How Senior Executives Learn and Apply that Learning to their Practices

A study of the experiences and perspectives of senior executives in education, publicly-traded companies and privately-held enterprises

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I, Robert Cooper, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

Learning and applying learning are considered to be vital activities for the success of senior executives in their jobs and, in turn, for the success of the organisations they lead. That connection between learning, applying learning, and personal and organisational effectiveness has been posited by observers and supported by research. However, few studies have closely examined the specific ways in which senior executives learn and apply their learning.

This study was conducted through qualitative analysis of interviews with 24 experienced senior executives from three broad fields. Eight of the interviewees were from educational institutions, eight were from publicly-traded for-profit companies and eight were from private for-profit enterprises. Thirteen were men and 11 women. All had at least five years of experience at a senior organisational level. Twenty-one of the participating senior executives were interviewed once, and three of them—one from each of the three fields—were interviewed twice, with the second interview taking place at least six months after the initial interview.

Twenty ways in which more than half of the senior executives reported that they learn were identified, and those were placed into four primary categories. Three of those primary categories—learning from experience, from reflection, and from guidance by others—were supported by a fourth category of practices and attitudes that prompted and furthered their learning.

Eleven ways in which more than half of the senior executives reported that they applied learning were identified, and those were also placed into four primary categories: to advance the organisation's effectiveness, to create constructive change, to support the growth and success of others, and to personally improve.

The findings are presented and discussed in the context of expectations in the research and theoretical literature regarding learning and application of learning by executives, and suggested subjects for further study are presented.

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Impact Statement

Each day, every one of billions of people is personally affected by the influence of thousands of organisations. It takes only a cursory glance around any place where one finds oneself to see products and services provided by organisations, and it takes little additional awareness to recognise that the world is being shaped by the decisions and actions of many more organisations. Casting the mind back in time, any individual will acknowledge that his or her life has been substantially formed by the effects of organisations, be they schools, places of worship or any of several hundred other kinds of organised activity.

Within organisations, executives lead the processes that determine what products and services will be provided, to whom, at what cost (direct and indirect), when, where, and how. Senior executives—those highest in the organisational hierarchy—affect those decisions and actions significantly, so that cumulatively, senior executives have an outsized impact on what the lives of all people are like and will be like.

The thoughts and behaviours of senior executives are affected by learning. That learning can take many forms, from confirmation of an existing understanding to the development of a new or revised understanding. It can range from the acquisition of facts to a transformational reconceptualisation of some significant matter. Once something has been learned, it can be applied, either deliberately or unconsciously, or it can have no application effect. When it is applied, it will change something about what the organisation does. That change will in turn shift the worlds of all those who are affected by the organisation. That shift may be small—a slightly better or slightly worse product or service, for example—or it might be large—an iPhone or a search engine or an electric car, to name a few examples.

Thus the questions addressed in this thesis—How do senior executives learn? How do they apply learning?—potentially reach into the fabric of the lives of billions of people, today and into the future. That connection between learning, applying learning, and personal and organisational value creation has been posited by observers. However, few studies have closely examined the specific ways in which senior executives learn and apply their learning.

This small, localised study can make no claim except to possibly be the beginning of several possible impacts. In the general organisational sphere, it might be used to consider the design of training and development programmes for executives, on which many tens of millions of dollars are spent each year and which are of course dependent on the executives actually learning and then applying what they have learned. It might inspire individual executives and possibly other leaders to think more deeply about how they learn and apply learning, and to perhaps try more effective ways of doing those things. Consultants, executive coaches, and others might use the results to make their practices in relationship to senior executives more impactful. To the extent that better learning and application by senior executives makes those executives' organisations more successful, there could be impacts on overall organisational performance.

The extent to which those effects occur will be dependent in part on how broadly the outcomes of this study are disseminated. I intend to write about them, speak to groups about them, and share them through my extensive network, as well as applying them in my own work with organisations.

In the academic sphere, this study might result in scholarly attention being paid to an important topic that has received scant research attention. It might offer future researchers some foundational data and possible insights to affect their investigations. Beyond the thesis's subject area of senior executive learning, it could affect the broader topic area of leadership and learning, with its findings tested for value in relationship to leaders in general and not just senior executives.

The logic is indisputable: executive learning and its application affects everything that organisations do, and everything that organisations do affects billions of people throughout the world. Even if this small-scale study only galvanises more research attention to understanding the learning-related aspects of that reality, its impact could be significant.

For me personally, my 20-plus-year career as an advisor to executives and other leaders can probably be fairly judged by criteria directly related to the subjects of this thesis: whether I have helped my clients to learn and to effectively apply what they learned. I will move forward in my career with a far broader and deeper understanding of how I can be most effective in those regards.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my research supervisors, Peter Earley, Professor of Educational Leadership and Management, and Dr. Joanne Waterhouse, Senior Lecturer in Educational Leadership, for their unwavering support, guidance and encouragement.

Many of my business, neuroscience and leadership colleagues have gone the extra mile innumerable times over the past five years while I was focused on this doctoral research. I extend special thanks to my long-time strategic thinking partner, Jerry de Jaager, and to Nanette Koerner, LuAnn Freund and Suanne Standage, Susan Duggan and Bill Anton.

I am enduringly grateful to my grandparents and parents: who in varied and meaningful ways, beginning when I was a young boy, set me on the path of valuing and exploring the power and potential of where learning meets leadership. I am blessed each day with the presence—whether nearby or from wherever in the world they happen to be—of our daughters, Chelsea and Shanna, who are stars in my sky. And at the heart of everything I do is my love for my wife and business partner, Leslie, who has been a guiding light in my drive to learn and grow and in shaping the life we have built together and continue to build.

My enduring appreciation also goes to each of the senior executives who agreed to participate in this study—for their kindness and candour as well as for their individualised commitment to do everything in their power to lead their teams and organisations into a better future through these times of great change.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

This chapter outlines the focus of the original research for this thesis and sets out the questions that the research addresses. It also summarises the theoretical and methodological approaches taken and outlines the structure of the thesis.

Learning and executive effectiveness

It is widely contended that learning by executives can be correlated with the effectiveness with which they carry out their positions and, in turn, that the effectiveness with which they carry out the responsibilities of their positions can be correlated with the significant outcomes they create in those positions. Learning by executives is widely assumed to be associated with positive organisational outcomes (e.g., Kayes and Kayes, 2011; Kearns, 2015; Seijts and Latham, 2005; Seijts, 2014; Staats, 2018). However, the presumed or claimed outcomes are widely varied (e.g., Covey 1990; Knapp, et al, 2003; Kouzes and Posner, 2016; Leithwood, et al, 1999; MacBeath, 2003; Schein, 2010; Senge, 2006; Southworth, 2002) and often bereft of specific empirical or organisational data.

For this thesis, I interviewed 24 senior executives to understand how they learn and how they apply learning when carrying out the responsibilities of their positions. The 24 subjects of this study are referred to as 'senior executives' because they were at high organisational levels (no lower than the third hierarchical tier of their organisations' organigrams, or 'organisation charts'), and they have had served in positions at that level for at least five years.

Even though each of the interviewees was identified by peers as a respected and high-performing executive, I am not able to independently verify that characterisation and so I do not contend that my findings apply to high-performing senior executives more or less than they would to less successful senior executives. I am offering concepts or constructs associated with learning and application in general by senior executives, as the beginning of a possible framework for further research and analysis. Those constructs or concepts are offered in the following categories:

1. The senior executives' views of how they learn;

2. Their descriptions of how they apply learning

Eight of the interviewees were from organisations in the field of education and 16 were from profit-seeking organisations not explicitly focused on education. By 'profit-seeking', I refer to organisations with the goal of making a financial profit. I refer to all of the interviewees as 'senior executives' because they all have served for more than five years in high-level or executive organisational positions.

Of the sample from non-education profit-seeking organisations, eight were from companies whose stock is publicly traded and eight were from privately-held corporations. Thirteen of the interviewees were male and 11 were female.

It should be noted that among the senior executives from educational institutions who were part of this study, several of them work at educational institutions where making a profit, or showing a financial surplus, is an essential goal. For the executives that I interviewed from small private colleges, for example, the financial viability of their organisations was an omnipresent concern that guided their attentions and their activities. In that way, their acquisition and application of learning may have had an impetus more similar to that of the executives from profit-seeking businesses than to the executives I

interviewed in public-education organisations, where profit or financial surplus was not a major concern.

Two indisputable realities underlie this research. The first is that senior executives learn. As human beings functioning in the world, they construct new understandings, acquire new information and perform all the other tasks that can fall under the wide range of definitions of what learning is. The second reality is that they apply what they learn, whether they do that intentionally and with awareness, or do it without even recognising that they are doing so.

But since, in differing degrees, all people learn and all people apply learning, the utility in practice of an asserted general relationship among learning, application and effectiveness vaporises: All senior executives, being people, ought to be effective by definition: they learn; they apply; therefore, they must be effective. This premise is of course refuted by empirical evidence: some senior executives are effective, to varying degrees, and some are ineffective, to varying degrees. Some are reported to learn, from experience for example (e.g., McCall, 1988), yet 'many lack the disposition to learn' (Seijts, 2014:121) and learning and its application may be inhibited in multiple ways, including constant pressure to get things done (Mintzberg,213:169) or, as Hirst, et al (2004:311) point out, the more experience an executive has, 'the harder it is to learn'.

As I will discuss later in Chapter 2, there is a history to how compelling it is to assume or describe the link between leadership and learning. As Vaill (1996) advocates, 'learning as a way of being' makes sense for leaders. But as to how it actually happens and is sustained, expanded or mandated, little is revealed to date in the literature.

Regarding 'leadership'—and narrowing the focus to senior executives

This thesis does not address a possible interrelationship between leadership and learning—it attends only to one side of it: increasing the understanding of 'the richness and complexity of learning' by senior executives. By perhaps adding to the understanding of how senior executives learn, the findings of this thesis might be used by others to further examine the intersection of learning and leadership, but it is not the purpose of this thesis to address it.

When MacBeath and Dempster refer to 'leadership', it raises an important semantic and methodological point regarding this thesis. Semantically, 'senior executives'—the subjects of this thesis—might alternatively be referred to as 'senior leaders' in the sense that the word 'leader' is used to designate something about organisational rank, authority, or some other structural consideration. At times in academic research as well as common parlance, 'leadership'—that 'multi-layered, often elusive quality' referenced by MacBeath and Dempster—is taken to mean very broadly 'things that a "leader" does'. That vaporous conceptualisation can be referring to 'things that a person with positional authority does' in the semantic sense in which a 'senior leader' might be the same as a 'senior executive'; or it could be referring to a more focused identification of the subject as someone who is a 'leader', regardless of their positional/structural authority.

In the latter case, where some position-independent 'leadership' attributes are either being attributed to a person or people, or are being sought by a researcher, there must be a specific, operationalised definition of what a 'leader' does—what 'leadership' is. Such a definition might be explicitly applied in some individual studies, but most often it is not; and across studies, 'leadership' is defined in a broad range of often general, often imprecise ways that account for that 'multi-layered, often elusive quality' identified by

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MacBeath and Dempster (2008:1) . The 2018 eighth edition of the magisterial *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (Northouse, 2018:3) states:

> [T]here are almost as many definitions of *leadership* as there are people who have tried to define it. It is much like the words *democracy*, *love*, and *peace*.... Scholars and practitioners have attempted to define leadership for more than a century without universal consensus. [italics from original]

Because leadership is not a topic of this thesis, I have not investigated whether the 24 senior executive subjects are 'good' leaders' or 'bad' leaders, nor have I sought or drawn any connections between how they learn and how they lead. I have only ascertained their perceptions regarding how they learn and how they apply learning across all of their responsibilities. Those responsibilities include far more than 'leading', unless leading is defined so broadly as to lose any meaning. At times, the subject of leadership will arise because it is raised by one or more of the interviewees as an aspect of their jobs, but I am interested in how these senior executives learn and apply learning across the full range of their roles.

Since learning by persons with positional authority is the subject of this thesis, I only use the term 'leaders' in a qualified way throughout, noting the subjects are 'positional leaders' to identify them as individuals who hold positions that authorise them to use certain resources made available to them by virtue of their positions. Whether or not they are actual 'leaders' (whatever that might mean) is not my concern. In parts of this thesis where I am discussing positional leaders at various organisational levels, not all of whom might be considered 'executives', I refer variously to 'managers' or 'supervisors'.

At times, the subject of leadership will arise because it is raised by one or more of the interviewees as an aspect of their jobs, but I am interested in how these senior executives learn and apply learning across the full range of their roles, which, as described in chapter 2, include much more than 'leadership', except insofar as 'leadership' is defined as anything a senior executive does.

Relevance to 'leadership'

Although the practice of leadership within organisations is not the main focus of this thesis, the research findings may be beneficial for future investigations of relationships among learning, the application of learning and the practice of leadership. It seems certain that learning contributes to leadership effectiveness, and that leading can contribute to learning (MacBeath and Dempster, 2009); 'leading' is one of the ways in which learning is applied (e.g., Kayes and Kayes, 2011; Kearns, 2015; Seijts and Latham, 2005; Seijts, 2014; Staats, 2018; Wingard, 2015). Insofar as this thesis provides constructs that help understand how executives learn and apply learning, it is likely to benefit future researchers who are studying the complex, often elusive and contentiously debated relationships among leadership practices, learning and the application of learning.

It is also the case that acting, including taking 'leadership' actions, creates experiences from which an executive might learn and then apply that new learning, so there are also reciprocal relationships among leadership, learning and application. I have said that 'leadership' as a practice is not the subject of this thesis. At the same time, it is not possible to fully explore the topic of learning by executives without reference to the research that has been carried out related to learning by 'leaders', which often appears under a rubric of 'learning and leadership'. Often that research in fact addresses the broader issue of learning by executives, who are simply defined as 'leaders' in the research design. At other times, when learning is examined in the context of some set of activities or goals that are defined as 'leadership' activities or goals, there might be valuable insight about how executives view learning, learn, apply learning and encourage learning by others. So, the 'learning and leadership' literature is sometimes directly relevant (when 'leadership' means 'things that "leaders"—that is, "executives"—do'), and sometimes indirectly

relevant (when the question under analysis is how learning affects 'leadership', since understanding learning is still part of the equation). I explore and discuss this in the literature review in Chapter 2.

