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Personal Development Planning and Vertical Leadership Development in a VUCA World

Kevin Coopersmith
Stockton University, kcoopersmith88@gmail.com

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Cover Page Footnote

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KEVIN COOPERSMITH
GALLOWAY, NJ, USA

Personal Development Planning and Vertical Leadership Development in a VUCA World

Abstract

To explore how personal development can be utilized as a tool for leaders to adapt to our VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) world, a qualitative study was conducted on the narrative experiences of eight leaders who had successfully completed personal development plans. The emerging field of vertical leadership development, recognized as a unique developmental approach towards overcoming complexity and uncertainty, was connected to the key themes of personal development planning. Vertical leadership development and personal development planning were united across five conceptual themes: development and application of skills, self-awareness, self-efficacy, self-exploration, and continuous improvement. The experiences of the participants helped to inform how their plans connected with these themes, and how plan success and retention can be ensured overall. The study found that plans are at their most successful when they are thoroughly structured with the individual's personal goals in mind, have direct application to the participant's working life, and are supported by some degree of accountability and/or reflection. The study observed thematic connections between conventional personal development plans and vertical leadership development, highlighting potential connections between developmental approaches that are focused on boosting skills competency and capacity in times of VUCA. The findings help to inform how personal development plans can best serve as a resource towards managing complexity, uncertainty, and change.

Introduction

As our society grapples with an unprecedented global pandemic, generation shifts, climate and economic challenges, social justice reform, and political and cultural divisiveness, there is a great need for competent and thoughtful leaders in our modern world. But in spite of this significant need, and the leadership development industry being a \$366 billion global industry in 2019, there exists a significant skills gap in leadership capacity and capability in our society (Beerel, 2020). In a time of constant change, leaders must grow and find new ways to adapt to the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world in which we find ourselves (Codreanu, 2016; Horner, 2013).

Personal development plans (PDP) stand as a unique tool for leaders to further develop their skills and capacity for thinking and managing uncertainty. However, there is need for more research regarding personal development plan experiences in the private sector (Greenan,

2016), and organization-sponsored personal development plans are typically viewed as low priority initiatives (Chlebikova et al., 2015). There exists an opportunity for organizations to adapt to the challenges of our ever-changing world through placing a stronger, more refined focus on the development and the growth of their employees (Kegan et al., 2014). However, the ideal structure, context, and approaches behind these plans remain uncertain and untranslated to actual practice.

The concepts behind vertical leadership development centralize on expanding an individual's thinking capacity and ability to manage change (Petrie, 2014), positioning it as a unique approach to helping leaders and organizations navigate our VUCA world. However, vertical leadership development remains a developing body of research (Pesut & Thompson, 2018), that has not yet been introduced or utilized in most traditional personal development contexts (Petrie, 2015).

To better understand the themes related to effective personal development plans, and the nature in which they can help leaders and organizations to manage the changes of our VUCA world, a qualitative, narrative study was conducted. The researcher interviewed eight business leaders across a variety of organizational backgrounds (including small and large business, nonprofit, religious, government, education, and healthcare) and personal development plan contexts to explore and contextualize their growth. The primary goal of the research was to gain an understanding of how personal development plans can be utilized as a tool to help individuals become more effective, agile leaders to help themselves and their organizations navigate the complexity of our ever-changing world. In order to connect the participants' experiences with elements behind vertical leadership development, a conceptual framework was established to identify five key developmental aspects which connect conventional personal development plan approaches with vertical leadership development.

Conceptual Framework

For this study, personal development plans and vertical leadership development were connected through five key concepts:

- **The Development and Application of Skills:** The ongoing growth and development of one's skills, found at the heart of personal development planning (Beausaert et al., 2011).
- **Self-awareness:** "The skill of being aware of our thoughts, emotions, values, and actions" (Hougaard et al., 2018, para. 9).
- **Self-efficacy:** The ability to manage one's own skills and resources effectively (Zimmerman, 1989).
- **Self-exploration:** Realizing one's full potential (Thorne, 1992) by seeking an answer to "What do you want to become?" (Ciobotaru, 2017, p. 100).
- **Continuous Improvement:** Supporting one's growth as an ongoing, continuous process throughout one's lifetime (Ciobotaru, 2017; Tamminga & De Boer, 2018).

Table 1 below provides the conceptual framework of the study, The Personal and Vertical Connection Framework, which connects these personal development themes to the theories surrounding vertical leadership development.

Table 1: *The Personal and Vertical Connection Framework*

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT CONCEPT	VERTICAL LEADERSHIP CONNECTION
<i>Development and Application of Skills:</i> Effectively learning and utilizing new skills and abilities, while also making efforts to further refine the individual’s current skillset (Beusaert et al., 2011).	<i>Development and Application of Skills:</i> Development of an individual’s capacity to learn and apply new skills (Petrie, 2014; Rooke & Torbert, 2005), while effectively forming a plan to synergize and apply learned information and experiences (Petrie, 2015).
<i>Self-Awareness:</i> “The skill of being aware of our thoughts, emotions, values, and actions” (Hougaard et al., 2018, para. 9) in order to perform more effectively and improve relationships (Ciobotaru, 2017).	<i>Self-Awareness:</i> The process of reflection through Elevating the Sensemaking, integrating multiple perspectives into one’s own by Enabling the Collisions (Petrie, 2015).
<i>Self-Efficacy:</i> An individual’s ability to manage their own skills and resources effectively in order to perform skills needed in specific tasks (Zimmerman, 1989).	<i>Self-Efficacy:</i> Building an individual’s capacity to interpret and apply new skills through expanding vertical capabilities (Petrie, 2014; Rooke & Torbert, 2005).
<i>Self-Exploration:</i> Seeking an answer to the question, “What do you want to become?” (Ciobotaru, 2017 p. 100), and realizing one’s full potential (Thorne, 1992).	<i>Self-Exploration:</i> Expanding an individual’s capacity to understand and utilize new skills through vertical growth (Petrie, 2014), while applying reflection and sensemaking relationships to gain better knowledge of self (Petrie, 2015).
<i>Continuous Improvement:</i> Personal development initiatives should be ongoing throughout the individuals’ lifetime as they seek to consistently adapt, evolve, or change their key characteristics (Chartered Management Institute, 2017; Ciobotaru, 2017; Tamminga & De Boer, 2018).	<i>Continuous Improvement:</i> Steady, constant lifetime growth through vertical development (Cook-Greuter, 2013; Rooke & Torbert, 2005), adapting and growing through challenging experiences (Watz, 2019).
<i>Note: This table connects the five key concepts of personal development with vertical leadership. These five concepts aim to bridge the contextual gaps between conventional personal development plans and vertical leadership development concepts. Through better understanding the ways that these concepts intersect, personal development plan initiatives can be crafted with a greater awareness of how to ensure plan success and to guide outcomes that help leaders to manage change and uncertainty.</i>	

Review of Literature

Personal Development Plans

Personal development is driven by the process of individuals better understanding themselves, and acquiring and refining skills to best address their strengths and weaknesses (Beusaert et al., 2011). It is recognized as an ongoing, continuous process rather than a solitary developmental event (Ciobotaru, 2017). Personal development plans are structured undertakings to facilitate personal development within an individual. They can

be useful as an assessment tool to observe the performance, competencies, and goals of employees (Eisele et al., 2013), and can serve as contexts to strategize and achieve an individual's personal development goals and objectives (Tasker, 2015). Effective personal development plans can serve to help individuals look backward as well as forward, to analyze their ongoing direction, to reflect, and to serve as an opportunity for mentee-mentor relationships to play out (Beausaert et al., 2013). Plans can be very flexible and varied based on an individual's needs and goals (Greenan, 2016; Kivimäki & Meriluoto, 2018), and they can serve as unique driving elements for organizational and individual success (Kegan & Lahey, 2010). Greenan (2016) has recognized a need for further exploration to be conducted to better understand how personal development plans can influence growth, change, and competency in the private sector.

