicator at all levels at the organization, recognized clear cultural differences of existing groups, and empowered their employees at all levels. Another important strategy for leaders in this sector includes the ability to embody their own story, meaning the leader can view the organization as an entire system and recognize the potential impact one area had on others (Bennis & Nanus, 1997; Gardner, 1995; Senge, 1990). This includes emphasizing the importance of culture, where the leader is “sensitive to the needs of members within the organization and creates a holding environment for employees” (Johnson Langer, 2009, p. 56).

In summary, to be successful and lead through change biotechnology leaders must foster learning cultures in the organization. Learning environments allow organizational leaders to adapt to VUCA markets. The challenge, then, becomes how LDPs can operationalize participants embodying their own stories to foster self-awareness, change, and personal growth.

An Identity-Centered Approach to LDPs

Day and Harrison (2007) claimed leadership was best understood in terms of identity. Identity has been defined as a reflexive process of the self and constructed self in
which self-reflection and identity formation are based on an individual’s own perception of who they were through their ability to practice self-awareness (Ibarra, 1999). Thus, if identity is a process of self-reflection and leadership is best understood in terms of identity, then, axiomatically, leadership is a process of self-reflection to best understand who one is and how one leads.

When considering identity in the context of leadership, leader identity can be best defined by their followers (i.e., their relationships with others), so heavy importance should be placed on who leaders are as they directly impact their followers. Leaders can then understand their own identities in the context of how they lead among others. Kohonen (2005) asserted that leadership is “a way of being rather than a set of skills or competencies” in which leaders could understand their “self” as a process and “way of being” instead of their ability to produce organizational outcomes (p. 27). If leader identity is best understood in relation to others, then this process of understanding the self must be done in a collective context. One way that LDPs can foster meaning-making is through storytelling, the process of understanding one’s own story or experiences in relation to the stories of others.

**The Individual: Self-Reflection and Self-Awareness**

In the context of LDPs, as individuals make self-discoveries they marry their personal life and professional practice to unify personal and professional beliefs and values. This marriage of values and beliefs creates a deeper investment in the organization and amplifies an individual’s sense of purpose at work. Self-development seeks to deepen an understanding of the self as part of a transformational journey (Walker & Reichard, 2020). Avolio et al. (2004) described leaders as those who are self-aware of
their own “values/moral perspective, knowledge, and strengths,” and who are “confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and high on moral character” (p. 4). To exhibit a strong understanding of one’s own morals and values requires an understanding of the underlying mindsets that inform those beliefs. Polizzi and Frick (2012) related self-awareness to transformative learning practices, as they “involve core reflection and dialogue (i.e., inquiry or rational discourse) enabling individuals to make self-discoveries within the context of their personal life and professional practice” (p. 25). However, self-transformation requires active engagement and responsibility on behalf of the sojourner. Mirvis (2008) emphasized the importance of participant agency in their own experience, saying, “the onus of transforming activities into mind-expanding, heart-rendering and soul-stirring encounters, are on the participants” (p. 74). It was not enough for LDP participants to go through the motions of self-actualizing practices; they also had to actively engage with the experience and take responsibility for their own development (Holmberg et al., 2016).

In fast-paced environments demanding efficiency, it can be difficult for organizations to provide the time and space for self-reflection. Because of the daily demands of their roles, leaders especially are not often given the opportunity to self-reflect on their own personal or professional experiences. LDPs, therefore, are a unique environment in which organizations can intentionally make space for regular self-reflection. For example, Eriksen (2009) used practical reflexivity so students could develop self-awareness. Although this process took place in the context of a graduate course, the practices outlined by Eriksen could be useful for leadership, as well. Eriksen (2009) wrote that practical reflexivity, as defined by Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith (2004),
is a form of existential questioning that allows participants “to understand ourselves, our ways of relating to others, and how to participate in our social world” (pp. 35–36). Practical reflexivity challenges participants to understand how their own beliefs and values inform their life and heighten their self-awareness as a precursor to self-authorship. Eriksen had students share their self-narratives with the class creating a community of learning to deepen their collective understanding. This allowed students to identify and articulate how their own values and beliefs created meaning in their lives and, in turn, forced them to consider how their experiences, values, and beliefs impacted their leadership principles. By sharing their own narratives, students became the authors of their own stories. Drawing from their own knowledge and experiences allowed students to understand who they were to inform who they would be.

This creation of knowledge from participants’ own experiences began with self-reflection (either individually or in pairs or in a group), and learning through self-reflection occurred when leaders leaned into discomfort or what was unfamiliar (Mirvis, 2008). It was in this unfamiliar space where the most growth happened, but it was only when the leader was responsible for their own development and willing and able to engage in the self-actualization, reflection, and practice that enabled them to become a more effective, authentic leader.

The ability for leaders to sit in critical self-reflection directly related to how they learned from their personal experiences and provided the foundation for individuals to reflect in a meaningful way to gain understanding (Boud et al., 1985). Densten and Gray (2001) investigated the relationship between leadership development and reflection, stating:
The main objective for integrating reflection in leadership development programs is to maximize individual potential by allowing students to evaluate the significance of their experiences from a leadership perspective. In leadership education, deep reflective learning requires students to consider the underlying dynamics of power and to question basic assumptions and practices. (p. 119)

In LDPs, the process of allowing leaders to share their own experiences in a group context allowed them to gain new perspectives from outsiders looking in. Engaging in critical self-reflection could also bring up unpleasant memories or situations, causing participants a level of discomfort (Brookfield, 1994; Dewey, 1933; Reynolds, 1999). It was important that LDP practitioners were equipped to support participants to lean into this discomfort to grow. Although some uncomfortable feelings arose in the process of critical self-reflection and new insights were gained on past experiences, there was still value to sitting in this discomfort. Densten and Gray (2001) noted the risk of not including reflection as an LDP intervention, saying, “Without reflection, leaders may be convinced by past successes of their invincibility and fail to consider other viewpoints, with possibly disastrous consequences” (p. 119). When working with other people, it was imperative that leaders were able to lead with empathy and understanding varying viewpoints. This encouraged open and honest communication among teams. However, not all leaders practiced reflection in a way that allowed them to be open to diverse perspectives that challenge their own personal mindsets. Densten and Gray (2001) noted:

- Often leaders are unaware of their perceptual sets and biases. Thus, an important function of leadership education is to provide opportunities for student reflection so that students gain understanding of how they perceive and interpret their
observations. Further, reflection is important for leadership development as it can provide leaders with a variety of insights into how to frame problems differently, to look at situations from multiple perspectives or to better understand followers. (p. 120)

When self-reflection is integrated into leadership programs, participants can learn more from their peers, engaging in diverse thought that challenges their own mindsets. To make meaning from critical self-reflection, LDPs can facilitate this process by creating an ecosystem of learning among leaders. This shift from deep critical individual reflection to storytelling can foster meaning-making for greater self-awareness, but the challenge facing LDPs is how to design a program that centers the human experience in a group setting.

The Collective: Storytelling as Meaning-Making

To deepen the process of critical self-reflection, meaning-making can also occur in a collective contexts, such as storytelling. Schedlitzki et al. (2015) emphasized the relationship between critical self-reflection and storytelling, saying, “Within a leadership development context, it is nevertheless advisable to build in time and space for critical reflection on the power of storytelling and the inherent subjectivity of a storyteller’s interpretation of a particular narrative” (p. 416). Storytelling, the narrative action of telling one’s own story, is referred to in this study as an intervention method for leaders to better understand their personal journeys and the experiences contributing to their own identity development to better understand themselves as leaders. Storytelling typically occurs with one individual sharing in the context of the collective, or group setting. Meaning-making then occurs when individuals of the collective (i.e., audience) make
sense of their own personal experiences in relation to the storyteller (i.e., speaker; Schedlitzki et al., 2015). Not to be confused with storytelling in leadership development that focuses on how to tell a “good story” (e.g., public speaking with a beginning, middle, and end), storytelling as a process focuses less on how to structure a good story and instead, allows the audience to sit in self-reflection in relation to the story of the storyteller.

Before discussing the role storytelling has in LDPs to encourage identity development, it is necessary to acknowledge the origins of storytelling as an Indigenous practice. Iseke (2013) described storytelling as “Indigenous peoples’ oral traditions, historical/ancestral knowledge, and cultural resources” (p. 559). Because storytelling in Indigenous traditions was considered sacred, the practice was deeply revered and respected (Iseke & Brennus, 2011). Iseke (2013) also described storytelling as a method of research, emphasizing the power of storytelling as both a pedagogical tool for learning life lessons and as witness and remembrance to preserve history. Iseke and Brennus (2011) noted:

Stories are a history of our people from many lifetimes and stories are real . . . we include a lot of things in storytelling that we leave for the other person to interpret themselves. It gets their mind going. It puts their experience together and validates them as a person who has the ability to be able to draw from that storytelling and relate it to their own lives. (p. 249)

Storytelling as an Indigenous practice allows one to share personal history, not only for one’s own meaning-making, but for others to draw upon as a meaning-making
experience. Those who witnessed and remembered the story being told were also considered agents in the knowledge cocreation process. Iseke (2013) wrote:

I allow my reading, viewing, or listening to be an event and this is allowing their witnessing to interrupt my own life. This pedagogical witnessing is a historical consciousness, and functions to link a series of acts in community where knowledge is shared through revisiting the past. (p. 568)

Storytelling as a practice can be used in manager development programs as a reciprocal process of knowledge creation among leaders. Although many LDPs have included communication interventions and the power of influential storytelling (e.g., how to be a good public speaker), storytelling referenced in this paper is recentered in the Indigenous context, where stories were used to pass knowledge among groups of people, to teach morals and values, and to relay culture. In this way, storytelling became a way to form a community as individuals become a part of the storytelling process. Storytelling requires listeners, who then become a part of the storytelling process as recipients of knowledge passed down from the storyteller.

Storytelling as an Indigenous way of knowing has many benefits in the context of leadership development: as an effective tool for influencing or inspiring followers (Denning, 2007), a means for advancing organizational change (Parkin, 2004), or as a tool to develop leadership skills (Auvinen et al., 2013). Auvinen et al. (2013) posited that leadership could be constructed through storytelling, arguing that “storytelling can be a valuable source of trust by creating a shared context and sense of meaning among leaders and their followers” (p. 497). Although Auvinen et al.’s argument, which focused on the act of storytelling as a practice of leadership, was not the focus of this review, the
relationship they drew between leadership and storytelling was paramount. Storytelling could also be powerful, specifically for leaders who “are often noted for providing a compelling vision that inspires followers to act to fulfill the vision, often by telling stories” (Parry & Hansen, 2007, p. 281). There is influence and power that storytelling holds because of its ability for sense-making, building trust, and fostering community that is not exclusive to followers, but can occur as a shared experience among leaders. Auvinen et al. (2013) wrote, “Managers who use storytelling techniques may be aware of the power of their stories; these managers already have a kind of narrative identity that provides a context of trust for their use of stories” (p. 500). Additionally, Cunliffe (2002) suggested self-reflection had a place in management training, saying:

> If we are to have an impact on management practice, we need to recognize the embodied nature of the learning process and focus on helping managers develop a critical practice from within experience. This may be achieved by helping managers develop self-reflexivity, an ability to question their own ways of making sense of the world. One way of doing this may be by reframing critical management suppositions within the context of everyday, lived experience and sense making. (p. 41)

Cunliffe suggested that “learning as embodied” allows for self-development that highlights the nuances of leadership by focusing on an individual’s lived experience, where many skill-based training programs fell short. In the context of leadership development in LDPs, storytelling could also be used as a vehicle for self-awareness, reflection, and identity coherence for the participants. There was also a sense of
community-building and meaning-making as individuals shared their personal stories in the context of their professional life.

For practitioners seeking to use the art of storytelling as an intervention in LDPs, it is important to note potential barriers participants may face related to storytelling. Some reasons participants in an LDP have been reluctant to share their stories have included: fear that they did not have stories to share, discomfort with sharing personal information, feelings of risk associated with vulnerability, and perceived reduction in credibility (Cleverly-Thompson, 2018). Schedlitzki et al. (2015) pointed out the potential barriers that prevented participants from sharing vulnerable stories in their own practice, stating:

Such reflective space has in the past led to incredibly deep but also unsettling insights for participants . . . . The ensuing group discussion brought to life the complex reality of stories, rumours and gossip and their subjective, travelling, socially constructed nature. In doing so, it also highlights that storytelling requires interaction with an audience and that this audience engages cognitively and emotionally with the story, recreating meaning for themselves through this lived experience. (p. 416)

Despite the discomfort participants felt from “deep but also unsettling insights” (p. 416), they still engaged with the story. Through the discomfort, growth and deeper meaning occurred. The challenge, then, is that practitioners must be intentional in removing potential barriers in the community they create in an LDP for leaders to feel safe enough to share. Mirvis (2019) identified additional barriers to storytelling, such as the difficulty in lowering one’s guard in a competitive environment. However, one participant in a
manager development program stated, although difficult, “once you sense the value of truly connecting, building on it seemed relatively easy” (Mirvis, 2019, p. 5). Another participant added, “One has to be open with oneself, understand one’s own basic core values, and accept other people’s differences ‘as is.’ This acceptance needs to be sincere and from the heart; without any prejudice, judgments and expectations” (Mirvis, 2019, p. 5). As a result of openness and self-awareness one participant “got to know a great number of enlightened souls but also discovered myself” (Mirvis, 2019, p. 5). These conversations were critical to not only creating more empathetic leaders, but also to fostering authenticity and vulnerability. Participants considered the question, “Who am I?” and used the power of storytelling to unpack the many experiences of their lives to answer this question. A community engaging in storytelling questions about personal identity, values, beliefs, and priorities, along with the feelings that accompany them, may open “doors into deeper realms of self-consciousness” (Mirvis, 2019, p. 5) and self-awareness. Self-reflection then shifted from the past and present to future, as leaders considered who they wanted to become (Mirvis, 2019). If barriers to storytelling were removed and leaders were able to reflect on their own life experiences and identify the moments that shaped who they were, there was an opportunity for them to increase their abilities to communicate more authentically and be more effective leaders for ascendant generations in an organization (Auvinen et al., 2013).

Sharing stories and hearing the stories of others helped develop a community in the classroom that fostered inquiry into leadership (Eriksen, 2009). Storytelling allowed participants to empathetically enter another’s life and to become a part of a living conversation (Witherell et al., 1995). A small community formed during this exchange, a
means of inclusion that invited “the reader, listener, writer, or teller as a companion along another’s journey. In the process we may find ourselves wiser, more receptive, more understanding” (Witherell et al., 1995, pp. 40–41). Shamir and Eilam (2005) highlighted this approach where leaders’ self-stories contributed to their leadership development.

According to Bruner’s (1986), “narrative mode of knowing,” participants could answer the question, “Who am I?” in the form of life-stories. Sherwood and Makar (2022) studied the role of life-stories and sense-making for college students studying statistics. They found the students’ abilities to tell their stories in their own language resulted in more robust learning. For LDPs, storytelling offers several levels to the depth of learning and making-meaning of participants’ own experiences in four distinct ways, as outlined by Sherwood and Makar (2022):

First, stories are known to act at a “deeply human level,” capturing imagination in ways that help humanize the abstract (Clark & Rossiter, 2008, p. 65). Second, stories allow us to communicate with others about what we learn throughout our lives (Avraamidou & Osborne, 2009). Third, stories can help us learn by building bridges between concepts, thereby creating a sense of connectedness, relevancy, and coherency (Avraamidou & Osborne, 2009; Noll et al., 2018; Norris et al., 2005). And fourth, through reshaping and reimagining story elements in order for them to fit together and make sense, learners build a holistic perspective of what they are learning (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). (p. 2)

Storytelling centers the participant’s experience in their own learning. Instead of participants acting as passive agents in the classroom, they become the teacher by telling their own stories and viewing those stories as knowledge (i.e., what they know). This
knowledge then becomes exchanged in the classroom setting, not only for their own meaning-making, but also for the learning of others in the room. By recalling and sharing their own lived experiences, participants can draw new meaning to past experiences (Clark & Rossiter, 2008; Collins, 1999; Dewey, 1933; Lemieux, 2018; Milne, 1998; Phillips, 2013). Stories also humanized the learning experience where sensemaking occurs through storytelling (Weick, 1995).

In essence, stories provide a personalized approach to learning that centers the human experience and views that experience as knowledge to assist in the meaning-making process. Storytelling can then act as an intervention for enhanced learning and meaning-making in the context of LDPs by allowing individuals to make sense not only of their own personal stories, but of their journey into leadership, as well.

**Leadership Development as a Process: Individual and Collective Sensemaking**

Although leadership has been a well-studied field, little has been known about the process of leadership development (Day & O’Connor, 2003). Because leadership is critical to the state of society and in organizations, it is important that a greater emphasis is placed on understanding the process of leadership development. To recenter the process of leadership development in leadership conversations, sense-making and meaning-making can offer a pathway toward understanding this process. Weick (1993) defined sensemaking in terms of leadership, saying, “Sensemaking is about contextual rationality. It is built out of vague questions, muddy answers, and negotiated agreements that attempt to reduce confusion” (p. 636). Storytelling as a process of sensemaking could assist leaders and practitioners to better understand leadership. It is this process of meaning-making, making sense of one’s own lived experiences in the context of hearing
about the experiences of others, that deepens critical self-reflection required for leadership development.

Sensemaking became popularized by Weick (1995) to explain how individuals made sense of their environments and was expanded into the context of organizations. He described the phenomena of sensemaking and organizations as interrelated (Weick, 1995). In organizations, Weick highlighted the importance of organizational events as catalysts for sensemaking and the structure of making sense of those events (Weick, 1990, 1993, 1995). Weick suggested sensemaking, as a social psychological process, could contribute to organizational outcomes, instead of focusing on the outcomes themselves. In two separate publications, Weick (1990, 1993) also identified how several small failures could contribute to a larger disaster due to individuals defaulting to patterned behavior in familiar situations. Sensemaking assisted individuals with reflection to change their behaviors, instead of defaulting to what was familiar and comfortable. In essence, sensemaking was about understanding how one could draw multiple meanings from the same event. Weick explained sensemaking as never ending, where sensemaking events could trigger uncertainty or ambiguity, further opening possibilities to find new meaning and the need to constantly making sense of the environment.

Because sensemaking occurs as an individual draws meaning from their environment, it can be said that sensemaking and identity are closely intertwined. Helms Mills et al. (2010) operationalized Weick’s seven sensemaking properties: grounded in identity construction, retrospective, focused on and extracted by cues, driven by plausibility rather than accuracy, enactive of the environment, social, and ongoing. Because six of the properties were built on the foundation of identity construction, it is
essential to note the importance of identity in Weick’s properties of sensemaking. Helms Mills et al. (2010) described sensemaking and identity construction, saying:

According to this property, who we are and what factors have shaped our lives influence how we see the world. Our identity is continually being redefined as a result of experiences and contact with others, for example, parents, friends, religion, where we went to school, where we work and what type of job we do all affect how we view certain situations. . . . Thus, identity construction is about making sense of the sensemaker. (p. 184)

Like sensemaking where meaning is consistently being drawn from one’s environment, identity is also constructed in one’s context (Berry, 1990; Graves, 1967). This consistency can also be described as fluidity, where sensemaking and identity construction are both dynamic. Additionally, sensemaking is both social and relational. Helms Mills et al. (2010) acknowledged the importance of the social property in sensemaking, stating:

This property acknowledges that the sensemaking process is contingent on our interactions with others, whether physically present or not. As well, an organization’s rules, routines, symbols, and language will all have an impact on an individual’s sensemaking activities and provide routines or scripts for appropriate conduct. But when routines or scripts do not exist, the individual is left to fall back on his or her own ways of making sense. (p. 185)

In organizations, leadership is embedded in one’s relationship with others. However, in organizations that experience constant change or VUCA environments, it is critical that leaders make sense of those experiences. In this context, LDPs could be both the
interrupter (i.e., disrupting the routine of daily work) and the holding environment (i.e., space for critical deep reflection) for sensemaking (Winnicott, 1953). To draw meaning from current events, sensemaking becomes a comparative process where meaning is given to the present based on similar or past experiences. In summary, identity construction is an important foundation for one’s sensemaking of the present, where meaning occurs in comparison to one’s past experiences.

In the context of LDPs, storytelling can act as a vehicle for sensemaking for participants to better understand their own individual identity and their identity as a leader in the context of the organization. Leadership as a process of storytelling can act as a critical intervention in LDPs. One way that practitioners can foster storytelling is through other mediums besides oral stories. Colville et al. (1999) related sensemaking to the way individuals can use a map to stay on track and avoid getting lost. In an organizational context, this map metaphor can prove useful for practitioners to assist leaders with visual representations of individual experiences that hold meaning in a broader context of their own identity construction. Helms Mills et al. (2010) wrote:

By focusing on key elements of a strategic plan, for example, organizations may ignore other cues from the environment in order to stay on track. The sensemaking process may allow individuals to interpret cues, or features of a map, in ways that support their beliefs. Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy means that we do not rely on the accuracy of our perceptions when we make sense of an event. Instead, we look for cues that make our sensemaking seem plausible. In doing so, we may distort or eliminate what is accurate and
potentially rely on faulty decision making in determining what is right or wrong.

(p. 185)

Helms Mills et al. (2010) pointed out the pitfalls that individuals who attempt to make sense of their experiences alone can fall into, emphasizing the importance of making sense of one’s experiences in the context of the collective like an LDP. Collective sensemaking also allows the individual to hear other perspectives on the same event, facilitating a new process of meaning-making and potentially a change in mindset. This collective sensemaking can occur in organizational LDPs. Specifically, Salicru (2018) identified storytelling and sensemaking as leadership practices in organizations.

Sensemaking can be most useful to ground individuals in contexts where the environment is rapidly changing, such as biotech organizations. Organizations and leaders could then maintain their sensemaking ability to better analyze, interpret, and communicate in a complex environment (Neill et al., 2007). This adaptive sensemaking can assist leaders in the ability to frame, understand, and respond to evolving changes in an organization (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014). As Salicru (2018) described, “The genesis of sensemaking, then, is chaos and confusion, as people attempt to answer the question ‘what’s the story?’ by mapping the context and the ongoing unpredictable experiences thrown at them” (p. 132). Storytelling can serve as a map that grounds leaders in the process of sensemaking, where meaning can still be made from unpredictable experiences to drive organizations forward. Weick et al. (2005) also compared sensemaking to cartography as a metaphor for how individuals can draw meaning from their own maps. In this way, maps can serve as a means of visual storytelling to assist leaders with sensemaking of multiple individual experiences in the context of their own lives.
Fostering an identity-centered approach to leadership development requires a focus on the individual (i.e., deep critical self-reflection), the collective (i.e., understanding oneself in relation to the stories of others), and sensemaking (i.e., drawing meaning from individual and collective reflections through storytelling). In LDPs, leadership can be best understood in terms of a process of understanding oneself through storytelling (both individual and collective). When organizations dedicate leadership programming to identity construction, reflection, and sensemaking, participants can assist one another in better understanding themselves as individuals to better understand themselves as leaders.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

I conducted this narrative inquiry case study at a publicly traded biotechnology organization. For this study, I refer to the organization as BioTechOrg (BTO). I use this pseudonym to protect the confidentiality of the organization and place more focus on the storytelling of the participants, rather than the organization itself.

The limited scholarship that exists surrounding innovative leadership development program (LDP) interventions was the primary catalyst for this research. Measurements of an LDP are often outcome-based, but research that highlights the learner’s experience is a growing need. Companies have invested millions of dollars into leadership development with little time spent determining whether such interventions were effective (Sogunro, 1997). Although it is understood that leadership development in an organization is paramount, few organizations center the human experience of their employees. Organizations are made up of people, yet little emphasis is placed on the development of the individual.

As a result, I developed this study to investigate the phenomenon of storytelling for sensemaking as a radical intervention in an LDP, specifically a manager development program (MDP). This study relied on a qualitative approach to measure how storytelling can foster sensemaking using semistructured interviews and focus groups (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, I examined leadership identity reflection during an MDP experience and perceptions of leadership identity sensemaking by program participants. The purpose of this study was to examine participant experiences that contributed to leadership identity sensemaking during and after an LDP.
This chapter provides an overview of the research methods I used to conduct this study and collect data to address the study’s research questions. The chapter begins with an overview of the research design and the background of the study. Discussions of the research ethics, participant recruitment, and the data collection process follow. I conclude with ethical standards used to preserve the integrity of the study. I used the following research questions to guide this study:

1. How does storytelling foster individual self development?
2. How does storytelling create collective meaning-making in a group setting?
3. How can storytelling support leadership development in an organization?

**Research Design**

For this study, I used qualitative inquiry methods to humanize the experience of the people leaders in the organization. Because the goal of this research was to gain a better understanding of the research questions in both breadth and depth, qualitative methods were most appropriate, as I, as the researcher, was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tidsell, 2016).

Because the focus of this research was storytelling as a vehicle for meaning-making, I used narrative inquiry to capture the lived experiences of the participants throughout the program (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kim, 2016). This approach allowed participants to draw from their own experiences to create meaning and apply concepts from the program. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) wrote that narrative inquiry was paramount in capturing the human experience because “humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2). Additionally,
Fontana and Frey (2008) highlighted how narratives could breathe life into the stories of participants. As an Indigenous practice, storytelling has historically been viewed as knowledge itself and was how groups of people preserved their history, culture, and language. Today, narrative inquiry is used as a research method to critically explore the in-depth experiences of humans in ways unlike any other data collection method (Chase, 2007).

Because of the nature of qualitative research, a standard format for reporting qualitative research does not exist. However, it is important to consider the research audience (Merriam, 2009). Narrative inquiry also offers a rich descriptive data set that is easily digestible for the reader. Additionally, a narrative inquiry approach highlights the personal lived experiences of the participants interviewed; for this reason, Chapter 4 begins with the findings outlined in a storied way for ease of reading and to emphasize the individual responses, or story, of each participant.