Researcher positionality

I am an educator, neuroscientist and advisor to organisations. For more than two decades I have had the opportunity to work with, observe and learn from thousands of executives and managers in hundreds of organisations in a wide range of industries and fields, including educational institutions as well as private and public companies, large and small. My work has included designing and applying an array of measures to assess the performance of leaders and organisations and gauge improvements.

I grew up in a family of educators. One of my grandfathers was a superintendent of schools. The other was a teaching surgeon. Both of my grandmothers were elementary school teachers. My mother taught at high school and college levels. My father served as a graduate school professor.

I learned in many ways that leadership in education, and continual learning by educators in positions of influence, can matter greatly. Beginning in 1992 with my first consulting and research assignment for a Global 500 company, I entered the realm of organisations seeking greater effectiveness with an assumption that many, or most, executives and managers keep learning. I believed that continual learning should make those executives more effective and innovative, better able to both navigate and anticipate change—and therefore better able to make the greatest positive difference. I wanted to know how, when and for what purpose positional leaders learn, or fail to learn, and how they apply, or fail to apply, learning.

Over the past two decades I have led a global strategic advisory firm working with thousands of positional leaders in hundreds of organisations around the world. Clients select our firm, and my help, specifically because of our focus on developing customised, scientifically referenced approaches to help them get the most from their time, resources and performance. Each year for more than 20 years, I have also selected and studied a different group of up to 12 high-level managers from a wide variety of organisations in a range of different industries and fields, working directly with each of them to understand how they best learn and apply their learning and how they might accelerate progress toward their most purposeful and meaningful goals.

This experience has revealed to me one insight above the rest: Continued learning is vital. Some executives keep learning and applying learning in effective ways and others—perhaps many—do not.

That general awareness was the impetus to embark on this doctoral programme, enrolling in September 2014. I continue to have a commitment to understanding learning by positional leaders within educational institutions. I delved into whatever literature I could find on learning and positional leaders—not only in the realm of academic and educational institutions but also in private enterprises and public companies.

Because the subjects of this study were senior executives, my role and background may have played a vital part in helping the study itself become a reality. Research suggests that the position of practitioner-researcher can not only make it more feasible to secure the right participants for a study but may also provide a higher level of engagement in the experiential learning that can bring the research alive (West-Burnham 2005a, 2009, 2012). In this investigation, I wanted to track my discoveries, analyse them qualitatively and see whether I could provide valuable observations and possible insights or data that could lead to such things in future studies.

Problem statement

We live in what has been called a 'learning economy' (Staats, 2018:4), at the dynamic and complex confluence of technology, speed, connectedness and information access. Executives are faced with challenges and opportunities—as well as a daunting blur of distractions (Rushkoff, 2014)—as never before. It is argued that to succeed in this new era, executives must learn more continually and wisely than ever before. Petriglieri (2014:1) asserts that 'learning is the most celebrated neglected activity in the workplace'. Research by Staats (2018: 3) concludes:

> To succeed in this new environment requires continual learning—how to do existing tasks better and how to do entirely new things. If we fail to learn, we risk becoming irrelevant. We end up solving yesterday's problems too late instead of tackling tomorrow's problems before someone else does.

Learning by leaders has been named as a key issue affecting the future of every organisation (e.g., Kayes and Kayes, 2011; Kearns, 2015; Senge, 2006; Wingard, 2015). Learning by leaders is considered a core element of flourishing schools, communities and organisations more generally (Cherkowski and Walker, 2014). The ideal or notion of building 'learning organisations' (Senge, 1990) has proven popular even though the literature reports few, if any, tangible enduring results (Staats, 2018). 'Learning orientation' has been broadly defined as an attitudinal or mindset commitment to being 'in learning mode' (Ashford and DeRue, 2012; Heslin and Keating, 2017) and learning orientation has also been suggested to be important to senior executives and leadership development in educational, public and private organisations. Bell, et al (2016:8) state:

> Senior leaders with high learning intelligence, strong learning teams and learning-oriented organizational cultures are essential in today's rapidly changing environment. . . . Learning intelligence enables senior leaders

to make the best possible decisions—and deliver better results for the entire business.

It is further argued (e.g., Nicholas and West-Burnham, 2016) that learning and application are particularly important in this era of rapid change within organisations and within the organisations' relevant environments—changes in technology; in customer expectations and behaviours ('customers' including students in scholastic settings); in marketplaces; in government roles and demands; and in many other aspects that affect individual and group performance and organisational outcomes.

One consequence of the perceived need for learning by senior executives as an aspect of organisational success is suggested by numerous recent reports (e.g., Bell, et al, 2016). Groysberg (2014: 2) implores senior executives to 'keep learning once you hit the C-Suite' and asserts 'it's…a question of career survival'. 'Put lifelong learning on the CEO agenda' is the call to action by Edmondson and Saxberg (2017: 1) as they contend it too often is not. Other research suggests that senior executives are subject to higher expectations and greater isolation than ever before and are met with increasingly less tolerance for error (Krieger and Ang, 2013; Heidrick and Struggles, 2018; Meilach, 2012; PWC, 2018). There has never been a higher turnover in organisational executives than is being seen in current times (Jenter and Lewellen, 2017; PWC, 2016). West-Burnham (2005a) asserts that conventional attitudes and approaches of leadership development may be over-focused on expediencies related to the near-term success as well as the long-term career of the individual senior leader and that this, in turn, blocks significant organisational potential.

Yet, assuming learning is vital to the success of senior executives, few studies have researched how they learn and how they apply their learning. In part, this dearth may be the result of executives' disinclination to be interviewed or to be part of rigorous research studies.

Through interviews with 24 senior executives, this thesis attempts to identify common patterns and/or practices among those senior executives with regard to learning and application. It is hoped that this knowledge will provide perspectives for further studies as well as being useful for improving executives' practices.

Research approach

In order to understand fully the perspectives of the study participants, the study necessarily takes a qualitative approach. A follow-up stage included an in-depth face-to-face interview with one executive selected from each of the three categories of executives. Each of those three interviews took place more than half a year after the initial interview. The interview techniques were selected in alignment with the findings of Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) to help increase the chance that each interview went beyond any rehearsed 'stories' to explore the experiences, evolved perspectives and real issues of the interviewees. The methodological approaches for this study are described in more detail in Chapter 4.

Structure of the thesis

The thesis is presented in seven chapters. This opening chapter has included a discussion of the rationale and the overall aims of the study. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature as it relates to the conceptual framework of the research and final research questions. Chapter 3 describes the research design and methodology and the steps taken to ensure the study's validity and reliability. Chapter 4 presents the approach to data analysis. Chapter 5 presents the primary data. Chapter 6 focuses on making sense of the data, along with discussion and interpretations. Chapter 7 provides conclusions and

reflections along with discussing originality and significance, contributions to the field and theory, and implications for future research.

Summary

This chapter has presented the overarching rationale for this qualitative interview study, reflected on researcher positionality, offered definitions of key terms and laid out the research questions that guided the research. In the next chapter I explore in greater detail the literature that informed and helped the decision making throughout this study.

Chapter 2
Literature Review

Over the course of four years, my critical literature review thrust me into what began to feel like a complex and ever-expanding labyrinth of hundreds of theories concerning leadership, learning and adult learning, along with a dizzyingly varied and expansive assortment of claims regarding the benefits of 'learning organisations' and 'learning-oriented' or 'learning-led' leaders or executives—backed by limited rigorous empirical evidence. I felt like I could have kept exploring these fields for decades, but I concluded my searches once I had used the literature to identify the most meaningful focus for my present study.

This literature review included reviewing an extensive set of readings and notes from UCL graduate classes, conducting hundreds of Google Scholar and University College London's Institute of Education Library searches, reading several hundred peer-reviewed studies and delving deeply into many of them and investigating the bibliographies of numerous seminal and anchor texts. I used Endnote as an online data repository and citation-collection source for input into a series of Word documents which I developed to organise relevant, iterative written drafts that captured my own reflections about the literature along the doctoral journey and made explicit the analytical evolution of my thinking about the literature. I applied strategies from Patton (2015) as well as Hart (2018) for systematic literature reviews. I made use of several specific sources of guidance (Torraco 2005, 2016). I also kept in mind the advice of Ravitch and Riggan (2016) to apply the literature review process as a source of reference points and building blocks for the conceptual framework that guides this research.

This chapter reviews the theoretical and empirical literature related to learning by executives, with the purpose of establishing the knowledge base that leads to the research questions and approach of this study. I will review and highlight the general literature on learning before focusing on adult learning, followed by recent findings on self-directed learning, transformative learning and experiential learning, and barriers to learning which include emphasising strengths and overemphasising past learning rather than looking forward. This is followed by discoveries about the relationships between and among learning, curiosity, vulnerability and effort. Next, I step back and consider learning as both a journey and a way of being. This is followed by highlights of three realms of study that I found interesting in establishing points of reference for my research: an inspiring large-scale project sponsored across the past decade by the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Education related to connecting leadership and learning; a study of the performance impacts of leaders who are learners; and finally, a large-scale study of organisations in business, education and sport to assess the sources of performance beyond expectations. Next, I delve into data and insights about how senior leaders learn, how that learning may impact organisational performance and how such learning may be applied. I end with an overview of the documented challenges of studying senior executives, a view of the conceptual framework that both kept my interests high throughout the research and helped me begin to make sense of key aspects of the larger fields of learning and leadership and my literature review's influence on condensing and finalising my research questions.

Learning

Learning is essential to life. The art and science of teaching children, and learning by children, is known as pedagogy, which derives from the Greek word 'paid', meaning child, plus 'agogus' which means 'leader of'. Andragogy—which derives from the Greek word 'aner', meaning adult—brings into focus the

mindset and processes of learning by adults. Over the past four years of exploring, contemplating and compiling this literature review, one message about learning was that despite centuries of study, clarity on 'What is learning?' remains elusive (Illeris, 2009; MacBeath and Dempster, 2008).

The concept of learning is notable because, despite centuries of research, it is still problematic, complex and must be viewed dynamically in light of rapid changes in technology, communication, and complexities in modern life and education. A comprehensive view of learning must incorporate an array of conditions that continually and reciprocally enable and/or disable the learning centres of the brain, and shape, and/or are shaped by, the learning process.

Illeris (2007, 2009, 2017) describes a dynamic dualism between external factors that connect learning with the social, cultural, attitudinal and physical environment, as well as with internal factors driven by perception, memory, clarification, elaboration and ultimately acquisition and application:
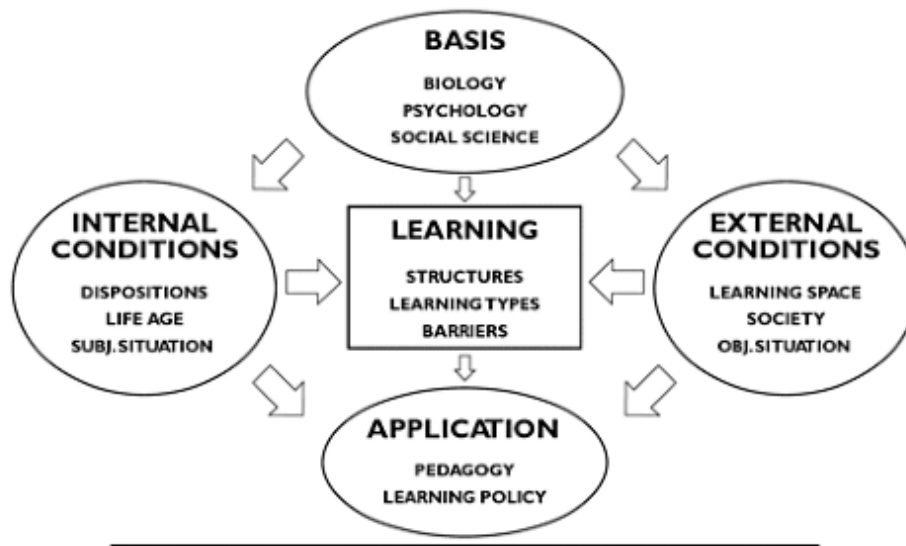
Figure 2.1: Illeris's Learning Model. Source: Illeris (2009: 8)

While a number of learning theorists focus on a single aspect of this integrated view of learning—such as certain social learning theories which emphasise

internal conditions, or a behaviourist or cognitive learning theory that examines the internal psychological processes associated with learning—this model by Illeris (see Figure 2.1) prompted my consideration of how a more narrowly defined learning theory fits into a more inclusive view of learning— and this more inclusive model provides a holistic view that is adaptable to a wide range of learning circumstances and settings.