VUCA

The concept of VUCA (an acronym for volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) was originally introduced by the U.S. military near the end of the Cold War to describe the diverse and ever-changing global landscape (Codreanu, 2016; Millar et al., 2018). Magee (1988, p.1) observed the term to represent "a world order where threats are both diffuse and uncertain, where conflict is inherent yet unpredictable, and where our capability to defend and promote our national interests may be restricted by materiel and personnel resource constraints." The term has since been adopted to management and leadership contexts to represent the challenges leaders and organizations face, the complexities related to globalization and technological advancements, and the rapidly changing nature of our world (Millar et al., 2018).

Gaining an understanding of each term that VUCA represents is beneficial to contextualize its meaning in organizational and professional development initiatives. Volatility refers to "sudden, extreme, and multi-layered fluctuations" in areas including the economy, society, and politics, which can mean that prior experience and knowledge alone can no longer be reliable for solving the problems of today and tomorrow (Codreanu, 2016, p. 31). Uncertainty represents the frequently missing or unclear contexts surrounding the issues we face, making it difficult to properly predict or interpret the nature behind social events and challenges (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). Complexity refers to the increasingly complex interconnectedness of our world, as technology and advancements in travel open new doors for collaboration and communication across cultures and organizational contexts (Codreanu, 2016). Ambiguity addresses the fact that these new, constantly changing social and organizational contexts represent unprecedented, unexplored unknowns (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014).

Challenges of a VUCA World

In recent years, several global and social challenges have served as key representors of VUCA and the challenges that these climates create for leaders. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a unique test of leadership, calling on leaders across all organizational contexts to lead with a new degree of agility, empathy, and global competency (Grint, 2020). As leaders everywhere respond to the pandemic, the rising challenges related to climate change may signal a deeper need for strategy reform and environmentally conscious leadership (Goffman, 2020). Meanwhile, the ongoing discussions and protests related to social justice in America (Jackson, 2021), create a greater need for leaders to be able to adapt to new contexts and maintain strategies to adapt to the developing challenges of our

society (Torbert, 2020). At the same time, the global workforce is experiencing a significant generational shift (Alton, 2017) as younger generations step into leadership roles with new values and goals, a desire to interact with the world equally, and pursue self-actualization (Zavatskyi & Toba, 2017).

As the challenges and contexts of VUCA continue to multiply, leaders are placed in uniquely difficult and complex scenarios. Organizational adaptation to VUCA requires meaningful and lasting change throughout an organization (Millar et al., 2018), creating a need for leaders to adapt new skills and understandings to adapt and meet the challenges of VUCA (Codreanu, 2016; Horner, 2013).

Vertical Leadership Development

Vertical leadership development is a unique approach to leadership development which revolves around expanding an individual's capacity to think, make decisions and establish strategy, integrate multiple perspectives, and interact with the world around them. It is an emerging body of research (Pesut & Thompson, 2018), therefore the connections to how it relates to conventional personal development and its overall individual and organizational impact is still developing. Petrie (2014, p. 8) describes vertical leadership development as the "advancement in a person's thinking capacity," and notes that it differs from the concept of horizontal development, which addresses "the adding of more knowledge, skills, and competencies." Towards this end, the horizontal development frequently exhibited in personal development plans speaks to filling an individual's "cup" of knowledge, whereas vertical leadership development aims to expand that person's "cup" overall, so that they can better utilize their own skills and abilities (Petrie, 2014). Vertical leadership development is often a lifelong process, involving extensive learning and growth over a long period of time (Cook-Greuter, 2013). However, vertical leadership development can be cultivated if the right circumstances are provided, which typically requires heat experiences (complex situations that challenge a leader's current ways of thinking), colliding perspectives (when leaders are encountered with new perspectives, insight, and scenarios), and elevated sensemaking (an ongoing reflection or facilitated growth process that allows the leader to process and contextualize their growth)(Petrie, 2015).

Vertically-developed leaders can have a significant impact in guiding organizations in times where innovation and creative thinking are needed. Leaders who achieve a higher capacity of vertical development can better navigate conflict and can serve as powerful change agents within their organizations and society (Rooke & Torbert, 2005). Vertical leadership development is a powerful tool in helping leaders to continuously grow and adapt to ongoing change and organizational challenges (Jones et al., 2020). Organizations who effectively utilize vertically- developed leaders stand to be able to be better united under greater strategy and vision during times of uncertainty (Torbert, 2020), due to these leaders' unique abilities to better manage ambiguity while operating with a higher level of self-awareness and multi-perspective thinking (Cook-Greuter, 2013). Vertical leadership development serves as a unique approach to help organizations to manage VUCA by advancing the competencies and capacities of key leaders (Till et al., 2016).

Personal Development and Vertical Leadership Connections

The conceptual framework of this study is guided by five themes which connect conventional personal development plans to vertical leadership development: the development and

application of skills, self-awareness, self-efficacy, self-exploration, and continuous improvement. These concepts are reflected in the realms of both developmental approaches, and by further connecting them, this study aims to bridge the gap between what defines a traditional personal development plan experience, and one that can best equip its individuals with the vertically-minded level of capacity development needed to be effective leaders in our VUCA world.

Development and Application of Skills

Personal development plans can serve as unique opportunities for individuals to learn and refine skills. A key component of personal development plans is the learning and development of new skills and abilities, while also further building on an individual's current competencies (Beusaert et al., 2011). This process can boost an individual's overall skillset, leading to them becoming more eligible for promotion or being a more worthwhile hire for prospective employers (Beusaert et al., 2013). In the world of vertical leadership development, this type of growth is recognized as horizontal development, the "adding of more knowledge, skills, and competencies," (Petrie, 2014, p. 6), which is recognized as an important element in capacity development. Our VUCA world creates ongoing complexity and uncertainty, placing a greater need for leaders to develop and utilize new skills and capacities in order to respond to change (Jari & Lauraéus, 2019).