Presenting the lived experiences of the participants through storytelling centers their human experiences and how they make sense of them in the context of leadership and the organization (Chase, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). Using narrative inquiry in this study followed the form and content for the research itself. Much like storytelling, narrative inquiry highlights the unique diversity of the human experience (Daiute, 2013). Using narrative inquiry allowed less experienced leaders to make meaning of their own stories without having direct managerial experience to draw from. This also allowed more experienced leaders to process and engage in deep reflection to look at their own experiences with new eyes.
Prior to individual interviews participants had begun drafting their leadership maps. Because participants had already engaged in deep individual reflection to create their maps, no preparation or interview script was provided to them prior to interviewing. For focus groups, the participants had already graduated from the MDP several months prior and had completed their final drafts of their leadership maps. For this reason, no preparation or interview script was provided prior to the focus group discussion. Through their own narratives, participants expressed the how or why of their lived experiences or provide more detail into those experiences and how they made sense of them.

For the purpose of this study, I used narrative inquiry to highlight the storytelling aspects of the program. I collected data using two methods to highlight the ways in which storytelling is used as an intervention: semistructured interviews and focus groups (see Table 2).

Table 2

Data Collection Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method description</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semistructured individual interviews with current</td>
<td>To measure how participant reflection of their leadership map</td>
<td>Current participants in the cohort being studied.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participants.</td>
<td>contributed, if at all, to their conception of their own leadership identity. The leadership map is also a practice of authenticity and vulnerability in its creation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semistructured focus groups with graduated participants.</td>
<td>To measure how graduated participants made meaning of their program experience by hearing the stories of their peers, if at all, and in what ways, if any,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Graduated participants who completed one of the pilot cohorts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method description</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Participants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Artifact analysis of leadership maps collected from participants as part of the MDP.</td>
<td>To measure how all participants used their reflections throughout the program to make meaning of their experiences. Their maps reflect their stories, and their lived experiences inform their leadership positionality.</td>
<td>Both current and graduated participants.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Preliminary Phase**

In the year prior to this dissertation study, I conducted preliminary research to assess the efficacy of an originally designed and facilitated leadership development program. The preliminary phase consisted of three pilot cohorts with 15–18 participants per cohort \((n = 50)\). Although I did not conduct formal interviews, I collected pre- and post-program surveys and individual module surveys from all participants. Surveys revealed that some of the more experimental aspects of the program that were not assessment-based, such as processing circles and exercises in vulnerability, allowed participants to reflect in ways they never had at work. Stories participants shared included coming out to their team and celebrating marriage to their partner, the loss and associated grief of losing family members, and understanding allyship as a privileged White male. In turn, participants perceived sharing their personal lived experiences with colleagues across the organization benefitted their development as leaders. The profound impact these deeply personal stories had on participants’ overall experiences, both individual and collective, offered a new framework for humanizing the leadership experience in the organization that had yet to be explored. These findings inspired this case study to
determine if meaning-making could occur in the process of knowledge cocreation and storytelling from lived experiences and could have a significant impact on leader development.

**Role of the Researcher**

As the primary researcher of the qualitative study, I was solely responsible for all aspects of the research design, participant selection, data collection, and analysis. Because the majority of the study relied on collecting data about the human experience, I functioned as the primary data collection instrument (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Research Site Selection**

This study took place in 2023 at BTO. Because I was the researcher of this study, was employed by BTO, and designed the MDP, I used convenience sampling for the research site and participant selection. This insider approach to the research site had both advantages and disadvantages. My employment at BTO eliminated potential obstacles in data collection processes and facilitated a greater sense of trust between the organization and researcher. My rapport with executive leaders in the organization also fostered a sense of credibility and trust that can often mitigate participant skepticism of researcher intentions during the research process. Because I designed the MDP, I benefitted from flexibility and autonomy during the research process. I designed and managed all MDP cohorts and was, thus, knowledgeable on all programmatic aspects. This provided both the advantages and challenges of being both an insider and member and an outsider and nonmember of the participant population (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

However, this insider approach can also have disadvantages, such as jeopardizing researcher employment if the results of the findings were unfavorable to BTO.
Additionally, the research occurred in 2023 after a series of company-wide layoffs across the field of biotechnology, potentially creating a volatile environment and lack of security for the research site and my position in the organization. Prior to any data collection, I obtained site and research permission from BTO and the institutional review board (IRB; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

**Background on BTO**

In 2020, BTO experienced rapid growth in the wake of the COVID-19 global pandemic. BTO grew from a startup of 70 employees to 1,700 employees in 2 years, leading to a hyper-growth of the organization and its teams and high promotion rates. However, rapid growth also presented challenges for the organization and its employees. Due to an increase in hiring, many non-manager employees, or individual contributors, were quickly promoted to leadership positions without formal management training. Additionally, employees worked under a variety of models: remote, hybrid, or on-site. The diverse ways in which work was conducted siloed collaboration and communication across departments and posed challenges for establishing a rich culture in the organization. Rapid growth also meant that policies and procedures for culture, employee development, and more were secondary to production. At the time of this study, there was no training available to new managers or leaders. This led to a dire need for training and development on an organizational level. BTO decided a leadership program that focused on the largest pool of leaders, the organization’s managers, was paramount.

As of the conclusion of this study, BTO consisted of over 1,200 employees on diverse teams: clinical laboratory; communications; environmental health and safety; finance; information, security, and technology; legal; marketing; operations; people and
culture; purchasing; and software engineering. It had over 100 patents in its portfolio, over five facilities, and was expanding internationally. In 2022, due to the urgent need for an LDP, the company created a position to hire an internal employee who would design the program to address the leadership needs of the organization.

**About MDP**

In 2022, three pilot cohorts for the first MDP graduated 50 supervisors, senior supervisors, managers, and senior managers. Despite the diversity of work models (i.e., remote, hybrid, and in-person), BTO prioritized the MDP as an in-person, cohort-based program. The pilot cohorts included only leaders in the production department because the in-person format fit the needs of leaders working in-person and on-site.

Each cohort met over an 8-week period, with one in-person session per week (all day). The company offered approximately three to four MDP cohorts each year. Each session day consisted of two modules (i.e., morning and afternoon) on a variety of topics: Gallup Clifton Strengths, authentic leadership, the multigenerational workplace, effective leadership, inclusive leadership, and more. The facilitator was the senior learning and development (L&D) specialist working internally in the organization, and cofacilitators helped support some of the modules based on their subject matter expertise. Primarily, the L&D specialist designed, managed, and handled all administrative needs regarding MDP (see Table 3).
Table 3

About the MDP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Summary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program description and purpose</td>
<td>The MDP is a unique professional development opportunity designed to help introduce, support, and enhance skills and knowledge of new to midlevel people managers at BTO. Curated internally, the program aims to expose and train participants using the various tools that make a great leader. Based on transformational leadership theory and practical skills, participants will lean into discomfort, be vulnerable, and challenge themselves to better understand who they are and how that informs their leadership style. This program is meant to be an introduction and stepping-stone for new leaders to gain confidence as they begin their journey in management and provide experienced managers an opportunity to sharpen their leadership skills and gain new insights. This is an opportunity for participants to experience a community of peer managers from across departments in an organizational setting while growing as leaders at BTO.</td>
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</table>

To get the most out of the program, participants are responsible for their own active participation, session attendance, completing the minimum required pre and post surveys, further learning recommendations, and other program-required materials.

Program structure | Cohort-based: Participants are selected as individuals to participate in the program as a group. Participants are selected through a nomination process by their direct manager. 8 weeks–16 modules: The program takes place over the course of 8 weeks, with morning and afternoon modules. Each module is approximately 3 hours and focuses on individual reflection, engaging activities, videos, and presentation. Program evaluation: Participants complete many surveys throughout the program to assess their understanding of the material, the program value, and program efficacy. Surveys are completed before and after the program and after every individual session. Graduation: At the end of the 8-week program participants present the final version of their leadership map at the program graduation. The graduation audience consists of the managers of each
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Eligibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>participant, other leaders</td>
<td>participant, other leaders in the organization, team members, and participants’ loved ones such as family members or spouses (optional).</td>
<td>Participants must:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership challenge</td>
<td>Leadership challenge sessions: Upon the program completion, participants are required to attend three virtual follow up sessions for the first 3 months after graduation. This allows the program facilitator to continue to hear progress and applications beyond the program learnings and allows participants the opportunity to workshop as a group any leadership challenges they are facing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sessions</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Be full-time supervisors, senior supervisors, managers, or senior managers at BTO for a minimum of 3 months in their role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Be nominated by their direct manager or human resource business partner, and nominees must be approved to participate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Manage a minimum of one direct report in Workday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Be in good standing with the company (i.e., no performance improvement plans, disciplinary actions, probations, or open investigations).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Be available to travel to in-person sessions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Positively contribute to the program and not hinder other participants’ active participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Actively attend and participate in all required sessions and complete all required homework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Have ongoing support from their manager and HRBPs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Be active employees (not actively on leave of absence or medical leave of absence).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Adhere to any COVID-19 testing requirements as stated by BTO or program facilitators for on- or off-site meetings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program</td>
<td>Participants who successfully complete the program will be able to:</td>
<td>Program objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>objectives</td>
<td>• Use their strengths to maximize talent and potential of themselves and their team.</td>
<td>• Use their strengths to maximize talent and potential of themselves and their team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Define leadership and the difference between successful versus effective leadership.</td>
<td>• Define leadership and the difference between successful versus effective leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Practice vulnerability and authenticity to build trust.</td>
<td>• Practice vulnerability and authenticity to build trust.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Assess emotional intelligence (EQ) and DiSC communication style perspectives.</td>
<td>• Assess emotional intelligence (EQ) and DiSC communication style perspectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Understand different strengths and challenges of leading a diverse multigenerational team.</td>
<td>• Understand different strengths and challenges of leading a diverse multigenerational team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Component</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Approach and address conflict by having</td>
<td>difficult conversations.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Gain a clear understanding of performance</td>
<td>management and role as a manager in the process.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learn how to develop employees and coach</td>
<td>them in their career journeys.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Define and understand the need for diversity,</td>
<td>equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) in the workplace and how to be an inclusive leader.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEIB in the workplace and how to be an</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inclusive leader.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program features</td>
<td>Facilitators: Each module is led by a facilitator with subject matter expertise. All facilitators are full-time BTO employees.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership map: Participants reflect on their</td>
<td>own personal leadership journey and create a visual “map” that outlines their past experiences and how those experiences inform who they are today.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>own personal leadership journey and</td>
<td>Throughout the 8-week program, participants draft versions of their leadership map. Participants individually draft their map in the structure of the program and are given dedicated time to revise it before presenting the final product at graduation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>create a visual “map” that outlines their</td>
<td>Leadership philosophy statement: Participants articulate their leadership map (where they have been) into a written leadership mission statement (where they want to go) based on their own leadership goals. Whereas the leadership map is a visual representation of their leadership story, their leadership philosophy statement is a written statement of what kind of leader they want to become.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>past experiences and how those experiences</td>
<td>Support group: As a part of building community at BTO, participants are placed in small groups to use one another as resources and support throughout the program. Participants can use these informal groups as additional opportunities to connect, reflect, or simply get to know one another from across departments.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inform who they are today.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participant Selection**

I used convenience sampling to select the participants for this study. I selected this method due to my insider role at the study site. The MDP required a nomination
process that vetted participant eligibility (see Table 3), and this research study only included active or graduated members of the program. I used convenience sampling to identify volunteers from MDP, as any of the participants in the program met the following study requirements: (a) must be MDP eligible and enrolled, or (b) must have graduated from MDP (see Tables 4 and 5). For confidentiality purposes, I assigned pseudonyms to participants.

Table 4

*Demographic Characteristics of Research Participants—Interviews*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Time at BTO</th>
<th>Experience as manager</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant A</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2.5 years, 6 months</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>Manager, production planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>0 months</td>
<td>Manager, internal and executive communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant C</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>1.5 years, 6 months</td>
<td>Senior manager, research and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant D</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11 months</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Senior scientist, research and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant E</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2.5 years, 6 months</td>
<td>0 months</td>
<td>Lead, production shift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant F</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Manager, production</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

*Demographic Characteristics of Research Participants—Focus Group*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Time at BTO</th>
<th>Experience as manager</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1.5 years, 6 months</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Senior human resources business partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2.5 years, 6 months</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Senior manager, engagement and culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Supervisor, equipment maintenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Senior manager, research and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Time at BTO</td>
<td>Experience as manager</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Manager, platform engineering development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>5 months</td>
<td>Supervisor, laboratory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection**

As one specific program, the MDP, was the primary focus of this study, I selected participants based on their acceptance into the program as active or graduated participants via convenience sampling. I recruited participants based on their acceptance into the MDP cohort via their organization’s email \( n = 15 \), or their completion of graduating from one of the three pilot cohorts \( n = 50 \). In the recruitment email (see Appendices A and B), I notified participants my positionality as a doctoral student at the University of San Diego, the purpose and voluntary nature of the study, the confidentiality of participant responses, and the potential benefits or risks associated with the study. I provided my contact information along with a link to the online consent form. Once they received the recruitment email, 12 participants completed the consent form: six agreed to participate in the focus group and six agreed to individual interviews.

In the last step of the data collection process, I used two primary methods: semistructured interviews and focus groups (see Figure 1). I conducted a one-on-one, semistructured interview for 30 minutes to 1 hour per active participant. In addition to interviews, I conducted a semistructured focus group for 1.5 hours. I conducted all interviews and the focus group in person at the research site. In addition to these primary data collection methods, I also noted comments or personal discussions the participants disclosed to me.
Figure 1

*Data Collection Process*

I sent the 15 enrolled participants individual emails requesting a one-on-one in-person interview. I sent 15 graduated participants individual emails requesting their participation in a focus group. I outlined the study’s purpose and provided context of how the data results would be represented on the consent form. I did not send participants the interview questions ahead of the scheduled interview or focus group, but I did reiterate consent prior to each interview. Once participants confirmed the date and time for the one-on-one interviews and all focus group participants confirmed their participation, I sent Google calendar invitations with the agreed upon dates to each participant.

**Ethics and Credibility**

I conducted this study following IRB approval from the University of San Diego (see Appendix C). To ensure the well-being and safety of the research participants and ethics of the study, I submitted this research proposal to the IRB prior to conducting research and collecting data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I received consent from BTO’s chief human resources officer, and I sent consent forms to all participants prior to data collection. I reiterated participants’ voluntary participation (with the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time) at the start of each interview.
Additionally, my insider role as the program manager and facilitator established trust and credibility with the research participants. By the time interviews and focus groups were conducted, I had already met and worked with the participants over several MDP sessions. Therefore, active participants were already introduced to me as a primary facilitator in MDP, and graduated participants knew me well from having completed the MDP in a previous cohort. This allowed for a more personal approach to the interview process as I had already established trust and credibility with participants.

**Semistructured Interviews**

I conducted semistructured one-on-one interviews with voluntary participants. I conducted these interviews in-person at the research site based on the availability of the participant, and they lasted for 30 minutes to 1 hour depending on the participant. After I received participant consent to record the interview, I recorded all audio using Otter.ai transcription software. I revised transcriptions to ensure audio accuracy and later uploaded them into NVivo software.

To capture the unobservable aspects of the participant meaning-making experience, I used semistructured interviews as an appropriate data collection method. Patton (2015) described the purpose of interviews, saying:

To find out from them those things we cannot directly observe . . . feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. (p. 465)
I conducted semistructured interviews in person to capture descriptive data surrounding one of the study’s artifacts: the leadership map. During the semistructured interviews, I asked participants to reflect on their completed leadership maps. As the leadership map was used as an authentic leadership intervention to provide each participant a platform to sit in self-reflection, consider their personal lived experiences as part of their own leadership story, and then articulate the meaning of those experiences, interviews were critical in capturing the why behind the leadership map. Although I posed interview questions, the interviews were semistructured for flexibility based on the conversation between the participant and me. The interview included questions such as:

- Tell me about your experience in MDP.
- Please highlight a few of the points on your leadership map. Why did you add them to your map?
- How does your leadership help you make sense of who you are today?
- In what ways did your leadership map contribute to your own understanding of leadership?

**Focus Group**

Focus group participants were graduates who had completed one of the MDP pilot cohorts in 2022. The focus group met at the research site that worked best for participant availability. Similar to the semistructured interviews, I collected data during focus group discussion using Otter.ai transcription software and voice recording software. I revised transcriptions to ensure audio accuracy and later uploaded them into NVivo software.

Focus groups were considered an appropriate method for capturing the perspectives and reflections of graduated participants who had completed the program.
during the pilot cohorts that occurred in the preliminary research phase. I used focus groups intentionally to further measure the efficacy of individual storytelling in a group setting to cocreate meaning (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). Because participants experienced learning in a group setting during the program, focus groups or group interviews facilitated by me as the researcher mimicked the structure of the program itself. Hennick (2014) described focus groups where the data obtained was collected in a social setting that would not available in one-on-one interview settings, saying:

> Perhaps the most unique characteristic of focus group research is the interactive discussion through which data are generated, which leads to a different type of data not accessible through individual interviews. During the group discussion participants share their views, hear the views of others, and perhaps refine their own views in light of what they have heard. (pp. 2–3)

In essence, focus groups fit the form and content that storytelling encourages during the MDP itself and allows participants another opportunity to cocreate meaning in a group setting, the collective process of sensemaking.

The role of the researcher in a focus group is to act as facilitator, not to bring the group to a consensus regarding focus group topics of discussion; rather, the researcher should encourage a variety of collective viewpoints (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). In the case of sensitive topics, the moderation of focus groups can also foster an expression of viewpoints not easily accessible during one-on-one interviews. Some of the focus group questions included:

- Throughout the program you heard from your peers as they shared their own stories. What did you think of storytelling throughout the program?
• In what ways did your own stories help you throughout the program?
• Hearing the stories of others?
• What are your thoughts on sharing personal lived experiences in a professional space like this organization?

Interview Guides

The primary data collection procedure of this study was semistructured interviewing. I identified open-ended questions that guided the interviews with flexibility to adjust based on the participant responses (Glesne, 2016). I used a narrative inquiry approach to capture the participants’ stories as they shared them. Active listening was critical in engaging with participants as they responded to interview or focus group questions. The interview guides for this study may be found in Appendices D and E. To tailor questions to deepen participant responses, it is critical to reiterate the adjustable nature of the interview guide. The interview guides for both one-on-one interviews and the focus group served solely as a guide, and I adjusted them as needed in real time during the interview process.

At the start of each interview, I reiterated the purpose of the study and voluntary consent, with the option to opt out of the study at any time, to the participants. I also reiterated my roles in BTO and as a PhD student, and that my desire to study the program was both personal and professional. I allotted time prior to the start of each interview to answer any questions participants had.

To record the one-on-one interviews and focus group discussion, I used a digital recorder. Otter.ai served as a digital transcription device I used along with the audio recording to cross-check data for accuracy once collected. After each interview and the
focus group, I made written and voice recorded reflections. These reflections served a purpose in not only capturing my experience after interviews, but also allowing thoughtful insights into any potential biases that may have surfaced so I could mitigate them in the analysis. I uploaded collected data and memos to a private Google Drive folder, a secure web-based storage system, that was only accessible to me, my dissertation committee chair, and my committee members.

**Leadership Map**

As part of the authentic leadership module in the program, I asked participants to draft (and continue to draft and redraft throughout the remainder of the program) a leadership map (see Figure 2). The leadership map served as a tangible project for participants to tie what they learned in the program to their own experiences. The purpose of the map emphasized the sentiment “Who we are is how we lead,” and that understanding who they were as individuals would inform their unique leadership practices.
Figure 2

Leadership Map Activity

To create their maps, I asked participants to picture three to five life events (either personal or professional) that impacted their journeys into the leadership positions they currently held. I asked them to sit in deep reflection, highlight the highs and lows of those experiences and create a visual of those experiences in whatever format they chose (e.g., a map, timeline, drawing). Through the map, they created a visual representation of their lived experiences. I asked participants to share what some of those experiences were throughout the program to practice vulnerability. The exercise took place in several stages (see Table 6) before participants produced a final draft that they presented at the MDP graduation.
### Table 6

**Leadership Map Drafting Process**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Draft stage</th>
<th>Instruction and prompts</th>
<th>Materials</th>
<th>Storytelling</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Initial       | In the initial drafting stage (Day 1 of MDP), participants were told to create a running list (no limit) of all the important experiences they had in their lives. Experiences could include memories, achievements, important mentors, family members, or pivotal challenges. Participants were told to distinguish these experiences from their resume, and highlighting challenges and adversities were just as important as successes. | • 8x11 paper  
• Pen/pencil  
• Post-its  
• Music (playing while participants are drafting)                                                                 | Once participants were done drafting their list of experiences, the facilitator asked for several participants to share at least one of the items on their list and why they chose to include it. The request for sharing was posted to the MDP cohort group, without calling on particular participants. Volunteers then shared in front of their cohort. After volunteers shared, the facilitator asked the cohort to share what hearing the stories of their peers felt like (debrief). | 1 hour total (30 minutes for individual drafting and 30 minutes for storytelling)                                             |
| Redrafts/editing | Between Day 1 and the final day of MDP, participants were given more opportunities to continue to refine and redraft their leadership maps. The editing phase included more | • 8x11 paper  
• Pen/pencil  
• Post-its  
• Music (playing while participants are drafting)                                                                 | After each drafting process, participants were asked to share their work. The facilitator encouraged participants to continue to be vulnerable in what they                                                                 | 45 minutes total (20–30 minutes of drafting and 15–25 minutes of storytelling)                                                                 |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Draft stage</th>
<th>Instruction and prompts</th>
<th>Materials</th>
<th>Storytelling</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>individual revisiting of their initial lists of experiences with suggestions for participants to work toward highlighting only 3–5 experiences from that list. As participants narrowed their list of 3–5 experiences, they were asked to begin the visualization process for how they would like to share those experiences at graduation. There was no requirement for what a map should look like; participants were encouraged to be creative.</td>
<td></td>
<td>shared. Volunteers shared in the large group. Debriefs occurred with the entire group once volunteers were done sharing.</td>
<td>1 hour total (30 minutes for finalization of map visual, 30 minutes storytelling practice in their support groups)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final</td>
<td>On Day 7 of the 8-week program, participants were asked to finalize their map (both the list of 3–5 experiences and the visualization of the map).</td>
<td>Materials for the final draft varied. The facilitator provided poster paper and colored markers. Examples of participant final leadership map formats included: A photo of a dish</td>
<td>Participants were asked to share parts of their maps in their support groups to ask for feedback prior to presenting at graduation. This allowed participants to practice vulnerability in a smaller group setting and to ask their support groups any questions they had prior to finalizing their final drafts.</td>
<td>1 hour total (30 minutes for finalization of map visual, 30 minutes storytelling practice in their support groups)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft stage</td>
<td>Instruction and prompts</td>
<td>Materials</td>
<td>Storytelling</td>
<td>Duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
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<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>they cooked, song lyrics, presentation slides, timeline, art, video, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Memos

In addition to the interviews, a focus group, and the leadership map, I collected researcher memos as a means of further triangulating the data. Memos provided a method for me to reflect on the data being collected, including participant observations that occurred during MDP and any personal thoughts, biases, or assumptions I had (Saldaña, 2016). This reflective process allowed me to better understand how my perspectives could influence the study. The memos also allowed me to capture my initial impressions and reactions to the data in real time. This was especially valuable when dealing with complex or emotionally charged data (e.g., the storytelling aspect of the program) to document immediate thoughts or feelings. Charmaz (2014) encouraged researchers to write what came to mind.

In qualitative research, the trustworthiness of the research can be determined by four elements: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). Memos allow for reflexive commentary from the researcher which, in turn, increases credibility of the researcher. Once memos are written, they also become pieces of data in the data collection process. Researchers can use memos to assist in the coding process. Analytic memos help with “future directions, unanswered questions, frustrations with the analysis, insightful connections” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 45). Thus, the six memos I collected in this study added insights for the foundation of later analyses and supported me in refining the data analysis.

Data Analysis

The data collected from semistructured interviews, a focus group, leadership maps, and memos, which captured perspectives from before and after the MDP, assisted
with validity of the data and themes that were present (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Additionally, I analyzed data through coding methods (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2016) using NVivo software. I uploaded transcriptions to NVivo to code the one-on-one and focus group interviews and the leadership maps and analysis. I used qualitative analysis after completing the coding to find relevant themes throughout the interviews and focus group (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I grouped the codes that emerged as relevant themes from interviews and the focus group (Saldaña, 2016).

**Preparing the Data**

In this study, I used several data sources over two MDP cohorts; thus, I initiated coding after all data were collected and the programs had ended in October 2023. I reviewed the one-on-one and focus group interview transcriptions on Otter.ai software to ensure coherence by listening to each recording while following along for accuracy in comparison to the transcriptions. Once I had reviewed them, I uploaded all transcriptions, memos, and leadership maps to NVivo software in preparation for coding.

**Coding Phase 1: Open and Descriptive Coding**

The first phase of the coding analysis consisted of open and descriptive coding of the focus group and individual interviews. Essential criteria for open coding consists of “exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitive, and conceptually congruent” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 213) codes to allow emergent categories and themes. The rationale for using open coding was that “emergent categories usually prove to be the most relevant and best fitted to data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 37). I used descriptive coding to summarize the basic content in an interview, specifically to identify the meaning behind what was being communicated by the participant(s). This led to the development of
independent codes that described everything about the leadership program experience with 62 references to storytelling, 60 references to sharing in the workplace, 33 references to connection, 26 references to vulnerability, and others.

**Coding Phase 2: Axial Coding**

After the first phase of coding, the second phase included a systemic analysis of axial, or analytical, coding. Axial coding “goes beyond descriptive coding” where coding transforms as “interpretation and reflection on meaning” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 206). This method of coding allowed for the interpretation and meaning-making of the data to address this study’s research questions. The process of interpretation included drawing connections between the various codes, categories, and themes to inform the findings. Axial coding provided both insights into the individual and connecting experiences of the participants and a categorized data set to respond to the research questions. Based on the categories of the most salient and descriptive moments and reflections from the participants, including the most frequent descriptive codes, I further analyzed the data to see how participants described their experiences of storytelling and meaning-making (Saldana, 2016).