In assembling and describing the views of more than a dozen of the 'most influential contemporary learning theorists', Illeris (2009) further suggests that learning and related competency development may be viewed through three dimensions that prompt or initiate the learning process itself (see Figure 2.2):
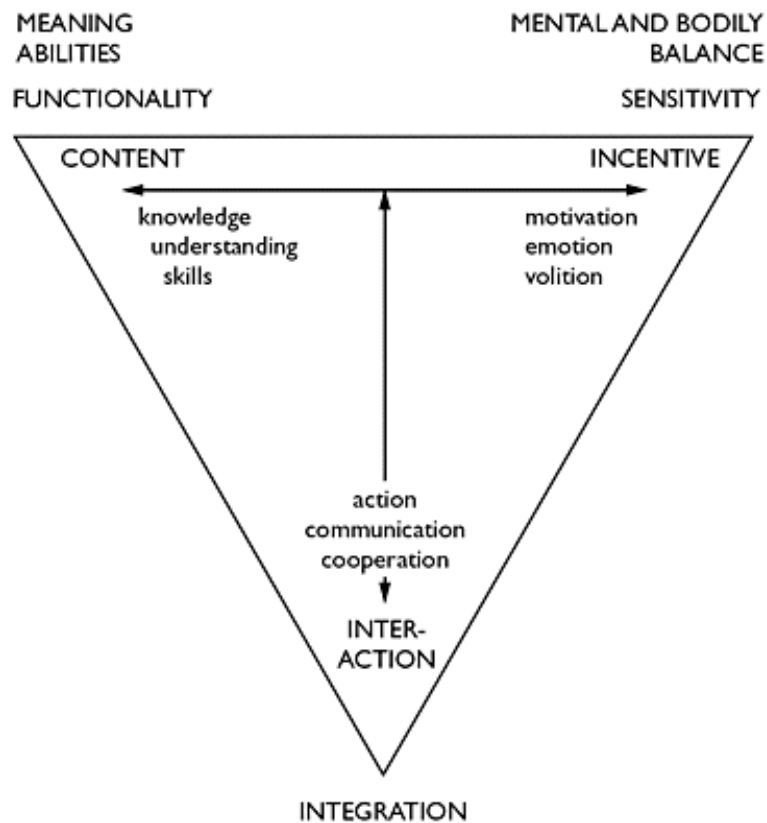
Figure 2.2: Illeris's Learning Dimensions. Illeris (2009: 11)

Jarvis (1987:11) states that learning seldom arises 'in splendid isolation from the world in which the learner lives…it is intimately related to that world and affected by it'. Adult learning is specific to both the culture and context in which the learning takes place (e.g., Donaldson, 2008; Kayes and Kayes, 2011; and MacBeath and Dempster, 2009). From classrooms to the most informal learning moments, the human brain makes sense of what it perceives only within the framework of perspective (e.g., Eagleman, 2017) and such perspective is both unique to each individual and influenced significantly by the culture of the organisation and the context of why the learning may matter and where it fits in its relevance to life, school or work.

I found myself increasingly agreeing with Illeris (2009:18) when he asserts that 'learning is a very complicated matter, and analyses, programmes and discussions of learning must consider the whole field if they are to be adequate and reliable'. He also admits this is 'a very wide-ranging demand' (2009:18).

As Illeris notes, the content dimension in Figure 2.2 centres on what is learned and can include information, knowledge, skills, perspective, meaning and more. The incentive dimension serves to spark and channel the focus and energy required to learn; it relates to inspiring learning in significant ways that influence, and are influenced by, the content of learning. This seems to parallel what Vygotsky (1978) and Furth (1987) referred to as the cognitive and emotional aspect of learning. The interaction dimension described by Illeris initiates engagement in learning that can include social observation, dialogue, experience, activity or participation.

Expanding the Literature Search

I often found myself reflecting rather numbly on diverse learning theories, opinions and approaches advanced in recent decades. While it can be said this expansion of the theoretical field has increased nuance and richness to the science of learning, it has also introduced burgeoning complexity and debate. One visual display captures a limited but compelling glimpse into this rapid and ongoing expansion of the field; it was created by Millwood (2009) in 'Holistic Approach to Technology Enhanced Learning' (Figure 2.3) as an attempt to make a complicated topic more graspable. In his words:

> Learning theory has been a contested scientific field for most of its history, with conflicting contributions from many scientific disciplines, practice and policy positions. With continuing and disruptive influence of technology on information, knowledge and practice in all sectors of society, it is no wonder that innovators [are] drawn to the interactive potential that computers bring to learning (Millwood, 2009: 1).
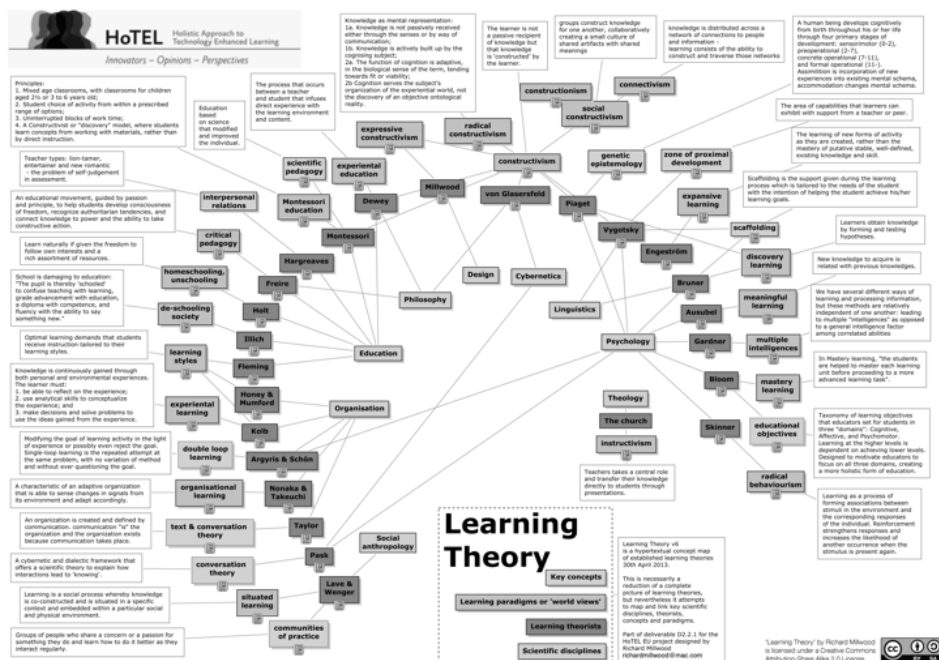
Figure 2.3: Learning Theories. Source: Millwood (2009)

I wondered if the literature had established a pioritised synthesis of learning that stood out amidst the burgeoning maze of theories. I wondered where, in fact, does learning intersect with leading? Several recent studies (e.g., MacBeath and Dempster, 2009) have attempted to clarify the possible connections and interactions between learning and leadership. Later in this chapter I will explore the findings to date of the Leadership for Learning initiative from the Cambridge Faculty of Education. For now, as MacBeath and Dempster (2009:2) state:

> We try to answer the question 'What do we know about learning?' and consider why, after centuries of research the answer still remains so elusive. Perhaps it is because we continue to view it through the prism of school, institutional conventions serving to obscure the inherent impulse with which we are born and which continues, although often dulled and diminished, throughout our lifetime, yet very often not in school. We may apply a similar analysis to leadership. The leadership impulse is equally in our genes but, like learning, may be inhibited by social and institutional conventions. It is naturally distributed through every population and in all of those populations there is a struggle for power and a desire to influence others.

Nonetheless, it would seem that how one learns will assuredly influence in some way, however small, how one subsequently leads. This, in turn, would seem to impact practice and performance, whether in a school, life or work setting. Reciprocally, how one leads would logically seem to change the vantage point or priorities, however small, of how one learns. This pressed my literature search into some of the outer reaches of research on learning and leadership—even though many of these journeys into specific areas of research ended up purely serving as points of context, reference or understanding and were not ultimately integrated into my research design itself.

To visually scan on a single page even 24 learning theorists, and definitions of their approaches, in nine scientific disciplines, paradigms or worldviews, as in Figure 2.3, gave me pause whenever I felt overly passionate about a particular view or approach. Using the interactive version of this visual, I found it useful

to be able to quickly contrast learning approaches and key concepts, such as moving from Vygotsky's (1978) on learning as a sociocultural process to Bruner's (1990) discovery learning, considering how it might relate to Engetröm's (1987) expansive learning or Argyris and Schön's (1995) 'double-loop learning' or Gardner's (1993;1999) 'multiple intelligences', and considering the role of experience or application in the experiential learning models of Dewey (1986) or Kolb (1984) and then perhaps asking myself how it might apply within Lave and Wegner's (1998) 'communities of practice'.

I found that the conceptual thickets were dense, but at the same time, the terms 'learn', and 'learning' seemed to be broadly understood by most individuals. Some researchers (e.g., Mayer, 2003) include qualifications regarding what it means to learn—such as requiring that the learning experience produce change while raising the potential for improved performance and future learning. Illeris restricts learning to things that create 'permanent capacity change' (2009:29-30).

These normative associations of learning with detectable change are useful in delimiting a study, but they are not in my view necessarily part of what 'to learn' means. For my interviewees, and for me, the question of change is better incorporated into the second part of my questions, related to the application of learning, not learning itself, or into the related question of 'Why learn?' when the answer is 'In order to change something'.

I chose as broad and simple a definition as I could for the purposes of this study: *To learn* (v.) is to incorporate new information into existing knowledge, skills, behaviours and/or attitudes. The 'new information' may be derived from experience, observation, study, reflection or other sources.

Adult learning

Despite feeling there was an expansive and justified contemporary emphasis on pedagogy, I knew that my primary research interest was in adult learners who serve as senior executives. I kept in mind the comment of Ozuah (2005: 84) that 'all the great teachers of ancient times were teachers of adults, not children'. However, while many or most adult learners may demonstrate a more independent and self-directed approach to learning than a child might, there are also many exceptions to this assumption or tendency. One of the most vocal proponents of andragogy, Knowles (1984), admitted that there are circumstances and settings where an adult facing the chance to learn may be decidedly dependent on a teacher or mentor for that learning.

In his seminal research on adult learning, Thorndike (1928) demonstrated that adults could, in fact, learn. This provided the start of a scientific understanding for a field that, until that time, had little more than faith that adults could learn. Andragogy emphasises that adults and children learn differently. The inherent complexity of adult learning has been pointed out in numerous studies, and adult learning as a discipline has been variously described as a philosophy (Pratt, 1993), a set of principles or approaches (Merriam, 1993) and as a theory (Knowles, 1989). Through decades of debate, the core tenets of adult learning advanced by andragogy have persisted (Davenport and Davenport, 1985; Knowles, et al, 2015; Pratt, 1988). Knowles (1989: 112) ceased calling his work a theory and switched to describing it as 'a model of assumptions about learning or a conceptual framework that serves as a basis for an emergent theory'. Knowles (1998: 31) set forth the following integrated andragogical view of what he named 'core adult learning principles', as shown in Figure 2.4.

Goals and purposes for learning

Individual and situational differences

Andragogy:
Core adult learning principles

1 Learner's need to know
– why
– what
– how

2 Self-concept of the learner
– autonomous
– self-directing

3 Prior experience of the learner
– resource
– mental models

4 Readiness to learn
– life related
– developmental task

5 Orientation to learning
– problem centered
– contextual

6 Motivation to learn
– intrinsic value
– personal payoff

Institutional growth

Subject matter differences

Situational differences

Societal growth

Individual learner differences

Individual growth

Figure 2.4: Andragogy in practice. Source: Knowles, et al (1998)

It made inherent sense to me to consider dynamically his linkages between and among goals, individual situational variations, the intrinsic drives such as the motivation to learn, a need to know, the readiness to learn, an openness or orientation toward learning and an instinct to deepen self-knowledge through learning. Numerous outgrowths of these principles of andragogy have influenced recent studies in adult learning theory and practice (e.g., Merriam and Bierema, 2014). Yet within the field of adult learning, there is little consensus and much divergence and variation in learning theories. Different viewpoints and criteria make it especially challenging to align and sort what is most relevant and well founded.

As noted previously, Illeris (2009) draws from a number of learning theorists under three 'dimensions' of learning: interaction, content and incentive. Gredler (1997) divides a vast array of theories into seven 'contemporary perspectives'. Gross (1999) groups theories according to either a mechanistic procedural approach or an organic and integrative worldview. As I studied and worked through a number of variations in grouping learning theories, I found the most value in making some minor modifications to the five broad traditional learning theory groupings suggested by Merriam, et al (2007) and Merriam and Bierema (2014). These five groupings—behaviourist, humanist, cognitivist, social cognitivist and social constructivist—can be viewed as foundational to current understandings of adult learning.

Behaviourists assert that human behaviour results from interactions between the individual and stimuli in the environment. Behaviours that are reinforced are likely to strengthen and endure. Therefore, by changing the circumstance or environment, learning can be prompted—and is only confirmed by observable behaviour change. Thorndike (1928) pioneered adult learning theory and conducted seminal research on learning theory via intelligence testing, environmentally induced versus intrinsically generated changes in behaviour, transference of behaviour change and learning, and attempts at measuring the quality of life.

Humanists contend that all people have the capacity for growth and development and have free will in making choices and shaping their behaviour. Maslow (1973) set the ultimate aim as self-actualisation whereas Rogers (1983) set the goal of being a 'fully functioning individual'. Both emphasised an integrative 'whole person' view engaging body, mind and spirit in human development.

Cognitivists believe that the primary driver of learning is the mind and its pattern-seeking, information-processing power rather than the environment or the whole person. Piaget (1972) introduced a four-stage model of cognitive

development via learning that encompassed sensory-motor responses to stimuli, an early childhood phase of transforming concrete learning experiences into words and symbols, a later childhood phase of understanding concepts, and a more advanced stage represented by reasoning and abstract thinking. Amidst many critiques of Piaget's work, some researchers contend that adults can move among these cognitive stages and choose which elements are appropriate based on the learning context (e.g., Knight and Sutton, 2004). Cognitivists form their learning theory view on the neuroscience premises of insight generation, information processing, problem solving, decision making, memory and resulting development. They also assert that the mind perceives, feels and processes new experiences or stimuli with reference to prior knowledge and makes meaning from this exchange (e.g., Grippin and Peters, 1984; Staats, 2018).

Social cognitivists expand on cognitive learning theory by adding a social rubric. This involves the human capacity to observe ourselves and others—and our interactions—and how this capacity influences both understanding how learning occurs and how it may be of value in the social context of life and work. While the brain cognitively processes information and strives to generate insights and make connections as we learn, the brain is also attuned to noticing the behaviours of others and, where appropriate, modelling that behaviour. Some social cognitive theorists align with behaviourists in the contending that behaviour must be reinforced for learning to occur (e.g., Hergenhahn and Olson, 2005; Merriam and Bierema, 2014).

Social constructivists draw from the works of Dewey (1986) and Vygotsky (1978) and are convinced that learning is the primary way that people orient to life and establish perspectives on experiences—in other words, learning is a purposeful and social construction of meaning from lived experiences. Vygotsky (1978) emphasised the role of sociocultural context that is set via a culture's symbols and language that this context incorporates. A number of the key

elements of constructivism, in particular the reflective and social constructions of knowledge, are incorporated into the theories and approaches of reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983), self-directed learning, experiential learning, transformational learning, and communities of practice (Merriam and Bierema, 2014).