Self-Awareness

Through personal development, an individual can become more aware of themselves and the world around them, making them more agile in times of uncertainty and able to understand the needs of themselves as well as others. Self-awareness refers to "the skill of being aware of our thoughts, emotions, values, and actions," and there is a rising need in business and society for leaders who lead with greater self-awareness and emotional intelligence (Hougaard et al., 2018, para. 9). Self-awareness can boost an individual's overall performance and improve their relationships (Ciobotaru, 2017), and individuals who are more self-aware can better assess their strengths and weaknesses and adapt to balancing multiple demands and uncertainty (Mustaffa et al., 2013). This principle is also heavily valued in the world of vertical leadership development, where the process of looking inward through reflection is a key component for growth (Jones et al., 2020). The ability to reflect and integrate one's own perspective as well as the perspectives of others is recognized as a crucial component for vertical growth to take place (Petrie, 2015).

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy relates to an individual's ability to best utilize their skills and resources in order to accomplish tasks (Zimmerman, 1989), and individuals who are able to operate with a high level of self-efficacy can better utilize their capabilities and accomplish their goals (Bandura, 2015; Lyons & Bandura, 2019). Self-efficacy is recognized as one of the five key elements of this study's conceptual framework because operating with a high level of self-efficacy can often bridge the gaps between knowledge competency and actual utilization of skills. Self-efficacy can lead to noteworthy developments in individual and organizational success (Lyons & Bandura, 2019). The values of self-efficacy are also reflected in vertical leadership development, where the ability to understand and best utilize one's growth are a sign of vertical capacity growth (Petrie, 2014; Rooke & Torbert, 2005).

Self-Exploration

Self-exploration refers to the process of an individual finding an answer to the question “What do you want to become?” (Ciobotaru, 2017, p. 100). Personal development plans can often relate to this process through helping individuals to develop themselves on intellectual, moral, and aesthetic levels (Zavatskyi & Toba, 2017), as personal development can often be “a search for acceptance, awareness, and understanding” (Tamminga & De Boer, 2018, p. 99). In vertical leadership development, finding new perspectives, relationship contexts, and goals is recognized as a crucial component in the development process (Rooke & Torbert, 2005), as individuals must go through significant reflection and sensemaking in order to understand themselves and their goals (Jones et al., 2020; Petrie, 2015).

Continuous Improvement

Personal development is considered an ongoing process, rather than a singular event (Ciobotaru, 2017), and can be defined as “a continuous lifelong process of nurturing, shaping and improving skills and knowledge to ensure maximum effectiveness and ongoing employability” (Chartered Management Institute, 2017, para. 1). Personal development plans are most effective when there is strong emphasis on the concept of how individuals can continue to grow and improve themselves over time (Maguire & Blaylock, 2017). This process of ongoing growth is reflected in vertical leadership, where one’s development is considered to be a lifelong process (Cook-Greuter, 2013; Rooke & Torbert, 2005).

Methods

A narrative, qualitative study was conducted in order to gain a better understanding of the personal development plan experiences of eight business leaders across a variety of conventional organizational contexts and plan experiences. The researcher utilized a qualitative methodology rather than a quantitative, as a qualitative approach enables a deep exploration into participant’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Johnston, 2010; Milena et al., 2008). This narrative-based approach focused the study on the heart of each individual’s personal development plan journey, and helped to better understand and contextualize their growth through the plan and its efficiency in helping them to manage in times of change and uncertainty.

Participants

Participants in the study (N=8) were business managers or owners who reported to have experienced growth as a result of a personal development plan experience. This sample represented a wide variety of plan experiences, organizational contexts, and a balanced age/gender ratio. Because sample sizes are not straightforward in qualitative research and can depend on the study and its nature (Butina, 2015; Guetterman, 2015), the sample was determined to be sufficient after all eight interviews provided a wide variety of perspectives, plan experiences, and a rich, narrative dive into the participants’ experiences. A purposive sampling process was utilized to recruit the participants and determine the richness of the information provided from the interviews, which helped to find context and a natural size for the sample to address the often unclear and uncertain guidelines regarding qualitative sample size (Vasileiou, et al., 2018).

Due to the experience levels necessary to achieve a leadership role in their respective organizations, participant ages ranged between 32 and 64. Participants were initially

recruited through the use of NJ Biz’s mailing lists of “Best Places to Work For” in New Jersey, and random sampling through NJ Biz’s Book of Lists was utilized to reach a greater variety of potential participants. The NJ Biz lists were selected due to the researcher’s familiarity with using the service’s contact lists for previous studies, and due to the focus of New Jersey businesses as a way to improve response rates due to the local recognition of the researcher’s institution, Stockton University. This approach helped to recruit the majority of participants, however, most of the participants hailed from traditional business backgrounds. In order to recruit participants from other organizational contexts (in particular, health care, faith-based, government, and education), a purposive recruiting process was then utilized. This involved outreach to local healthcare industries, religious organizations and ministries, local county level government organizations, and New Jersey-based high schools, colleges, and universities until the sample was completed to represent each of the intended organizational backgrounds.

All eight interviews were conducted between March-May 2020 through the video conferencing software Zoom. Interviews ranged in length from approximately 42 minutes to 1 hour and 7 minutes. Over 481 minutes of interviews were compiled, producing 345 pages (83,160 words) of transcripts, alongside 142 pages (19,167 words) of field notes taken by the researcher. Participants were assigned pseudonyms for the purpose of the research, and all approved of their interview transcripts through the process of member checking before the data analysis process began. All eight participants, their demographic and organizational backgrounds, as well as the nature of their personal development plan experience (either directed or self-directed) are detailed in *Table 2* below.

Table 2: Participant Demographics, Career Backgrounds, and PDP Experiences

NAME	AGE	GENDER	ORG CONTEXT	ORG TYPE	PDP DIRECTED OR SELF-DIRECTED
Jordan	50	F	Consulting	Business	Directed
Alex	34	M	Landscaping	Business	Directed
Austin	32	M	Digital Product Development	Business	Directed
Shane	45	M	Care Package Distribution	Nonprofit	Self-Directed
Robin	60	F	Religious - Community Support	Religious	Self-Directed
Cameron	43	M	County Library System	Government	Directed
Shannon	64	F	Healthcare	Healthcare	Directed
Blair	53	F	Higher Education	Education	Self-Directed

Note: Table displays participant demographic information, career background, and plan experiences.