**Noncoding Analysis**

In addition to the coding phases of this study, I conducted other noncoding analysis to further make sense of the phenomenon of storytelling. I used concept mapping and diagramming to analyze the data and connect frequent categories and themes to one another. Visuals like concept mapping and diagramming allowed for visual representations to highlight relationships among the data. I reported any inconsistencies
or contradictions in participant experiences in the findings section to provide a holistic explanation of the storytelling phenomena (Mathison, 1988).

**Limitations**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the relationship of storytelling as an intervention for meaning-making and leadership identity development in an MDP. However, there were several limitations to this study. First, the participants for this study were only representative of two MDP cohorts, not the leadership at BTO as a whole. Additionally, participants represented only one level of management (i.e., supervisors and managers) at one biotechnology organization. In the future, including more diverse representation of not only leadership positions in the organizational hierarchy, but also other organizations as additional research sites, would enhance the transferability of this study.

Furthermore, the data collected from this study occurred over the span of 4 months. The short length of the 8-week MDP and the limited number of cohorts included in this study did not allow for a breadth and depth of data collection. Memos I analyzed as part of this study’s data set were not as thorough as they could have been; given that I wrote memos at the end of each MDP session I facilitated alone and for the entire day, the memo writing process proved to be cumbersome. Future iterations of this study should include data points from multiple cohorts over an extended period of time to enhance the reliability of the findings and intentionally dedicated time to write thorough and comprehensive memos. The short duration of this study also made it difficult to make extensive claims surrounding storytelling as an intervention across leadership programs and organizations.
Along with the limitations outlined in this section, my positionality and personal point of view could also impact the data collected, how it was collected, and what was considered important or relevant to this study.

**Positionality and Efforts to Mitigate Bias**

Limitations from my own positionality and background, including my experiences and perspectives surrounding storytelling (i.e., authenticity, vulnerability, sharing) and my position as the sole leadership program designer and developer at BTO could have affected this study. Additionally, I had personal investment in MDP as an employee at BTO and had formed relationships with colleagues at the organization and the MDP program participants and graduates. I had also personally designed and implemented every aspect of the MDP. My professional and personal beliefs were deeply invested in the outcomes of leadership programs at BTO. For these reasons, I had personal beliefs about the benefits of storytelling as an intervention in the corporate space to foster meaning-making at an organization.

To mitigate these biases, I used triangulation of multiple sources (i.e., one-on-one interviews, a focus group, leadership maps, and memos) to inform the findings (Mathison, 1988). Although the memos served to capture my own reflections of the program and participant engagement to assist in mitigating my own biases, I must acknowledge that my own biases (either conscious or unconscious) could be present. However, I am confident in my ability to continuously reflect, monitor, and be aware of any potential biases that could have affected the outcome of this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
Significance of the Study

In analyzing the data, I discovered a clear relationship between storytelling, vulnerability, and connection and the challenge of transferring these reflections beyond the structure of the MDP. The in-depth analysis of the qualitative data of this narrative inquiry study provided the framework to understand how participants experienced individual and collective storytelling in MDP. The qualitative data collected in 15 interviews and the focus group across two MDP cohorts further explained the ways in which individual and collective storytelling impacted participants in understanding their own leadership practices both inside and outside the structure of MDP. I triangulated data collected from participant interviews, the focus group, leadership maps, and researcher memos (Mathison, 1988) to make sense of the storytelling phenomena as an intervention in leadership development programming. The findings from this study highlighted the gap in current literature surrounding biotechnology startups, leadership development interventions, and storytelling.

In this chapter, I provided details about the methodological framework that guided this study, including the study design, participant selection, overview of the data collection, and data analysis. The following chapters include the findings of the study. Chapter 4 includes participant profiles and the findings to the research questions, and Chapter 5 addresses the salient themes and intersection of the phenomena presented in this study involving storytelling as a leadership development intervention.
CHAPTER FOUR  
FINDINGS

In this study, I sought to understand how the role of individual and collective storytelling allows leaders to better understand themselves and others in the context of a manager development program (MDP) at a biotechnology organization (referred to by the pseudonym BTO). This chapter details the experiences of the 12 leaders who participated in the MDP at BTO. First, I provide brief participant profiles and pseudonyms as context for their backgrounds. Second, I explore each participant’s story and experience in MDP, as explained by the participants. Through analyzing their narratives, or stories, three themes emerged: (a) storytelling as a means for individual self-reflection for self-awareness; (b) storytelling as a vehicle for collective community building, empathy, and understanding; and (c) storytelling that fosters shared meaning-making at the individual, collective, and organizational level that ultimately contributes to leadership development. The relationship between the findings is outlined in Figure 3.
Additionally, the organization of this chapter follows a narrative inquiry approach that shares the data in a storied way: first, participants share their own experiences in individual interviews; second, I represent participants’ collective experiences together, grouped by shared themes; and third, I present high-level insights that center the human experience in an organization and summarize the benefits of storytelling.

**Participant Profiles**

A brief profile of each participant is provided in Table 7 that includes information such as their racial background, gender, professional title, duration working at BTO, experience as a manager, and education background.
## Table 7

*All Participant Profiles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Highest education</th>
<th>Work format</th>
<th>Work experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Manager, production planning</td>
<td>High school diploma, business-related certifications</td>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>15 years in production planning</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Manager, internal and executive communications</td>
<td>Master of Science in communications and marketing</td>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>Over 5 years in project management and communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Senior manager, research and development</td>
<td>Bachelor of Science in biology</td>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>Over 8 years in research and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>Senior scientist, research and development</td>
<td>Master of Science in chemical engineering</td>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>3 years as a scientist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>Lead, production shift</td>
<td>Degree as a medical/clinical assistant from a career college and several online certifications</td>
<td>In-person</td>
<td>3 years as machine operator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>Manager, production planning</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree in computer science</td>
<td>In-person</td>
<td>6 years in pilot operations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Highest education</td>
<td>Work format</td>
<td>Work experience</td>
</tr>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Focus group</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Senior human resources business partner</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree in communications, human resources management certificate</td>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>10 years in human resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Focus group</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Senior manager, engagement and culture</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree in communications</td>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>10 years in talent relations, engagement, special events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Focus group</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Filipino American</td>
<td>Supervisor, equipment maintenance</td>
<td>Multiple certifications including: Engineering technician, mobile application development, OSHA 30, yellow belt lean six sigma, and working toward an associates degree in engineering</td>
<td>In-person</td>
<td>4 years in the technical field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Focus group</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Senior manager, research and development</td>
<td>PhD in molecular microbiology</td>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>20 years of experience in research and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Highest education</td>
<td>Work format</td>
<td>Work experience</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Focus group</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Manager, platform engineering development</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree in physics</td>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>10 years of experience in engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Focus group</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Supervisor, laboratory</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree in molecular biology</td>
<td>In-person</td>
<td>3 years experience as research technician</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Storytelling as a Means of Individual Reflection and Self-Awareness

Despite the diversity of each MDP participant’s background, values, and beliefs, all those interviewed agreed they engaged in self-reflection that contributed to their personal growth during the program. However, the extent to which each participant described their growth (large or small) varied. Deep reflection and personal growth allow an individual to engage with their past to better understand their future and, in turn, to better understand the why behind their behavior. This self-exploration enhances self-awareness on the individual level that informs the individual’s leadership practice. In the context of an organization, specifically a biotechnology organization like BTO where the focus was on production and output, self-reflection and self-awareness are not always integrated in the organization’s management culture. The following section outlines the semistructured interviews and experiences of participants in creating their leadership maps, sharing vulnerably and authentically, and engaging in self-reflection. Participants agreed that understanding their own stories made them better leaders: leaders who are more self-aware and understand the value of authenticity.

Participant A

Participant A was a very vocal participant in MDP. She was quick to participate and engage in activities including small or large group discussions. She was familiar with management-focused workshops “like manager skills” trainings, and her impressions of the MDP overall were positive. She said:

I think the program is great, I really do. Like I said, I’ve had bad managers’ skill training. I don’t think they do a whole lot for people. Maybe . . . I feel that those are good structures for learning how to manage in the company, like in general,
like how managers work. Like if you are new to the workforce and want to start a job, and we want to move up one day and want to be a supervisor, and then maybe you want to be a manager, and then if you want to go up from there, you know, how you become a senior manager, a VP, and a CEO? Like, I feel like those kind of give a structure for what the steps are. The MDP program that we did tells you how to be a person through that, if that makes sense. I equate it to, when you were talking about the leadership map. And when you said that the leadership map is not your resume, it’s the in-between. MDP, I feel, gives people the in-betweens of a manager skill set training.

Participant A was one of the only participants in her cohort to have already completed another manager training before, but in her own words, her previous trainings were focused on management. Her experience in MDP focused on the “in-between,” what I have often referred to as the gray area or nuances of management that are unpredictable, especially when working with diverse groups of people.

Participant A also had an extensive background of trauma, addiction, therapy, and recovery. Her willingness and openness to share could be related to the previous work she had done during her recovery. However, despite having those experiences prior to MDP, Participant A still felt the opportunities for self-reflection reminded her to stay grounded and appreciate her lived experiences. She said:

So one [takeaway] was that [the program] really reminded me of my journey, where I come from. I always forget that a lot. Especially if we have been through a lot. And then we’re in a much better place now. And I feel like a lot of times, we can forget everything we went through to get here, not on purpose. But just—new
life, new feelings, and I tell people all the time when I talk about a past experience, I’ll say, “in a different lifetime.” And it really feels like that a lot of times. But it reminded me that I really need to stay connected to that. Because our roots are what got us here, right? So, I think that would be my biggest takeaway was being reminded, especially in class when we would have to reflect on things, write things down, like kind of really revisiting some of where I came from.

For Participant A, MDP reemphasized the importance of her story and to stay grounded in that. Her ability to reflect throughout the program and share her story in a professional setting at work allowed her to view her story from “a different lifetime” to one that was in the present, an ongoing continuation of her story. Her ability to stay grounded in her past experiences allowed her to have gratitude for the success she has experienced today. She shared:

Because my life, my journey, all of it. My success of where I am, you know, call it overcoming obstacles, right? Really, for me, it all goes back to gratitude. And to keep gratitude in place, you kind of have to remember where you come from. Normally, I do, like, I’m not a disconnected person, I just think it sucks the life force out of us sometimes. And then moving. I’ve had big things happen over the last 4 years of my life. Like overwhelmingly big things like moving states, changing jobs, abusive relationships ending—like big things. And I think just in that—getting married, planning a wedding, new family, so just in those 4 years, there’s just a disconnect from remembering that stuff. And this really brought that back.
The culmination of Participant A’s experience in MDP reflecting on her past was exemplified in her leadership map (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Participant A’s Leadership Map*

Participant A described her leadership map as a visual representation of her trauma, addiction, recovery, and ultimate growth and gratitude from those experiences. She said:
My four key components of my leadership map are my roots, my branches, my leaves, and my flowers. And so, the four key components, and why they’re on there, and why they’re highlighted. And there’s words all throughout the leaves and the roots. And so, the roots are really what I learned and what I was taught as I was growing up, right? So, as a child going through life, they are what grounded me. So, these [the roots] are what started in life and what grounded me. And then you grow, right? The sun is gonna come up, the moon is gonna come up, regardless of what your life is, right? You just have to kind of go through it, right? So, one foot in front of the other, you’re gonna grow. So that’s the tree, right? So, you’re growing no matter what is happening down here you’re still growing. And so, I want to add a hand here, but I didn’t have time to find it. But really what this is supposed to show you is that this is how life started for me.

Participant A’s leadership map took the form of a tree, a metaphor for the grounding and growth she experienced in her life. Personal growth was cultivated over time, with the tender care of people in her life she referred to as “angels.” She explained:

As I grew, I get to my middle point. I really had the fortune to have a few key angels as I like to call them, mentors, that really reached down and pulled me up from where I was in life. They brought me up, and so all the names—these are all the names up here in my branches and in my leaves—are all people that had a positive impact in my life. Who then are responsible for the roots going this way. You’ll see that the words start to change, and they change more to love, and caring, and support. And then the real highlight is that no matter where you start from, we are in control of our own path.
The angels in Participant A’s life supported her from the traumatic childhood she experienced and guided her to the path that ultimately contributed to who she is today. Reflecting on her life, Participant A reframed her trauma as being able to grow into something beautiful, saying:

Everyone has to understand that, right? I’ve heard so many people that blame a bad childhood or early traumas on why they are terrible people today. True, I 1,000% agree that early traumas affect us throughout our life; however, there is a point in your life where you are now in control of what you do about those. And so, my point in those was somewhere around here, and so what I did with those was able to bloom and grow healthy flowers on the other side of it. So that didn’t come out as eloquently as it’s supposed to, but that is what it is, what it’s intended to show. I don’t know if that’s what you saw when you looked at it, but, yeah, so starting from that growing regardless, and then being able to, to turn it into something that can still be healthy and beautiful and flourish and grow.

In her cohort, Participant A was the only participant who handmade a creative art project for her leadership map. Although other participants created their own unique maps, the majority used a computer to create them. Participant A workshopped her map over the course of the 8-week program by initially writing down impactful lived experiences she had on to post-its, and she organized those post-its into what became her final leadership map. Participant A attributed her growth to the mentors or “angels” who invested in her success. Despite the adversity she faced, she was able to produce something beautiful, and through her reflection she was able to stay grounded in the experience of where she came from, who she is today, and how she chooses to lead.
Participant B

At the time of her participation in MDP, Participant B had recently been promoted to manager; however, she did not have any direct reports. She was also at a point of personal transition in her life; along with her recent promotion, she was going through a divorce and anticipating a move to a new state. When asked about her preprogram expectations, Participant B stated:

I’m not, like, a super overthinker, so I just like, I was gonna dive headfirst with things, so I didn’t have a lot of expectations. I guess maybe what surprised me is that other people, whether they’ve been managers for a while or not, have the same concerns of, am I doing this right or should I do things differently? And as a person who, I don’t have direct reports, and I’ve been recently promoted to a manager, and I like to have direct reports, I was like, oh, that’s always interesting, because you can tell that no matter how long you’ve been doing it, you still have concerns of like, Am I doing it right? Am I supporting my team enough? So, I would say that was surprising in a good way. Like, I appreciated that.

Reflecting on her experience in MDP, Participant B was surprised to find that no matter the experience of the managers in the cohort, all participants shared the same questions about whether they were performing and supporting their teams well. She added:

I guess maybe BTO in general, with managers, it was a little surprising, because I think a lot of people here aren’t super experienced managers. Hence, the program, which I think is good. So that was interesting to me. Also, like my aunt, she’s a CEO of a hospital. So, I’ve always gotten some really great advice from her. And
she’s always told me from day one, like, just because you’re good at your job doesn’t mean that you would be a good manager, and I think BTO was guilty of that from the growth that we went through. I’m not saying that’s good nor bad. It’s just kind of what it is. And I guess I really liked learning about my cohort. I was surprised because I’m curious, I guess, how some of them might be as a manager, like that would be surprising. Because I’ve seen some of them actually manage. And I don’t know, but then again, that’s why the training program is here. I was surprised that we focus more on authentic leadership than anything else. I would say that probably is my biggest surprise, not saying that’s a bad thing. But I was surprised by that. Because my expectation was so black and white of like, you should do this, and you shouldn’t do that. So maybe I would say that’s the overarching surprise for me.

Participant B acknowledged the growing pains that a startup like BTO experienced due to hypergrowth. During the COVID-19 global pandemic, the organization grew from 70 employees to nearly 2,000. This hypergrowth, as Participant B explained, resulted in the promotion of a lot of individual contributors from the organization into management positions without any training. The quick promotion without training of many managers could also explain Participant B’s initial surprise that all MDP participants had the same question of “Am I doing this right?” given their lack of training or experience in management and formal leadership positions.

When asked about the sharing aspect of the program, Participant B found it personally helpful. She said:
Funny enough, this helped me out a lot in my personal life, just reflecting on my life as a whole. Even though this little tiny part might not be great, like when I look at my entire leadership map, I feel like I have a lot to be thankful for.

Participant B found the process of creating her leadership map as a reflection of her life journey. In that process she gained gratitude for her privileges and accomplishments.

Participant B’s leadership map was a picture collage (see Figure 5), which she described in her own words as:

I’m a visual person, so I did the picture collage. And I feel like pictures say a lot. I’m not, like, a tech person . . . so although it works for some people, that’s not what I gravitate towards, but I liked it. To me it felt like it came naturally because it’s my life. It’s not like I’m making anything up, or I have to memorize something, like, I didn’t practice. I liked the activity. It was fun, like funny and fun. When you write everything down. You’re like, oh crap, you know, you forget about this, or it’s like, oh, yeah, of course for me, and I have this glaring, like glaring to me of, like, got married, got divorced. And I kind of was avoiding that because I didn’t want to talk about that. But that was, like, a huge part. So, within myself I was wrestling, the whole reason I moved out here is because I had gotten married, and like, where I had met my person, moved out here, and then got married, so much of that I wanted to share because it’s a huge part of my story, but I just wasn’t ready. And so that part maybe was a little bit trickier.

During one MDP session Participant B asked me how much she should share. I personally knew she was experiencing a divorce, but that was not something she disclosed in the cohort or to her peers. This was also not shown on her leadership map.
As part of the sharing process, participants were asked to be vulnerable and share their experiences, but what they chose to share was up to them. Participant B was still processing the end of her marriage. When we spoke in class, she asked at what point does one feel ready to share something more vulnerable? Although I could not directly answer that question, because it depends on the threshold of each individual’s capacity for vulnerability and trust, I did encourage her to share what she felt comfortable sharing. Although the class was a psychologically safe space for sharing, if she was not ready to engage and process her divorce, then perhaps it was not the time or place to share about what she was experiencing.

Participant B then shared what it was like to hear about her peers’ leadership maps, saying:

With my leadership map, but like everything else, I appreciate it, and it was just kind of fun to write your whole life down, and like, and like, you forget about some things, I liked it. And presenting it everything—I enjoyed hearing others’ leadership maps, even though I might have heard some things about theirs, and I liked seeing how they presented it. I was very proud of the cohort because I feel like a lot of them really went out of their comfort zones doing that. So, I want to also give them credit where credit’s due, or I think a lot of them really exceeded in a place that makes them uncomfortable.
Even though Participant B did not feel comfortable sharing her current experience of going through a divorce, the leadership map activity allowed her to reflect on all the positive accomplishments and changes she had experienced in her life. Although she was not someone who was afraid of public speaking and chose not to share one of the more vulnerable aspects of her present life, she felt deep appreciation for her cohort peers who did share more personal aspects of their story. Participant B’s map allowed her to reflect on her life overall, not just her current challenge of her divorce, and to appreciate her life for the overwhelmingly positive experiences she had.

When thinking about the MDP overall, Participant B shared her key takeaways, saying:

I guess that our lives shape how we see the world and how we naturally think that we should lead, and none of it is right or wrong. I just think it goes back to being
a good manager. You have to meet that person where they’re at. Same with your love language. Just because you like this does not mean that your partner’s love language [is the same], and I think it’s the exact same with your employees. Like each person works differently. And they all have a story and maybe the better we can understand everyone’s story, the better we can kind of set everybody up for success, and that’s not just more, that’s in life, too.

Participant B’s experience in MDP allowed her to reflect on her own story and the importance of understanding the stories of those she works with or manages. She acknowledged that each individual is unique and managing direct reports means being able to understand and empathize with their own lived experiences and adapt to each individual’s needs. Finally, Participant B expressed her excitement for managing direct reports in the future to implement what she learned in MDP, saying:

It makes me really excited. Like, I can’t wait to have a direct report. It does make me nervous because I want to do a really good job. Last summer, I had an intern and really loved her, and we had so much fun, and I’m excited to do that. And I honestly learned a lot and have a lot to take away from this. I know I still have plenty of areas to grow, but I’m super glad I did it, and it was quite honestly, like I said, had a lot of fun, and I learned a lot.

Similar to Participant A, Participant B learned from the program. Specifically, she reflected on her own life and experiences and was able to do so with gratitude.

Additionally, her experience in MDP and storytelling gave her a unique perspective to learn more about her colleagues, future direct reports, and practicing empathy for diverse experiences.
Participant C

Participant C was one of the more reserved participants in the program. As a manager of research and development, much of her daily focus was on data and research. However, Participant C also managed a team of direct reports. When participating in her interview, she was very careful to answer the questions as accurately as possible, but I often found her answers were vague and needed clarification for specificity. During MDP she rarely shared personal or vulnerable aspects of her own life, and out of all the participants interviewed for this study, I knew Participant C the least.

Participant C identified two key takeaways from MDP: (a) the program reminded her the importance of her role as a manager, not just a data scientist, and (b) the program emphasized the value of investing and getting to know her direct reports. She said:

I think participating in the program, that kind of gave me more time to focus on, you know, my role as manager, a lot of my current role gets pulled into my role as a more of a scientist, coupled with a manager, and so it kind of dedicated more time to really think about my role as the manager aspect of it. In terms of, you know, some tools were provided, a lot of, I liked the extra guidance or whatever that are in the [Google] classroom. One of my supervisors left, and so I’m short people. And so, I actually need to spend more time getting to know things like the skip level, whereas I hadn’t invested as much time as I would have liked to have. And I think the course kind of brought that to my attention a little bit more. And I think takeaway is kind of making that time, as well as, I don’t know, my department’s a little crazy. There were four shifts. And so, trying to manage
across four shifts is a challenge. I think this course helped [me] think about some of the cultural and environmental aspects of managing that.

It is interesting to note that the program provided Participant C with the perspective that she could lean into her manager role more and get to know her team better. Most organizations assume all managers understand the need to build rapport with their direct reports, yet it was the program that reminded Participant C of her impact as a manager leading people. In her nearly 2 years working at BTO as a manager, it took a leadership program for Participant C to refocus her energy, not just on her day-to-day responsibilities, but in her role as a manager.

When asked about her thoughts on storytelling, Participant C responded:

I think it was beneficial. It definitely helped me get to know people in the group better and have more understanding and respect for them. And also appreciation that, you know, these are the people I work with that are where they are at. It’s nice to hear different people’s stories. So, I think it adds value to seeing them as a whole person, rather than just, like, you know, this person builds my [products].

Although Participant C was quite reserved during the program, she understood the value of storytelling. If not for herself to share vulnerable aspects of her own story, Participant C saw value in others sharing about their personal lives. She may not have engaged in storytelling herself, but she enjoyed hearing the stories of others. Additionally, Participant C had mixed feelings regarding the leadership map activity, sharing:

I thought it was okay. I started breaking out more childhood, middle young adult, to now. And then different experiences. I had an age, and then it did seem like I kind of had similar themes going across. And then I started that way and then kind
of the day of actually needing to get it to change to a little bit more of a word cloud, which a nicer presentation, would have highlighted the words as I went through different experiences, but I kept it a little more brief. Reflecting on the activity, I think it was fine. I guess in terms of changing me as a leader, I don’t know necessarily if it impacted [me] that much. It definitely made me reflect on it, and, potentially, I could have been a little more vulnerable. It does make me think, like, oh, I should take the time to connect with my people a little bit more and get to know them better. And I definitely have some people I know really well and some people I don’t know as well, so it made me reflect on other people’s stories that I’ve worked with.

Participant C’s experience with her leadership map was that “it didn’t impact [her] that much.” This is a different sentiment than other feedback I received regarding the creation process of a leadership map to represent participants’ stories in the program. Despite Participant C thinking the leadership map activity was not very impactful, it did allow her more time to reflect on her lived experiences. Her key takeaway from the leadership map process was her desire to “connect with people more and get to know them better.” Additionally, Participant C also acknowledged she “could have been more vulnerable.” During her interview, Participant C stated, “I really want to keep hardships to myself, and I did in the class,” which is in contrast to her reflection that she could have been more vulnerable in what she shared. Her map took shape as a word cloud (see Figure 6), without context or details and no connections drawn between the words. This showed the comfort level with which Participant C chose to share about her life. However, her observation (not necessarily a personal desire) that she could have been
more vulnerable showed that she noticed a difference in the depth with which her peers shared.

Participant C also felt that the leadership map was challenging in terms of design. She said:

I don’t know, I think I was focused on trying to tie each experience or finding specific experiences. So, if you reflect on your life, there’s a lot of obviously different things, and some things matter more than others. So, trying to sort out, I guess, compile the best way to put everything together or what was worthwhile to share versus not. I tried to do like one thing from each stage, so one more childhood, one more young adult, one more current life for selecting them, I tend to gravitate to what is easy, but still something interesting or that has impacted me, I guess.

When asked what Participant C meant by “worthwhile” or “easy to share,” she elaborated: “I’d say it was something that still shaped that time in my life fairly significantly. But it wasn’t, and then I kept it fairly brief or didn’t go into a lot of detail.” Participant C’s threshold for sharing vulnerable information was evident in her map and what she chose to highlight in her life. Although her colleagues in the cohort often shared experiences of trauma, healing, or change, Participant C spoke to a few of her life experiences that she described as impactful, but her descriptions lacked specificity, context, or details. It is important to note that Participant C’s definition of impactful or threshold for vulnerability in a group setting like the MDP was defined by her; there was not a standard or expectation set in the program to push or challenge participants to share what they were not comfortable sharing. Instead, I encouraged participants to self-
regulate their own boundaries and capacity for vulnerability and authenticity. It was important to establish a psychologically safe environment to hold vulnerability at all levels in the cohort, which meant allowing each participant their own autonomy in what and how they shared about themselves.

**Figure 6**

*Participant C’s Leadership Map*

Participant C had the self-awareness to recognize the difference in her leadership map compared to her peers in the cohort. When asked what she thought of sharing her leadership map in a group setting, she said:

*It felt okay, okay, and generally I don’t want to talk about myself that much. I present, but I normally present data. So [it was] a little different experience for*
me. I think it’s been quite a while since it’s been more of like a soft presentation. So it was good for me to utilize that skill set that had been underutilized for a while.