Additionally, I explored how the past several decades of research in neuroscience have cast light on the ability of adult brains to defer the assumed diminution of their learning capacity and, instead, to continue to learn across their lifespan (e.g., Diamond, 1998; Knowles, et al, 2015; Staats, 2018). One recent study reported that, for certain kinds of insightful and creative learning, the peak learning age might occur at 60 or 70 (Hartshorne and Germine, 2015). Merriam and Brockett (2007:8) have as part of their definition of adult education 'activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception, define them as adults'.

Over the four years of this doctoral study, my many and varied forays into learning theories and approaches served to both deepen my understanding, expand my perspectives and help clarify my focus while the research project was being envisioned and designed. A key consideration that emerged for me was the sense that adult learning and its realised and untapped potential are more deeply embedded in our personal and professional activities than most of us know.

The dynamic perspective of adult learning

One of the essential discoveries in the field of adult learning is that learning transpires within the dynamic context of life and work. This resonates with my experience in working with senior executives. Adults now have the opportunity to employ technology to independently engage in formal, nonformal or informal

learning without the past constraints of time and place. In particular, as Merriam and Bierema (2014:18) state: 'Informal learning is endless, boundary-less, and ubiquitous in our lives'. Parker (2013: 55) adds: 'Technology is not just a device that is utilized as a tool. Rather, technology has infused every aspect of society to essentially change the thought process in learning'. But how many adults, leaders, and in particular, senior executives, actually take regular advantage of these ongoing learning opportunities?

It is vital to note, however, that this dynamic can be as powerful in blocking learning as in generating it. A common assumption in andragogy is that adults are intrinsically self-directing in their personal, work, family and community lives and therefore are automatically self-directing in their learning (Merriam and Bierema, 2014). Yet the quantity of experience-related adult learning does not equate with the quality or value of such learning, and, as Merriam and Bierema note and my own observations confirm:

> Adults can become dogmatic and closed-minded about learning something new because their prior knowledge and experience has worked for them in the past and they see no need to learn something else (2014: 5).

Staats (2018) contends that perhaps significantly fewer adults continually learn than is widely assumed. The literature also indicates that stressful times or a perplexing or traumatic life or work experience might create barriers to learning (Merriam, et al, 1996).

One framework that seemed to align with the experiences of adult learners and adult educators is one of settings or styles such as formal, nonformal and informal settings. In essence, formal learning settings are those structured for classrooms or lectures, for example, by educational institutions or business organisations and their corresponding professional development programmes. Nonformal learning settings are generally short-term, voluntary, structured learning initiatives such as seminars or workshops sponsored by institutions,

associations, enterprises or community-based groups whose primary mission is other than educational or business ventures. Informal learning activities comprise the spectrum of unstructured learning opportunities that arise spontaneously or by plan in everyday life and work and may be engaged by either individuals or small groups. As Merriam and Bierema point out:

> [W]e have been so conditioned to thinking of learning as something that takes place in an educational institution that our learning at work or in our everyday life does not seem to count as part of our learning (2014: 16).

There is a growing sense of the untapped power and potential of informal learning (Staats, 2018). I found myself imagining many executives I have worked with nodding their heads at this statement. King (2010: 421) reported that in a fast-paced world where 'knowledge is increasing at lightning speed, … formal learning is inadequate to meet these lifelong learning needs: people do not have time to enrol in formal classes at every new life stage and for every decision they must make'.

A Canadian study revealed that 90% of adult learners were actively engaged in one or more forms of informal learning (Livingstone, 2002). It has been estimated that the majority of learning in the workplace is informal (e.g., Staats, 2018). Additional differentiations are being defined for informal learning; for example, 'incidental learning' is described as an unexpected, inadvertent, or accidental learning 'by-product' of doing something else (Merriam and Bierema, 2014; Staats, 2018). In essence, incidental learning 'happens outside the learner's conscious awareness, while informal learning involves a conscious effort on the learner's part…' (Taylor, 2012: 14). This felt meaningful to me because I was increasingly sensing that learning can indeed happen for at least some leaders in small and sometimes larger ways; that is, in any form, from anywhere, at any time. This led me to delve into Eraut's (2000, 2004, 2007) work-based learning research focused on developing professional knowledge and competencies via non-formal learning and the

problematic issues associated with knowledge creation. That raised other questions for me about the linkages among what Eraut (2000) called 'deliberative learning', which he noted is frequently over-emphasised, 'implicit learning' and 'reactive on-the-spot learning'. These forms of work-based learning shift in their emphasis based on 'time, experience and complexity' (Eraut, 2000: 113) and, in my experience, perceived necessity or urgency.

I had a growing sense from the literature that some spark or drive was often required to ignite learning and that perhaps even more than external forces, intrinsic motivation to learn and the self-awareness to direct one's learning, were key.

Self-directed learning

Self-directed learning (Merriam, 2006) has received attention within andragogy. It is said that adults are, or could be, learning almost all the time. One of the assumptions of andragogy is that because adults are self-directing in their lives, work and communities, they can also be self-directing in their learning. Self-directed learning has been variously described as a choice, a skillset, a mindset, a process, or an inherent attribute. Many people assume that adults continually learn. And, of course, at least in some minor ways, most adults do. Yet self-directed learning has sometimes been minimised or marginalised in the literature and assigned shallow meaning of little more significance than self-study (e.g., Livingstone, 2002; Silen and Uhlin, 2008; Staats, 2018). While it may be believed that all adults have the capacity to be active, continual self-directed learners, the willingness, motivation and conditions required to do so may vary greatly.

Self-directed and self-regulated learning are claimed to be core elements of motivated adult learning and incorporate situational, affective, cognitive and behavioural processes during learning in pursuit of a strong, clearly defined

learning goal (Sitzmann and Ely, 2011). Beyond goal-oriented learning, however, it seems obvious that every learner and learning setting or opportunity is unique and there are certainly a vast number of degrees and levels of self-directedness.

I explored a number of psychological studies and was especially curious about Dweck's (2006) reporting of the positive learning and performance benefits of a self-directed growth mindset over a fixed mindset; the former type of mindset being learning-oriented and the latter type being reactive and defensive. Self-directed learning has been found to strengthen the brain's encoding and retention of insights because the learner is personally driven and highly active in the learning process (Gureckis and Markant, 2012). Yet if a mindset serves as a lens for perceiving past, current and upcoming learning possibilities, the actual impact of learning must be viewed in a different way. On the one hand, informational learning—reading, scanning, or listening to news, facts or data, for example—is a form of learning that most people consider typical and pervasive (Staats, 2018) even though for adult learners it may be neither. Yet informational learning can feel as detached as watching a movie (Staats 2018) in which a teacher reads notes from a podium or the front of the classroom. At the other end of the spectrum, some types of learning change the learner. We have all experienced 'learning moments' that stop us in our tracks, shake us up and change what happens next and even who we are and how we experience work or life, across time. These are considered transformational—which is the category of learning studies I moved into next.

Transformative learning

While it is widely assumed that much of adult learning is informational (Rushkoff, 2013; Staats, 2018; Wiseman, 2014), Kegan (2000: 49) makes a clear distinction between 'informational learning', which adds to 'what we know', and 'transformative learning'—learning that 'changes…how we know'.

The significance of learning can be measured in the behaviour or attitudinal change that happens following the learning experience. The more meaning and impact that learning has, the more it is considered transformative learning.

It has also been suggested that transformative learning has transcended andragogy as a primary philosophy of adult education (Taylor, 2008). I found that comment meaningful in that Kegan (1982 and 2000) had served as an early point of reference in my thinking about 'the evolving self' as an intrinsic drive for adult learning. Some researchers insist that the change that results from learning must be reflective of how the learner has moved beyond simply repeating or reconfirming pre-existing thinking, feeling, or behaviour (Kayes and Kayes, 2011; Wiseman, 2014). Yet Kegan (2009) and others consider this distinction to be one between 'informational learning' and 'transformational learning'.

Mezirow (2000) emphasised ways of knowing in adult learning that he labelled 'frames of reference' and that are distinctly transformational in the sense of epistemological change rather than simply the acquisition of information. Such learning is effort-laden, requiring rational, reflective and critical thinking as well as a purposeful examination of assumptions and beliefs. Kegan (2009) builds on this work and asserts that while 'informational learning' is valuable for changing *what* we know across a range of learning activities, disciplines, approaches, or fields and can include increasing our 'fund of knowledge' or array of skills or extending current cognitive structures and frames of reference, informational learning nonetheless adds value by adding to existing knowledge, or taking place within the brain's existing knowledge framework and therefore must be clearly distinguished from more transformational types of learning. Kegan (2009:42) states that transformational learning 'is a lifelong phenomenon'.

One of the keys in transformative learning is the depth of the learning experience itself—in other words, a willingness to engage openly and deeply

with a learning challenge or opportunity without being able to know or control the outcome (Taylor and Cranton, 2012a and b). That purposeful and even vital characteristic of learning immersion—in contrast, for example, with more mindlessly 'going through the motions' or 'dabbling on the surface' during learning—has been a theme for more than a century in the learning theory known as 'experiential learning'. I had many questions about how experience generates learning and how learning can, conversely, prompt experience—and I turned my attention to that focus area next.

West-Burnham (2009) observes that the transformation of leadership in learning will depend on 'an enormous investment in the quality of interpersonal relationships' (p. 70). That view is echoed by MacBeath and Dempster (2009), Kayes and Kayes (2011) and Wiseman (2014). West-Burnham also asserts that leadership in education should be about learning, which requires that the leader not only be a learner but that 'the learning of others is the leader's primary concern' (2009: 3). He proposes that 'the inherent conservatism of education systems perhaps explains the dominance of incremental improvement...[while] the primary work of leaders is to translate principle into practice and help to create a shared and preferred future' (2009: 2).

Nicholas and West-Burnham (2016) build a case that every learner is unique and must be seen and respected as such because of the many factors affecting learning—'the range is so diverse and the possible permutations so great', they write, 'that it becomes essential to start with the individual learner' (2016:94). If we forget or neglect to individualise learning, they say, we must stop and reclaim that priority, an action that they say is particularly important because, as individuals, 'learning can take place anytime, anywhere and with anyone' (2016:100).

On a related note, learning is virtually never simply 'happening' or 'not happening'. Accordingly, one of the lenses through which learning can be viewed is its depth. West-Burnham and Coates (2005) and West-Burnham

(2012) argue that there is value in differentiating among what they described as 'shallow', 'deep' and 'profound' learning, as shown in Figure 2.5.

	Shallow **What?**	**Deep** **How?**	**Profound** **Why?**
Means	Memorisation	Reflection	Intuition
Outcomes	Information	Knowledge	Wisdom
Evidence	Replication	Understanding	Meaning
Motivation	Extrinsic	Intrinsic	Moral
Attitudes	Compliance	Interpretation	Challenge
Relationships	Dependence	Independence	Interdependence
	(Single Loop)	(Double Loop)	(Triple Loop)

Figure 2.5: Deep Learning. Source: West-Burnham and Coates (2005: 35)

As described, these three levels or modes of learning may feel somewhat obvious:

> Shallow learning is teacher dependent and places the learner in a mostly passive learning mode; this encompasses minimalist memorisation and replication of information; uncritical uptake of data or facts; emphasis on getting through content that can quickly be forgotten.

> Deep learning is active and initiated by the learner (with a teacher serving more as a mentor or facilitator); it emphasises integrating past learning with present learning; requires depth in assessing the relevance and meaning of the learning; depends on the creation of knowledge along with the ability to demonstrate understanding and application. Content is remembered and applied forward.

> Profound learning is transformational, with the teacher serving as sounding board, guide, or counsellor; it requires turning knowledge into wisdom—and internalising it within the identity and agency of the individual; it is adaptive in the sense that it can

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fluidly create new meaning in complex, challenging or changing situations and contexts.

Experiential learning

There is evidence suggesting that life experience can be a powerful driving force for learning, yet researchers also report that a number of people in general and managers in particular, often discount what can be learned from experiences outside of work (Ruderman and Ohlott, 2000). Growing up, I had a copy at my desk of Dewey's *Education & Experience* (1938), a gift from my grandfather—a book he often referred to when he was a school superintendent. The inscription written inside the front page was a pair of quotes re-penned by my grandfather as coming from Dewey: 'Arriving at one goal is the starting point to another'; and 'Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself'. (It turns out that this latter quote was misattributed to Dewey; it is from Norman, 1922: 140). Dewey contended that learning was a lifelong process involving recalling, considering, applying and adapting past experience and perspectives to new and different situations.

In adult learning, the connection between life experience and learning illuminates a number of theoretical learning approaches and frameworks. The learner's experiences, rather than information exposure or formal classroom training, are central themes and points of emphasis seen in Dewey's seminal works (1938), Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984), Schön and Argyris's exploration of reflection-in-action or reflective practice (1983) and Lave and Wegner's (1998) communities of practice, among others.

One widely held view (e.g., Knowles, et al, 2015; Merriam and Bierema, 2014) has been that many or most adults are primarily motivated to learn not for the sake of learning itself but rather to deal with a challenge or opportunity of immediate concern. In many cases, those challenges and opportunities are related to the learners' work or social roles, which are inextricably woven to

their past and present life experiences. At the same time, it is worth noting that, indeed, rather than learning in order to address an immediate challenge or opportunity, some adults learn for the innovation power of learning, or even for the sheer joy of learning. Others seek learning for the adventure of it, or for the sense of accomplishment learning can bring when it occurs outside one's past habits or comfort zone.

Transformative learning is experiential in its dynamic and activated when a work or life experience is significant enough to force or prompt questioning about how work, life and the world can be understood. Dewey argued that learning is ignited when past experience cannot explain a present situation.