Measures – Materials and Instruments

Participants were interviewed via one-on-one, approximately one-hour meetings through the video conferencing platform Zoom. All participants were interviewed using the Personal Development Growth Inquiry (PDGI), an instrument developed for this study utilizing concepts from the literature review and conceptual framework. The questions of the PDGI were designed to encourage storytelling with the participants, so that their individual

leadership journeys and development outcomes could be placed in full focus. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the researcher took supplementary field notes during the course of the interviews and maintained a reflexive journal throughout the recruiting, interviewing, and analysis processes.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed utilizing the framework analysis approach. The interview transcripts were shared with participants for their approval as part of the member checking process before the researcher began to organize, categorize, and theme responses. The researcher began with an initial cursory read of all transcripts, before sorting each question and analyzing the emergent themes that arose across all participant responses. The researcher utilized a review and reflection process throughout, and maintained a reflexive journal to analyze their thoughts and feelings throughout the process. The findings were ultimately categorized by exploring and quantifying the key themes that came out of each question response, and through further analyzing the individual responses given. Within-case and cross-case analyses were utilized to explore the narrative journeys of each participant (both as individuals and as part of the greater sample). The data helped to identify trends, key outcomes, and noteworthy principles to better explore how personal development plans can be utilized to manage VUCA while reflecting the key themes of vertical leadership development.

Results

Within-Case Analysis

Development Profile: Jordan

Jordan is a 50-year-old female who serves as the vice president of a consulting firm. In 2013, when she was first moving into this new leadership role, she pursued a structured, intensive personal development program to meet the challenges of her new responsibilities. The experience helped Jordan to develop leadership abilities and advance her skillset while gaining a better sense of herself and her long term personal and professional goals. The program’s intensive, immersive nature alongside the real-world application it offered served as a strong catalyst to help Jordan overcome the challenges of meeting her new career opportunities. Ultimately, the experience allowed her to develop the skills necessary while gaining a stronger sense of self, leaving her with a strong desire to continue her development journey.

I would say the conclusion [of the plan experience] is that I can handle anything and no matter what, nothing is happening to us as a company or to me personally, it's just a detour. So I have now become really confidently agile as I continue to develop as a leader.

Jordan’s experience is summarized in *Table 3*.

Table 3: Profile Summary for Jordan

PROFILE	PLAN EXPERIENCE	PLAN OUTCOMES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 50 years old, female ● Business – Consulting ● Current role: Vice President 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 20 indirect reports ● 1-year, directed plan ● Developing financial and coaching skills to adapt to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Greater competency at work with increased confidence ● Succeeded in being able to

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 19 years managerial experience ● 7 years at current organization ● 4 direct reports 	<p>new job</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Heat experience driving her to adapt and respond to new responsibilities ● Positive experience that was challenging and helped to overcome roadblocks 	<p>adapt to change and new leadership role</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Helped to guide organization forward ● Inspired further growth and development
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CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK COMPETENCIES

- **Development and Application of Skills:** Developed relevant skills necessary to lead organization forward
- **Self-Awareness:** Development allowed for greater self-reflection and understanding of shortcomings
- **Self-Efficacy:** Better at managing own strengths and weaknesses and communicating needs with team
- **Self-Exploration:** Better understanding of growth and better at accomplishing goals
- **Continuous Improvement:** Pursued additional structured and unstructured development opportunities while starting a developmental peer group

Development Profile: Alex

Alex is a 34-year-old male serving as president of a family-owned landscaping business. Prior to assuming his leadership role in his family business, Alex wanted to pursue other career opportunities. He found this in the world of corporate information technology, and while working in that field, he pursued a two-year leadership development program held within his organization. The combination of peer support and direct integration into his career allowed Alex to develop key industry skills and mindsets while also growing as an individual. Because the program was directly tied to his career, it allowed Alex to advance his growth much faster than a typical entry-level position would offer. At the culmination of the program, Alex was offered a full-time position in the company, and the experience, skills, mindsets, and contacts he gained helped him to set the stage for his career moving forward.

I think [the program] was critical to developing different skills and how I use them today, and everything you kind of do builds on itself and you're able to draw on experiences or you're able to draw on skills that you've learned from others or from classes.

Alex's experience is summarized in *Table 4* below.

Table 4: Profile Summary for Alex

PROFILE	PLAN EXPERIENCE	PLAN OUTCOMES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 34 years old, male ● Business - Landscaping ● Current role: President ● 4 years managerial experience ● 3 years at current organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 6 direct reports ● 75 indirect reports ● 2-year, directed plan ● Extensive corporate leadership development program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Experience pushed him from his comfort zone, challenged to learn new skills and competencies with real world application ● Led to career advancement, key development of skills, networking, and a greater capacity to lead ● Formed key peer groups and mentors within organization ● Helped him to eventually serve as a leader within family business

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK COMPETENCIES

- **Development and Application of Skills:** Developed relevant skills necessary to lead organization forward
- **Self-Awareness:** Development allowed for greater self-reflection and understanding of shortcomings
- **Self-Efficacy:** Better at managing own strengths and weaknesses and communicating needs with team
- **Self-Exploration:** Better understanding of growth and better at accomplishing goals
- **Continuous Improvement:** Pursued additional structured and unstructured development opportunities while starting a developmental peer group

Development Profile: Austin

Austin is a 32-year-old male who is a partner in a digital product development firm. Austin underwent a significant personal development experience while attending school for his Master of Business Administration with a concentration in Organizational Leadership. Alongside his education in leadership development, Austin was mentored by a faculty member, who helped guide him to seek out more readings, resources, and reflection tools to support his growth. The experience led to him being inspired to pursue the field of leadership development further, while advancing himself from an entry-level position in his firm all the way to the role of partner. Austin's development allowed him to grow as an individual and a leader, and he implemented his growth directly to his career. The experience helped him to grow as a leader, to better communicate and collaborate with his team, while continuously seeking new ways to grow.

[My development] really hasn't concluded. It's ongoing, but, I love it. I think I'm a better person for it. I think people around me respect me more. They're more open to ideas from me and from themselves, being able to express their ideas and not feeling an apprehension to doing so, or afraid to voice their opinions... And I think that having that openness is a huge thing that has occurred, at least in my organization and in my circles from me taking a new approach to how I manage or lead my team.

Austin's profile is summarized in *Table 5* below.

Table 5: Profile Summary for Austin

PROFILE	PLAN EXPERIENCE	PLAN OUTCOMES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 32 years old, male ● Business – Digital Product Development ● Current role: Partner ● 10 years managerial experience ● 8 years at current organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 38 direct reports ● 10 indirect reports ● 2+ year, directed plan ● Pursued Master of Business Administration with focus on reading and utilizing leadership development books 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Plan helped to develop new skills and competencies with real world application ● Moved up in a leadership role in his career as a result ● Gained key competencies to manage teams and oversee leadership vision and strategy ● Better at communicating, collaborating, and building relationships

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK COMPETENCIES

- **Development and Application of Skills:** Developed career skills and leadership abilities
- **Self-Awareness:** Greater understanding of self, deeper reflection as to how his actions affect his team as a leader
- **Self-Efficacy:** Improved recognitions of strengths and abilities, greater ability to set goals through roadmap planning and focus
- **Self-Exploration:** Helped achieve career milestones and set new ones
- **Continuous Improvement:** Continued to pursue development opportunities while consistently applying growth and lessons to working life

Development Profile: Shane

Shane is a 45-year-old male who is the co-founder and president of a care package distribution nonprofit. When the previous leaders of the nonprofit left the organization, Shane assumed the primary leadership role. However, in order to adapt to this new responsibility, Shane pursued a self-directed personal development plan to better develop the skills and mindsets to lead the organization effectively. Shane’s development was largely ongoing as he adapted to this role and learned how to develop key leadership skills alongside career competencies including marketing, networking, and relationship building.