As a researcher, Participant C was accustomed to presenting data, but rarely liked to speak about herself. The value she saw in presenting her leadership map was to practice her “soft” presentation skills. She did not describe the presentation aspect of sharing her map in the cohort as vulnerable or transformative; instead, she saw it as a practical opportunity to sharpen her presentation and public speaking skills. When asked what she thought of vulnerability, Participant C stated:

I see the value of vulnerability, but to a point. I think generally I’m much more of a listening type of person. There’s actually somebody [at work] who always makes fun of me because when he asks a question I spit it back to him. And so, it’s his goal to try to not have me spit them back, if that makes sense. Because [he says] “you always get me to talk about myself I hear nothing about you!” So I think some of that is just me.

Because Participant C did not like to talk about herself during the program, her response regarding the value of vulnerability from an individual perspective was not surprising. She did not enjoy talking about herself and at times during her interview, seemed nervous or anxious about responding to questions. Despite her personal view on vulnerability, Participant C saw objective value in storytelling, specifically when others shared. “It forced me to kind of try to make connections a little bit more,” she explained. She continued saying, “There’s different hardships you don’t always necessarily see, and those can impact people.” However, Participant C also felt, at times, discussions
resembled therapy too closely. She said, “The only negative side was I didn’t want it to drift too close to feeling like therapy, but, you know, finding that line I think is important, too.” Overall, Participant C found value in her MDP experiences but held a strong boundary in terms of how much she was willing to be vulnerable and share openly.

Participant D

Participant D began MDP only having managed direct reports for 3 months and began the program with an open mind. He described his biggest takeaways saying:

I really don’t have any negative experiences honestly. Everything is positive. I’d say. Like they just said, Yeah, but he just said like, one of the one of the biggest thing that comes to mind is, like, don’t make assumptions, right? You know, always take everything with a grain of salt, I guess. Understand that people come from a different place, whether that be whatever path you’re on, but everything that we’re exploring for our leadership map, all of that shapes who they are and how they are. And you can’t really translate your own experience or project your own experiences to what you expect from yourself or from what you’ve experienced.

For Participant D, the leadership map activity allowed him to learn about his peers to better understand “who they are and how they are.” Learning about his peers on a deeper level helped Participant D mitigate any potential biases or assumptions he had made about them and instead, respect their unique experiences and appreciate their differences.

When asked about his own personal experience sharing about his life, Participant D described storytelling as a necessary discomfort:
I’m not a crazy open public person, but I’m also not necessarily always super shy to share some things, and I’m fine with it. In general, hearing other people’s stories was very great. But I understand sharing my own story can be uncomfortable, but it’s not a negative thing. It’s just something that I knew in my head, like, oh, it’s something that we’re gonna have to get used to, you’re gonna have to get more comfortable with it. So yeah, it might have been a little uncomfortable in the beginning, but I just knew it was part of the process.

As an integral part of the MDP, Participant D understood that sharing was necessary even if he felt initially uncomfortable talking about himself. However, as the program continued his level of discomfort was significantly less than at the beginning. He spoke to his initial fear of sharing vulnerably in front of others, saying:

> It’s just fear of being judged or fear of people not really understanding as much. For me in particular, I have a pretty good, like, relatively privileged background. And it’s actually something that I personally do kind of grapple with. I feel a little ashamed to be having all these privileges. My parents always had enough money, they could pay for my college tuition, right? Didn’t have to worry about working extra jobs. So, stuff like that, like money becomes a sensitive topic, background becomes a sensitive topic. While I’m proud of what they’ve done, it’s kind of like, I don’t want to sound overly spoiled, I guess. But at the same time, you know, I gotta take advantage of these opportunities that I do have otherwise [they’re] wasted, so there’s that side of it, too.

Participant D expressed a fear of sharing about his personal life and others not being able to understand his background. He was both proud of his parents and worried their
accomplishments and success would make others view him as spoiled. His guilt created a fear of judgment and misunderstanding.

Participant D described the evolution of his experience with storytelling throughout the program regarding his own leadership identity, saying:

At first, I didn’t fully understand it. I’m sure I’ll figure it out later. And it did make more sense later. Because the whole purpose, at least in my eyes, is authentic leadership, like you can’t lead effectively unless you understand yourself first. And that storytelling just kind of helps bring out the understanding. Which I’m assuming is the whole point you’re trying to find out. And then the Harvard Business article you also referenced, [and] hearing how their stories have impacted their current life. It does make a lot of sense like some people behave the way they do, people act the way they do because of their experiences, and understanding that can help you be true to yourself and not try to mimic some other ideal figure in your head. And, like the article said, it’s like there’s no ideal traits. It’s unique to every leader. All successful people have very different traits. They’re not following the model.

Storytelling throughout the program allowed Participant D to better understand how his life experiences contributed to who he had become, and then revealed how his values and beliefs informed how he led. To lead authentically, leaders must have self-awareness to “be true to yourself.” Storytelling allowed them to cultivate an authentic understanding of themselves.

Storytelling also showed Participant D how his experiences with his father’s professional success informed how he views work. He shared:
For my own story, I remember that first activity—one of the first days you just had this draft, like just, just go through and just draft you know, recount your life. It was the first time I really sat down and [had] gone back to think about [in] more detail what happened, because you don’t think about it as much, or at least not normally for me. The first thing was remembering how my dad was away for a lot of home. He was out being successful doing something with his career, and then my mom was the main caretaker. And then that shaped my own kind of personality, my work ethic and whatnot. But seeing those as examples, both good and bad. Those did shape how I think right now. So, it’s like, oh, like you can, you can work your ass off and work and be super successful. But then you leave a lot of things behind, you’re sacrificing some things too, right? So obviously there’s a balance, but it also depends on you know, I understand that maybe he just valued his company more.

Participant D stated that reflecting on his lived experiences during the program and drafting his leadership map was the first time sat down to reflect. One of his first memories was of his father working a lot and not being present at home while his mother was his primary caretaker. Participant D attributed his dedicated work ethic to his father, but in MDP acknowledged that he intentionally enforced a level of work and life balance. He saw what his father sacrificed for his career, and although Participant D valued work ethic himself, he desired more balance than what his father had. Participant D also added that the leadership map process and self-reflection gave him more clarity on his values. He said, “It’s thinking it up from an older me perspective, right, which I haven’t had a
chance to do until this. It brings out more emphasis or clarity on what I was thinking and what it really means to me.’’

Additionally, the leadership map activity, although difficult, allowed Participant D to reflect on three phases of his life, saying:

My map was split into three different sections, two thirds of my life so far. I put a couple of descriptors for events or people that show up in the top, and then I have a high level—what did I take from this experience? And then, at the very bottom, I listed some core values that would come first in mind from each of those sections. So, when I see it I looked at the big picture. I focused on what I take away from each point, which derived from individual experiences, and then those takeaways together form, very broadly, the way things are happening.

During MDP, Participant D expressed that he never had the opportunity to look at his life holistically, configuring important moments that impacted him. His map allowed him to view his life as a process of understanding where he came from and his own accomplishments. He shared:

From the very beginning, I mentioned my dad worked very hard for his company. He’s the most obvious epitome of your successful company. And then my mom was the role model that set kind of like my work ethic, my routines, kind of like what I was required to do, whether she had me and my siblings all required to do a sport or an instrument, obviously do well in school, and then language school on Sundays, like Chinese school. So, at the end of the day, it was a lot of work that kind of built up, but the takeaway for me from that section was that what worked for me was that structure, which I may have hated as a kid, but it was actually
very helpful and helped me stay focused. My takeaway for that point was linear structure is important for me to maintain my focus. Because even today, when I was in school too, university, I would set time for myself to work from this time and then turn my brain off and do something else later. And that helped me really just get this work done now, have fun later.

As a manager of research and development, Participant D’s leadership map was very process-oriented and systematic (see Figure 7). Although his map was not the most visually robust representation of his story, the format he chose reflected how he thinks: he is organized and processes information to seek understanding. His map showed three parts of his life: childhood, adolescence, and early career. In each phase of his life he outlined specific memories, key takeaways or lessons learned, and one or two words that summarized that part of his life. His reflections allowed him to draw deeper meaning from those experiences and synthesize them on his map. Participant D’s understanding of leadership after the program and creation of his leadership map was that there was not one way to lead.
When asked what Participant D thought of his leadership map compared to his cohort member’s maps, his key takeaway was that stories are unique to each individual. He said:

Mostly that it’s just unique to every individual. It’s seeing my own compared to everyone else’s. They were all so different from what we were talking about. But there’s no one right way to do it. The best way to do it [leadership] is just to be yourself and prove that you’re not pretending to be someone that’s, you know, very total professional or someone that’s just being personable. Being honest, I think, was a big takeaway.

Participant D’s experience throughout the program allowed him to understand his own unique journey into leadership and not to compare his lived experiences with the
experiences of others. Ultimately his understanding of leadership was to be authentically
and unapologetically himself.

Overall, Participant D expressed gratitude to the program, as it allowed him to
hear the stories of others, which gave him a variety of perspectives to inform his own
leadership journey. He said:

I’m really grateful when you put this program together, because it’s very helpful,
and it’s really cool to see it. Especially hearing from all these different researchers
like Brene Brown or other CEOs. Putting it all together in one place really helps,
just makes it easy to absorb the information because this is something that you
would never be able to do on your own. Unless you’ve dedicated your time to
searching for those things. I’m super grateful for that. And I think if this could be
expanded to some broader program outside here, that’d be really cool, too.

As a researcher himself, Participant D appreciated the centralized learning that occurred
during the program. The variety of resources that were presented to him made the content
and reflection easily digestible while exposing him to new perspectives and ideas. His
final reflection was the hope for leadership programs in BTO to continue and expand.

**Participant E**

Participant E was a unique participant in MDP because she did not hold a formal
management title of supervisor or manager. Due to the strength of her nomination and the
number of available spaces in the program, she was selected as an exception. However,
she expressed a strong desire to potentially become a supervisor or manager in the future,
and MDP aligned with her professional aspirations. Participant E described her
expectations prior to starting the program, saying:
So before starting the program, I was really excited, because I don’t have a title of supervisor or manager. So as a lead, I was like, “Oh, it’s a really great opportunity for me” to learn all the foundations of being a supervisor and manager. So, coming into MDP, my first class, I was really excited.

Participant E also had a growth mindset from the start of the program. She took her opportunity to be a part of MDP seriously, as evidenced by her daily notetaking, questions, and completing all asynchronous learnings in between in-person sessions. She highlighted a few of her biggest takeaways from the program, saying:

During the Gallup Clifton Strengths [module] that it was really eye-opening because I didn’t know I had those strengths. And then in class, they said focus on your strengths and how you can make it even better in your daily life and at work. And then, every time I went to class everything was just something new, something I didn’t know. And there was like, okay, supervisors had to go through this, you have to do this. And ways that I can even help my supervisor, even make her job easier. Or give her advice on something that I’ve seen from my perspective. Also, the tools that were given during the MDP were very helpful, and so those tools are very cool. You guys gave out handouts every time. And, actually, I carried my notebooks, I was like, “Okay, let me go back. What can I do?”

Participant E’s growth mindset fostered her learning agility throughout the program. She initially was quiet and did not share much in the first session, but as she felt more empowered to take control of her own learning as the program continued, she shared more. One could argue that Participant E’s growth mindset throughout the program could
be due to her being earlier in her career; however, she also actively applied what she learned in her daily role. Her commitment to improving herself was clear in her engagement and actions both in and out of the program.

She described the application of her learnings beyond the program, saying:

For conflict management, after that week, there was actually a conflict [at work]. And I did go based on what I learned from that class. My supervisor wasn’t there that day, so I actually went to HR for advice. Because they said if you ever need to reach out, you can always, it was confidential, and they will give you an answer. And that really helped. I asked about what I can do in regard to a conflict that has happened over time, but I don’t know how to resolve it. So HR said, “just have a one-on-one with the manager.” In MDP, something that stood out to me was that one-on-ones with your manager and employees was very important. So I did on that day, I did Slack, and my supervisor, like “Oh, I saw an observation that can we talk about it and once you come back?” Then on that following work day, we met. I was just talking like the observation, how the class helped me if I didn’t have [my supervisor] present, but I have something like a tool that I can use, and that was HR just for advice. And that can help me [it’s] the first time I ever went to HR, I never went to HR. And something like conflict through workers was I’ve never seen myself, but it was just like, why is this happening? But the good thing is the issue is resolved. [At work there] has always been a great culture, everybody’s motivated to come to work. So overall, my MDP experience has been really great. And I wish everybody had the opportunity for them to gain knowledge.
The MDP provided several different perspectives to Participant E: first, she felt empowered to seek resources and problem-solve without the help of her supervisor; second, she gained confidence in her ability to apply what she learned; and third, she wanted to share the benefits of her experience with her colleagues and peers. When asked what else stood out to her regarding MDP, Participant E responded:

Something that stood out to me was the leadership map. At first the hardest thing was something vulnerable, people I saw [I thought], Oh, they’re shy or didn’t feel comfortable sharing out there. But towards the end of the program, hearing everybody’s leadership map journey. . . . It’s funny because you think you’re the only one that goes through hard times. And when I see a lot of people have hard times, and you’re not the only one. And then you see where they have been and where they are at, it’s very inspiring, inspiring to see where they can get to and where they can be in the future. Very eye-opening. At first, I was like, “What does authentic leadership have to do with being a leader?” And I was just like, “why?” But then it made you realize thinking about it, and doing a rough draft about all the things you have been through in your life that has made you where [you are]. As a lead, wow, maybe the past that you chose and the experiences you have lived have made you a stronger person.

Despite being early in her career, Participant E experienced a great deal of adversity and trauma, which she shared in her leadership map. She shared the leadership map process and deep self-reflection that occurred during the program allowed her to look at her experience with new eyes. This refreshed her perspective regarding trauma and reframed it as experiences that gave her resilience and, ultimately, strength.
Participant E then felt empowered by not only her own story, but also by hearing the stories of her peers. By hearing other participants sharing their experiences, Participant E felt a sense of community because she “was not alone.”

Participant E described the process of creating her map as challenging. She framed her map as a campground with different signs and choices of paths along the way. An avid hiker, Participant E felt that the campground pathways allowed her to share about something she enjoyed in her free time, but also highlighted alternate paths she could have taken, roadblocks she experienced, metaphorical mountains she had to climb, and the unknown path ahead of her. She explained:

My leadership map was the layout of a campground. And my first point, there were different signs, and each sign will represent either a good thing or a bad thing. And I started off with my 3 months being homeless. That was one of my biggest highlights. Because from that moment on, I’ve never been stable until I found a job at BTO. So that’s why I put that as a highlight there. Because I did suffer for a couple years, jumping from place to place. And then from there, it was leaving the United States to go to Mexico. There’s a lot to the story.

Participant E’s leadership map began as a path of extreme hardship: experiencing homelessness and having no sense of direction for her life. In her early adolescence she recalled a sense of hopelessness and loss of autonomy as a minor who had to live with the circumstances given to her. She shared:

I was raised in Texas and then moved to Mexico. For my mom’s decisions, it was just following her path where she wanted to go. And at that time, I was underage, I couldn’t do anything. Obviously, you have to go with your parents. It was hard
for me, because I had to look out for me and my sister and start working and trying to feed our family. From there I turned 18, I started looking for a job in [a big city]. And one of the points—my mom, I do thank her, because first thing she told me that they all were always hiring in manufacturing. And so, I went to a recruiter. They got me a position at [a biotech company], that’s where that opened doors, and I met a lot of people. I learned a lot of skills for that job as well. And I thought that that was not the only place.

Participant E felt more empowered as she grew older and was able to make some decisions on her own. Finding her first professional experiences gave her opportunities that would propel her toward the career she has today. She said:

From there, I decided to go to school at a career college. That was one of my points on my leadership map where I left it like a trail that does not end because that’s another path that I could take as a medical assistant. And then from there, I had to leave my house because of crossing every day from Mexico. I lived in Porto Nuevo, almost 2 hours to the border. And doing public transportation all the way was too much for me. And then a point where like, all my money was going to my family. And I couldn’t get anything for me, after all the hard work and getting up every morning. From there, I moved my job from [a biotech company]. I had my friend refer me here and told me “oh, this is a startup company, you should try it out.” And I always like everything about science, pills, and biology. And as a medical assistant, I was like, “that’s interesting because I already know how to treat a patient, what’s the backend of diagnostics?” And when I did that, it was very eye-opening how different my other company was to this one. My other
company did not have opportunities at all to grow. Compared to here where I saw something in BTO that I did not see in my other job.

Creating her leadership map allowed Participant E to reflect on the path to get to BTO, where despite the challenges she faced, many people referred her to professional opportunities. After pursuing a career at BTO, Participant E again was faced with familial hardship. She said:

There was a hard moment when I left my house, and my mom did not talk to me. Because I really left my house without anything and never came back. I even blocked her from everything [on social media]. It was a very hard decision. I had the courage to do that. I don’t know how, but it was just too much for me. At that moment I got a call saying that my mom was arrested in Mexico. She had to get extradition from Mexico to Texas. I had to pick up my sister because she was underaged, and I could not leave her with an abusive dad. Not a [biological] dad, but my mom’s partner, but I could not let her be there. Because he’s not even our dad. So, I took care of my sister. And from that moment, she came with me. And so now my mom is still in jail, and it has been hard for us. But I think we got to a point where we got over it. We have to understand that our mom’s choices were not the correct ones.

Just as Participant E was beginning a new life and career, she quickly became a caretaker for her younger sister after her mother was put in jail. Despite how difficult this period was, Participant E and her sister recognized the decisions their mother made had consequences and ultimately, their decisions would impact their future as well. She said:
So, we have to follow our own path. And doing my leadership map, it showed to me how my own actions and what I did, to get out of where I was, to be a better person and have a future, was really outstanding. Just reflecting and drawing it out. And making a map was difficult, because I had to think back like, what choices did I make to become who I am? And just looking through those points I saw, wow, why did I leave my house? What would have happened if I had not left my house? I would have been stuck in the same hole.

Reflecting on her leadership map (see Figure 8), Participant E was able to see where the decisions she made in her life impacted her future path. She also recognized that she had the power to break her family cycle of hardship and trauma:

And then from there, I got promoted. I had been promoted to production shift leader [at work]. And then from that moment on, I’ve always been motivated to be even better and always learn new things. When I lived in Mexico, during that time with my mom, we didn’t have a source of income. We were selling items at the swap meet, like reselling items. So, since I have a lot of connections over there, I decided to make my own brand, where I sell hair clips and jewelry, as well. And now I sell at three different showrooms in Mexico. At first, I didn’t like it, but now I have a little hobby of doing it. And thanks to my mom, she hadn’t made the name of it, it was the name that I put the brand is what she gave me. Even though we went through hard times, she’s still my mom. But I kind of did that for her at the same time, because I like it, and that’s on my map, it was just a trail that doesn’t end because it could be another pathway I could take. But I decided, well obviously, I came back to my trail, where it’s a campground. And
then from there, there was a bike. The bike was to take the easy route, right? I could just do it all over again. Or I could take the hiker path where it was just more challenging.

For Participant E, being recognized at BTO and obtaining a leadership position made her more engaged and motivated at work. She also continued her entrepreneurial business out of Mexico and reconciled her complicated feelings for her mother, even using the name that was suggested for her business.

In all of this, Participant E owned her decisions and understood that she had the power to decide what happened next. She said:

So I decided to take the challenging path where I don’t know where it could take me. If opportunities came, I would say, “Yes, I’m gonna take it because what’s the worst that can happen?” If I think I’ve been to the worst, what’s the worst thing that can happen now? So, I’m just in there, I feel the end of the map was binoculars trying to observe my future and where I’m headed. And MDP made me realize that there’s more to this. And that I could be even better.
Participant E felt deep appreciation for her experience in MDP and the leadership map activity. Given the space to reflect on her life and create a visual representation of her leadership challenges over time, Participant E gained a new perspective of empowerment in her lived experiences. Additionally, she reframed some of the trauma she experienced, like being homeless or her mother getting arrested, as transformational. The leadership map was a vehicle for Participant E to visualize the trauma and roadblocks she faced in her life and her ability to come out the other side to achieve stability and success. This made her not only appreciate her experiences with a new perspective, but also allowed her to gain confidence and hope for her future. She summarized her experience in MDP, saying:

Stepping out of my comfort zone. [Having the] courage about putting the things that made me vulnerable, putting it there and saying it in front of everybody. And
also reflecting what I did, that I thought it was the incorrect thing to do, but it was
the right thing to do. Because people say “don’t be selfish,” but sometimes you’ve
got to be selfish. Just doing the leadership map, how it, how we all reflected on it.
Like you said, it can empower.

Participant E’s experience in MDP was transformative for her own growth and
development and an opportunity for her to deeply reflect on her experiences and choices
in life. Her experience of engaging in deep self-reflection at a work-sponsored program
allowed her to view her professional success as a result of her personal resilience. This
empowered Participant E and allowed her to gain confidence in her pursuit of a future
management role in the organization.

**Participant F**

At the time that Participant F participated in MDP, he had only worked at BTO
for 6 months and managed a team during that time. Before going through the program
himself, Participant F had nominated one of his direct reports, a supervisor, to participate
in the program first. Due to supporting his direct report through a previous MDP cohort,
Participant F had an idea of what took place during the program. This allowed him some
insight into beginning the program with an open mind. He said:

**Overall, I did have a lot of fun. I met a lot of great people, made some great
connections and had an opportunity to be vulnerable where I normally never
actually have had before, other than with personal friends. I did have some limited
kind of insight into MDP, [because] one of my previous supervisors, who was my
direct report, would meet with me about MDP to talk about what you guys
learned, and then he’d ask me questions. So, it was great that I was able to help**
them with that. But now going through MDP myself, I know I can be much, much more useful to my other supervisor who will start [the next MDP cohort] next week. So overall, my expectation of MDP was kind of what I expected because of my insight. But as far as what actually happened, it was much more of an impact than I expected, right? I mean, the main thing was just working on our stories together as a cohort was very transformational in the sense that it made me really reflect on who I am, what I’ve done, and what I’ve done to get this far, and where I want to go. For me overall, it’s been a very good experience.

For Participant F, the MDP allowed him a space in a professional setting where he could authentically and vulnerably be himself in a way that he previously had only done with his closest friends. He also found value in his experience to make him a better manager and support his other supervisors who planned to attend the program in the future. He described the storytelling aspect of the program as “transformational” in allowing him to reflect on what experiences in his life contributed to who he is today and what kind of leader he wanted to become.

Participant F further detailed the importance of stories in his overall MDP experience, saying:

For me, my key takeaway is just, just how stories work. [In the beginning of the program] the CHRO [chief human resources officer; shared] her story. I was talking to her about this after graduation [because I] really, really appreciated the way she gave us her story because I love stories, but I never really connected it to what people do professionally. But the fact doesn’t change that you have a story. And that story is what basically brings you to wherever you are. So, utilizing that
story and using it to reflect on yourself and better yourself as a person, as a
professional, whatever it may be. In essence, most good leaders have used stories
every day. That’s what I’m starting to connect now. So, it’s not new, but I guess
to me, it’s very new as a concept and as practice, and I’ve always been intrigued
by people’s personal stories. It’s how I connect with them on a more personal
level. But now just using it on myself to better myself is very, very useful.

Participant F emphasized the importance of storytelling, both sharing his own story and
hearing the stories of others, as a critical part of his own self development throughout the
program. Stories allowed Participant F to align his personal life and his professional one,
where his experiences both in and out of work contributed to how he leads.

Additionally, Participant F entered MDP with some assumptions about how he
would be perceived given his younger age as a manager. He said:

I’m usually one of the youngest people in the room being a manager. I’ve always
felt that my age was, or could be, a gating factor for me. I’ve always been told
that it isn’t, and obviously they can’t discriminate with age, but I’ve always felt
like that’s one of the things I have to watch out for with my age, being in a higher
position than most people my age would be. I might get undermined, but at that
point, I’m just being my biggest critic. But for me, the whole point of that was
just kind of using all that opportunity that I’ve had because I might not, not
necessarily have had them. Depending on people sponsoring me, guiding me,
coaching me, using all the opportunities I’ve had in order to better myself. And
then now using this MDP story, bettering myself in that in a more reflective
manner. I know I could be a good leader. I know I can get stuff done, and I can
make a group to yield. I’m very analytical, but as a person utilizing my inner strengths, how far can I go with just the mentality of “I need to get this done” versus “I can integrate all this stuff that I have into this direction that I want to go” and in essence, developing myself in that regard.

Participant F had some potential assumptions that could be made about him prior to beginning the program. He described his age as a factor that others could view as inexperienced, despite his management title. However, he also reflected that this could be his own perception and not reality. The MDP allowed Participant F to reflect on those who supported him throughout his career to get him to where he was as a manager. He also leveraged storytelling to further deepen his own understanding of himself.

Throughout the MDP, Participant F was very vulnerable and open. In earlier program sessions participants were invited to be vulnerable and share authentically. Participant F described that, although he was nervous, he was willing to use the program as an opportunity for growth, saying:

I was nervous. I was very 50/50. And honestly, you were pretty vulnerable as our coordinator. So, I felt like I kind of wanted to do the same. And thankfully, Participant A did the same afterwards when she shared her story. But for me, it was very 50/50, and I kind of just wanted to take a leap of faith. Try it out. I’ve never said that aloud before. That story. And it definitely makes you think, like, what else? What else do you have bottled up inside that you can use to better yourself? It may or may have been a negative experience, but reflecting on that kind of stuff and what it has helped you become is very important. It becomes a point to help you learn who you are and what you’re capable of. Because even at
a young age, we face a lot of different things. Whatever background they come from, it depends on how we utilize that opportunity. But those instances become who we are.

The story that Participant F referenced was his childhood. His mother left him and his little brother, leaving him to become the “man of the house” at a very young age. He shared his feelings of abandonment with the cohort, which prompted Participant A and then Participant E to share their experiences of childhood trauma, as well.