In my literature review, this led to further exploration into Kolb's experiential learning sequence or cycle, which is based on his definition of learning as 'the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (1984: 38). Kolb draws on seminal work by Dewey (1938, 1986) and others and a similar model of experiential learning was proposed by Lewin (1947) who got the idea from control engineering. Kolb refined and popularised it in a learning cycle with four steps or phases, as shown in Figure 2.5:
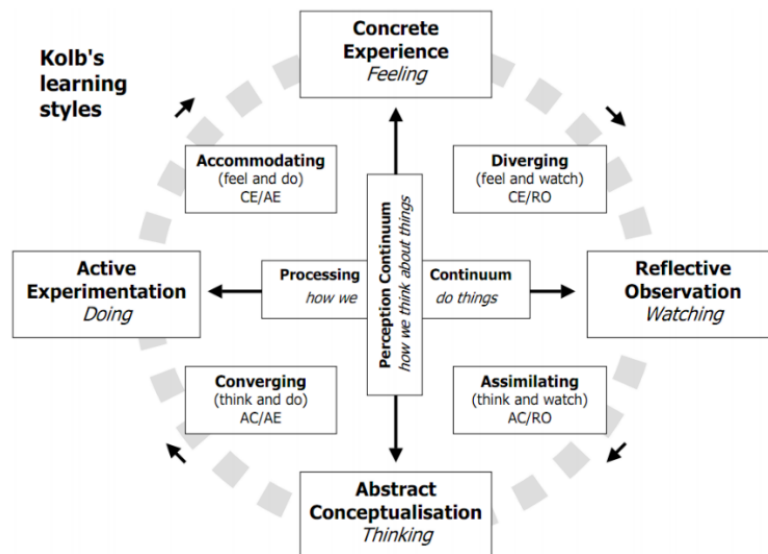
Figure 2.6 Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. Source: Kolb (2012)

While there is little doubt that this model has contributed to the field of learning, it has also been widely criticised by those arguing that conceiving of experiential learning as structured sequence of steps is either naïve or false or has only limited usefulness in specific situations because many different connections exist between experiencing and learning and knowing that do not follow this sequence and go beyond these four factors (Fenwick, 2001; Kayes, 2002; Kirschner, et al, 2006; Miettinen, 2000; Rogoff, et al, 2003). Miettinen (2000: 61) asserts that Kolb fails to prove how the 'four different kinds of abilities are related to one another or correspond with phases in a cycle'. Some of these criticisms may be lessened if Kolb's approach is viewed not as steps or styles of learning but rather as an ideology or perspective (Seaman, 2007). As I proceeded with the literature review, I kept Kolb's model as a point of reference although I was unable to find studies showing its practical use by senior executives consciously applying the model.

At this point, I felt frustrated in my search for what I had hoped would be an array of studies on the topic I was most passionate and curious about: how senior executives learn and apply their learning. I kept altering my key word searches as I sorted through potentially insightful and relevant studies in the UCL and global databases. I kept seeking to look deeper into the literature related to education, psychology, sociology and business and eventually located 'experience-driven leadership development'.

Despite having been involved with the literature and advancements in executive education and performance, I had not read McCall, et al (1988), regarding a qualitative study of nearly 200 executives. The interviews engaged the executives in reflecting on their careers and pressed them to pinpoint several experiences that produced a significant improvement in their management. The research (further analysed by McCauley, et al, 2014) was summarised in four developmental experience areas: challenging assignments; other people, hardships and personal life experiences.

The results intrigued me for a range of reasons. First, slightly more than 6% of the experiences were related to coursework; 56% of the reported learning experiences were from challenging assignments; and next came learning from other people and from hardships. The research (McCall, et al, 1988; McCauley, et al, 2014) claimed to pinpoint what kinds of experiences engaged learning that resulted in management development—yet little, if any, of the actual learning was mentioned. While the McCall, et al (1988) research was at least partially replicated with more diverse groups of subjects (e.g., Douglas, 2003; McCall and Hollenbeck, 2002; Yip and Wilson, 2010), one main finding was consistent—that challenging work-related assignments seemed related to management development. Another factor that showed relevance was the leader's learning orientation—which can mean the drive or commitment to embrace challenges or opportunities (DeRue and Wellman, 2009; Dragoni, et al, 2009; Hess, 2014; Seijts, 2013; Staats, 2018).

One interesting twist in this development pathway of experiential learning research is that while formal learning programmes are structured to enforce basic learning tenets and can be managed, evaluated and improved, experience-driven development is messy, evolving and unscripted (McCauley, et al, 2014: 909-911). McCall, et al (1988) advocated a '70–20–10' catchphrase that placed 70% emphasis on work-related challenges and less emphasis on relationships (20%) and training (10%). Those percentages have been questioned by subsequent research which reported higher importance associated with relationships and hardships, while challenging assignments were reported as substantially less of a factor. (Douglas, 2003; McCall and Hollenbeck, 2002; McCauley, et al, 2014; Yip and Wilson, 2010).

After examining a range of details and nuances beneath the original research (McCall, et al, 1988) and subsequent studies, I felt concerned that although it seemed obvious that leaders learn from their experiences, the question of how they learn from these experiences seemed inadequately addressed. And when

they learn, how do they apply that learning? These studies only hinted at answering my questions. Vaill (1996:6-7) has argued that if managers are to navigate their way into a better future, they must integrate 'the learning that life teaches outside the institution'. I kept recalling what Hill (in McCauley, et al, 2014: 239) asserted: the ability to facilitate learning from experience is not developed overnight and requires significant commitment as well as its own learning journey and much practice.

This led me to wonder how purposefully and deeply leaders choose to engage in learning. I searched for studies and found that, counter to conventional thinking in management circles, there are some little-known barriers to learning and developing new capabilities that may hinge on what leaders do after identifying and emphasising their strengths.

Transcending strengths—and the past—to move toward possibilities

Kaiser (2009:162) stated that 'continuous learning and dealing with the unknown, untested and untried may be the secret to success'. I explored studies in psychology, education and management that examined competencies and self-awareness. Kruger and Dunning (1999) introduced the phrase 'unskilled and unaware of it' into the vocabulary as they studied how difficult it can be for managers to recognise their own incompetencies or gaps in capability or development potential. Clifton and Nelson (1995) first promoted a focus on a manager's strengths, rather than weaknesses, and I have been following with interest the relatively widespread endorsement of this philosophy or mindset by senior executives.

In essence, by using various questionnaires (e.g., Rath, 2007) to detect an individual's 'Clifton Strengths', the encouragement, or admonition, is to use those strengths more often in daily activities. Yet doing that can tend to become what Kaiser (2009: 4) described as repeating what is habitual and

enjoyable. In this way, noticing and focusing on fixing weaknesses can be largely bypassed or even ignored. My own experience has indicated that many executives felt authorised to not only emphasise their strengths, but also to defend or inflict them and correspondingly to have reduced their curiosity, learning or testing of alternatives or improvements. A series of studies by Kaiser (2009) and Kaplan and Kaiser (2013) confirmed this observation, reporting that emphasising or favouring 'strengths' created an array of barriers to learning. McCall, et al (1988) introduced the managerial phase 'strengths become weaknesses'. Kaplan and Kaiser (2013: 71) expanded that research, concluding:

> Analyses of derailed leaders time and again point to the excessive reliance on qualities that were key to past success but less relevant to the current role. We have learned that to stop overplaying a strength does not mean, as many leaders fear, to stop using it. It means using the strength more selectively.

I was also drawn to search the literature on the learning aspect of past-present-future focus or time horizon. Recent research by Seligman, et al (2013; 2016) delved into the inherent capacity in humans to orient toward what is ahead and 'prospect the future' and why this kind of mindset or learning is a cornerstone of human success. Their data on the powers of prospection suggest that the best performance outcomes, in managers, for example, are correlated to the brain-based attitude, viewpoint and behaviours of 'navigating into the future'. On a related note, Gilbert and Wilson (2007) report that intelligent action by leaders may be driven more by 'possible futures' than by past performance, attitudes and habits.

This observation seems aligned with earlier research by Markus and Nurius (1986) on the application of learning as the means to increase self-knowledge and to hint at, or illuminate, the learner's 'possible selves', which the researchers define as ideas of what individuals may become (1986:954). That research stretched back to the seminal work in philosophy, psychology and

education of James (1910), who emphasised the term 'potential social Me' and distinguished that mindset and perception from 'the immediate present Me' and the 'Me of the past'. Markus and Nurius explored the contrast between each individual's representations and mindsets centred on the self in the past versus the aspirational and learning or growth impetus created by the possibilities generated by representations and mindsets of the self in the future. This turned my attention toward research on the significance of wonder, or specifically curiosity, in learning.

Curiosity and learning

Most forms of learning require open mindedness or curiosity; sometimes referred to as a 'growth mindset' (Dweck, 2006; 2015; O'Keefe, et al 2018). Heslin and Keating (2017:367) refer to this as being in 'learning mode' and propose that it helps leaders make the most of experiential learning. The literature reveals that while many of the biological functions, mechanisms, variations and neural underpinnings of curiosity-imbued mindsets remain little understood (Leslie, 2014), curiosity has been shown to be a strong motivator for learning (e.g., Berlyne, 1978; Kidd and Hayden, 2011). A recent neurological study reported that curiosity makes the brain more receptive to learning (Gruber, et al, 2014). In psychology, curiosity is often described as the degree to which an individual engages in effortful cognitive activities such as learning. Accordingly, curiosity is vulnerable to neglect (Cacioppo and Petty, 1982; Cacioppo et al, 1986). Curiosity is also seen as a response to an information gap. We feel curious where there is a gap between what we know and what we want to know (Golman, et al, 2015).

The literature indicates that curiosity may be emboldened or expanded by the degree of a learner's sensory and cognitive awareness when engaging with a learning challenge or opportunity (Hess, 2014; Staats, 2018). Curiosity has been shown to be enhanced in workplace settings by what is called 'reflection-

in-action' (Argyris and Schön, 1995; Schön, 1983; 1987), whereby a leader or professional ponders what is being learned while the learning is taking place.

Vulnerability and learning

The literature confirms that learning requires being open to change (Brown, 2014; Kolb, 1984; Thomas and Seely Brown, 2011; Wiseman, 2014) as we access, process, update and act upon information from a range of available resources. Kegan (2009) notes that 'transformational learning' requires vulnerability and courage to even momentarily transcend past habits, knowledge and behavioural patterns. Brown (2014: 171) frames this for managers:

> If you want a culture of creativity and innovation, where sensible risks are embraced…,start by developing the ability of managers to cultivate an openness to vulnerability in their teams. And this, paradoxically perhaps, requires first that they are vulnerable themselves. This notion that the leader needs to be 'in charge' and to 'know all the answers' is both dated and destructive…[and] kills innovation.

In an interview, Schein reported on his studies of 'the anxiety of learning' (e.g., Coutre, 2002) and suggested that there can be value in vulnerability because 'survival anxiety' among senior leaders must be greater than 'learning anxiety' for learning to occur. Gardner (1981:6) stated:

> We are just beginning to recognize how even those who have had every advantage and opportunity unconsciously put a ceiling on their own growth, underestimate their potentialities or hide from the risk that growth involves.

Kayes and Kayes (2011) contend that meaningful learning by leaders requires being exceptionally open, even vulnerable, willing to step outside one's typical mindsets, perspectives and knowledge base to consider new possibilities. This

takes conscious commitment and effort—which turned my review of the literature toward studies on the link between effort and learning.

Effort and learning

Staats (2018) argues that today 'we have a bias for busyness and it keeps us from pausing to [make the effort to] learn'. Weaver, et al (2017) report that effortful learning improves conceptual knowledge. In contrast, Merriam and Bierema, L (2014: xi) argue that 'Adults are learning all the time', giving 'searching the Internet' as one example of such learning. Other studies show that ready access to information via technology may be undermining the human drive toward effortful mental exploration and discovery and may thereby be creating an illusion of learning (Fisher et al, 2015).

To transcend this tendency requires both concerted effort and 'mindful agency'—which Deakin Crick, et al (2015), define as:

> being aware of my thoughts, feelings and actions as a learner and able to use that awareness to take responsibility, to plan and manage learning processes; the opposite is being 'robotic'.

It follows that mindful agency requires conscious focus and thereby effort. That effort has been shown to pay dividends not only in traditional learning outcomes but in the very survival and growth of thousands of neurons produced daily by the adult human brain throughout the lifespan (Shors 2015). This discovery augments the finding that learning creates new neural circuits in the brain that may act to help influence or shape future behaviour (Carter, et al, 2000; Diamond; 1988; LeDoux, 2015; Loehr & Schwartz, 2003). In my work with executives, I have committed to staying current in the neuroscience literature and I remain intrigued, for example, with studies reporting that, when it comes to successful learning, the degree of effort matters and growth begets growth, literally, of new brain cells. As Shors (2014: 311) describes it:

> Learning increases the survival of newly generated cells…as long as the learning experience is new, effortful and successful.…Successful and successive learning experiences perpetually increase the number of neurons that survive in the future. A great number of neurons can be accrued by increasing the opportunities for learning to occur.

Some researchers assert that concerted effort and mindful agency combine to create the necessary 'learning power' that enables a person to regulate engagement in the type, amount and flow of learning (e.g., Deakin Crick, et al, 2015). As I reflected on the potential value of enhanced learning power, I wondered where it fit in the time horizon of a learner; that is, what happens when learning 'across time' connects today's learning opportunities with tomorrow's goals.

Mindsets and learning

Recent research on the notion of fixed versus growth mindsets (Dweck 1986, 2006, 2015; O'Keefe, et al, 2018) suggest that a person's intrinsic assumptions about the fixedness or plasticity of their intellect and performance affect openness to, and drive to, learn (see Figure 2.7).