So I’ve learned how to be a leader outside of work, right? Delegating authority, making decisions. I’ve learned to basically transpose how I handle myself in the corporate world. Talking, running meetings, whatever. Whereas before, I probably didn’t have the same level of etiquette or patience or how I present myself. Like basically [in] my nonprofit work, I went from being somebody that couldn’t talk to 10 people to being able to speak to 10,000 people or being on TV and speaking.

Shane’s development is summarized in *Table 6*.

Table 6: Profile Summary for Shane

PROFILE	PLAN EXPERIENCE	PLAN OUTCOMES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 45 years old, male ● Nonprofit ● Current role: Co-Founder and President ● 10 years managerial experience ● 11 years at current organization ● 30 direct reports ● 0 indirect reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 1-year, self-directed plan ● Sought to develop key skills and competencies to lead his organization forward ● Heat experience necessitated growth by needing to take over leadership role in organization after previous team departed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Greater competency at work, better at forming organizational strategy ● Improved ability to overcome shortcomings ● Addressed skills gap within working environment, gained ability to successfully lead organization forward
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK COMPETENCIES		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Continuous Improvement: Continued to develop and learn relevant skills related to leading his organization, undergoing efforts to advance leadership capacity ● Self-Awareness: Mindfulness was a key factor in acknowledging and overcoming challenges ● Self-Efficacy: Improved management of tasks, better capacity to multi-task ● Self-Exploration: Continuously setting new goals and seeking to adapt to best lead his organization forward ● Development and Application of Skills: Built key career competencies and abilities to guide his organization through the leadership transition into new success 		

Development Profile: Robin

Robin is a 60-year-old female who serves as executive director of a religious nonprofit which focusses on community support. At the beginning of 2019, Robin developed a personal development plan through the help of the book “Your Best Year Ever: A Five Step Plan for Achieving Your Most Important Goals” by Michael Hyatt. Through the utilization of the book and her plan, Robin set the stage for ten personal and professional goals to achieve through her development over the course of the year. Robin maintained accountability through a series of benchmarks, progress tracking, accountability, and reflection. Her goals included professional goals, such as growing the volunteer pool of her organization, and personal goals in terms of reading personal development books, managing personal finances better, and building relationships. The plan helped Robin to develop new skills and abilities in her personal and professional lives, and she set new goals to achieve in a similar development plan for 2020.

[The plan] exceeded my expectations and I felt more confident as a leader and more confident in my appearance, because I met a lot of my physical goals. More confident and more excited about setting goals because I can see how they were reached before. Especially with the volunteers. We got our whole team together. And so, when I set my goal this year which is obtaining and securing a fully funded facility for our [new center], it just made me more confident that this is what everyone does. A lot of hard work and you set your goal, and you go out and you get it.

Robin’s experience is summarized in *Table 7*.

Table 7: Profile Summary for Robin

PROFILE	PLAN EXPERIENCE	PLAN OUTCOMES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 60 years old, female ● Faith-based Nonprofit ● Current role: Executive Director ● 30 years managerial experience ● 10 years at current organization ● 20 direct reports ● 0 indirect reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 1-year, self-directed plan ● Plan focused on personal/professional development through the book “Your Best Year Ever” ● Motivated by desire to achieve and to further help support organization ● Plan involved thorough accountability and reflection to achieve goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Achieved goals for both personal and professional life ● Helped to lead her organization forward and adapt to growth while building up team ● Improved relationships in personal life ● Annual plan’s success inspired her to set new growth goals for the following year
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK COMPETENCIES		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Development and Application of Skills: Developed key leadership competencies to better serve her organization and guide it forward ● Self-Awareness: Advanced understanding of self and improved focus on relationships and communication with others ● Self-Efficacy: Helped actions and strategies to feel more intentional and structured ● Self-Exploration: Improved awareness of strengths and weaknesses, deeper sense of reflection and ability to set goals ● Continuous Improvement: Adapted 2019 plan forward to set new goals and a new development plan for 2020 		

Development Profile: Cameron

Cameron is a 43-year-old male who is an assistant director for a regional library system. In 2016, while in a senior librarian role, he was invited to attend a two-month, company sponsored supervisor training to further develop his skills and abilities as a leader while preparing himself for career advancement within his organization. The program was an all-day intensive workshop held every Tuesday, which helped Cameron to develop skills such as conflict management, facilitation of employee reviews, and communication skills. The program’s intensive nature based around real-world application allowed Cameron to develop himself further as a leader, and position himself for a better role within his organization.

...the role of [my plan] was to prepare me for the next level. I mean, I had a goal of being a department supervisor. And then, one of the most important things with working in a county system is that I feel that you need to be motivated to take on the promotions and this course that I went through was sort of was setting the foundation for that. It set the foundation for becoming a department supervisor.

Cameron’s development is summarized in *Table 8*.

Table 8: Profile Summary for Cameron

PROFILE	PLAN EXPERIENCE	PLAN OUTCOMES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 43 years old, male ● County Library System ● Current Title: Assistant Director of County Library System ● 10 years managerial experience ● 8 years at current organization ● 5 direct reports ● 41 indirect reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 3-month, directed plan ● Organization-sponsored program to develop key managerial skills and competencies ● Experience offered opportunity to develop skills and advance career ● Structured plan built around role playing scenarios and competency development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Advanced career in a new managerial role ● Built relevant skills and abilities for serving as a leader within a government organization ● Plan experience provided him with an ongoing resource binder to apply and retain information
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK COMPETENCIES		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Development and Application of Skills: Built and reinforced relevant skills necessary to lead and manage others within his organization ● Self-Awareness: Plan and proceeding reflection inspired him to enact role model behavior in leading and managing his team ● Self-Efficacy: Developed greater capacity to multi-task and approach complex managerial scenarios ● Self-Exploration: Has continued to reflect on and explore his growth, and focus on the necessary steps needed to achieve his career goals ● Continuous Improvement: Has continued to seek out and pursue organization-sponsored development programs 		

Development Profile: Shannon

Shannon is a 64-year-old female who serves as the assistant vice president of development for a regional healthcare organization. In 1990, she was faced with a unique heat-inspired scenario when she, while struggling to adapt to the responsibilities of her new leadership role, was told that she needed to either undergo an intensive development program or resign from her current role. The intervention program involved regular meetings with her

direct supervisor as well as the organization’s senior leadership team, and called on her to set developmental goals, undergo peer and supervisor review periods, and build a greater skillset and mindset as a leader. The experience was ultimately successful, and paved the way for her to improve herself personally and professionally and position herself for a long term, rewarding career in a leadership role.