Participant F described storytelling as a highlight for him throughout the program. He shared his experience of storytelling and creating his leadership map, saying:

That was my favorite part. You opened by stating that the program is a people approach to management, and we’re going to utilize the story a lot. But it really, really did totally dig into that, and it helped me shape my leadership map. I wanted to make it a story. And funny enough, I did share my leadership map with my closest friends. It’s not like I was hiding anything, or they weren’t learning anything new. It was just for them. They did learn some new stuff, stuff that I’ve never told them, but for the most part, they were like, oh, we should make a movie. I mean, just the fact that they would say that it lets me see, or kind of hints to me that, you know, just this whole story thing. Right? It can play out to say anything you want it to be. I would say it’s essential and in, you know, just getting through, not getting through but, in understanding where you are, where you want to be. It could help you where you go. It really was my favorite part of the whole MDP. Getting the time to really put it together with the leadership map as well was tough, but well worth it for me.
For Participant F, the storytelling aspect of the program allowed him to form what his final leadership map would be. He found the power of storytelling so compelling that storytelling informed his final leadership map: a book made up of the chapters of his life. When asked why Participant F chose to later share his map with his close friends, he stated:

I think it’s just because I’m lucky enough to have friends from elementary that are still part of the same group. Over the years we’ve grown, but we still remain very close-knit friends. We practically share everything with each other. I mean, for me, it was a no brainer, just to kind of show them you know, like hey, I did this really cool thing at work. I want to share with you guys and get your feedback. And they were there for those dark times for me, with me. So, showing it to them and letting them know that, hey, this is it. And I kind of also tried to use it in a way to show them appreciation. Like hey, you know, like you guys remember all this stuff. You guys were there with me. You guys were there for me. And so, it just felt natural for me to share it with them.

Although MDP only required Participant F to share his leadership map at graduation in front of his cohort and colleagues at BTO, he chose to share it with his friends, as well. The act of Participant F sharing his map vulnerably both inside and outside of work showed the alignment of his own personal motivations for vulnerability, where he found value in storytelling in the workplace as an act of courage and in his personal life with those who already knew those parts of his story.
Participant F described the process of creating his leadership map, saying:

When we started it was actually very hard. Now we’re digging stuff up from our past. Naturally, we sometimes [forget about] very complex trauma, even past successes sometimes you kind of just forget about it. Because it’s overshadowed for one reason or another. So, starting it was probably the hardest part. But having guidelines on what to reflect on [helped], like family matters or keystone events and even professional experiences, those were all very useful and very helpful in getting me to think about what I want on my map. And I did see it coming because I was helping my previous supervisor with his map. We were in this [conference] room and stayed up till almost 2 a.m. working on it. It was the week of graduation. We really thought about his leadership map, and it was kind of a foresight for me just to see what the criteria was. But it still didn’t make it easier to do, just the fact that you have to really dig into your own life just to figure out what those lived experiences are.

Despite Participant F knowing what the leadership map project was from his direct report, he still found the initial process of deep self-reflection difficult. His difficulty stemmed from trauma that reemerged for him in the process of understanding which experiences in his life informed who he had become. Although there was an invitation for participants to be vulnerable in sharing about their lives, they were not prompted to focus on trauma. However, for Participant F, much of his childhood consisted of trauma, and, ultimately, he decided to share that in his cohort. Participant F described his leadership map, saying:
I tried to make it into a story where it had a title. And the chapters were based off of the years. So, it was a chapter timeline format. Instead of putting bullet points for each chapter, I made a synopsis or a summary for each chapter. Going back to the whole story thing was my favorite part of MDP; I really wanted to drive that whole story thing. I thought it was a great way to just get the points together. For me, highlighting the points that I did, those were pretty much my highs and lows. But most of the ones I did highlight were the ones very, very recent, like 2014. There was a lot of stuff that did happen before that. That also shaped me, like my first job was in 2007 where we opened up a family restaurant, and I worked there every day after school and summer. I really learned a lot of stuff from my grandpa. One thing I did wish I highlighted more is the key leaders in my life that really shaped me because a lot of those leaders definitely did help me develop myself and my leadership style. What I like to do is I like to really pick the best parts of every leader I’ve ever had and kind of make it my own. In essence, I just become a legacy of every person that’s ever coached me and guided me and tried to carry on the best of the best qualities of them.

Participant F’s leadership map reflected the impact of storytelling, where he wanted to share the highlights from his own story in the form of chapters in a book (see Figure 9). He highlighted his parents’ divorce, where he and his brother lived with separate parents. He also spoke of marrying his high school sweetheart, a marriage that later ended in divorce. He later remarried and became a father to his stepdaughter. Although Participant F’s leadership map had aspects of his childhood that he considered
traumatic, he chose to highlight some of the challenges and successes he had faced, both personally and professionally.

**Figure 9**

*Participant F’s Leadership Map*

![Participant F’s Leadership Map](image)

After describing his map, Participant F shared what he learned from MDP and the process of creating his leadership map, saying:

Leadership in general. It made me understand what made me a leader. For me, that’s important if I want to become the leader that I want to be. But leadership in general, it definitely made me understand where I developed what traits I have.

And then also, it’s also helped me outline what traits I want to have and where I can go forward. So, it wasn’t just a map of, you know, where I am, or where I was
to where I am, but also helps me figure out what else I need to get to that next point in that map.

Participant F experienced opportunities for deep reflection throughout the program which ultimately led him to better understand himself and thus, better understand his leadership style. He recognized who he was and what type of leader he wanted to become. Overall, Participant F described his experience in MDP and which parts of the program he valued most, saying:

The whole leadership journey. I definitely got out of it more than I was expecting because I was expecting to go into MDP and learn from other leaders, you know, kind of going back to the whole thing of I feel like I’m always the youngest person in the room. While I wasn’t necessarily the oldest person in the room, I actually was one of the managers with a little bit more experience. You have people that didn’t have any direct reports or were new to having direct reports. I was not used to being the person that had the experience to share. And so, as part of my conversations with my director, it was about me getting more out there. I tend to be kind of reserved. Assessing and identifying the situation, I have a tendency to not be as vocal as I should or could because I’m too busy thinking about stuff. I don’t feel like I’m reserved in any way, I’m just busy thinking, but it can come off as I’m reserved. One of the things I really hoped to do and try to do with MDP was be very vocal and not assertive, but very much contributing. There’s lots of experiences that we all have that can be a part of that wisdom for each other. And I think that was a pretty good forum for it. Like even just implementing the stuff that we’ve learned the previous week, trying it out with the
team and getting back to the group and saying like, “Hey, you know, this part worked” or “This part was difficult. This part got push back.” I think that was a great opportunity for me and they pushed me to really, really practice that, to be myself.

For Participant F, the act of storytelling in a cohort format allowed him to make sense of his lived experiences in a way that gave him confidence as a leader and manager. Through self-reflection, he understood his personal lived experiences as contributing to his leadership style. Additionally, the cohort format gave him a forum to practice vulnerability in a safe space where others were encouraged to do the same. Finally, Participant F understood his leadership journey to be one of self-discovery and affirmation in who he is.

All participants shared, although challenging, the process of creating and sharing their leadership maps allowed them the opportunity for deep reflection as a way to better understand themselves. Participants agreed that sharing their vulnerable stories was difficult but, ultimately, the most rewarding. Each participant also agreed that storytelling was valuable, both on an individual level to better understand themselves and on a collective level of hearing the stories of others.

**Storytelling as a Vehicle for Trust Building, Empathy, and Fostering Community**

In the context of MDP, participants engaged in their own individual learning by reflecting on experiences throughout their lives. Through this reflection, participants were able to better understand how the impact of experiences, memories, people, and challenges they had faced informed who they had become. Throughout the program, they were encouraged to share vulnerable and personal aspects of their stories with one
another in large or small group settings. The act of sharing personal lived experiences in a group context like MDP created the safe space and container for participants to have the courage to be vulnerable, express empathy toward one another and build a sense of community by reciprocating this practice.

The following section outlines the focus group interview and semistructured interviews of participants. All interviewed participants agreed, although sharing their own stories was challenging, there were personal and professional benefits. Specifically, sharing vulnerably in a cohort structure like MDP allowed participants to be more empathetic, build trust, and foster a sense of community with one another.

Fear and Trust

Through the cohort format of MDP, participants were not only able to engage in their own interpersonal self-reflection, but they were also able to build trust and empathy by hearing the stories of others. One of the most critical components to creating a psychologically safe environment from the beginning of the program was fostering trust among the participants so they were not afraid to share. Through community guidelines and modeling vulnerability as the facilitator, I encouraged participants to be vulnerable as well. The reciprocal process of storytelling and actively listening to the personal lived experiences of their peers allowed participants to build trust by sharing vulnerably and practice empathy by hearing the stories of others. Interviews and focus groups with the participants highlighted their experiences of building trust and practicing empathy over the course of two separate cohorts.

Although building trust was essential for creating a psychologically safe environment where participants felt as though they could share openly and honestly at
work, participants found the exercises and activities rooted in vulnerability to be challenging. Many of the participants expressed the challenge of engaging in deep self-reflection and a fear of being judged by their peers. Participant A explained:

That was the hardest session for me. Because that was when we had to sit down and reflect on events that have happened, things I haven’t really thought about in a while. So it was hard just because of that. Going back to stuff that I haven’t really paid much time to lately, and then all at once coming back. And then being in the new setting with new people, yourself [the facilitator] included. Trusting people, I never just straight trust somebody. And so, reflecting on it, remembering things, having to be honest about those things. And then trying to decide if I felt like I could share it, all happened in that session. Yeah, I went home tired that day. It was emotionally draining.

Participant A described her experience in the first MDP session where the participants learned about authentic leadership and were asked to engage in activities to reflect on their lives and begin to think about what events informed who they are today and how they show up at work. For Participant A, her reflections included early childhood traumas, addiction, and domestic violence. No matter what types of diverse experiences participants had, a critical component of creating a psychologically safe environment was allowing participants the autonomy and ownership of choosing what they shared in their cohort. No one was ever forced to share. As Participant A highlighted, she tried “to decide if [she] felt like [she] can share it.” Additionally, another participant almost quit the program after the first session because she was uncomfortable with sharing her experiences. Participant 4 stated:
I started with a negative [mindset], to be honest. It was uncomfortable and stressful. I was more expecting a lecture style, so I can just sit there to rest and think about something else, but it was not [like that]. So, I was talking with my supervisor the first couple of sessions [and said], I think I’m going to drop [the program] because, yeah, it was more like conversation.

Participant 4 experienced enough discomfort in her 1st day of MDP that she considered quitting the program altogether because the format was not lecture-style as she had expected. Unaccustomed to speaking about her personal life at work, Participant 4 was unsure of the rationale behind sharing authentically and openly in the context of a leadership program. She elaborated:

Personally, I’ve been here for 7 years comfortably working here. I’m still comfortable. I’m uncomfortable with those kinds of [people] problems, but I’m very comfortable working as an employee for my job. So once a week I was uncomfortable. It was a way to expose myself to the [unfamiliar], which is okay, right?

Instead of quitting the program, Participant 4 made a choice to lean into the experience and discomfort she felt about sharing at work. She described her role at the company after having worked there for 7 years as very comfortable; she always knew what to expect. However, once a week during MDP she was exposed to something new and uncomfortable. Other participants also experienced levels of discomfort and described the interpersonal reflections that occurred in the program as similar to therapy. Participant D stated:
It kind of felt like a mini therapy session. It’s like you’re hoping that everyone can be more open and share whatever they’re willing to, right? And in return, people hear that and appreciate it, and then hopefully creates a cycle of everyone who can help share a little bit more here, a little bit more there. Without having personally ever gone to therapy before, it’s kind of what I imagined. It was uncomfortable at first. I mean, it still is a little bit, but I do think after discourse, it’s a bit easier to share that with people, as long as you can assume that people are respectful, it’s a safe space and whatnot.

Participant D also found the aspect of sharing about his personal life was challenging and compared some of the activities and reflections to therapy. Although he had never been to therapy himself, Participant D imagined the level of interpersonal reflection that was required in MDP was comparable to speaking with a therapist.

Another participant, Participant 5, also felt like the program discussions resembled a therapy session. Participant 5 said:

I was sort of worried that it was going to be not as much of a discussion and more like pushing some high-minded ideals on me, like, “Yes, do that and then you’ll be a good manager.” Like lecture. I thought it was kind of going to be a little bit wishy washy and not direct. Even after the first week, I was worried it was going to be very wishy washy and not really usable. And then it became pretty clear that it was going to be like 8 weeks of therapy and discussion. It seemed like a really well-structured therapy session that ran for a really long time. So, I was happily surprised, but I was definitely worried going into it like, well, do you think it’ll be useful?
Although Participant 5 was initially skeptical about the usefulness of the program, he was surprised by the discussions and openness of the program. Instead of being a lecture style management program, Participant 5 realized the program was very individualized, so participants had complete autonomy over what they learned from the program.

Participant 4 further described the benefits of the open discussions and storytelling with her cohort, saying:

Yeah, that was really good and the best way you know each other, right? I believe all the people tried to be honest and to be authentic because we are learning authenticity and vulnerability. And we don’t have many chances to talk about certain things in real life, right? So, it’s not the guys talking about the kind of therapy session. It’s not the therapy session, but people feel like this therapy session because it’s kind of something in your deep mind and then bring it out.

And itself can be emotional and make other people emotional.

Despite initially wanting to quit MDP after the first week, Participant 4 saw the value of storytelling in the program to get to know her peers. She referenced authenticity and vulnerability as an application of her learning. She also felt her peers compared MDP to therapy because the introspective reflection brought deeply seeded memories to the surface that drew on their own and others’ emotions.

The discomfort that participants described throughout the program was self-regulated: I asked participants to self-assess throughout the program and monitor their own levels of discomfort. This allowed participants to choose their level of vulnerability, what they chose to share with their cohort, and what they kept private. This allowed participants to mitigate their own fear of judgment by their peers and begin to build trust.
with one another. Participant 1 described his fear of sharing in front of his work colleagues, saying:

I find that it could be a little bit difficult for employees to accept an HR person in the group and still be honest. I didn’t want to be a disrupter in the group or [the reason] people wouldn’t be able to open up. And then it was also a struggle for me internally to be like, “What? How far am I gonna push myself?” I was struggling with that fine line on professionalism and, you know, do I share stuff about my personal life, or do I not?

Participant 1’s struggle was not unique—many of the participants expressed fear of being misjudged for what they shared in front of their cohort. Participant 1 felt like he had to balance his perception as a human resources professional with what he chose to share about his personal life. Additionally, Participant D had a similar fear of being judged at work; he shared:

At the very surface level, it’s just these are new people I don’t really know very well. Like, I only have a professional working relationship with them. They only see me as the subject matter expert for my field, but not as some person that spills his life out or whatever, right? I guess going a little bit deeper, maybe it was a fear of it not being a safe space, or if people know this one thing about me, then maybe they’ll think of me differently. Thoughts like that. I’m getting better at it, but I do care a little bit about what people think about me. But at the end of the day, there’s always a little inkling of, “Oh, if they think poorly of me?” especially as people that I work with and see me every day. I just wouldn’t want any
impressions to kind of hold sway over what they think about my work or anything else.

Many of the participants, like Participant D, viewed work relationships as separate from their personal life. There was an acknowledged fear among participants of being judged in a professional context based on their personal life experiences. For Participant D, he was concerned that he would be viewed as less professional or less of a subject matter expert if he shared more insight into his personal life. He explained:

I guess it’s not that they would think differently of how I am on the job, I guess. But kind of what I was saying at the beginning; it’s like, “Oh, you’ve had such a good background. You didn’t have any struggles, you got to where you were because you’re born into a good family, you didn’t have money troubles.” And I’m wondering if that would undermine the amount of work I put in. Not to say that I worked harder than other people who are less privileged, but just saying, “Oh, you didn’t have to work that hard.” That’s maybe the impression that I see people would have.

Participant D was concerned his peers would see his privileged background (i.e., having successful parents, financial security, and access to education) as the reason for his success, undermining his own hard work.

Participant 1’s self-regulation allowed him to feel confident in what he chose to share in his cohort and what he chose to keep private. He explained:

I liked how at the beginning [the facilitator] laid it out: you can share as much as you want, or you can share as little as you want. And for me that first session, like I said before, I was nervous because I’m in HR like, what do I share? What do I
not share? I made an agreement with myself, like a personal agreement, what level I’m going to share up to, and it was higher than I thought I was going to share. But I still stuck to that agreement. For me personally, that made the whole program easier to me because I had made this agreement with myself that this is what you’re going to be comfortable sharing. So, I think that that kind of alleviated the stress throughout the program for me because I already held myself to a certain standard of what I agreed to, for myself, and what I was comfortable with.

Participant 1 was able to trust that he had complete autonomy over how far he pushed himself to be vulnerable and shared throughout the program, which helped mitigate his fears of being judged by his peers as a member of HR. This allowed him to build trust with his cohort understanding that he was in charge of his own level of vulnerability. However, like Participant 1, many other participants were surprised by how much they chose to share about their personal lives throughout the program. Participant 4 also actively made the choice to engage and share. She explained:

[The facilitator] didn’t force anything, and the program did not force anything. I think it’s based on the information that was shared, the individual forced themselves. I mean, everybody has a choice. I mean, I don’t know whether it is true or not, but every single day a person makes 3,000 choices. Whether it’s going to drink water or sparkling water or something like that. The setup of this kind of program, and then whether you want to open your eyes totally 100% is your choice, and then I think the reason why I am uncomfortable or stressed is because I give myself stress: Are you going to think about this subject? Do you have the
will to change yourself? I had to make a decision, right? Every single session, whether I’m going to talk about my opinion, because they never forced “[Participant 4], do you have anything to say?” or something like that, right? So, I just raise my hands.

The self-regulation that occurred among the participants also allowed them to gauge the extent to which they chose to share about their personal lives. Participant B revealed in her interview that she was in the process of getting a divorce; however, this was not something she shared with her cohort. Participant B explained why she chose to keep that part of her story private, saying:

I’m personally going through a lot. I’m going through a divorce. There were a couple times where I was like, “Do I share that?” but I’m also really not ready to share that. I gotta be honest, I am not saying it’s obviously a part of my story. It’s in the process of being in my story. But I don’t feel like that’s making or breaking me as a leader, and I don’t feel like at this point in time, it’s necessary for me to tell. I feel like I remember this one session where you said this, and I agree with it—Once I can kind of get a grip on it and I feel more comfortable, then I feel more forthcoming. So, I think maybe it’s just my circumstance. Maybe I felt more sensitive. “Oh, they want me to be vulnerable, and this is a huge pivotal part of my life right now, but I’m not ready to share.” I think that was the little fight I had in my head.

The self-awareness Participant B demonstrated regarding not being ready to talk about her divorce was encouraged throughout the MDP. Although vulnerability was at the core of mitigating fear of judgment and building trust, I asked participants to share
only what they felt comfortable sharing. This practice of self-regulation, and ultimately self-awareness, was consistent throughout the program. All participants engaged in deep self-reflection to better understand themselves, become more self-aware, and, in the process, be more vulnerable with one another to build trust.

**Empathy**

Once participants had the courage to share, trust was built slowly over time with their peers. By sharing their own individual stories with one another without affirming any of their initial fears (e.g., no judgment, bias), participants were able to mitigate their own biases by hearing the stories of their peers. Stories revealed information about their peers of which participants were not aware. The diverse backgrounds and experiences of the participants brought them closer together by building on that trust and allowed them to practice empathy in hearing the unexpected stories of their cohort.

Participant A described her experience of hearing the stories of her peers by saying, “I am a nurturer by nature. And I want to save everybody. So whenever someone shared something that was difficult, I wanted to help them.” While sharing, participants often felt vulnerable and sometimes became emotional. Participant A was able to empathize with her peers and wanted to console them and make them feel safe.

Additionally, Participant B acknowledged that her own biases and assumptions of her peers were mitigated once she heard their stories, saying:

I also like when I hear other people’s stories, it just kind of backtracks. You really have no idea what people have been through, and people could be going through a lot like me, but you know, you go to work, and you put on a good face, and you try your best to move forward. So I feel like that’s like the empathy part of me,
you might not know what’s going on here and might not feel comfortable sharing, but “Hey, I noticed maybe you seem a little distracted. Let’s talk about that.” I think this goes back to showing that empathy goes a long way—making observations and really caring about your employees goes a long way. When I hear other people’s stories, too, when I hear about all the [stuff] that they’ve been through, and look at them now. I’ve learned a lot about myself. And it takes note of how people have been through so much. Kindness and empathy goes a long way, and we all sometimes have to put on faces and everything might not be as great as it might appear.

Participant B’s experience of hearing the stories of her peers not only allowed her to learn more about herself (i.e., her own biases and assumptions) but gave her insight into the roles of empathy and kindness at work. She described how people can often mask the reality of their situation at work, but how it is difficult to leave our entire selves at the door when we walk into the office every day.

Participant 3 also acknowledged her own mindset of keeping her personal and professional lives separate, but MDP allowed her to see the value of sharing more about herself at work. She explained:

As far as other people sharing, I learned a lot from it. I actually learned that, yeah, everyone has a different leadership style, but we all kind of go through the same experiences. That was nice to know. As far as me sharing—so at the beginning of the program, I did also feel a bit uncomfortable like, “What I have to share myself?” [I had] that same mentality: my personal life is my personal life, and work life is my work life. And then I learned throughout the program, I didn’t
realize how not open I am to sharing. I felt like, okay, sure, whatever, I’ll share when I need to, that’s great. But when I am sharing, I have those feelings of uncomfortableness. Why am I feeling this way? It’s, it’s odd. That’s how I felt about the sharing. I think overall, that might be another personal take away from the program. I learned that I keep people on a shallow level. I don’t really form deeper connections with them, because I always keep that surface level of my life. That was enlightening.

Participant 3 felt a deeper connection with her peers as they shared more about their personal lives. Additionally, she learned that she did not actively engage in a deep or meaningful way with her peers and instead, kept them on a “shallow level.” Although uncomfortable, Participant 3’s greatest takeaway from MDP was to form deeper connections with her peers and share more than surface level interactions.

Participant 6, as a newer manager, often felt imposter syndrome due to her lack of formal management experience. She shared:

I feel like I learned a lot. I do have impostor syndrome. Like, who let me be in charge of these people? I don’t know what I’m doing. So, I feel like I learned a lot just from other people’s stories, like with your story about leadership. Trying to think about who are great leaders in my own life that I have learned a lot from or can look up to.

Hearing the stories of others allowed Participant 6 to recognize her own imposter syndrome—and that the feeling of not being capable of managing people was a shared concern of her peers, so she was not alone in that feeling. Hearing her peers describe leaders in their lives also allowed Participant 6 to reflect deeper on the experiences in her
life, whether formal or informal, where she learned leadership traits. This gave her confidence in her own leadership journey through understanding that she was not alone and was more capable of leading than she thought.

Participant F summarized his experience of hearing others share throughout MDP, saying:

So, learning my own story was one thing, but definitely hearing about other people’s stories, whether it’s as dark or darker for me, it just, just sums up that no matter where we were, where we started, we were all in that room together, right? To a degree, all of our stories are connected. Seeing that, and then not just, not just using my story to get through the program, but everybody’s stories. It puts us together in the same room as in unison as a cohort. And I thought that was great. I think what really helped me get through this session was just, just being a part of that group. Because I could come to the session every day knowing that I can, effectively, trust these people, grow with them, connect with them, and it’s appropriate at the end of the day, and it’s for everybody’s benefit.

For Participant F, he not only experienced personal growth but understood the storytelling aspect of the program as a collective story. He felt a greater sense of connection with his peers throughout the program and felt like a part of a community by sharing the same experience together.

Fostering Community

An integral part of the cohort structure for MDP was not only to create psychological safety, build trust, and practice empathy, but to foster a community culture among participants through peer-to-peer learning. There were several benefits to sharing
vulnerably in a community setting: first, participants were able to relate to one another on a more personal level; second, there was a shared phenomenon where if one participant shared, others would join in; and third, participants felt more confident in their own storytelling.

Many of the participants were able to relate to one another through storytelling by discovering they shared similar experiences. Participant A described her feelings around storytelling in a professional setting, saying:

I think it’s great. It allows you to build trust with each other. It was hard for everybody in our class. I would say everybody else was either not trusting or just shy in general. So, it was harder for them. But I feel like storytelling allows people to know you on a personal level and relate.

In a professional setting like MDP, participants were able to get to know one another on a more personal level. This allowed them to better relate to one another and understand their commonalities. For many participants, having shared experiences with other MDP participants made them feel less alone. Participant A said:

I have done a lot of volunteer work throughout my life. I’ve sponsored youth and even adults through recovery programs, therapy, and stuff like that, and even life coaching. It helps people to heal to know that they didn’t go through something by themselves. But a lot of people’s pain, they feel alone in that pain. And until you share that, people don’t understand. There’s also a believability to it, right? I know for me personally, I wouldn’t go to the dry cleaner to fix my car. I want someone who has fixed a car before to fix my car, right? There’s trust in that. So, knowing that someone else is going through something that you’re going through,
or that you went through, helps you to be able to share and talk about that. And if you’re the person who’s been through it, and you don’t share that, then no one knows that. Outside of work, that is always where I find my strength in sharing things that have happened to me. It’s also where that sense of gratitude comes from, I have been through a lot in my life. They said, “Of all the things you’ve been through in your life, how is it that you’re still so optimistic?” I said, “Well, it’s probably twofold. I probably am just optimistic by nature. I remember being a happy kid. But also, it comes from I have gratitude for every bad experience I had. Because it’s given me the groundwork to help other people.” So, like, without that, you can’t help someone through something if I haven’t been through it.

Participant A highlighted the importance of sharing one’s story so that others can feel less alone. She also found meaning in her own experiences, even in instances of trauma, because her story could help someone else. This also gave Participant A a sense of gratitude for the challenges she had faced in her life.