Approach: *Commit to a learning mindset*
→ Embrace a learning orientation
→ Set learning goals

Self-enhancement vs. Self-improvement

Fixed vs Growth

Mindset Cues

Mindset

Prime Motive

Reflection: *Capture the lessons of experience*
→ Diagnose cause-and-effect
→ Consider counterfactuals
→ Distill lessons learned

Action: *Create & capitalize on learning opportunities*
→ Plan & conduct experiments
→ Engage in feedback seeking
→ Regulate disruptive emotions

Figure 2.7: Mindset Cues in Learning by Leaders. Source: Heslin and Keating (2017)

Subsequent reflection, observation and research (e.g., Dweck, 2015, 2016) raised worries that many students, teachers and professionals may have presumed themselves to have a growth mindset as well as oversimplifying the research findings with an erroneous summary sentiment: praise the effort, not the outcome. Reflecting on recent findings related to growth mindset, Dweck commented:

> I think a lot of what happened [regarding false growth mindsets among educators] is that instead of taking this long and difficult journey, where you work on understanding...and over time being able to stay in a growth mindset more and more, many educators just said, **'Oh yeah, I have a growth mindset'** because either they know it's the right mindset to have or they understood it in a way that made it seem easy (Gross-Loh, 2016: 47).

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Learning as a journey—and a way of being

The concept of a 'learning journey' (Deakin Crick, 2015) requires that learners become aware of, and improve, their capacity to learn and transform by purposefully and effectively engaging with new learning opportunities (Claxton 1997, 1999). Lifelong learning is both a public and personal activity in which self-awareness and awareness of one's own worth as a person are necessary conditions for identifying and engaging as a learner in what is worthwhile to learn (Deakin Crick and Wilson, 2005). The word 'journey' was of particular interest to me because it infers connecting the near and the far. It may help learners step beyond 'present shock' of distractions, interruptions and engulfment in data (Rushkoff, 2013) and strengthen or embolden a commitment to learning where there is a sense it leads to a better future (Seligman, et al, 2103) or a desired 'possible self' (Markus and Nurius, 1986).

Studies indicate that people can become aware of and improve their capacity to learn and transform through purposefully and effectively engaging with new learning opportunities that are aimed at future improvements (Seligman, et al, 2013), as opposed to a more immediate and dogmatic focus on the summative assessments required in traditional learning outcomes (Claxton 1997, 1999). When learning is seen as journeying, not simply an action in a single setting or a path from point A to point B, it requires significantly more attention between the person as a learner, the knowledge that is being created, and where that knowledge leads (Deakin Crick, et al, 2015: 127; Seligman, et al, 2013; Markus and Nurius, 1986).

In an even more all-encompassing vein, Vaill (1996:6-7) has argued that if managers are to navigate their way into a better future, then institutions must demand an ongoing commitment to learning such that it is embedded 'into their very being…[and] such learning must be marked by strong self-direction, willingness to take risks and integration of the learning that life teaches outside the institution'. Vaill's research reminded me of comments by Gardner

(1996:2-6) who made an impassioned plea for the continual self-renewal that results from lifelong learning:

> I'm talking about people who—no matter how busy they seem to be—have stopped learning or growing…There's something I know about you that you may or may not know about yourself. You have within you more resources of energy than have ever been tapped, more talent than has ever been exploited, more strength than has ever been tested, more to give than you have ever given. Unlock it. Become it.

While such admonitions may feel like a pep talk, I find Gardner's words meaningful when I reflect on my experiences with senior executives, and this also led me to expand my search of the literature to examine studies focused on the connection between learning and leadership.

The problematic, elusive and often contentious nature of leadership and learning—and their intersection

Substantial scholarly interest has been directed to the ways in which learning and leadership intersect. About such inquiries, MacBeath and Dempster (2008:1) have observed: 'The richness and complexity of learning is matched by the multi-layered, often elusive quality of leadership, so that teasing out their interrelationship is not for the faint-of-heart'. Despite more than a decade of research by, for example, the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education's initiative entitled 'Leadership for Learning', few transformative insights have been produced to date. Similarly, Kayes and Kayes (2011) advocate for 'learning-directed leadership' yet fail to provide clear data or evidence on how such leadership combined with learning is implemented by senior executives. What about something as seemingly straightforward as a leader learning from experiences? As Keating and Heslin (2017:374) conclude, for leaders at any level of an organisation, 'Learning from experience is neither automatic nor assured'. And McCall and Holenbach (2002:222) state: 'Although most leaders

routinely talk about learning from their experiences, some leaders actually do much more than others to systematically learn'. But what, specifically, they do in that regard remains a mystery.

While something as seemingly straightforward as defining learning remains 'elusive' (MacBeath and Dempster, 2009:2) and 'a developing narrative' (2009:48), leadership itself is just as contested, complex, changing and problematic. Groysberg (2014: 4) observed that companies

> differed on the type of leadership most highly in demand, mentioning 'inspirational leadership', 'leadership in a non-authoritarian manner that works with today's executive talent', 'take-charge' leadership, 'leadership balanced with authenticity, respect for others, and trust building', and 'strategic leadership'. Ethical leadership was also mentioned. Some consultants observed that the type of leadership sought depends on a company's specific needs. 'Visionary leadership is frequently mentioned when a company is on a new path, adopting a new strategy, or at a tipping point in its growth', one respondent noted. Another said, 'Driving an organization or function to a higher level of performance, efficiency, or growth requires a 'take-charge' leadership'.

Schein (2010:16) asked:

> What of leadership? Writings about leadership have also exploded, but we are not much clearer today than we were twenty-five years ago about what is a good leader and what a leader should be doing. We have many proposals of what leaders should be and do, and different lists of 'core competencies' or traits that leaders should exhibit. Part of the confusion derives from the fact that there is no clear consensus on defining who is a leader—the CEO, anyone at the head of a department, or anyone who takes the initiative to change things. Leadership as a distributed function is gaining ground, which leads to the possibility that anyone who facilitates progress toward some desired outcome is displaying leadership.

While 'leadership and learning are conceptualised as activities both of which inform each other' (MacBeath and Dempster, 2009:180), 'the quest for solid empirical ground has generated a considerable body of studies and meta-studies over the last decade' (e.g., Bell, et al, 2003; Leithwood, et al, 2004; and

Wiziers, et al, 2003) 'yet without definitive conclusion' and, as Levacic states (2005: 198) the actual evidence for a causal relationship is relatively sparse.

The possible connections and interactions between 'leadership' and 'learning' are extensive, yet the data is still lacking on specific interrelationships of leading in ways that engage and facilitate learning and, conversely, learning in ways that advance the effectiveness and success of leading. In other words, to date the literature on a leadership-learning connection is predominantly conceptual or assumptive, and lacking in evidence. In addition, there is little if any data to date on the ramifications or positive impact of integrating leadership and learning into practice and performance at individual or organisational levels.

Leadership is often vague until it is viewed from the perspective of a specific position or role in a specific setting or context involving a specific purpose and people. Johnson and McLean (2006:31) state that 'Cultural background, assumptions, and view of the world influence our understanding of adult learning'. Culture has been defined as 'a set of shared, yet often unarticulated assumptions that permeate thought and action' (Merriman and Bierama, 2014: 240). Culture influences the context of learning as well as social interactions. Leadership and learning can both be viewed as occurring in contextual settings involving unique individuals who have multiple perspectives, differing goals and agendas, and variances in initiative, position, and personality.

Schein (2004: 17) defines culture as 'a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valued and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems'. Culture 'deeply influences nations, ethnic groups, geographical regions, organisations, social groups, neighbourhoods and classrooms'. (Merriam and Bierema, 2014:239).

Every organisation exists in a context and culture—geographic, historical, industry or field-specific, and dependent to some degree on mission or charter, values, purpose, and diversity and engagement of leaders. Learning and leadership are also influenced by neural biases, tendencies, or variances that are distinctive to each individual as well as to each leadership-learning point of intersection in attitude or action and all of these variables are informed by culture and context. Therefore, where learning and leadership connect must always take into account this backdrop of culture and context. Drawing on a considerable body of work, MacBeath and Dempster (2009:178) conclude that:

> Leadership and learning are conceptualised as activities both of which inform each other. No one can be immunised against leadership and no one can be quarantined from involvement in learning. Indeed in quite material ways when one is learning, as a bare minimum, the self is leading; when one is learning with others, leadership often moves fluidly from group to individual as does what is learned. The defining feature about a leadership for learning framework is that individuals and collectives are able to be self-consciously reflective about: (i) what and how they are learning; (ii) how they are led; (iii) by whom and why; and (iv) what they are learning about leadership and their own learning as a result.

It also became evident during my search of the literature that there is a growing commonality of change and pressure that demands learning by senior executives independent of their industry, field or specific organisation. Not long ago, it could be assumed that organisational culture was a significant variable in how learning and leadership were viewed and engaged. It was also assumed that the specific industry, field, organisation, setting and circumstance in which learning or leadership occurred would be significantly influenced by the distinctive culture and context of that place of learning or leadership. Yet recent research suggests that these distinctions are blurring (e.g., Davidson, 2017; Hess, 2014; Rushkoff, 2013; Staats, 2018).

Today's organisations and leaders face rising similar pressures that are increasingly agnostic to industry, field, organisation or setting (e.g., Rushkoff,

2013; Staats, 2018). The rapid pace of change, performance demands, complexity, uncertainty, media and information engulfment, and so on, are blurring the more pronounced contextual differences of the past. For example, 'education itself has become a commodity of the marketplace' (Merriam and Bierama, 2014:3) and the 'technology infused lives of today's learners' (Parker, 2013:54) is transforming not only the culture and context of learning but also the very learning itself. Whereas it might seem that senior executives in educational institutions would face significantly different community or performance pressures, pace of change, degree of complexity, technological advancement, external distractions, and so on, when compared with senior executives in publicly-traded for-profit companies or private for-profit enterprises. Davidson (2017) argues that today's world is experiencing pandemic pressures and expectations that, instep with changes in other industries and fields, call for significant adjustments in the learning and practices of higher education leadership. Rushkoff (2013) reports that the level of distraction and interruption have become so ubiquitous that every field and professional is facing increasingly similar levels of pressure, distractions and change.

Mentoring and coaching

Mentoring and coaching have been put forward as ways to help senior executives learn to succeed at their roles in the very challenging circumstances described in the preceding section. Keller and Meaney (2018:1) observe:

> Organizations most often try to help newly appointed [senior] leaders by supplying them with mentors or informal 'buddy' networks... Some methods—for instance, tailored executive coaching and customized assimilation plans—have been shown to double the likelihood of success....

'Yet,' Keller and Meaney add, 'only 47 percent of external hires and 29 percent of internal ones find [mentoring and 'buddy networks'] helpful' and 'only 32 percent of organisations use [tailored executive coaching and customized assimilation plans]'. Lofgren urges chief executive officers to consider that mentoring can be essential for developing executive leaders (Lofgren, 2018:63):

> By taking an active role in their growth, even if it's connecting them to the proper individual for mentorship, you ensure they have access to the right resources to reach their next level.

'However,' the article's author also reports (Lofgren, 2018:64), 'many CEOs I've worked with struggle with mentoring and developing their senior executive team'.

The American Management Association commissioned a global study on coaching and its association with higher performance (American Management Association, 2009:1), reaching the following conclusion:

> Coaching is most frequently used for high potentials and executives. The results showed that there is a significant relationship between using coaches for these groups and coaching success.

That report also noted that 'coaching is only used by about half of today's companies' and 'only a minority of organisations assess the impact of their coaching interventions'. Based on studies of the shortcomings of coaching programs, the report listed many areas in which such programs could be made more effective, including targeting the right individuals, selecting the right coaches, more carefully designing coaching engagements, and avoiding disconnection between coaching and other development activities.

Thus, while there is data that coaching for senior executives can, in fact, elevate performance and build or strengthen key competencies (e.g., American Management Association, 2009; Feldman and Lankau, 2005), and that mentoring relationships can improve organisational behaviour and citizenship

over time (e.g., Keller and Meaney, 2018; Lofgren, 2018), the challenge remains that both coaching and mentoring programmes are difficult to design effectively, uncertain in their outcomes owing to lack of evaluation, and often disconnected from other organisational development activities (e.g., Berglas, 2002; Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson, 2001; Keller and Meaney, 2018; Lofgren, 2018; McDermott, et al, 2007; Underhill, et al, 2007).

Changing leadership roles and models: Top-down versus distributive leadership

Nicholas and West-Burnham (2016) suggest that we need to re-examine our conceptions of leaders and leadership in terms of effectiveness 'in a rapidly changing world' (p. 1). They review research both within and beyond the realm of educational leadership. One aim is to help leaders transform their implicit perspectives and behaviours into explicit ones. This focus also encompasses helping senior leaders learn.

West-Burnham (2004) argues that, from both a moral and utilitarian perspective, much of the emphasis in leadership is centred on individual senior leaders in charge of the organisation and may be counterproductive, and that an alternative model of 'leadership as a collective capacity that is reflected in structures, processes and relationships' (p. 1) may be warranted and worthy. I was curious about whether this attitude was becoming more widespread among senior executives themselves, especially related to how they learn and apply learning. West-Burnham and Nicholas (2016) suggests the potential significance of viewing and engaging leadership as collective or additive capacity of organisation or as part of a shared or 'distributive' leadership model that encompasses all levels and roles of leaders across the organisation. Yet it raises the question of whether, in some or many cases, the effectiveness and scope of such distributive leadership may hinge on support from senior executives. As West-Burnham (2004: 6) states:

> [It] might well take an individual leader to initiate the process that develops shared leadership potential. This is an inevitable feature of the transition process: it has to be started by someone who is willing to preside over the diminution of his or her own power. The benefit of this is that it will almost certainly improve the quality of that leader's life and produce a more fundamental and lasting commitment to organisational effectiveness.

As I studied this research and the related theoretical and practical questions, I wanted to see if this attitude and associated actions were representative of senior executives more than a decade after these observations were first published. I next turned my attention to the literature on how mindset may affect learning.

Three studies of leadership and learning

During my journey through the literature exploring leadership in the context of learning, I kept returning to the theme of 'leadership' as one activity that is affected by learning and the application of learning by executives. The following three research focuses were of particular interest to me: (1) 'Connecting leadership and learning' from the University of Cambridge Leadership for Learning network, has brought a decade of research attention to the dynamic and reciprocal nature of leadership and learning; (2) the connection between mindset and learning, in particular with regard to experiential learning by leaders, is a focus of Heslin and Keating (2017); and (3) the National College for School Leadership study and report on 'performance beyond expectations' (Hargreaves and Harris: 2013) which was recommended to me and which I studied with interest.