I have really had a terrific career with multiple opportunities. I've worked with wonderful people. I've shaped the path of my organization. I've made significant contributions over all of these years. I'm not dissatisfied at all. [The plan] was worth every moment that I spent thinking about and doing the things I needed to do in order to be a better employee, a better leader, a better person.

Shannon’s growth is summarized in *Table 9*.

Table 9: Profile Summary for Shannon

PROFILE	PLAN EXPERIENCE	PLAN OUTCOMES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 64 years old, female ● Healthcare ● Assistant Vice President ● 30 years managerial experience ● 44 years at current organization ● 10 direct reports ● 0 indirect reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 9 months, directed plan ● Developmental program within organization that involved thorough skills improvement, team review, and mentorship ● Heat experience: Was required to undergo training or lose position ● Plan served as a thorough evaluation of her current career course, allowed for trajectory change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Retained position at work and ultimately received promotion ● Greater skills competency and improved ability to understand self and communicate with others ● Led to a long, enriching career of helping others develop
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK COMPETENCIES		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Development and Application of Skills: Built and further developed key career competencies while revamping leadership style ● Self-Awareness: Greater understanding of self and how actions influenced others, improved capability to listen and observe before acting ● Self-Efficacy: Better management of time, achieved a greater work-life balance ● Self-Exploration: Refined career focus with a stronger emphasis on helping others ● Continuous Improvement: Pursued graduate degree (master’s) upon completion, continued to pursue a learning journey built around skills development and growth 		

Development Profile: Blair

Blair is a 53-year-old female who works as a professor of educational leadership and program coordinator for her department. While working on her doctorate, she used the book “Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization” by Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey alongside other developmental books and resources to create a strategy to advance her personal and professional goals. The plan allowed her to shift focus in the midst of a career change, and identify the steps necessary to advance her career while growing her individual capacity and capabilities. After a yearlong period of development and reflection, she began to develop a greater capacity to understand herself and her goals, paving the way for career advancement and further growth.

[Before the plan], I was stuck and I didn't know how to get past it, and [the plan] gave me information. Like it was informative. It helped me understand myself better. And the experience of growth in that, you know, when you get stuck, and you're not moving forward, and then you find something that helps you do that, it's a very empowering feeling.

Blair's growth is summarized in *Table 10*.

Table 10: Profile Summary for Blair

PROFILE	PLAN EXPERIENCE	PLAN OUTCOMES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 53 years old, female ● Education ● Professor of Educational Leadership ● 6 years managerial experience ● 6 direct reports ● 0 indirect reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 1-year, self-directed plan ● Developmental journey to bolster skills and competencies through the use of the book "Immunity to Change" ● Heat experience brought on by feeling stuck after quitting job and lacking career direction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Found career direction and moved into a new role ● Developed a greater ability to communicate and collaborate with others ● Continued to grow through additional development opportunities and through the utilization of peer support and mentorship
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK COMPETENCIES		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Development and Application of Skills: Built relevant abilities to lead, communicate, and collaborate while advancing career ● Self-Awareness: Self-awareness a key plan component in raising a deeper understanding of self and how to overcome competing commitments ● Self-Efficacy: Became more conscious of how time and attention was being used and how best to utilize skills and abilities in working life ● Self-Exploration: Improved understanding of goals and how best to acknowledge and overcome roadblocks ● Continuous Improvement: Continued to seek out new development books and opportunities while applying gained skills and experiences to life 		

Personal Development Plan Experiences and Outcomes

The opening questions of the Personal Development Growth Inquiry (PDGI) ask participants to evaluate the effectiveness of their personal development plans, and to explore what made their plans positive experiences overall. All eight participants noted that their plans helped them to develop new skills, solve career problems, and apply what they had learned into their working lives. Seven out of eight participants felt that their plans helped them to face challenges, and they also noted the effectiveness of having a stable plan structure established from the start. *Table 11* further depicts the key positive elements of participants' plan experiences.

Table 11: Coded Responses Regarding Positive Experience Factors within PDPs

KEY ELEMENT	<i>n</i>	%
Developing new skills	8	100%
Solve career problems	8	100%
Real world application	8	100%

Facing challenges	7	88%
Developing a stable plan	7	88%
Pushed from comfort zone	6	75%
Helped support organization	6	75%
Embracing change	5	63%
Overcome roadblocks	5	63%
Peer/org support	5	63%
Diversity of experiences	4	50%
Continuous Growth	4	50%
Accountability	3	38%
Expanding connections	2	25%

Note: Answers to Q1A If it was primarily positive, what were the key elements that contributed to it being a good experience? are summarized here.

When asked how their plans helped them (or failed to help them) develop new skills and abilities, all eight participants noted several key factors across their plans. These were career development, the development of soft skills (such as improved collaboration or leadership skills), overcoming previous shortcomings, gaining new experiences, having real life application, an increase in communication skills, and a noted improvement of their professional relationships.

Six participants also shared that their plans helped them to better understand themselves and their goals, to better accomplish their goals, and to better support their organizations overall.

Table 12 explores these responses in greater detail.

Table 12: Key Outcomes of Participants' PDP Experiences

KEY OUTCOME	n	%
Career development	8	100%
Development of soft skills	8	100%
Overcome shortcomings	8	100%
New experiences	8	100%
Real life application	8	100%
Communication	8	100%
Improved professional relationships	8	100%
Understanding self and goals	6	75%
Accomplishment of goals	6	75%
Improved support of organization	6	75%
Accountability	5	63%
Self-management	4	50%
Reflection	4	50%
Reinforced previous education	4	50%
Empathy	3	38%
Humility	3	38%
Support Others	3	38%

Note: Answers to Q2 In what ways did your personal development experience help you (or fail to help you) to develop any skills or abilities? are summarized here.

Time management	3	38%
Conflict management	2	25%
Improved personal relationships	2	25%

The interviews were conducted from March-May 2020, during the onset of the COVID- 19 pandemic. As a result, a question was added to the instrument to explore how the participants felt that their personal development plans impacted their ability to respond to the pandemic.

Because the pandemic represents a noteworthy case study in leaders responding to VUCA, it was worthwhile to see their responses in the early stages of the pandemic’s organizational challenges. Seven of the eight participants noted their plan had helped them to better manage complexity and change, while six participants felt they were better at developing organizational strategy, responding to challenges, supporting others, and serving as improved communicators overall.

Table 13 provides further detail on participant responses to this question.

Table 13: Experiences in Applying PDP Growth to Coronavirus Pandemic Response

PANDEMIC RESPONSE OUTCOMES	n	%
Improved management of complexity and change	7	88%
Better at developing organizational strategy	6	75%
Improved communication	6	75%
Better at responding to challenges	6	75%
Better at supporting others	6	75%
Improved leadership ability	4	50%
Improved management of multiple perspectives	4	50%
Increased collaboration	4	50%
Better at managing personal life	3	38%

Note: Answers to Q19 How has your personal development plan been useful to you as you respond to the coronavirus pandemic? are summarized here.