The majority of participants found storytelling, especially sharing intimate details about their past, to be difficult. However, there was a phenomenon that occurred where once one participant shared, others would follow. Perhaps it was an unspoken acknowledgement of ensuring no one felt alone, but once one participant shared first, it created a domino effect where other participants shared as well. Participant D described that a safe space was required to make him feel more comfortable sharing openly, but if one person demonstrated bravery in going first, he was more likely to share afterwards. He explained:
What group do I consider a safe space? Now that I think about it more, I guess I don’t really have a good answer. I probably wouldn’t be the very first one to share. But if I see someone that’s a little more brave, then I would also be open. Admittedly, Participant D would not necessarily be the first person to share, but he felt more comfortable doing so if someone else went first. There was a specific instance during MDP where Participant F shared a personal experience from his childhood, then Participant A shared, and then Participant E shared. Participants were asked to share a vulnerable part of their lives with their cohort. When asked what prompted Participant F to go first, he said:

Somebody has to start somewhere. I mean, if I didn’t, maybe somebody else would have, but it might have been a little bit less dark. And it would have changed the way that the volunteers work, maybe it would have changed the way I volunteered my story. If I had gone a little bit later, right? Maybe I would have picked less darkness like, “Hey, I was a first generation graduate, and I had to figure that out for myself.” Not knowing that, “Oh, by the 10th grade, I had lost my grandpa, my dad was gone, and mom had to leave just so she could pay for my living expenses.” So definitely, I think there has to be a jumping off point and it has to be done by somebody or it has to be led by somebody. And that will definitely dictate the pace of vulnerability within the team.

It took courage for Participant F to speak first. He acknowledged that perhaps the depth of vulnerability that he chose to share would have been different if someone else had gone first. The first person to speak set the tone for the rest of the participants who chose
to share, and, in this case, Participant F sharing first created a domino effect of other participants sharing similar stories. Participant A described the session by saying:

Participant F shared first about a period of growing up without his parents around. And then that prompted me to want to share with him because I could relate to him. I also grew up without parents. And I could just tell when he was sharing it, he felt very vulnerable and out there when it ended. He shared this thing that was very painful. And then it was dead silence. I know that doesn’t feel good. And I could relate to him. And so I just wanted him to know that he wasn’t alone at that moment. So, then I shared, and I think I said I wasn’t normally going to do this, but I just didn’t want you to feel that you’re the only person, and then I shared.

And then that made Participant E share something.

Despite Participant A not initially planning on sharing that she too grew up without both parents, she chose to share that information after Participant F shared. Through the shared experience of not having both parents, Participant A and Participant F were able to relate to one another in a way they had not expected. Then Participant E, moved by her peers’ vulnerability, also chose to share that she, too, had gone through a similar experience. She said:

When I first started the program, I saw that I’m not the only one that has been through the same situation. Hearing them speak, I know they had the courage to say that. Participant F first started first saying something difficult, and then Participant A saying that he’s not the only one to do this. And I was like, “You know what? I want to be part of that. I want to be a part of what they’ve been through and understand how they feel, and have the courage to say that.” And as a
leader, you have to step out of that comfort zone. [I was] moved by their courage
and also one of my Gallup Strengths was being an includer, [so] not [wanting to
leave] them out on their own.

Unknowingly, Participant F had initiated a domino effect of shared vulnerability.
His courage and willingness to share first gave Participant A and Participant E the
courage to share as well. Whether or not Participant F intended to do so, he inspired those
around him to also share and be a part of a community based on their shared experiences.
Even participants who chose not to share admitted they would have felt more comfortable
doing so had other participants shared similar experiences to theirs. Participant B
explained:

But I feel like if more people were like that, then I probably would have felt more
comfortable being like, “Hey, this also has happened to me. I get it. I understand
maybe a part of the pain or struggle that you’re going through.” I was so proud of
Participant E because she had shared some things in our support group. And when
she said that in front of the whole class I was like, honestly, you have balls,
because I don’t know if I would have shared that much about my life, because
she’s been through a lot between her mom and taking care of siblings, everything
else. So yeah, I feel like maybe if more people did it, then I would have felt more
comfortable doing it, too.

If Participant B had a shared community, one where other participants had experiences
similar to hers, she would have been encouraged to share more. In her interview,
Participant B admitted she did not feel ready or equipped to speak about her divorce.
However, if other participants had shared their experiences with divorce, perhaps
Participant B would have felt more comfortable doing so as well. Participant 6 also agreed that hearing the stories of her colleagues helped mitigate her imposter syndrome because other leaders also felt similarly. She explained:

I think just learning from everyone and, like, knowing that I’m okay, I can do this. I think learning from everybody’s stories helped me realize that I’m not alone in this weird impostor syndrome thing where I don’t know what I’m doing. Just learning from everyone else’s story has helped a lot.

Like Participant 6, Participant E also stated that storytelling made her feel less alone. She said, “Everybody had different stories. Everybody has different ways to say their story and express their story. And some of them I was like, wow, you’re not the only one [to go] through this situation.” Shared experiences, when spoken in a group setting like MDP, allowed participants to create a sense of community in their cohort. There is a phenomenon that occurs when participants in a group setting share similar experiences, one that encourages vulnerability, builds trust, and fosters a sense of community.

Another feature of MDP was the creation and presentation of participants’ leadership maps. Although participants crafted their maps individually, at the end of the program they shared their final maps in front of their peers. Participants agreed that trust was built in their cohort over time, making it easier to share vulnerable aspects of their maps in front of their peers. However, guests, such as friends or family and other leadership in the organization, were also invited to graduation, which participants noted made the presentation of their maps more difficult because more strangers were present. This reinforced the sense of community participants experienced in their own cohorts, where they felt more comfortable sharing in that group setting than with strangers.
present. When he was asked how he felt sharing his map in front of others at the program graduation ceremony, Participant D pointed out the distinction between sharing with those with whom he had already built trust (i.e., his cohort) versus essential strangers (i.e., graduation guests), saying:

I think in the program I was more comfortable because we’ve been meeting with the same people, and yeah, it gets comfortable after a certain point. I must have missed it in the very beginning, but I didn’t realize we were presenting to a larger group at the end. My first thought was, “Oh, do I want to put everything on it? I was originally planning to . . .” It goes back to that safe space thing because I think it’s one thing when you as a moderator or instructor explicitly say things like, “This is the space where we are expecting or going to expect to hear vulnerable things.” That opens the door for, okay, it’s expected, it’s normal. But in a group of attendees, like 50 people that come for [graduation], people that don’t know what the program is about, they’ll be like, “Where did this come from?” It would be a shock. So, for me, it was like, oh, come the big graduation ceremony I did feel a little bit more nervous about it.

Participant D felt nervous about sharing his leadership map in front of guests at graduation, specifically noting that the safe space was not established like it had been with his cohort. Trust, an essential part of encouraging vulnerable sharing, was not fostered in the larger group at graduation due to the guests who were invited. This forced participants who chose to share more vulnerable (often trauma-informed) parts of their map to have even more courage than if they only had to share in front of their cohort peers, those whom they had already established as a trusted safe space.
Additionally, Participant D noted a sense of risk associated with sharing in front of strangers because it was more difficult to anticipate how they would react. This risk is mitigated in a safe space built over time, where MDP participants know how their peers will or will not react. Participant E also was afraid of being judged by her story at graduation, saying:

I thought I was going to be embarrassed. There are some points in my life, looking at everybody else, I don’t think a lot of people have been through what I’ve been through just by looking at them. Just judging, I was basically judging everybody by how they were. And [I was] afraid of saying things. But then in the class we did support groups. And every day we started off with like, “How was your weekend?” or “How are you doing?” or “Tell us something about your map?” And hearing everybody’s stories, it was just like, okay, I can do this. Why not? And just saying it, it was a relief, because it’s something that I kept away. And it’s funny, because no one knows my mom’s in jail except here at BTO. In that group. Not even my friends.

Despite Participant E’s initial fear of sharing at graduation, she was able to build trust in her MDP cohort and in her support group over a period of time, which made her feel more confident in sharing her leadership map. By practicing sharing vulnerably throughout the program, it became easier for Participant E over the course of the MDP. In the end, Participant E shared that her mother was in jail, something she had not even shared with her closest friends. This sense of community made Participant E feel more confident in owning her own story. She described her experience as being a part of a family, saying, “It just feels like a family now, all of our colleagues in our class. This is
just a small family where we can reach out to each other and do check-ins.” Participant E’s experience was similar to many of the participants, where they developed relationships with their peers and built trust over time, leading to a sense of community that went beyond MDP.

Throughout MDP, I encouraged participants to face their fear of judgment, be empathetic, build trust with one another, and, ultimately, foster a sense of community in their cohort. The process of sharing vulnerably with their peers forced participants to mitigate their own judgments and biases to become more empathetic leaders. When they realized many of them had shared experiences, this created an environment where participants trusted one another, which encouraged other participants to share more. This reciprocal process of storytelling where one person shared and others followed, fostered a community culture where participants could engage with their colleagues in a meaningful way that typically does not occur at work.

**Storytelling: A People-Centered Approach to Leadership**

All MDP participants viewed storytelling as a critical component of the program; one that fostered individual deep reflection, trust, empathy, and community. The following section outlines a foundation that could allow storytelling to occur in an organization by building brave spaces, creating opportunities for connection, and using storytelling for leadership development.

**Building the Brave Space**

First, participants noted that a safe or brave space (i.e., one where participants could be courageous to share vulnerably in a professional setting) was very important to establishing trust. Although this was integrated in MDP, participants also acknowledged
the difficulty of creating a brave space in the organization as a whole. Many participants felt confident in their own ability to create brave spaces for the teams they managed, but they were not confident in the organization’s or other leaders’ abilities to do so.

Participant A explained, “I’m building it. Right? Going the other way you’re throwing yourself out there and stepping into a space. So yeah, I have 100% confidence in creating the space, but do not have that much confidence in stepping into it.” In her interview, Participant A stated her own boss did not see the benefit of sharing personal information at work (i.e., storytelling). Although Participant A felt 100% confident in creating a brave space for her team members and direct reports, the same environment was not supported by her own boss. However, Participant B who shared a close relationship with her boss, felt different than Participant A. Participant B’s manager provided her a brave space where she could be vulnerable. She explained:

> It goes back to if you build a relationship with your employees and your coworkers, and it’s a safe space to be vulnerable. I’m always very forthcoming about everything. And so, I think there is 100% a place for that in the workplace. Like we’ve talked about, we all have lives, we’re all human. It does not shut off when we come to work, nor should I. There have been plenty of times [my manager] knows that I’m not having a great day, and she’s like, log off. There’s been plenty of days where I’ve gotten my work done, but I have to go take a mental break. She knows that, and she lets me do it. And like the fact that if I didn’t have her, if I didn’t have her as my support system, I don’t know if I would be doing as well as I am currently doing. So, I think all of that is so important. And I think it’s telling as a manager if your employee does not come to you and
feels comfortable saying things. That says a lot about you and your manager style, and that was a huge takeaway for me. I never want my person or my people to not feel like they can’t come and talk to me. I want them to feel supported and loved (maybe love might not be the appropriate word for work), but I love [my manager].

Participant B not only felt safe because of the environment her own manager cultivated, but she was able to experience first-hand the difference in how a brave space made her feel as an employee. Her manager was able to model a positive brave space, one that Participant B could aspire to create with her own direct reports. She also described a brave space as an environment where she could succeed because she felt supported by her manager.

In theory, creating a brave space where employees feel as though they can share their whole authentic selves with their managers has many benefits, but in practice balancing performance management and open communication could be challenging. Several participants also expressed a challenge in creating a brave space for their direct reports. Participant 5 said:

I feel a dichotomy that I also am struggling with because I feel totally on board with everything we did in MDP, but I’m struggling with what one of my reports is sharing with me now. I want you to be able to talk to me, but it’s also weighing on me, and I don’t want you to bring it in. But then it’s like, isn’t the point that we give them the opportunity to also experience that and go through it? I also am like, it’s a little bit too much at work, probably, but also, you need someone to
talk to about it. You don’t have anyone to talk to. It’s really tough, and I feel like I don’t think there’s any answer.

Participant 5 felt a dichotomy between how he felt about storytelling in MDP and in the practical application with his direct reports. One direct report was experiencing a difficult time at home and shared that openly with Participant 5. Although Participant 5 was glad to be able to create that brave space for his direct report, he also felt tension between wanting to help and not wanting to feel uncomfortable himself. Participant 2 also felt similarly, where storytelling in MDP was encouraged, but she did not feel comfortable hearing personal stories from her direct reports. She said:

I mean therapy, it’s amazing. I love therapy, and I think everybody could use therapy in their lives. I think it was nice [in MDP] because here’s a safe space where everybody is feeling uncomfortable. Let’s all get to that point together and do it and get through this, and we’ll be stronger after because of it. But again, I think of the reality of me with my direct reports, and with my manager. I’m definitely totally willing—if I get in a car accident and something bad happens, I’m willing to talk about that and share it, but I don’t want to get into my deepest, darkest things, which is I think kind of where [the facilitator was] pushing us. It felt [the facilitator] pushing us to go there during MDP, and I didn’t feel comfortable doing that, but I did it. [The facilitator] didn’t pressure anyone too much. I think those things are okay in this group therapy session where we’re all just taking off our armor together, but I wouldn’t want to do that with my team to that extent.
Participant 2 saw the value of being in shared discomfort in MDP with her cohort to build community and trust, but in application with her direct reports she felt that it was not necessary. The extent to which participants were vulnerable in MDP, according to Participant 2, worked well because of the shared discomfort among all the participants. However, in a manager to direct report relationship, Participant 2 felt the vulnerability of storytelling was not needed. For Participant 2, a shared discomfort and brave space was needed with the reciprocity of sharing, one that would not organically occur in a relationship with a manager and their direct reports.

Participant 1 summarized the tension between wanting to foster a brave space for his direct reports while balancing the duties of a manager. He said:

We don’t have to just be, in my opinion, the therapist and listen to them, and take all that burden. As managers we still have that responsibility to get the work done, and they should still also be held accountable. But we can also empathize and provide the resources and stuff like that. But, you know, it’s still not a free pass.

Participant 1 acknowledged the difficulty of creating a brave space for his direct reports, but also affirmed that the brave space is needed. Unlike therapy, creating a brave space is a reciprocal process. Managers must balance creating a safe environment for their employees while managing performance. Participant 1 asserted that both are possible, despite being challenging. He continued:

I understand what Participant 2 and Participant 5 were saying; it might be hard to get to that point with certain employees. And I think it is hard. And I think when you’re having those difficult conversations, too. For me, I got pieces of this training where I’m like, okay, I as a leader can listen to what you’re saying. And
for Participant 5, I can empathize with what you’re saying. But at the same time, like let’s bring it back to what your objectives and responsibilities and outcomes and expectations still are within your job. I think it’s not just going out there and sharing all our personal stuff and laying out on the table. I think the vulnerability piece is being able to just connect with them and empathize.

Participant 1 highlighted the importance of a manager’s ability to balance both performance management and productivity while being empathetic and creating a safe environment for their employees. The challenge for leaders across organizations is their ability to effectively balance creating brave spaces for their teams while ensuring employees can be high performing. A brave space allows employees the opportunity to feel seen and heard and to be vulnerable to admit their own mistakes. Setting the expectation for leaders to cultivate brave spaces in their teams and across the organization can support an environment that allows all employees to feel seen and thrive.

Creating Connection

Once organizations support leaders building brave spaces for their teams, one of the benefits for employees could be an increase in connection. Brave spaces allow individuals to feel a sense of trust among team members, which in turn encourages them to be vulnerable. In the setting of MDP, brave spaces ultimately led to increased sense of connection among the participants. When I asked participants their thoughts on integrating storytelling in an organization, overwhelmingly they agreed that one benefit would be creating a greater sense of connection with one another. Participant F said:
The potential benefits would be great. There’s no doubt about that in my mind. I think it would bring everybody closer together. It would be a good way to connect people, right? Because people want to hear stories and connect with it, right? Whether it’s little bits here and there, or the entire thing. There’s a level of connection. The only time you don’t really like a story is if it didn’t resonate at all. The people aspect for storytelling within a company would be tremendous. The other thing, too, is it definitely puts everybody on a more personal level, right? Look at it. It forces you to look at somebody as an individual, not as a, not as a headcount, not as a number or an ID. Even if they were a temporary employee—when I’ve had some temp employees I’ve always tried to get to know them on some level. And, you know, learn who they are. Because that, for me, is important to do, so that I know if I want to keep them or not. On a personal level, I feel like this person would not be a fit for the team, then, obviously, I can’t keep them around. But I won’t know that if I don’t know them. So, storytelling, in terms of a professional setting or implemented as a whole in the corporate structure like this one, would be hard. It would be a big challenge. But it would definitely be one of those transformational changes I would love to see in the future for many companies. But let me know if you need help with this. That’s gonna be a tough one.

Participant F emphasized how storytelling throughout MDP fostered a sense of connection among the participants. Beyond MDP, Participant F saw the benefit of investing in shared connections with his direct reports to foster a positive team culture. At
an organizational level, storytelling could potentially increase a sense of community, belonging, and investment in each individual.

Participant C agreed, although she felt sharing was uncomfortable, there would be value in storytelling in an organization. She said:

I think it’s a good way to build connections or establish connections faster than you would have in other scenarios. I definitely think it helps accelerate building that cohesion. I think it depends on who you’re sharing it with. I think it’s good as a manager to know my reports, and I think it’s good for my manager to know my experiences. But wider than that, I guess I could still see it adding value. There are peers that I work with that I tend to gravitate toward. You do build a connection with someone. For example, this person in engineering always helps me, I’m gonna reach out to them, and building that kind of back and forth is definitely beneficial. And you could say, like, you know, on a professional level if they knew my story—technically one of the people I’m good friends with we play soccer together. They work here. You know, they’re in a different department, but they’re my go to person in that department because of that. So, I think it definitely adds value in that sense.

Participant C had challenges with vulnerability throughout MDP and considered herself a very private person who takes a while to open up about her personal life. However, despite her private disposition, Participant C still viewed storytelling as adding value to build connections at an organization.

Participant 4 shared a story during MDP regarding a mentor she had over the years—one who still kept in touch with her. At one point in her career, she had health
issues where she was missing work for doctor appointments, and this mentor was incredibly supportive during her health journey. However, Participant 4 did not see the connection between vulnerability and leadership, saying:

I think it is important. I thought that story was extremely important to myself. Maybe this story might be important to others because there are certain leaders—I mentioned I’m going to go to New York in August to participate in a meeting, a celebration meeting, so we have a very tight connection. He’s 80. So that kind of personal connection everybody may have, right? I think because he’s a great leader there is some kind of a piece I don’t understand. But that’s real, that connection, right? That strong bond. I think that piece of a story—Maybe people can think about their own kind of connection with or with it with their own leaders.

As humans, we strive for a personal connection. These strong memories that Participant 4 had with her mentor, someone whom she considered a great leader and who had been there for her over a number of years. Their relationship went beyond just a transactional boss/direct report. His investment in Participant 4’s personal well-being and the connection they built over a number of years was powerful. If Participant 4 had strictly had a professional relationship with that mentor, it is unlikely she would have felt this strongly about him after so many years. The intersection between vulnerability, trust, and leadership, is a sense of connection and belonging at work.

Participant D also agreed that storytelling fostered connections at work and there would be benefits at an organizational level. She said:
Benefits definitely like productivity just improved. People will just be close to each other more. The more comfortable you are with the people you work with, the happier you’ll be and the more productive you’ll be, too. It kind of brings me back to conflict resolution stuff we talked about where it just breeds an environment where honesty is valued. And if people can tell their stories without fear of being judged, then no fear of sharing ideas or farfetched ideas, right? So productivity, and I would probably say retention, right? People would feel closer together. And I mean, off the top of my head, it would just bring everyone else in a better place with a better mindset as a whole. I can’t really see any downside steps, really just convincing people to start doing it is the only downside they would say.

Participant D highlighted the cultural benefits to an organization through storytelling: positive work environments, increased innovation, and employee engagement and retention. However, like Participant F, Participant D acknowledged that integrating storytelling throughout an organization could prove to be challenging if there was not a shared mindset of vulnerability.

For Participant 5, the importance of building connection with his direct reports opened his mind to new perspectives about leadership. He said:

I think historically, I’ve always thought of people I’ve reported to in the context of their ability to lead a technical project, and not really much outside of that. And I feel like all of the discussion sort of drove a sense of responsibility, and sort of like, set an example of how to think about it. Because if I think of anything I’d have to say about previous bosses, it’s strictly based on whether or not they were
good at what they did and whether or not they could make good changes in that setting. Not about how they got other people to interact and work. I feel like having that framework laid out, and there were a lot of useful modules outside of it, but just having, like, understanding that that is part of the job, and then it’s part of what makes you good at the other aspects of it, as well. Not only how much progress can we make, because it’s more than that. I guess thinking about the fact that it’s more than that is something that was sort of new. And that instilled that responsibility.

Even as a direct report, Participant 5 only viewed competent leaders as those who were the most technically skilled. However, MDP emphasized the importance of human connection at work, a responsibility that Participant 5 took with him beyond the program. Participant 5 recognized the unspoken and often underdeveloped skill for leaders to build connection and breed a closeness in their teams. Through MDP, he felt more confident in creating connections between direct reports, in a team, and between a leader and their direct report.

Additionally, Participant B noted additional benefits of storytelling to an organization such as increased employee engagement. She said:

I feel like it’s necessary. I think I struggled sometimes because I love you and I love my job so much. I know I’m probably one of the few who actually love what I do. I love the company’s mission. I love my boss. I know BTO’s been through a lot with the layoffs. I totally get it. I know financially people are like, what’s happening? I 100% get it. But I guess it’s hard for me because I feel like a lot of people are really critical of BTO. And again, I know that a few might not have as
good of a manager or enjoy their job. But I’ve been in places like my previous job where that was not a safe space to talk about what’s going on personally at home or just at your job or if you’re having any issues.

Participant B felt a strong connection to the organization and her role. Compared to previous professional experiences, Participant B felt BTO had an opportunity to continue to inform the positive culture of the organization. She said:

And here I feel like it is much more progressive, and you can do that. Or at least look at the chief human resources officer; she wants to cultivate that type of culture where we can. So that’s where I see where I’ve been, and BTO is in a great spot, and then also where we could get because we want to progress. That does dishearten me, a lot of people are critical. I think we cannot just sit here and pretend we’re robots like we’ve said, I cannot work at 110% every day even when I’m the best I possibly can be. I don’t know anyone who likes to work 110% every single day, and I don’t even have children. People have elderly parents, there’s lots of other factors going on. I hope we can continue to cultivate that, and I think it’s necessary for retention, morale, culture, just and also, we spend so much time at work, like, you need to enjoy your job. It’s so important.

Participant B acknowledged the importance of supporting the whole person at work, where individuals do not remove aspects of their identities (e.g., being parents, caretakers) when they come to work. She noted fostering an environment of connection and personal investment in an organization kept employees engaged and motivated at work. A culture of connection allows employees to be themselves and have a personal investment in their colleagues and their organization.
Participant 4 summarized her experience in MDP as challenging, but worthwhile to an organization. She said, “I really do believe this is a really valuable program, and it will impact the employees and company. But, personally, it was very, very stressful and uncomfortable. Shaking my core. So this was quite an experience.” The discomfort Participant 4 experienced was due to the mindset and culture shift that occurred when storytelling was centered in the methodology of the leadership program at BTO. As an organization, BTO had not previously integrated the importance of connection, personal sharing, or storytelling. Because storytelling was introduced to MDP for the first time at BTO, many participants found it uncomfortable. However, despite the discomfort participants may have felt from being vulnerable and trying something new, they ultimately saw the benefit, not just for themselves, but for the organization as a whole.

**Storytelling and Leadership**

MDP participants in this study agreed that storytelling offered them opportunities for individual reflection and meaning-making, while fostering trust, empathy, and community among their cohort. Participants stated, although there could be benefits from storytelling, creating psychological safety and buy-in from the larger organization would be challenging. Participants outlined several potential challenges for integrating storytelling at the organization level: first, managers who graduated from MDP faced challenges in practicing storytelling in their own teams; second, some participants felt their own managers were not convinced of the benefit of fostering interpersonal relationships; and third, despite the challenges participants faced in practicing storytelling in the larger organization, they all agreed storytelling affirmed their own experiences, identities, and leadership framework.
Most MDP participants understood the value of storytelling in the context of the leadership program; however, integrating and replicating it with their direct reports presented new challenges. Participant 2 explained:

I know that from day one, [the facilitator was] very open with us saying that [they wanted] people to open up, and I think that sort of set a tone. That made me nervous because I’m fine talking to people and opening up to a certain extent, but I don’t want to go into my deepest darkest things at work. I think that is so honorable that [the facilitator was] willing to, and I respect [them] so much for that. But that’s not something I choose to bring into the workplace. Will I share about my hobbies and interests and my daughter? Absolutely. But I don’t really want to at work because I feel like that’s unnecessary and unprofessional.

Participant 2 felt sharing in the context of MDP, in a context of psychological safety where the tone was established for sharing vulnerably and openly, could be considered unprofessional in a workplace setting. However, Participant 2 specifically described her comfort level being a large part in her ability to share—one where she would talk about her personal life, but not her “deepest darkest” secrets. Participant 2’s observation was that storytelling could occur at work, but it largely depended on the comfort level of those who chose to share and the environment that supported that.

For Participant 1, his experience in MDP was a shift in his own mindset of what leadership experience looked like: a merger of the professional and personal. He stated:

I understand we want to see leaders that are strong, and that we can rely on and that are pillars, but personally for me if I can see someone who’s able to be vulnerable and own up to something or talk about something personal or
professional, I can relate to that on some level. That makes me respect that person more rather than just technical knowledge and strategy and all that. That’s great, I respect that a lot, but I think you can still be both. That helps me make that connection more where I respect that person because of the whole package.