The University of Cambridge Faculty of Education has devoted more than a decade to developing a 'Leadership for Learning' network (Leadership for Learning, 2018) based on the premise that leadership and learning are activities that inform and enhance each other and 'the richness and complexity

of learning is matched by the multi-layered, often elusive quality of leadership', while admitting that 'teasing out the [leadership and learning] interrelationship is not for the faint-of-heart' (MacBeath and Dempster, 2009:1). This Leadership for Learning (LFL) initiative focuses expressly on headteachers and their students, rather than on senior administrators or senior executives or encompassing their entire organisations or communities. It builds on the notion that leadership goes beyond rank, title, or position, and not only must consider managerial and performance agendas but is also always occurring in a social context and is therefore threaded to a social dynamic—asserting that 'wherever leadership matters, so does learning' and 'learning enhances leadership and leadership so infected cannot help but make learning its central preoccupying focus' as a means through which students and teachers can change their lives for the better (MacBeath and Dempster, 2009:1-2). This initiative also acknowledges and amplifies Czarniawska's (1997) notion of 'outsidedness', the process by which, as learners commit to understanding others better, they correspondingly also tend to better understand themselves and sense their untapped potential.

The initiative incorporates curiosity, vulnerability and innovation, which truly fit with my research interests. One purpose of this Cambridge initiative is to identify, demonstrate and measure a causal link between what school leaders do and what students in these schools learn, considering myriad influences within and outside the school setting. I found myself wondering what a similar matrix of investigation might reveal if expanded globally in education and including senior executives and large organisations outside education.

A fundamental philosophy that I felt enlivens the LFL initiative is the drive to see learning and leadership not only as related but also expanding how each is, in fact, a more encompassing dimension of our humanity and its potential than previously assumed. As the authors state, it is important to incorporate the

inherent impulse [to learn] with which we are born and which
continues, although often dulled and diminished, throughout our
lifetime, yet very often not in school....The leadership impulse is
equally in our genes but, like learning, may be inhibited by social
and institutional conventions (MacBeath and Dempster, 2009: 2).

When Mintzberg (2009) closely observed 29 leaders, in business, government,
health care and the social sector, what he saw—the pressures, the action, the
nuances, the shared learning—prompted his description of leading, and
managing, as being a practice, not a science or a profession, acquired
predominantly through experience and reflection and dependent on context. A
related requirement is initiative: there is growing evidence that effective
leadership hinges on human agency (Bandura, 1994), which can be described
as incorporating individual initiative; intentional actions; the aim toward
difference making, choice, and reflection on the effects of action. In leadership,
agency and purpose are at least partially collaborative (Leithwood and Riehl,
2003). Having agency generally suggests that there is a strong sense of self-
efficacy (Bandura, 1977), imbued by specific values and backed by a cultural
identity and ability to intentionally pursue worthy goals. To enhance learning
requires human agency, asserts Frost (2006), who defines such agency as
taking initiative and making a difference. Further, agency is about making
clear choices and taking intentional actions aimed at this difference-making, as
shown in Figure 2.8.

Leadership as activity

Agency

Learning as activity

Influencing others

Taking the initiative

Offering a service

Taking decisions on
behalf of others

Modelling new
behaviours

Making moral choices
for the wider good

Making the links

Shaping the moral purpose

Spotting the learning moment

Spotting the leadership moment

Making it happen

Posing questions

Analysing

Testing ideas

Portraying thoughts
and feelings

Thinking about thinking

Making moral decisions

Figure 2.8: Agency in Leadership and Learning. Source: MacBeath and Dempster (2009:47)

Over the past decade, the 'connecting leadership and learning' initiative has attempted to generate new understandings and place these findings on solid empirical ground. Nonetheless, the basic tenets remain both commonsensical and compelling. Swaffield and MacBeath (2008: 32) assert that '[l]eaders need to learn and leaders learn as they lead. Leadership of others involves being first able to lead oneself, a crucial premise of self-directed learning'. Moreover, leadership and learning are not only dynamic, they are reciprocal: They can overlap and enhance each other in a range of ways—including engaging in a growth mindset (Dweck, 2018; Staats, 2018), problem solving, reflection, innovation, sharing or collaborating and acting on experience. Claxton (2006: 4) argues that the capacity to stay cool and collected, as well as curious and open-minded, despite not knowing the solution to a challenge or opportunity goes well beyond technical training or cognition.

Other attributes—such as taking initiative as a leader to gain necessary insight to navigate or anticipate change—connect seamlessly from leadership into learning. A key characteristic of the LFL framework is that individual leaders, teachers, parents and students are positioned to be better able to be self-aware and reflective about what and how they are learning, how they are being led and, as a result, what they are learning about leadership and their own learning. This, it seemed, must fit within the context of changing leadership roles and models.

Performance beyond expectations

The study by Hargreaves and Harris (2013) titled 'Performance beyond expectations' was recommended to me as a thorough and compelling piece of research—which it certainly appears to be. With the present study and its evolving design in mind, I searched 'Performance beyond expectations' for relevant findings related to leadership and learning. I was struck by the fact that despite compelling stories and quotations, in the 61,162 words of this final report the word 'learn' is mentioned 11 times and 'learning' 71 times, with most of these mentions given in the names of schools or in the citations. All of the mentions of 'learning' were focused on children or students, except one 'teacher peer evaluations to enhance teaching and learning' and at one academy, 'Innovative learning calls for innovative teaching' (Hargreaves and Harris, 2013:60) and 'head coach to players: 'the attitude is that they can learn through hindsight...' (p.62). 'Learner' or 'learners' were mentioned 15 total times; and 'learned' six times—all related to children or students, except: 'When we consider what we have to learn about leadership and performance beyond expectations from sport...' (p. 41).

One way to look at the 'performance beyond expectations' study is to assume that while learning is not mentioned a lot, practically all of the

recommendations are potentially things that executives need to learn to do (as opposed to just being reminded to do by reading the study). They have to learn how to do them and then apply that learning. I was left wondering if this meant that such a comprehensive assessment of what matters for performance beyond expectations does not reach one conclusion about learning by leaders being important, what does that say about the presumed significance of learning for top performance? I was determined to search the literature to find out.

With these studies in mind I next searched for literature related to how senior executives learn.

How do senior executives learn?

Senior executives might be expected to learn in all of the same ways that other people learn, although it might be true that their particularly busy, complex and demanding jobs might be expected to place constraints on their learning opportunities and methods—or on the other hand those job conditions might stimulate them to seek learning more than others do. Furthermore, there might be something different in the overall character makeup of people who reach senior positions that either predisposes them to learning or predisposes them to learn less than others, or to learn differently than others.

In the former regard, while many, or even most, executives may talk about a commitment to learning, research shows that a relatively small number of leaders do more than others to extract meaningful learning from their experiences, yet little is known as to why (e.g., DeRue and Wellman, 2009; Heslin and Keating, 2017; McCall and Hollenbeck, 2002). Heslin and Keating (2017: 374) observe that 'leaders may...just go through the motions of appearing committed to learning while they largely strive to affirm their established leadership strengths and capabilities'.

Some researchers have contended that the default position for many, or perhaps most or even all, adults is to avoid learning rather than to actively learn (Ornstein, 1992; Leslie, 2014; Wiseman, 2014; LeDoux, 2015). It appears that, for people in general (Land, 1986; Coutre, 2002; Rock, 2009) and for leaders or senior executives in particular, one barrier is that human beings have a hard-wired aversion to change, labelled an 'immunity to change' (Kegan and Lahey 2009: 1). In many leadership and organisational settings, I have felt such a tendency. The human brain is said to be hard-wired with inherent anxiety about learning (Coutre, 2002; LeDoux, 2015), putting up an instinctive resistance to change (Ariely, 2010; Brown, 2014; Wiseman, 2014; LeDoux, 2015; Kegan and Lahey, 2009; Kaiser 2009; Kaplan and Kaiser 2013). My observations also coincide with the findings of studies revealing that a tension exists between environmental pushes toward learning and the instinctive human drive to establish certainty amid change (Ornstein, 1992; Ariely, 2010; Nease, 2016).

There has been a somewhat popular contention that senior leaders naturally continue to learn (Kayes and Kayes, 2011; Kouzes and Posner, 2013), with relatively little empirical or comparative evidence to support this contention. I would agree from my own experience that this is at least an aspirational aim of many, or even, most leaders—to learn and keep learning. If their learning is not assumed to occur naturally, it has nonetheless been assumed that many or most leaders purposefully and regularly learn (Argyris,1999; Collins, 2001; Senge, 1994; Kayes and Kayes, 2011); while other studies suggest that this may seldom be true (Seijts, 2014; Kearns, 2015; Wingard, 2015; Staats, 2018).

It has been said that 'power is the ability not to have to learn anything' (Deutsch 1963: 316). While studies have shown that some institutional leaders display higher levels of adaptability, learning and success (Kegan and Lahey 2009), these leaders were apparently very few in number (Boaz and Fox. 2014). One reason may be that the brain is hard-wired with inherent anxiety about

learning-related change (Coutre, 2002; LeDoux, 2015; Ornstein, 1992; Leslie, 2014; Wiseman, 2014) and change in general (Ariely, 2010; Brown, 2014; Wiseman, 2014; LeDoux, 2015). Learning therefore requires a clear commitment to being open to change (Kolb, 1984; Thomas and Seely Brown, 2011; Brown, 2014; Wiseman, 2014) as a learner accesses, processes, updates and acts upon information from a range of available resources.

As noted above, a distinction has been made between 'transformative' learning in organisations and 'instrumental' learning, with the suggestion that many executives may engage in instrumental learning, but few are transformative learners. These claims are often based not on academic research but on expressed opinion or a reflection of an author's experiences in the business literature. In this vein, Petriglieri (2014: 4) stated:

> [Transformative learning] does not just refine our skills. It changes our perspective.... We rarely visit the periphery of our knowledge and competence—the region where transformational learning happens.... The learning that we privilege is the safer, incremental kind. Learning that makes us better at what we do but hardly frees us up to revisit why we do it that way or what we may want to do next... [T]ransformational learning always involves defiance—of complacency, formality and norms.

In my experience with leaders and organisations I have observed or experienced a number of examples of such learning. Other researchers confirm that transformative learning requires disruption and often considerable inconvenience or discomfort (Stevens-Long, et al, 2012). Staats (2018:72) recently asserted that such learning requires intense focus and the willingness of senior executives to 'surround yourself with talented people who hold different perspectives...[and are] willing to tell you what they think'.

Staats (2018: 3) stated: 'Instead of doing the things that help us learn, we often do exactly the opposite'. Calling learning 'the most celebrated neglected activity in the workplace', Petriglieri (2014:17) observed:

> The question then is not whether we have time for learning, at work or elsewhere. It is what kind of learning we are encouraged, and have the courage, to pursue…. Look past the rhetoric and you will find signs of the neglect of transformational learning everywhere. In the workplace as well as in many business school courses, with their emphasis on tools that can be taught in a weekend and applied on Monday morning.

When Mintzberg (2009) observed the actual behaviour of 29 managers, he reported a common learning-related complaint among them by quoting one of them: 'How can you get in deep when there is so much pressure to get things done?' Reflecting on his original study and subsequent findings, Mintzberg (2013:169) stated that managing itself 'is learned on the job, enhanced by a variety of experiences and challenges' and he cites McCall, et al (1978) and McCall (1988), who, as previously noted, identified the five developmental experience areas as challenging assignments, other people, hardships, coursework and personal life experiences. The original McCall study (1978) asserted the '70–20–10' catchphrase compartmentalising leader development as 70% job experiences, 20% work relationships and 10% training. As noted previously, several subsequent studies have negated the percentages or formula, putting significantly more weight on relationships and hardships and significantly less importance on challenging assignments. I wondered how these elements would be revealed in this current study of senior executives.

Senge (1990:345) popularised the concept of the 'learning organisation', which would be based on an institution-wide 'designing of the learning process' and whose effectiveness could be gauged by the degree to which the organisation anticipated and adapted to change while reinventing and upgrading itself. Vision and purpose, individual and shared learning and ongoing dialogue are integral elements of such a culture. Schein (2013) and others assert that those things rarely happen even in the best-intentioned organisations.

I returned to some of the original research by Kolb (1984) and noted how he observed that the preferred innate 'learning style' of senior leaders was that of

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the 'accommodator'—a combination of 'active experimentation' and 'concrete experience'. That is, they are more inclined to act and then learn from the tangible consequences of their actions than they are to learn by the kinds of reflecting, observing, or conceptual thinking that might be more likely to be transformative.

I also carefully read Seijts (2014), who reported on interviews he conducted with 31 senior leaders about learning (this was published as a collection of transcript excerpts rather than an academic study of senior executives). I noted his conclusion that many lack the disposition to learn. Among other things, he wrote (2014:121):

> Some leaders have traits that prevent them from being open to new ideas. They may lack the courage to move outside their comfort zones….[T]hey may lack the humility essential for learning.

That comment stayed with me and I found myself thinking about this with regard to the early literature reviews on the curiosity, vulnerability and effort required for true learning. I thought about how Seijts also identified other factors constraining learning, including arrogance, overconfidence, laziness and the inability to 'recognize new opportunities for learning and seize them'.

While learning by leaders has been identified as a core element of flourishing schools, communities and organisations (Cherkowski and Walker, 2014), to flourish requires both emotional and mental engagement (Frederickson and Lodasa, 2005) and I was curious about those factors at work. Studies have demonstrated a positive connection between learning opportunities and work engagement (e.g., Bakker, 2011; Noe, et al, 2010) and this relationship between learning and engagement appears to be reciprocal—engaged leaders, particularly those with high levels of conscientiousness, are reported to be more curious and open to new information as well as more likely to engage in learning (e.g., Bakker, 2011; Bakker, et al, 2012).