Conceptual Framework Themes

The Personal Development Growth Inquiry was designed with strong consideration into the five conceptual framework themes which serve as a bridge between conventional personal development planning and vertical leadership development. While the “development and application of skills” area was covered in questions related to the previous section, specific questions were also asked to determine how participants’ self-awareness, self-efficacy, self-exploration, and continuous improvement goals were influenced by their plan experience.

All eight participants noted that they have continued to develop themselves since completing their plan by taking on new career opportunities (such as promotions, new positions, or added responsibilities) and by seeking new opportunities to continue their personal development journeys. Five participants have pursued new structured personal development experiences, while four sought out new unstructured personal development experiences. *Table 14* provides further detail on the participants’ exploration into continuous improvement.

Table 14: Participant Themes Related to Continuous Improvement after PDP Experience

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT APPROACHES	<i>n</i>	%
Taking new career opportunities	8	100%
Applying PD through new opportunities	8	100%
Additional structured PD	5	63%
Additional unstructured PD	4	50%
Addressing weaknesses / shortcomings from initial PDP	4	50%
Developed new mentor relationships	3	38%
Further changes to organization	3	38%
Developing peer groups	2	25%
Pursued graduate education	2	25%
Developed new mentee relationships	1	13%

Note: Answers to Q11 How have you continued to develop yourself since completing the plan? Describe some of the ways in which you have done so. are summarized here.

To explore the theme of self-awareness, participants were asked to share how their personal development plan experience contributed to the advancement of their level of self-awareness. All eight participants noted that they have exhibited deeper self-reflection since completing their plan experiences, with greater mindfulness and an improved awareness of self. Seven noted that they are better at understanding their own shortcomings, while six felt that they have gained a better awareness of their growth and goals. These responses are explored in further detail in Table 15.

Table 15: Participants' Evaluation on How Their PDP Affected Self-Awareness

SELF-AWARENESS COMPONENTS	<i>n</i>	%
Deeper self-reflection	8	100%
Increased mindfulness	8	100%
Improved awareness of self (general)	8	100%
Better understood shortcomings	7	88%
Better understanding of growth and goals	6	75%
Improved interactions with others	4	50%
Better understood strengths	3	38%

Note: Answers to Q12 Would you comment on any relationship between the use of a personal development plan and the advancement of your level of self-awareness, emotions, and actions? are summarized here.

Participants were then asked to share how their personal development plan experience had impacted their self-efficacy, framed through asking them to identify how their plan has helped them to best utilize their skills, time, and resources. All eight participants expressed a greater feeling of self-efficacy overall in these areas, while seven participants observed that they were better at managing time. Five participants felt that they had gained a better overall perspective, while five felt that the experience had made them more mindful. Table 16 provides a further breakdown of participant responses to the question.

Table 16: Participants' Evaluation on How Their PDP Affected Self-Efficacy

SELF-EFFICACY COMPONENTS	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Better self-efficacy (general)	8	100%
Better time management	7	88%
Increased perspectives and experiences	5	63%
Improved mindfulness	5	63%
Better at acknowledging shortcomings	4	50%
Improved communication	4	50%
Improved collaboration	3	38%
Better at realizing and achieving goals	3	38%
Improved long-term planning	3	38%

Note: Answers to Q14 *Would you comment on the relationship between your personal development plan and the management of your skills, time, and resources? are summarized here.*

To better inform how their plan experiences influenced their own self-exploration processes, participants were asked how their plans affected their understanding of their own growth and goals. All eight participants felt that their plans inspired them to set further goals for themselves to grow further (personally and/or professionally), while seven felt that their plans helped them to better understand themselves and achieve their goals. *Table 17* provides further context on participant responses related to self-exploration.

Table 17: Participants’ Evaluation on How Their PDP Affected Self-Exploration

SELF-EXPLORATION COMPONENTS	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Inspired ongoing growth	8	100%
Increased understanding of self	7	88%
Helped to achieve goals	7	88%
Increased awareness of goals	6	75%
Increased reflection	5	63%
Increased confidence	4	50%
Increased capability of overcoming obstacles	4	50%

Note: Answers to Q15 *How would you evaluate your understanding of yourself and your goals in relation to the role of your personal development plan? are summarized here.*

Discussion

This study sought to gain a better understanding of personal development in a VUCA world through connecting key concepts of personal development plans with vertical leadership development. The narrative, qualitative study focused on the lived experiences of eight business owners and managers who had experienced personal growth as a result of a personal development plan experience. Through analyzing their experiences in connection to the literature review and conceptual framework, key connections were made regarding their experiences and how they relate to effective personal development planning in a VUCA world.

Overall, the participant experiences connected with all five elements of the conceptual framework. *Table 18* provides a summary of the findings of the study, and how they connected to the five conceptual framework themes.

Table 18: Summary of Participant Experiences Relating to the Conceptual Framework

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ELEMENT	EXAMPLE QUOTE	CONNECTION TO STUDY
Development and Application of Skills	<i>“It was motivated by the fact that I was in a job that I wanted to be able to do better and to be better at.”</i>	Primary motivator for PDPs (Career Advancement) Most effective when integrated into real life(7/8)
Self-Awareness	<i>“[My plan] allowed me to say, ‘this is where I’m weak and that’s okay.’ It allowed me to grow from there.”</i>	7/8 participants felt they were better able to understand how to address and interpret their shortcomings.
Self-Efficacy	<i>“I was a much better steward of my skills, time, and resources.”</i>	7/8 noted an increased ability to manage time 5/8 felt more competent overall
Self-Exploration	<i>“I think I’m definitely more aware of myself and where I need to go because of the program.”</i>	7/8 felt improved understanding of self and that their plan helped to achieve goals 6/8 felt plan gave greater awareness of goals
Continuous Improvement	<i>“Continually learning, continually reading and continually putting myself in situations that are challenging and seeing how we can get out of them in a positive manner.”</i>	8/8 participants sought new opportunities to apply their growth after completing their plan

Note: Connections to the five conceptual framework elements uniting themes between conventional personal development plans and vertical leadership development are summarized here.

Ultimately, these findings help to provide an understanding on some of the most successful elements and outcomes of personal development plans that are focused on helping individuals to develop competencies in managing VUCA-related uncertainty and change. While the nature of all participant’s plans and career contexts were different, the five themes of the conceptual framework were reflected in their growth journeys and plan outcomes. Participants noted that they were most effective in developing and applying new skills when they were able to apply their growth directly to their working life, which speaks to Petrie’s (2014) observation that plans often fail if not connected to one’s real working life, and relate to Lee and Pang’s (2014) findings that adult learners are most frequently motivated by career advancement.

The plans served as a way for participants to boost their self-awareness, a recognized component and worthwhile outcome of personal development plans (Ciobotaru, 2017; Hougaard et al., 2018), as well as vertical leadership development (Petrie, 2015). All eight participants also reflected upon their growth as a key component in influencing their own self-efficacy and ability to manage uncertainty, complexity, and change through the lens of their COVID-19 pandemic response experiences. Self-exploration was also reflected in participant experiences, with their plans helping them to better understand themselves,

their growth, and their goals. Plans are most successful when they are used as a starting point for long-term, ongoing growth. In this study, all eight participants found new ways to continue their growth after completing their plan experience, which supports Maguire and Blaylock's (2017) recognition of ongoing growth as a key component in any successful plan experience.