Participant 1’s framework for what defines good leadership shifted throughout the program. Because of the exercises in storytelling, Participant 1 understood good leadership as leaders who were vulnerable and also skill competent. Although job roles, responsibilities, and expertise are a requirement for managers, Participant 1 emphasized the importance of earning respect and gaining connection with direct reports for leaders who are able to model vulnerability and foster interpersonal relationships. Storytelling, Participant 1 explained, was one way to practice this. Participant 1 also found alignment in his personal and professional experience from his own storytelling during MDP. He stated:

I think overall, this MDP made us, like, reflect a lot of what type of leader we are now and what type of leader we want to be; not just, you know, I’m going to be a good leader because I’m gonna listen, I’m gonna communicate. It was more of pulling pieces from our personal lives and what shaped us personally and professionally. Which I did. Some of the other programs that I’ve seen, it’s like you’re being taught at. It’s like, this is the way you should be, this is what a good manager does. There were highlights of do’s and don’ts [in MDP], but it was more interactive, and it was more conducive to get different perspectives and then be able to reflect on yourself, what do I agree with? Why don’t I agree with them?
Who do I want to be as a manager? So, a lot of internal reflection and interaction with each other, I think really helped a lot.

The storytelling in MDP allowed Participant 1 to hear diverse perspectives from the other participants, and, ultimately, he chose the leadership frameworks he would use in his own practice. Similarly, Participant 3’s takeaway from MDP was an increased level of self-awareness and understanding the benefits of storytelling with her own team. She stated:

I think as a leader with my team, I’m more of that person that’s like, “Okay, this is our goal. We’re gonna do this.” Everything is more work based. When I go on PTO, I don’t tell people where I’m going. I don’t share. But because of MDP, now I do share a little bit more, like, “Oh, I went here and did this.” I do see how people can relate to me more and connect more. It’s that give and take. [In the past], people would share things with me, and I interact with them. That’s awesome. That’s great, but I would never really share back. So now that I am sharing that I see the difference in our relationship. That social aspect applies back to projects that we’re working on because they feel more comfortable working with me because they know more about me.

Participant 3 saw immediate benefits to storytelling with her direct reports. She noted several changes in her workplace relationships, such as increased rapport and relatability, connection, and comfortability in collaboration. Storytelling allowed participants to share, learn, and reflect on their own individual and collective journeys into leadership. This created autonomy in the program for participants to decide their own learning outcomes and engage in their own reflections; this process created alignment and
confidence for many participants that transcended to their leadership practice beyond the completion of MDP.

Although many participants felt confident in their own storytelling abilities with their direct reports after MDP, some expressed challenges with stepping into psychologically safe environments with their own managers. Participant A found it challenging to get buy-in from her direct manager for the role storytelling has at work. She explained:

The second key takeaway that I would say is a conflict that I still struggle a little bit with: how to be authentic and share your story and lead. I agree with all of that, but in a workforce where, for example, your manager is a Baby Boomer, or your top management is not connected emotionally to themselves. There’s a challenge there, right? You want to share, you want to be authentic, but at the same time, you don’t want to be labeled as “that person with that tragic story.”

In an earlier part of her interview, Participant A expressed complete confidence that she could create a brave space for her direct reports and her team, but little to no confidence in her ability the step into that same space with her manager or the larger organization. Without others sharing the same mindset and understanding the value of storytelling and benefits to an organization, Participant A was fearful of judgment. She shared some examples as to why she felt that way, saying:

Okay, so here’s a perfect example. One of our first tasks [of MDP] was to set up a one-on-one [meeting] with our managers to talk about what our goals are. And then 3 weeks in, we had a check in with our manager to go over our goals, and how [MDP] is going. First of all, I had to set all those up. So I’m nominated, I
was pushed to be in one of the first few cohorts. He was very adamant that I
participated in one of these. And so, all of that happens, and then I do get in
[MDP]. And the second week, he’s [messaging] me at 11 a.m. if I’m going to be
on the staff call. I have to remind him, I’m in that class, remember? It’s all day.
“Oh, oh, yeah that’s right, sorry, I forgot you’re in those.” Well, if it’s so
important, you pushed for me to be in it, but then you’re not even really aware of
what it means for me to be in it. Managers are busy. But now we’re 3 weeks in
[and we have our second check-in]. I’ve had a goal, we’ve talked about it.

Participant A then recalled the first meeting she had with her direct manager regarding
MDP. She said:

He said, “And how’s it going? How do you feel?”

And I responded, “Interesting. It’s different than I thought it would be.”

He said, “Well it’s just like all those other training courses that we did, like
manager skillset stuff??

I said, “No, actually, it’s really based on psychological safety.”

He said, “What? What’re you talking about? Yeah, you’ve been in the these
before—it’s a manager training, [they tell you] this is how you manage people,
blah, blah, blah?”

Right. I said, “Okay, well this course is not that. This course is more about how
you are as a person translates to how you lead people, because of who you are as a
person.”

He said, “Well, why would we be sending people to that?”
I told him, “Because the theory behind it is that if you know who you are, you know how to lead.”

And then he was busy and off on something else, and that was the end of the conversation. So, when I hear that response, I’m not inclined to share, right? Because the response is, “Why are you talking about that at work?” Again, not to stereotype, but it does go to the baby boomer generation, you didn’t have emotions at work.

Participant A felt frustrated by that interaction with her direct manager, the same person who had repeatedly advocated for her participation in MDP. Additionally, her manager had approved her to fly in weekly from out-of-state to participate in the MDP sessions for 8 weeks. And yet, her manager did not understand why the program was focusing on self-reflection. Participant A then recalled previous managers she had, saying:

I had a manager once that said, “Never cry in my office.” He wasn’t a bad manager, wasn’t a bad person. He just had no skill set to deal with a crying person in his office. He didn’t know what to do with you; he didn’t want to get in trouble for sexual harassment if you were crying and he hugged you or tried to console you. So, he used to say you have those problems, take it with a coworker outside, go for a walk or for coffee; I don’t ever want to see you crying in the office. That mindset.

Participant A recognized a common fear of experiencing a sense of closeness at work: fear of crossing a line, expressing emotions or feelings, or bringing your personal life into a professional space. Despite her previous manager’s separation from personal
and professional life, Participant A had practiced vulnerability in other spaces outside of work:

So, if you are a person like myself, I do believe in everything we did in [MDP]. I’ve done everything that we’ve done in [MDP], just not in a workplace setting. In sponsorship of youth, or in my own recovery, or in therapy. In those areas, never ever would I hold myself back or stop and think, “Can I say this here?” If I’m sharing my personal story of recovery at a youth convention, never would I question what I just shared about my past when I was on a panel for doctors asking me about the effects these things had on me. But at work, it’s different. It’s a manager that doesn’t necessarily believe in psychological safety who wants you to come to work and do your job. That’s the struggle, the conflict. Where to apply [storytelling] freely.

Even when Participant A’s own manager sponsored her participation on MDP, she did not feel as though he understood the benefits of storytelling or fostering interpersonal relationships at work. Participant A’s examples showed the necessity of one critical component that must first be established before vulnerable sharing can occur in a professional setting: there must be psychological safety to ensure there is trust.

Despite challenges participants faced to establish a storytelling culture in their teams, both with their direct reports and managers, all participants felt a newfound sense of confidence in their own leadership identity and framework. Through storytelling, participants were able to merge their personal lives with the professional, integrating their workplace identity with their personal one. Reframing leadership experience as life experience through storytelling allowed participants to feel more confident in their leader
identity and thus, reflect on their own experiences and behaviors to integrate change after the program completion. Participant 1 said:

We’re almost programmed to think [leadership is] your resume, right? You don’t put personal things from when you’re 10 years old on your resume and say, this is what I’ve done. This is why I’m successful. This is why I should have that next position and be a manager, whatever the position is. But it shifted that to look at your whole life. It’s not just about starting your professional path when you’re 25 years old at your first job, professional job. And it opened up my eyes personally to see [my leadership] started way before then, and how it’s shaped. I was expecting just to have [my leadership map] look professional, that’s what I’m used to, and that’s what I thought [MDP] was going to be, so it was really surprising. But what came forward was how our lives shapes us and how we think it shapes us.

Participant 1 experienced a shift in his own mindset and definition of professional experience during MDP. Instead of focusing on leadership as professional, work-related experience, storytelling and the creation of his leadership map allowed Participant 1 to view his entire life experiences as integral for informing his own mindsets, behaviors, and leadership identity.

Storytelling fostered deep reflection and analysis of the participants’ lived experiences, allowing them to engage in interpersonal meaning-making in a workplace environment. This structure reinforced the importance of merging their personal and professional identities in a way where participants could build on their self-awareness to analyze their own behaviors, and thus, integrate change into their leadership practices.
Storytelling also encouraged participants to be vulnerable, which fostered newfound courage and connection. Participant 2 explained:

I was so stressed about this leadership map. I just don’t feel comfortable sharing, and [the facilitator said] pick just a couple points, but it just made me so nervous to share. I shared about my dad and really personal things, which was totally my choice to share. But I was so proud of myself because that’s something that normally would be such scary territory for me. So just really owning that journey and, like, these moments that have made you who you are, I think was really impactful for me. Also hearing that from my peers. I learned so much about Participant 1 and his leadership map sharing about where he came from and why he ticks the way that he does. It makes me feel so much closer to him as a colleague, as a friend. And I wouldn’t have had that opportunity to feel that closeness had he not been sharing.

Participant 2 felt courage from facing her fear of storytelling at work. Through storytelling, she was able to own her own journey into leadership. Additionally, she felt closer to other leaders in the organization because of their willingness to share their own stories, as well. At the MDP graduation ceremony, Participant 4 received the award for “Best Storyteller,” an award that surprised her manager. She described her motivations for storytelling in MDP by saying:

So, it was about leadership because the title is management development program—the whole thing is about leadership. So, I started thinking about leadership—who is the leader who impacts my life? The whole program is about leadership. So, I just keep thinking about my past, the people involved, and about
the memories. I have very important figures and keep thinking about them and then I get emotional. This might be a story I can share with people, right? So that’s why. I’m not much of a talker, so people misunderstand me. I’m shy. My boss, even after 7 years working together, she said, “Oh, you’re quite a shy person. How come you got the award for best storyteller?” The reason I don’t talk too much is not because I’m shy. It’s because most of the time I don’t need to, right? I mean if there is a R&D meeting, and it is extremely important for everybody, then I share. Otherwise, I don’t share.

Participant 4 shared that she was often misjudged for being someone who was shy. However, Participant 4 described herself as someone who chose to speak if she thought she had something important to say that would benefit those around her. In the context of storytelling in MDP, she shared about mentors who impacted her life because she found that experience to potentially be beneficial to her peers.

Additionally, participants found the activity of creating their leadership maps particularly impactful in affirming their leadership identity. Participant 6 shared:

One of the things that I chose to share was about being an older sister to my younger sister. I sent her a picture of [my leadership map], and she loved it. It was really nice to see that she appreciated the leadership that I’ve shown her, even though it’s like forced leadership. It’s still appreciated, having like an older sister to look up to. It was interesting trying to choose which things in my own life led me to the point of where I am because there’s no one to review and be like, is this okay? Does this make me a leader? This event in my life, has it led me to this point?
Participant 6’s experience of creating her leadership map allowed her to view her leadership experiences in all aspects of her life, including being a big sister. Although she had never managed direct reports, Participant 6 could reference her experiences as a mentor, counselor, and guide growing up with a younger sister. Additionally, she found the process of listening to the experiences of her MDP cohort peers as impactful. She explained:

But I thought it was really fun to share and to show other people, like my whole cohort, as well as other people in the company that were there at the graduation, to show who I am more as a person. So going back to vulnerability, I also don’t like presenting in front of a lot of people. It was a good experience in that sort of sense. It’s just interesting choosing different aspects of my life like what I said, I feel like imposter syndrome, like I don’t know, like it’s my first people manager leadership type position and a more professional aspect. So, it was interesting and eye-opening, just looking at the events that kind of got me to this point without even realizing that those were the events that got me to this point.

As a new leader in her first people managing role, Participant 6 did not have extensive management experience to guide her in her leadership practice. Her lack of management experience gave her imposter syndrome, where she questioned her own ability to lead others. However, storytelling in MDP and creating her leadership map allowed Participant 6 the opportunity to reflect on all the experiences throughout her life that led her to the present. This reflection and construction of her own leadership, through the lens of her own experiences, made a meaningful impact on Participant 6’s confidence in
owning her leadership skills and understanding that all of her experiences contributed to
the leader she is today.

Similarly, Participant B felt that the construction of leadership maps forced
participants to get out of their comfort zones and embrace their own learning
opportunities through reflection. She said:

I liked the leadership map, and I love that every person looks different. That’s the
uniqueness of us in our own life. None of us are the same. But we all can come
together and support one another. And just me as a person, if you’re in my life, I
want to get to know you on the deepest level. I want to understand you. And even
people that I work with, like my boss, she has unfortunately been through a
divorce very similar [to me]. She shared that with me and made me feel so
comfortable telling her I’m going through this. But also, it’s so wonderful that she
can support me. I see her as a manager but she’s also a dear friend. I love that.
Back to the storytelling piece, I think it’s critical. I think for a lot of people who
don’t feel comfortable sharing, it really drives home getting to know your
employees. There might be some things that maybe you don’t feel comfortable
sharing now, but at least they don’t see you on the surface level. At least they can
get something, and maybe the more comfortable and the more you build your
relationship, maybe you might feel more comfortable sharing other things.

Storytelling and sharing personal information at work forged a close bond between
Participant B and her manager. Additionally, that level of comfort created a brave space
for her to share that she was going through a divorce because her manager could relate to
that experience. In MDP, Participant B found storytelling to be a critical component to
foster connection among the participants to understand diversity of experience and perspective. On an organizational level, storytelling can allow managers to create brave spaces for their teams to increase comfort and trust.

Participant 1 also found storytelling to be a central takeaway from MDP. Storytelling allowed participants the opportunity to ask themselves the question: who do I want to be as a leader? Participant 1 described his experience in reframing his understanding of what leadership means to him, saying:

I think the biggest takeaway for me was that the modules are great and stuff, but I loved how we focused on authenticity. We started that early, so it was always in the back of our heads as we’re going through the program. That was the biggest takeaway for me—shaping and really thinking, because before I just thought I wanted to be a good leader. I want to be that for my team and be knowledgeable. That was like the foundation I could really go off of, you know? But it’s really picking apart, what does that mean to you? And really digging deep into what I think a good leader is and who I want to be as a leader and knowing that that’s going to shift as careers grow and things like that. So that was the biggest takeaway for me was being authentic. Because I think I’ve pulled different things from previous good leaders that I’ve had before, which I think is good to do. But I don’t know if it was truly authentic to what I wanted to be as a leader, so that was the biggest takeaway for me is the mission that we’ve created for ourselves and just the reminder to consistently remain authentic and hold yourself accountable to that.
Prior to MDP, Participant 1 was focused on being a “good leader;” however, storytelling through the program allowed him to focus on his own individual leadership identity and to define what good leadership meant to him. Authenticity then became an intrinsic motivator for Participant 1 in his own leadership journey, one that would inform his practice of leadership beyond MDP.

Participant 5 also felt a shift in his own mindset after MDP. He stated:

I think it definitely helped me feel more like an official manager. I feel more comfortable. I didn’t really know what to expect because this is the first company I’ve ever worked at that had any training at all. I’ve worked in really small companies. So, all of that together has been helpful just to have a different mindset about what our roles are as managers.

Participant 5 found his experience in MDP helpful to provide him a robust perspective as to the roles and responsibilities of managers in an organization. As a leader, managers are not solely responsible for managing performance. Employees have individual needs, motivations, and backgrounds, and by building self-awareness in MDP Participant 5 realized there were unspoken responsibilities for leaders besides management. Storytelling with his peers allowed Participant 5 to understand the diversity of perspectives, experiences, and leadership styles in an organization, and that opened his eyes to some of the interpersonal skills he was not using in his own leadership style.

Participant E summarized her overall experience in MDP as, “Getting to know everybody. Knowing that you’re not the only one, and there’s good people out there. There’s always support. And seeing things from different perspectives as well. Don’t judge a book by its cover.” Storytelling allowed MDP participants to practice
psychological safety to build brave spaces, create deeper interpersonal connections, and ultimately, inform their individual leadership in the organization.

The emphasis on storytelling in MDP allowed participants to engage in deep self-reflection to analyze their personal experiences, behaviors, and ultimately, what type of leader they wanted to be. In an organizational setting, storytelling has tremendous benefits for fostering trust, empathy, and reinforcing individual leadership identities for employees. This transformational approach to enhancing self-awareness gave MDP graduates the tools to ask themselves questions, have a growth mindset, and gain confidence in their own leadership practices. Although practitioners may face challenges integrating storytelling at the larger organizational level, beginning with a cohort-based model in leadership programming will allow change to occur over time. As the participants in this study agreed, storytelling fostered impactful transformation that transcended the structure of MDP into the organization.

**Summary of Findings**

Through investigating the experiences of the leaders who participated in MDP, three themes emerged from the data. First, storytelling allowed participants to engage in deep reflection and individual meaning-making to better understand who they were. Second, storytelling created a collective process for mitigating fear, establishing trust, practicing empathy, and fostering connection among the cohort. Third, graduates from MDP felt confident in their ability to build brave spaces, create connection among their team members, and affirm their own leadership identity in the organization. Although many of the participants were initially skeptical of the storytelling intervention introduced in this study, most of them found the experience transformational, and
ultimately, they learned more about themselves and their own journeys into leadership as a practice.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION OF FINDINGS

The concluding chapter of this study first discusses the findings from Chapter 4. This chapter then covers implications for practitioners, recommendations for future research, and concluding remarks. The purpose of this study was to investigate storytelling as an intervention in a manager development program (MDP) and how understanding who they are informed how leaders led at a biotechnology organization.

The following research questions guided this study:
1. How does storytelling foster individual self development?
2. How does storytelling create collective meaning-making in a group setting?
3. How can storytelling support leadership development in an organization?

Discussion of Findings

Three themes emerged from this study. First, storytelling allowed participants to engage in deep reflection and individual meaning-making for increased self-awareness. Second, storytelling created a collective process for mitigating fear, establishing trust, practicing empathy, and fostering a sense of belonging among the cohort. Third, graduates from MDP felt confident in their ability to build brave spaces, create connection among their team members, and affirm their own leadership identities in the organization. Storytelling played a critical role in the transformational learning outcomes of the participants at the individual and collective level. Participant learning was grounded in their individual reflection and ability to tie past experiences to current behaviors, and their experiences were affirmed by their colleagues in the cohort. Beyond
the MDP, participants felt so connected to the learning process they felt confident in their abilities to impact their direct reports and teams.

Individual Reflection for Self-Awareness

In the context of leadership development programs (LDPs), storytelling can be used as a vehicle for self-development to deepen an understanding of the self as part of a transformational journey. To exhibit a strong understanding of one’s own morals and values, one must understand the underlying mindsets that inform those beliefs. Critical self-reflection through storytelling allowed participants to relate self-awareness as a transformative learning practice to make self-discoveries in the context of their personal and professional lives. In fast-paced environments demanding efficiency, it can be difficult for organizations to provide the time and space for self-reflection. Because of the daily demands of their roles, leaders, especially, are not often given the opportunity to self-reflect on their personal or professional experiences. LDPs, like the MDP in this study, therefore provide a unique environment in which organizations can intentionally make space for regular self-reflection that can foster an increased self-awareness. Participants in this study agreed transformational self-reflection fostered self-awareness through storytelling and understanding their own stories made them better leaders who were more self-aware and understood the value of knowing themselves and knowing others (Khilji et al., 2015; Polizzi & Frick, 2012).

In the existing leadership development literature, there were two critical bodies of thought: leadership theory and leadership practice. However, because LDPs are rarely evaluated or studied in organizations (Avolio et al., 2010; Kirchner & Akdere, 2014), there was limited research that focused on both theoretical frameworks in practice.
Although self-awareness is understood in the field as a necessary component for effective leadership (Showry & Manasa, 2014; Vitello-Cicciu et al., 2014), exactly how to develop more self-aware leaders effectively in an organization is a nuanced and still emerging research topic (Brewer & Devnew, 2022; Cunliffe, 2002). This study contributes to the literature of leadership theory in practice by using storytelling as an intervention for leadership development.

Eurich (2018) outlined two categories of self-awareness: internal and external. Internal (or intrapersonal) self-awareness is defined as how one views oneself in terms of values, thoughts, feelings, behaviors, strengths, or weaknesses. External self-awareness is the practice of understanding how others may view you. Eurich (2018) described the fragile balance between internal and external self-awareness by explaining, “Self-awareness isn’t one truth. It’s a delicate balance of two distinct, even competing, viewpoints” (p. 3). Leaders who balance both are considered self-aware but engaging in the necessary critical self-reflection to become self-aware can be difficult and uncomfortable.

Practical reflexivity (Boud et al., 1985; Cunliffe & Easterby-Smith, 2004; Eriksen, 2009) through the creation of their leadership maps and individual and collective sharing allowed participants in MDP to engage in critical self-reflection for both internal and external self-awareness. Participants engaged meaningfully in their own personal self-reflection and processed their experiences in a cohort setting. The individual and collective process of reflection allowed for both internal and external self-awareness. For many participants, engaging in critical self-reflection brought up unpleasant memories or situations, causing them various levels of discomfort (Brookfield, 1994; Dewey, 1933;
Mirvis, 2008; Reynolds, 1999). This threshold of discomfort, determined and monitored by each individual, allowed participants to remain in control of the breadth and depth of their storytelling in what and when they chose to share and their level of vulnerability. This gave participants autonomy and agency over their discomfort, a critical part of the transformational learning process (Mirvis, 2008). It is in this unfamiliar space where the most growth can happen, but growth is only possible when the leader is responsible for their own development, is willing and able to engage in self-reflection, and practices these skills to become a more effective, authentic leader.

Storytelling allows leaders to practice reflection in a way that allows them to be open to diverse perspectives that challenge their personal mindsets. When working with other people, it is imperative that leaders can lead with empathy and understand varying viewpoints. This encourages open and honest communication among teams. All participants shared, although challenging, the process of creating and sharing their leadership maps allowed them the opportunity for deep reflection as a way to better understand themselves and the importance of understanding others. Participants agreed that sharing their vulnerable stories was difficult but, ultimately, the most rewarding component of the MDP. Each participant also agreed that storytelling was valuable, both on an individual level to better understand themselves and a collective level of hearing the stories of others. When self-reflection is integrated into leadership programs, participants can learn more from their peers, engaging in diverse discourse that challenges their own mindsets.

To make meaning from critical self-reflection, LDPs can facilitate the reflection process by creating an ecosystem of learning among leaders. This shift from deep critical
individual reflection to storytelling can foster meaning-making for greater self-awareness. Therefore, this study contributes to the body of leadership development literature, specifically, leadership development interventions and the steps organizations can take to foster self-awareness for leaders through storytelling.

**Trust Building, Empathy, and Community**

All participants in this study shared initial fears at the start of MDP: fears of judgment from cohort peers, being misunderstood, being viewed as unprofessional, and the risks associated with being vulnerable. Because of the fears many participants shared, trust building was critical for creating a brave space where these fears could be mitigated. Although many participants were reluctant to share their stories, trust building became an important foundation in MDP to remove barriers so participants could feel safe enough to be vulnerable in a group setting (Cleverly-Thompson, 2018; Mirvis, 2019; Schedlitzki et al., 2015). Psychological safety played an integral role in fostering trust that was supported by both me, as the facilitator, and the participants of each cohort (Lateef, 2020; Newman et al., 2017; Wanless, 2016). This study adds to the existing scholarship surrounding the benefits of trust, empathy, and community in leadership, and adds storytelling as an intervention for how organizations can foster effective leadership practices.

Storytelling offered participants a vehicle for self-exploration and exercises in vulnerability. By having complete autonomy of when and what they shared, participants could build trust with one another slowly over time. Through the process of storytelling, participants engaged in critical self-reflection, where recalling and sharing their own lived experiences drew new meaning to past experiences (Clark & Rossiter, 2008;
Collins, 1999; Dewey, 1933; Lemieux, 2018; Milne, 1998; Phillips, 2013). Storytelling among the cohort, both individually sharing and hearing the stories of their peers, gave participants an opportunity to experiment with levels of vulnerability; where sharing vulnerably was received with empathy and understanding, participants’ courage to share grew. Through storytelling, participants could answer the question “Who am I?” in the form of life-stories (Bruner, 1986).

Mitigating fear by storytelling can build trust, and the outcome of this process is community. By sharing stories and hearing the stories of others, a community can develop in the cohort that fosters inquiry into leadership (Eriksen, 2009). Storytelling then allows participants to empathetically enter another’s life and to become a part of a living conversation (Witherell et al., 1995). A small community forms during this exchange as a means of inclusion that invites “the reader, listener, writer, or teller as a companion along another’s journey. In the process we may find ourselves wiser, more receptive, more understanding” (Witherell et al., 1995, pp. 40–41). In this way, all participants take part in their own storytelling and the collective story of the cohort. The classroom then becomes a container for a small community where participants can engage meaningfully with one another, build trust, and share vulnerably to seek understanding.

Throughout MDP, I encouraged participants to face their fear of judgment, be empathetic, build trust with one another, and, ultimately, foster a sense of community in their cohort. The process of sharing vulnerably with their peers forced participants to mitigate their own judgments and biases to become more empathetic leaders. When they realized many of them had shared experiences, this created an environment where
participants trusted one another, which encouraged other participants to share more.

Contributions from this study highlighted this reciprocal process of storytelling, where one person shared and others followed, fostering a community culture where participants engaged with their colleagues in a meaningful way that typically does not occur at work.

**A People-Centered Approach to Leadership**

Storytelling as an Indigenous way of knowing has many benefits in the context of leadership development: as an effective tool for influencing or inspiring followers (Denning, 2007), a means for advancing organizational change (Parkin, 2004), and as a tool to develop leadership skills (Auvinen et al., 2013). Leadership can be constructed through storytelling, where “storytelling can be a valuable source of trust by creating a shared context and sense of meaning among leaders and their followers” (Auvinen et al., 2013, p. 497). Centering storytelling into a LDP like MDP reminds participants that leadership calls for engagement at work on a “deeply human level” (Clark & Rossiter, 2008, p. 65) that humanizes direct reports, colleagues, and managers across the organization. Storytelling in leadership development literature has been defined in several ways: reflexive dialogical learning processes (Cunliffe, 2002), dialogic approaches that emphasize the role of discourse in organizations (Schedlitzki et al., 2015), a means of influencing others (Pote et al., 2022), and a tool for managing change (Parkin, 2006).