To connect the themes of self-awareness, self-efficacy, and self-exploration in a context that places emphasis on developing and applying skills and ongoing improvement serves to represent a key construct for effective personal development plans built around responding to complexity, uncertainty, and change. The ever-changing elements of our VUCA world will continue to create new challenges and contexts for leaders and organizations to navigate, and the more personal development plans are crafted with these elements in mind, the better individuals can grow and best utilize their potential to live and lead in uncertain times.

Theoretical Implications

This research sought to unite key concepts between conventional personal development plans and vertical leadership development, and the findings supported Petrie's (2014; 2015) stance that vertical leadership development can be a unique platform to help individuals and organizations adapt to uncertainty and change. The findings suggest that vertical leadership development can be connected to conventional personal development plans on a nearly unconscious or subliminal level. The participants of this study were not actively familiar with the concepts behind vertical leadership development, yet their plan experiences (and proceeding growth) exhibited key themes for vertical leadership development as a whole. Therefore, vertical leadership development's key theories and applications may be capable of being utilized across more widespread contexts, outside of just the more "advanced" leadership development modalities in which it is more frequently housed. It is possible that vertical leadership development and its key theories may be capable of being utilized on a larger scale across all areas of personal development.

The study overall served as a noteworthy example of narrative-based, personal development experiences in the private sector, an area previously identified as needing further research (Greenan, 2016), while contributing to the emerging body of research around vertical leadership development (Pesut & Thompson, 2018). Participants as a whole gained a greater level of confidence and competency when faced with uncertainty due to their plan experiences, which can speak overall to how plans can be developed to best equip individuals with the capacities and skillsets to manage VUCA.

Practical Implications

Based on the narrative experiences of the participants, personal development plans should be developed with several key elements in mind. First, plans should be clearly developed and structured with a strong system of goals and benchmarks in place, with ongoing implementation into one's working life. Therefore, plans should be heavily personalized to the ongoing needs and contexts of the individual, however a "personal" development plan should not be a solitary process. Instead, plans should support the process of reflection and accountability through the utilization of mentors, mentees, and/or peer groups, which can support the elevated sensemaking process recognized in vertical leadership development (Petrie, 2015). Plans should also contain some type of consideration for ongoing growth and how an individual can continue to grow and apply themselves after the plan's completion

(Maguire & Blaylock, 2017).

Organizations seeking to utilize personal development as a growth tool for their leaders and employees should aim to ingrain these personal development plans within their organization's culture. This idea of looking at personal development as a unified process rather than a solitary one (Chlebikova et al., 2015) represents an opportunity for organizations to create unique developmental cultures. This type of environment can not only support an individual's growth further (in the areas of developing and retaining skills and ongoing growth), but it can also set the stage for how an organization and its people can act with greater agility and competency in the face of change (Jones et al., 2020; Kegan et al., 2014).

Recommendations for Future Research

This study's findings should be looked at as a starting or contributing point in the quest to better understand personal development plans and their context and implications in VUCA environments. Therefore, four recommendations have been made for future research in these areas:

- 1) **Further explore the practical implications of the findings through actual plan practice.** This study has established a framework for effective plans in adapting to VUCA. Actually developing a plan based on these findings and observing its efficacy would be the next logical step in applying and testing the findings of this study.
- 2) **Utilize experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic as a key resource for observing VUCA and its organizational impacts.** The COVID-19 pandemic stands as one of the most uniquely challenging organizational hurdles leaders face today. While this study was conducted in the early months of the pandemic (March-May 2020), there is potential for any researcher who aims to further analyze how the pandemic has influenced leadership, and the steps leaders have taken to respond to the organizational challenges the pandemic has created.
- 3) **Seek out nuanced, unsuccessful experiences of personal development plans in future research.** A limitation of this study was that all participants had self-identified that their plans had helped them to grow, which placed the emphasis of this research on successful personal development plans. Further exploration into unsuccessful plans, their contexts, causes for failure, and ultimate outcomes (if any) would help to provide better understanding of personal development planning overall.
- 4) **Cast a wider net of participant personal development experiences through a quantitative study.** This study focused on the narrative experiences of business leaders who had experienced personal development plans. Now that these findings have illuminated several key contexts and outcomes for effective VUCA-minded plans, a quantitative study across a larger sample could prove useful in better understanding the contexts and outcomes of this study.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Based on the findings of this study, four recommendations have been made for an organization or leader looking to further ingrain personal development plans into their organization's operations and culture:

- 1) **Create and utilize plans with an emphasis on developing relevant skills with an**

immediate integration into the participants' real life. Plans should be developed with a direct focus on the needs of the individual, and there should be clear opportunities for that individual to apply and continue their growth within the working life, so that the development is retained and immediately relevant.

2) **Utilize an effective, well-communicated plan structure with clear benchmarks and outcomes.** Plans were most effective when they had proper structure, with clear concepts behind how to determine success, benchmarks, and how to address plan completion and ongoing growth.

3) **Maintain accountability, sensemaking, and motivation through the utilization of reflection and mentor and/or peer support.** Personal development plans should not be solitary processes. Instead, they should incorporate various aspects of accountability and sensemaking to help the individual to contextualize their growth.

4) **Foster a development-minded organizational culture with opportunities for participants to continue their growth.** The more that organizations ingrain employee development into their culture, the more growth can be supported and sustained over time. This process may involve taking risks, and may shift power dynamics within employee-supervisor relationships, and may not always be a clear path to productivity and success. However, there is great potential for organizations that can effectively develop their employees and sustain an agile, dynamic growth culture.

The VUCA world has created an ever-changing series of contexts, obstacles, and perspectives for organizations and leaders to navigate. Its organizational and personal hurdles continue to grow with each challenge faced, whether it be a pandemic, environmental challenges, cultural, global, or social issues, or some new, currently unforeseen challenge. The more that leaders can continue to cultivate and utilize development, the better equipped they can be in navigating the uncertain waters of our ever-changing world.

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About the Author

Kevin Coopersmith, Ed.D., is an educator and writer in the fields of organizational leadership and communication studies. As a professor at Stockton University (New Jersey), Dr. Coopersmith prioritizes helping his students to embrace and utilize the best of their potential while guiding them to develop skillsets to adapt to today's dynamic workforce. His research in organizational leadership studies has covered personal development planning, vertical leadership development, mentorship, reflection, and how leaders can best equip themselves to thrive in today's ever-changing world. He serves on Beacon Animal Rescue's Board of Directors, and he has career experience in the fields of marketing, public relations, and public policy.

Dr. Coopersmith can be reached at KevinLCoopersmith@gmail.com.