However, this study focused on the role of storytelling as both the individual and collective processes of sharing vulnerable and deeply personal stories to build meaning of the self and as a group, which has not been discussed in depth in the leadership development scholarship.
MDP participants in this study agreed that storytelling offered them opportunities for individual reflection and meaning-making while fostering trust, empathy, and community among members of their cohort. Through storytelling, participants communicated with one another about what they learned throughout their lives (Avraamidou & Osborne, 2009) and built bridges between MDP concepts to create a sense of connectedness, relevancy, and coherency (Avraamidou & Osborne, 2009; Noll et al., 2018; Norris et al., 2005). Meaning-making in the context of an organization, like MDP, allowed participants to make sense of their environment (i.e., who they were in the context of their organization), engage in a social psychological processes, and realize patterned behaviors in familiar situations (Weick, 1990, 1993, 1995). Participants used storytelling and the associated deep interpersonal reflection to better change their behaviors instead of defaulting to what was familiar and comfortable, which fostered an inquiry into trying new things and being open to different perspectives. With leadership understood as a relational process that requires leaders to have a relationship with themselves and others, it is critical that leaders can make sense of their experiences. LDPs can be both the interrupter (i.e., disrupting the routine of daily work) and the holding environment (i.e., space for critical deep reflection; Winnicott 1953) for meaning-making, that allows participants to engage meaningfully in storytelling to better their relationship with themselves and others.

However, participants stated, although there were benefits from storytelling, creating psychological safety and buy-in from the larger organization could be challenging. Participants outlined several potential challenges for integrating storytelling at the organization level: first, managers who graduated from MDP faced challenges in
practicing storytelling in their own teams; second, some participants felt their own managers were not convinced of the benefits of fostering interpersonal relationships; and third, despite the challenges participants faced in practicing storytelling in the larger organization, they all agreed storytelling affirmed their own experiences, identities, and leadership framework.

In the context of LDPs, storytelling can act as a vehicle for meaning-making for participants to better understand their individual identities and their identities as leaders in the context of the organization. Because of the emphasis on storytelling in MDP, participants could engage in deep self-reflection to analyze their personal experiences, behaviors, and ultimately, the type of leader they wanted to be. In an organization, storytelling could have tremendous benefits for fostering trust, empathy, and reinforcing individual leadership identities for employees, as evidenced in the cohort-based model of this study. MDP graduates who completed this transformational approach to enhancing self-awareness gained the tools to ask themselves questions, a growth mindset, and confidence in their own leadership practice. Although there may be challenges that practitioners face integrating storytelling at the larger organizational level, beginning with a cohort-based model in leadership programming could offer a start to implementing incremental leader behavioral change over time. As the participants in this study agreed, storytelling fostered impactful transformation that transcended the structure of MDP and could have potential benefits for the organization.

**Summary of Findings**

In summary, several findings emerged from this study: (a) storytelling allowed participants to engage in deep reflection to better understand who they were to foster
greater self-awareness; (b) storytelling created a collective process for mitigating fear, establishing trust, practicing empathy, and fostering connection among the cohort; and (c) graduates from MDP felt confident in their abilities to build brave spaces, create connection among their team members, and affirm their own leadership identities in the organization. Although many of the participants were initially skeptical of the storytelling intervention introduced in this study, most of them found the experience transformational, and, ultimately, they learned more about themselves and their own journeys into leadership as a practice.

**Reflections and Implications for Practitioners**

In addition to the findings as described by the participants in this study, there are a number of reflections through this process that could be beneficial for practitioners in the learning and development (L&D) or leadership development spaces. This section outlines some of the reflections I had during this study and the implications for practitioners in related fields.

**Establishing an Organizational Learning Culture**

For many organizations, including the organization used in this study, development programs or learning opportunities are viewed as a quick fix to solve a problem. L&D professionals are often hired as the problem-solvers—the persons who can identify which problems need fixing and implement an intervention to resolve them. However, as many practitioners understand, a learning culture is fragile and requires multiple levels of buy-in, support, and resources.

BTO was an organization that identified a gap (i.e., more internal learning and development opportunities were needed) and hired an L&D professional to fix the gap
(i.e., develop leadership programming). However, intentional and sustainable learning efforts require the foundation of a learning culture that is supported by all employees, leaders, and relevant stakeholders. Leadership programs are not always the best starting point. Organizations can remove potential roadblocks for practitioners called to address learning and development needs in an organization through dedicated time and intention, including first establishing a learning culture through micro-learnings, monthly learning challenges, and defining company values and learning goals held accountable by performance evaluations. There will always be a level of resistance for those experimenting in an organization, but a “crawl before you run” mentality can assist practitioners in developing a long lasting and sustained learning culture that can be built upon over time. This also allows more time to accumulate data that support even the smallest of initiatives to assist in gaining stakeholder buy-in later.

**Executive Leadership Buy-In**

One of the major challenges I experienced in developing and scaling leadership programs at BTO was the nonexistent level of executive leader involvement. For L&D professionals who are expected to be catalysts of L&D initiatives, having stakeholder buy-in at the very top of the organization is critical. At BTO, executive leadership was focused on business success (e.g., product development, production, sales) and L&D efforts were not a priority. Once the MDP and other leadership programs gained traction, the number one question from participants was, “When is the executive leadership team going to participate in one of these programs?” As the only L&D professional in my organization, I never had a direct conversation with the executive leadership team. I experienced difficulty in explaining the importance of such development efforts to
employees as a requirement, but never having a timeline for when the executives would participate in the mandated requirement themselves. Because of this, many participants grew disillusioned and skeptical of the leaders at the organization, which presented another challenge regarding participant buy-in.

Another challenge was executive-level visibility. If executives do not want to participate in learning or leadership development initiatives in the organization, they can ensure the visibility of such initiatives to shows a level of support that is both seen and appreciated by the employees. This could include speaking at the start of leadership programs in the form of a welcome address, giving closing remarks at a program graduation, or simply recognizing graduates in an email. No matter the scale, visibility of leadership matters and not only shows employees a level of engagement that is expected, but also encourages trust and buy-in of the development efforts.

Experimentation and Exploration

As a latent stage start up, BTO was the perfect container for experimentation. As the first L&D hire at the organization, the organization placed no expectations or structure to what learning and leadership development had to look like. Because of this, I had creativity and freedom to design and implement leadership programming and development efforts that met the needs of the employees and leaders. However, as a startup, BTO did expect output at a heightened level, which meant I had less time to design and develop with intentionality. Despite the fast-paced expectations, the freedom to experiment with experiential learning opportunities was critical in determining what “fit” the organization. Although many organizations face the same relational challenges in communication, difficult conversations, performance management and more, there are
nuances based on industry, culture, and organization history. Understanding these
nuances and the unique needs of each organization facilitates an L&D structure that is
intentional, can gain buy-in over time, and will sustain the organization through change.

For L&D practitioners who are designing leadership programs, experimentation
through focus groups or pilot cohorts is a great way to get feedback and determine which
structures, curricula, formats, times, and resources work for the organization, and which
do not. Leadership theory has changed over time (and will continue to change), and the
needs of leaders continue to be dynamic. The alignment of theory and practice is the
greatest challenge for L&D professionals, and meeting that challenge requires support for
experimenting and trying new ideas that may feel uncomfortable for the organization.
However, the benefits of finding the unique “fit” of L&D for any organization lie in the
ability of the professionals in that field to try something new, fail, and try again.

The Art of Facilitation

Although there are practical administrative qualities needed of L&D professionals
(e.g., program management, relationship management, systems and processes), there is an
art to facilitation that is rarely discussed. The human experience is dynamic and unique,
and a cohort-based learning model for leadership programs means being able to meet
each individual where they are while maintaining the collective engagement of the group.
This is both a challenge and the greatest gift of cohort-based learning, as evidenced in
this study, where no matter what the curriculum required the variable was always the
participant experience. Participants come from diverse backgrounds in terms of
professional experience, education, trauma, family units, love, loss, and everything in
between. The human experience comes through when using an intervention like
storytelling. However, facilitators who ask for vulnerability through stories of their participants must be prepared for the diversity of what could be shared. As Schedlitzki et al. (2015) wrote, “These reflective spaces need careful facilitation to encourage participants to critically reflect on the cultural, political and gendered meanings of organisational roles and leadership” (p. 416). Through my own facilitation, I have experienced participants walk out, sob uncontrollably, yell, grow silent, hug, and hold one another. Facilitators who engage with participants in a vulnerable way must be prepared to handle both the most joyous of reflections and the most despairingly trauma-informed stories. Facilitating with empathy, compassion, patience, and understanding is essential. Additionally, facilitation works best with a team, where multiple individuals can support the administrative, creative, and dynamic needs of managing a leadership program. Facilitators are also responsible for creating the safe and brave container for participants to engage in this meaningful work, but the container is fragile and requires the utmost care and respect.

**Recommendations and Future Research**

This narrative inquiry study explored how participants engaged meaningfully with themselves and others in a MDP to better understand their leadership journeys at a biotechnology organization. Despite the notable findings discussed in this study, there are several limitations and recommendations for future scholars. The following sections outline the limitations, generalizability and transferability, and recommendations for future research beyond this study.
Limitations

This study had several limitations. This study focused on one leadership development program, specifically focusing on managers, at one biotechnology organization. Therefore, this study does not claim to be representative of all leaders at different levels across all industries. Additionally, the sample size of participants in this study was relatively small \((n = 12)\) compared to the overall MDP participant population \((n = 100)\). Findings from the qualitative data collected from interviews were only based on the 12 participants in this study. As a result, findings from this sample may not be representative of all leaders at BTO.

Also, the organization that initiated and implemented the MDP does not share characteristics across all biotechnology corporations. For example, BTO was a latent stage start up that experienced rapid growth in hiring over the course of 2 years prior to the first MDP. In the year in which this study was conducted, BTO also experienced three separate layoffs that reduced the workforce by 30%. BTO produced a unique product (not described here to protect anonymity) that distinguished the organization from other competitors. Because of these rapid changes, BTO had a unique culture and climate that may not be shared across other biotechnology organizations.

There were also data limitations to this study. Due to my role in facilitating and managing MDP, my capacity to write observation notes during each session was limited. Because MDP sessions lasted all day, the memos I recorded after each session could have had more depth, breadth, and scope of what I had observed throughout the day. I did not record memos after each individual session; instead, I recorded memos only for sessions where notable discussions occurred involving vulnerability or storytelling. Recording
memos for all sessions could have given me a more holistic understanding of the role of storytelling and pertinent data to either support or negate the findings. I also had access to pre- and post-surveys from MDP that I did not include in this study. The qualitative method of using narrative inquiry to highlight the participants’ own stories prevented me from expanding this study to include quantitative data points. Although I do not regret this decision, quantitative survey data could have been beneficial to the scope of this study.

Another limitation could include the interview techniques related to my own positionality as the program designer and facilitator of the leadership programs at BTO. I mitigated positionality concerns by interviewing participants over the course of two separate MDP cohorts. Additionally, I could have influenced participant responses during qualitative interviews and other data collection due to my insider perspective in the program. Research participants “may not be able to provide the level of detail, or use the concepts, that the researcher is interested in” (Barker et al., 2002, p. 2), which can cause misalignment between the data and the research questions. However, I used semistructured interview guides for both the focus group and one-on-one interviews to alleviate this potential limitation.

Despite some limitations, there were also many benefits to conducting this research with an insider’s perspective. My roles as both an employee and the designer and facilitator for MDP at BTO allowed me to have a deeper and more thorough understanding of the organizational culture, MDP program, participant responses, and the interrelatedness of relevant variables from an insider’s perspective. Additionally, the quality of the research was supported by my own research skills. Having completed two
qualitative studies during my tenure as a PhD student and relevant coursework (e.g., qualitative methods, quantitative methods, survey, and mixed-methods courses) provided me with experience in conducting ethical and quality research and mitigating any potential biases.

**Generalizability and Transferability**

This qualitative study only focused on one specific leadership development program, the MDP, that I designed and facilitated internally at a biotechnology corporation. Therefore, the nature of the program at a specific location and organization means the study’s findings are not generalizable for every context across industries due to the study being conducted uniquely at one specific biotechnology organization. In addition to specific context and population at BTO for MDP, the curriculum design and facilitation were unique.

The conditions of the program and individually uncomfortable deep reflections participants experienced challenged them outside of their comfort zones. Although beneficial as outlined in this study, it would be difficult for other organizations to replicate every aspect of MDP.

Despite the limited generalizability of the study, the findings are transferable for organizations or practitioners in the L&D space. Although some might argue that transferability of this study might only be useful to organizations with similar characteristics to BTO, it is up to the consumer of this study to determine whether or not it is appropriate to apply the findings of this study to their organization (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Other organizations may want to use this study as it outlines innovative
interventions that focus on behavioral and mindset changes to inform future leadership development programming.

My goal for this study was not to weigh the successes or failures of MDP, but rather to make sense of the phenomenon of storytelling as a vehicle for understanding leadership development. This study “may help . . . in the forming of questions rather than in the finding of answers” (Donmoyer, 1990, p. 182). In essence, there are questions that may have been generated by this study that can support the exploration of interventions toward a better understanding for how to develop future leaders in organizations.

Future Research

The findings of this narrative inquiry study could offer a deeper understanding of how to develop future leaders in an organization. This study provides an excellent foundation for further future inquiries into leadership development, including Indigenous models such as storytelling as an intervention across all levels of an organization. How L&D professionals can support behavioral changes for leaders in the context of LDPs that foster greater self-awareness, self-reflection, and community building will continue to be a question of further research. An exploration into different leadership development interventions would be a welcome addition to this body of research.

Another implication for research is the timing and scope of the study. The data collected in this study occurred after several rounds of layoffs by the organization. This could have affected the mindsets of the participants in seeing the value of storytelling in their own development due to the lack of organization resources after the layoffs. For this reason, timing of leadership development programming is important and to avoid programs occurring after large organizational changes, when possible. I make this
recommendation based on some of the critical feedback given by participants for the
timing of the MDP and their hesitation to engage vulnerably with their cohort due to
morale and mistrust of the organization.

Another recommendation for future research would involve more frequent data
collection throughout each MDP session. This could include detailed observation notes,
interviewing participants after each session, and more detailed researcher memos. In this
study, I collected qualitative data after the completion of each MDP cohort, either
immediately after graduation (i.e., semistructured interviews) or over a month after
completion (i.e., focus group). However, it would be very useful to conduct interviews at
the same times throughout each cohort to provide researchers a holistic understanding of
the participant experience as the program is occurring.

Data collection from other sources would also strengthen findings of this study.
For example, further triangulating the data on the perceptions of storytelling from the
perspective of the audience at MDP graduation (i.e., those witnessing the presentations of
leadership maps by participants) could have added insightful data to further support the
findings. Witnesses of storytelling (i.e., those who did not participate in MDP nor know
the context for the leadership maps) could have provided unique perspectives as to the
role of the storytelling at work. Researchers could gather data from semistructured
interviews or a focus group of volunteers from graduation to understand if the value of
storytelling was perceived by other employees across the organization.

Another recommendation for the continuation of this study would be to scale the
intervention of storytelling to all leadership levels, not just managers. Given the
difference in managerial responsibilities, both in breadth and scope, at every level of
leadership across an organization, it would be interesting to see if the level of transformation and buy-in for storytelling would vary among different leaders.

**Final Reflections**

Findings from this study suggested that Indigenous ways of learning and knowing (e.g., storytelling) can be effective behavioral interventions for leaders participating in LDPs. My passion for this research is rooted in my own personal journey in the field of learning and leadership development. My journey as a doctoral student in leadership studies with my strong background in leadership frameworks compelled me to put theoretical approaches into practice in my own career. It was in an adult development theory course taught by Dr. Zachary Green, where I engaged in my own storytelling and applied adult development theories to my own life. Understanding my own traumas, challenges, and joys by applying development theory to my own experiences transformed me. By the end of that course, I had not just a newfound appreciation for the art of facilitation as exhibited by Dr. Green, but a greater understanding of myself. It was then I transitioned out of my career in higher education and into the L&D space, where I could leverage my experiences to help others find greater meaning in their own lives and at work. My firsthand experience watching leaders across the organization be willing to lean into new ways of learning about themselves and others, and the transformation I witnessed as the MDP facilitator, impacted me in profound ways I never could have expected. I gained a greater appreciation for the human experience and how our own stories inform how we navigate the world, both personally and professionally. Seeing the intersection of theoretical frameworks and challenges that come with leadership in practice in this study reminds me, as the literature suggests, that more interventions for
leadership development are needed. This study illuminates the potential of storytelling as an intervention in shaping future leaders in organizations.

Moving forward, LDPs can no longer focus on skill building alone and must cater to the changing needs of leaders and their followers. It would be beneficial for organizations to focus on behavioral changes that shift leadership mindsets instead of merely addressing skill development. Additionally, there has been little scholarship that focuses on storytelling for leadership development in LDPs. The Indigenous practice of storytelling as a form of meaning-making and knowledge cocreation can be leveraged in LDPs to merge leadership theory with practice. However, attention to common pitfalls and barriers to participant engagement should be carefully considered. Practitioners can learn from Indigenous practices and ways of knowing to create innovative and effective LDPs, breaking the mold of conventional leadership programs to create impactful development opportunities for leaders.
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APPENDIX A

SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW RECRUITMENT EMAIL

For the research study entitled:

*Storytelling as an Intervention for a Manager Development Program (MDP)*

Hello MDP Participant,

I wanted to take a moment to ask for your participation in a study I am working on, *Storytelling as an Intervention for a Manager Development Program (MDP)*. I am currently a PhD student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. As an umbrella for my research, I am interested in the efficacy of storytelling to foster leadership development. Necessitated by an organizational desire and need to develop future leaders, I am interested in examining how participants in the MDP program make sense of their lived experiences and identity through storytelling.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how participants understand their own leadership journey in a leadership development program and in what ways can storytelling be measured. You are invited to participate because you are a part of the current MDP cohort.

If you decide to participate, you will complete one in-person private interview that will discuss your experience in MDP. The interview will take 1 hour total and take place at the MODA Amenities building, just like the MDP. The total time commitment for this research study will take about 1 hour. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. In the interview, I will ask things like: Tell me about your leadership map, And In what ways did group discussions help you understand your own leadership journey? The responses will contribute to the study and to better understand the program intervention efficacies.

This study involves no more risk than the risks you encounter in daily life. Your responses will be confidential and all your information will be coded with a number. Your email or IP address will be deleted, and nobody will know your identity. I will keep the study data for a minimum of 5 years.

· You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

Taking part in this study is optional. *Choosing not to participate will have no effect on your employment status, program participation, or any other benefits to which you are entitled.* You may also quit being in the study at any time or decide not to answer any specific questions. Should you decide to participate, please print out a copy of this page for your record.

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at Brittany Williams, xxxxx@sandiego.edu or the faculty advisor for this study, Dr. Antonio Jimenez Luque at xxxxx@sandiego.edu.

Thank you for your consideration,

Brittany Williams
PhD student and at the University of San Diego
APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP RECRUITMENT EMAIL

For the research study entitled:

*Storytelling as an Intervention for a Manager Development Program (MDP)*

Hello MDP Graduate,

Congratulations on your recent graduation from the Manager Development Program (MDP). I wanted to take a moment to ask for your participation in a study I am working on, *Storytelling as an Intervention for a Manager Development Program (MDP)*. I am currently a PhD student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. As an umbrella for my research, I am interested in the efficacy of storytelling to foster leadership development. Necessitated by an organizational desire and need to develop future leaders, I am interested in examining how participants in the MDP program make sense of their lived experiences and identity through storytelling.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how participants understand their own leadership journey in a leadership development program and in what ways can storytelling be measured. You are invited to participate because you previously graduated from the MDP.

If you decide to participate, you will complete one in-person focus group that will discuss your experience in MDP. The focus group will take 1-2 hours total and take place at the MODA Amenities building, just like the MDP. The total time commitment for this research study will take about 1-2 hours. Focus group discussions will be audio recorded and transcribed. In the focus group, I will ask things like: Now that you have graduated from the program, what are some key takeaways from your experience? And In what ways did MDP improve your leadership skills? The responses will contribute to the study and to better understand the program intervention efficacies.

This study involves no more risk than the risks you encounter in daily life. Your responses will be confidential and all your information will be coded with a number. Your email or IP address will be deleted, and nobody will know your identity. I will keep the study data for a minimum of 5 years.

- You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

Taking part in this study is optional. *Choosing not to participate will have no effect on your employment status, program participation, or any other benefits to which you are entitled.* You may also quit being in the study at any time or decide not to answer any specific questions. Should you decide to participate, please print out a copy of this page for your record.

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at Brittany Williams, xxxxx@sandiego.edu or the faculty advisor for this study, Dr. Antonio Jimenez Luque at xxxxx@sandiego.edu.
Thank you for your consideration,
Brittany Williams
PhD student and at the University of San Diego.
APPENDIX C

IRB APPROVAL

---------- Forwarded message ----------
From: <do-not-reply@cayuse.com>
Date: Friday, May 5, 2023
Subject: IRB-2023-287 - Initial: Expedited - Approval
To: xxxxxxxx@xxxxx.xxx, xxxxxxx@xxxxx.xxx

May 5, 2023

Brittany Williams
Sch of Leadership & Ed Science

Re: Expedited - Initial - IRB-2023-287, Storytelling as an Intervention in a Manager Development Program (MDP)

Dear Brittany Williams:

The University of San Diego Institutional Review Board (USD IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-2023-287: Storytelling as an Intervention in a Manager Development Program (MDP).

Decision: Approved. This study may start no earlier than May 5, 2023.

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Findings: Thank you for addressing prior IRB review feedback. This approval is based on the intended work and scope of activities outlined in the submitted proposal. If the research team makes changes to the project and/or its study protocols, the PI or their designated team member must submit a modification application for IRB’s re-evaluation.

Sincerely,

Truc Ngo, PhD
IRB Administrator

Office of the Senior Vice President and Provost
Hughes Administration Center, Room 212
5998 Alcalá Park, San Diego, CA 92110-2492
Phone (xxx) xxx-xxxx • Fax (xxx) xxx-xxxx • www.sandiego.edu
APPENDIX D

SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

*Storytelling as an Intervention in a Manager Development Program (MDP)*

*Interview Guide*

Thank you for your participation and willingness to meet today. I am so grateful for your vulnerability and willingness to share your personal perspectives and experiences in the Manager Development Program (MDP). As a reminder, your consent to participate in this interview is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. Additionally, I will be audio recording this interview and taking a few notes. Do you agree to proceed? (If the participant says yes, proceed) - Let’s get started:

1) Tell me about your experience in MDP.
   a) How was it overall?
   b) What did you think before starting the program? What did you expect and how was it once you started?

2) Now that you have graduated from the program, what are some key takeaways from your experience (either positive or negative)?

3) In the authentic leadership session, we discussed vulnerability and asked you to share about your personal lived experiences. What did you think of that session? What did you learn?

4) Throughout the program you heard from your peers as they shared their own stories. What did you think of storytelling throughout the program?

5) In what ways did your own stories help you throughout the program? Hearing the stories of others?

6) As part of the program, you completed a leadership map. Tell me about that activity. What did you think about it?

7) Tell me about your leadership map.

8) Please highlight a few of the points on your leadership map - why did you add them to your map?

9) How did you feel about sharing your map during the MDP?

10) In what ways do you think your map contributed to your understanding of leadership?
11) What else would you like to add about your leadership journey during MDP?

12) What are your thoughts on sharing personal lived experiences in a professional space like this organization?

*These questions will guide the interview discussion, with some slight variation based on the conversation that occurs.
APPENDIX E

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

*Storytelling as an Intervention in a Manager Development Program (MDP)*

Focus Group Guide

Thank you for your participation and willingness to meet today. I am so grateful for your vulnerability and willingness to share your personal perspectives and experiences in the Manager Development Program (MDP).

A focus group brings together a small group of people to answer questions in a moderated setting. The information shared in the focus group session should not be shared with anyone outside of the group, and that the confidentiality of anything you choose to say during the session cannot be guaranteed. I want to reiterate community guidelines that we discussed in MDP - that this is a safe space and what is shared here, stays here.

As a reminder, your consent to participate in this focus group is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. Additionally, I will be audio recording this focus group discussion and taking a few notes. Do you agree to proceed? (If the participants say yes, proceed) - Let’s get started:

1) Tell me about your experience in MDP.
   a) How was it overall?
   b) What did you think before starting the program? What did you expect and how was it once you started?
2) Now that you have graduated from the program, what are some key takeaways from your experience (either positive or negative)?
3) In what ways did MDP improve your leadership skills?
4) In the authentic leadership session, we discussed vulnerability and asked you to share about your personal lived experiences. What did you think of that session? What did you learn?
5) Throughout the program you heard from your peers as they shared their own stories. What did you think of storytelling throughout the program?
6) In what ways did your own stories help you throughout the program? Hearing the stories of others?
7) As part of the program you told your story through a leadership map. Tell me about that process.

8) What are your thoughts on sharing personal lived experiences in a professional space like this organization?

9) In what ways have you implemented storytelling into your every day as a leader?

*These questions will guide the focus group discussion, with some slight variation based on the conversation that occurs.*
May 5, 2023

Brittany Williams  
Sch of Leadership & Ed Science

Re: Expedited - Initial - IRB-2023-287, Storytelling as an Intervention in a Manager Development Program (MDP)

Dear Brittany Williams:

The University of San Diego Institutional Review Board (USD IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-2023-287: Storytelling as an Intervention in a Manager Development Program (MDP).

Decision: Approved. This study may start no earlier than May 5, 2023.

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Findings: Thank you for addressing prior IRB review feedback. This approval is based on the intended work and scope of activities outlined in the submitted proposal. If the research team makes changes to the project and/or its study protocols, the PI or their designated team member must submit a modification application for IRB’s re-evaluation.

Sincerely,

Truc Ngo, PhD
IRB Administrator

Office of the Senior Vice President and Provost  
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