I reviewed a number of studies that attempted to place learning by leaders in the broadened context of a community of learners—emphasising 'organisational learning' as the capacity for high performance and constant improvement through professional development, clear vision and building a culture for collective learning that wisely incorporates data to improve learning (Hargreaves, 2011; Knowles, et al, 2015; Staats, 2018; Thomas and Brown, 2011). Techniques to achieve this can include coaching and mentoring (Fullan, 2003; Schein; 2009; Knowles, et al, 2015) and self- and group evaluation, reflection and resulting dialogue (MacBeath, et al, 2008).

Connecting learning by senior executives and effective job performance

It is widely held that learning by leaders makes them more effective in their jobs and, conversely, that failing to learn sufficiently leads to declining job performance. What are the jobs of senior leaders? What differentiates the roles and responsibilities of the senior executives who are the subject of this study from the broader realm of 'leaders', 'managers' and 'supervisors'? What are the areas in which we might expect to see learning take on the most importance for senior executives?

It is generally agreed that senior executives are expected to bring distinctive capabilities to their jobs. Groysberg, et al (2011) analysed more than a hundred assessments of executives and also interviewed senior managers 'about the requirements for senior leaders, past, present, and future', stating (2011:5):

> The skills that help you climb to the top won't suffice once you get there. We're beginning to see C-level executives who have more in common with their executive peers than they do with the people in the functions they run. And today members of senior management are expected not only to support the CEO on business strategies but also to offer their own insights and contribute to key

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decisions.... To thrive as a C-level executive, an individual needs to be a good communicator, a collaborator, and a strategic thinker.

Zhou (2019) observed:

Decisions will be made without your input, and things will be done differently than how you might personally do them. One of the biggest challenges of managing at scale is finding the right balance between going deep on a topic and stepping back and trusting others to take care of it. As a team grows, learning to give this trust is essential.

A report by the Center for Creative Leadership (2018) stressed the importance of collective effort within top-executive teams, focused on three areas: *strategic focus* (creating vision; devoting strategic focus and energy; comparing innovation with risk; anticipating changes, needs and opportunities; and being pre-emptive to help assure the future viability of the organisation); *collective approach* (incorporating an integrated enterprise view; working collaboratively as an executive team; insisting that the good of the organisation is above that of individual or team aims; identifying and dissolving isolated functions and attitudes; and working openly and collaboratively to create solutions); and *team interaction* (acknowledging and benefitting from diversity in team members; attentively learning and effectively communicating; actively seeking differing views and insights; genuinely building trust and respect among and between team members).

McDonald (2016:1) stated: 'Today's senior executives must be proficient in their chosen field, but also current on big-picture issues facing their industries and organizations'. Groysberg (2014:33) reported 'the seven C-level skills and traits companies prize most' to be 'leadership, strategic thinking and execution, technical and technology skills, team and relationship-building, communication and presentation, change management, and integrity'. As noted earlier, Groysberg here also observed that companies 'differed on the type of leadership most highly in demand', and 'the type of leadership sought depends on a company's specific needs'.

Manciagli (2016: 1) stated that top executives '...must be able to create and deploy strong teams in the face of talent and retention pressures and intense competition in their industry or field, stay abreast of the latest technologies and innovation, and strategically navigate current organizational demands while also anticipating what's ahead'.

Describing the pressures faced by senior executives, Jolly (2018) stated:

> [The] role of a [senior executive] is evolving rapidly. Your job is no longer to tell your people what to do and then administer the systems and processes to check they're working... As CEO you know that the millennials entering your organisation are much better educated and more qualified that you were at their age. In fact, with your current skillset, you'd never get a job if you were starting out in your sector today.

Although it is understood that, as McDonald (2016:1) stated, 'Emerging trends, from the accelerated pace of change and disruptive innovations to dispersed workforces and regulatory compliance demands, have intensified the pressures facing company leaders', the strategic responsibilities that senior executives must fulfil are consistent with the following 2001 typology (Applebaum and Paese):

> Navigator: Clearly and quickly works through the complexity of key issues, problems and opportunities to affect actions (e.g., leverage opportunities and resolve issues).

> Strategist: Develops a long-range course of action or set of goals to align with the organization's vision.

> Entrepreneur: Identifies and exploits opportunities for new products, services, and markets.

> Mobilizer: Proactively builds and aligns stakeholders, capabilities, and resources or getting things done quickly and achieving complex objectives.

> Talent advocate: Attracts, develops, and retains talent to ensure that people with the right skills and motivations to meet business needs are in the right place at the right time.

Captivator: Builds passion and commitment toward a common goal.

Global thinker: Integrates information from all sources to develop a well-informed, diverse perspective that can be used to optimize organizational performance.

Change driver: Creates an environment that embraces change; makes change happen—even if the change is radical— and helps others to accept new ideas.

Enterprise guardian: Ensures shareholder value through courageous decision-making that supports enterprise—or unit-wide interests.

So difficult are the challenges, Jolly (2018) wrote, that 'You're not even sure what success means'. Hinchliffe (2018: 42) reported, 'Turnover among U.S. CEOs is at an all-time high', while 2017 turnover among CEOs of top British companies was 16.5%, and the global average CEO turnover was 9.3% (Jolly, 2018). Based on a meta-analysis of many studies, Keller and Meaney (2018) reported:

> [T]wo years after executive transitions, anywhere between 27 and 46 percent of them are regarded as failures or disappointments.... Bear in mind that these are senior leaders who demonstrated success and showed intelligence, initiative, and results in their previous roles (Keller and Meaney, 2018).

It is not surprising in this overall context that skills associated with learning are highly prized. Groysberg (2014) described what companies seek in their best executive candidates in the following words:

> The terms 'flexible', 'adaptable', and 'curious' came up frequently. One consultant described a typical in-demand executive as 'a sponge', primed to 'take in new skills' and 'learn from the people around them'. Another endorsed 'willingness to learn and adapt to changing environments', and a third urged 'adaptability, the ability to operate in multi-cultural environments and the openness to learn'. One consultant virtually spelled out a formal specification: 'Executives should not only have a high level of intellectual curiosity (staying current on market trends and changing

dynamics in business), but also a personal sense of flexibility and adaptability'.

Starting with McCall, et al (1988), I reviewed studies that sought to provide evidence of links between senior executive roles, or at least managerial roles, and learning. Building on his study observing 29 managers, Mintzberg only mentions learning two times in 200 pages of text. He argues that 'intrinsic to [manager] development has to be the carrying of the learning back to the workplace, for impact on the organisation' (2013: 170). But beyond insisting that this must happen, Mintzberg does not share data as to how, or whether, managers apply their learning in the workplace.

Research indicates that teacher-leaders with the drive to actively develop themselves and lead must commit to keeping up with the pace and complexity of change (Drago-Severson, 2016; Fairman and Mackenzie, 2015; Rushkoff, 2013; Vaill, 1996; Wiseman, 2013) by developing the capability to learn more of the right things despite lessened resources and diminishing personal support (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009b, 2009a).

Seijts (2014:365) presents the anticipated consequences of one reason for failing to learn:

> Some leaders believe that they are at the peak of their learning curves and have little more to learn....[T]his comfort prevents leaders from stretching their limits and improving their performance. Eventually, this leads to underperformance and obsolescence.

According to Kerr (2014: 2):

> A system adapts by learning, but it needs a leader who creates an enabling infrastructure, structure and power differential that allows for inquiry, reflection and action to foster such learning. Otherwise the organization will still adapt (as nothing stays still), but it will learn to be recursive and push for stability, or will become static, brittle and at risk of breakage.

Leaders who continue learning have been reported to be in high demand (Kouzes and Posner, 2013). The more that people are engaged in learning, some researchers say, the more successful they are at leading others (Posner, 2009; Posner and Brown, 2001).

Microsoft's chief executive officer, Satya Nadella, recently concluded (Nadella, 2017): 'Ultimately, the "learn-it-all" will always do better than the "know-it-all"'. While that sounds a little trite, I agree with the sentiment and I found that other researchers also have called for continuous learning, adaptability and innovation by leaders and professionals (e.g., Hess, 2014; Kouzes and Posner, 2016; Seijts, 2014; Staats, 2018).

In this literature review I have also sensed an expansion of learning into culture. For example, Thomas and Brown (2011) place learning above all other capabilities in importance, saying there is or should be a 'new culture of learning'. A popular question for leaders has been, 'Are you learning as fast as the world is changing?' (Taylor 2012:2). Mikkelsen and Jarche (2015) assert that 'the best leaders are constant learners', further stating, '[L]eaders must get comfortable with living in a state of continually *becoming,* a perpetual beta mode. Leaders that stay on top of society's changes do so by being receptive and able to learn'. In my experience, such a 'beta mode' may be relatively rare among leaders but is nonetheless within reach.

Whereas not long ago it might have been widely assumed that knowing mattered more than learning, there is increasing attention to the belief that learning beats knowing—at least often or perhaps much of the time (Hess, 2014, Seijts, 2014; Staats, 2018; Wiseman, 2013).

One report indicated that, on a global average, only one-third of Fortune 500 chief executives held their positions more than three years (Williams 2010). Of new chief executives, 38% failed in their first 18 months on the job (Centre for Creative Leadership, 2012). Pressures on people in executive leadership

positions have been rising. Leaders face increased speed of change and sudden shifts in conditions or circumstances, as well as heightened complexity and uncertainty (Osborn, et al, 2002; Porter and McLaughlin 2006). Learning is often suggested as the antidote to those pressures (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007; Birdi, Allan and Warr 1997; Colquitt and Simmering 1998).

It has been reported that informal learning, which I discussed earlier in this chapter, is vital for leadership development (Sessa and London 2006) and may account for up to 75% of learning within organisations (Bear et al. 2008; Birdi et al, 1997; Roy 2010).

I reflected on how many well-known senior executives have been considered exemplars of learning. Mango (2017: 134) writes:

> Once Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Steve Jobs and Richard Branson had learnt how to learn they dropped out of school, but they never dropped out of learning, by and through continued learning they have built some of the most successful companies in their generations.

A Global 100 chief executive (Immelt, 2017) recently stated upon his retirement that 'learning is a part of the DNA for all good leaders'.

I found myself wondering about that. Hess (2014) minced no words about the reality that organisations face: '[L]earn or die'. That learning must be undertaken (and put into practice) by senior executives and others throughout the organisation. Outworking the competition is no longer sufficient (Vaill 1998; Coutu 2002; Schein 2009; Taylor 2012). Learning by leaders has been named as a key issue affecting the future of every organisation (e.g., Kayes and Kayes, 2011; Kearns, 2015; Staats, 2018; Wingard, 2015).

The perceived most critical issue related to organisational growth and success has been reported to be leadership development (Deloitte Global Survey, 2007; DeRue and Wellman, 2009; Vicere and Fulmer, 1998). In education, Leithwood,

et al (2004: 5) state, leadership is 'second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school'.

Organisations invest more than US$24 billion a year in leadership development (Keating, et al, 2017). By its nature, the development of leaders entails the acquisition by them of new information that is incorporated into their existing knowledge, skills, behaviours and/or attitudes—that is, it requires learning. A Global Human Capital Trends study by Deloitte (2015) reported that 85% of respondents—which included 3,300 business and HR leaders from 106 countries—reported that learning was essential.

Thus, learning in general is crucial for an organisation's success, and senior executives must play a large part in that learning, as exemplars of learning, as reinforcers of the value of learning and by applying learning from all sources.

How senior executives apply learning

In much of the relevant literature, there is an unspoken assumption that learning matters and it seems to be rather automatically implemented or applied. The phrase 'Learn or die', for example, has no substance unless it is understood that what is learned is to be applied. Argyris (1999:14) stated, 'Organizational learning is a process of detecting and correcting error', thereby incorporating corrective actions as part of his definition of learning.

I mentioned earlier in this chapter that some theories of learning include action as part of the definition of learning—there isn't learning if nothing changes. I cannot go that far, and in any event I think that knowing more about specifically how leaders apply learning is an important avenue to pursue as a separate topic, as I have done in this thesis. Mango (2018: 117) argues:

> [T]he assumption advanced by most of the proponents of
> leadership theories, that by revealing to leaders what leadership is

and what leaders should do, then inevitably the leaders will utilize the acquired knowledge and skills to impact their followers and the society, does not stand the test of scrutiny.

Hirst, et al (2004) reported that the more experienced a leader is, the harder they must work to translate learning into leadership behaviours or to integrate new knowledge into their existing cognitive frameworks. The study also reports that there can be a significant time lag, up to eight months, specific earning by a leader and when, or if, that learning gets applied.

In my experience, it is not unusual for executives and other leaders to apply learning in cosmetic ways, making surface changes to entrenched attitudes or approaches just to be seen as doing something. I have described that phenomenon as 'polishing the past'. It counts as 'application', but it is far from transformative.

In Seijts's (2014) interviews with 31 senior executives, he asked as a central question 'How did you learn to lead?' His conclusion (Seijts, 2014: 336): 'Not surprisingly, all the leaders I interviewed for this book agreed that good leadership can be learned'. Sprinkled across several of the interviews were anecdotally described ways in which leaders might apply learning, including by becoming a better example, by sharing what they have learned with their teams and others who will benefit from it, and by creating focused pilot tests of new ideas to assess their value.

Application does not mean only overt action; it can mean building a new understanding that will likely serve as a basis for subsequent action. In Kolb's formulation (1984), leaders may apply learning to take a different kind of action than they otherwise would have taken, and they may also apply learning to try to improve their explanatory conceptual models about 'how things work' in a broad range of categories, from interpersonal relationships to organisational systems to environmental factors that affect the organisation.

As I have said, Argyris (1999) conceptualises organisational learning as 'a process of detecting and correcting error'. The application—the correcting—may be very pragmatic action to address an immediate problem, but Argyris argues for a larger understanding, in which the immediate problem must be viewed as possible evidence of a deeper failure of assumptions or understanding. For many executives, this 'double loop learning' can be a crucial way in which learning is applied, to reach a fresh, better understanding of the foundational premises that underlie their thoughts and actions, and the thoughts and actions of others in an organisation. Effective leaders are reported to use reflection and what are sometimes called 'after-action reviews', to assure that learning is captured to create new learning for future understanding and action (e.g., Lakhani, et al, 2012). These reviews might or might not include double-loop considerations.

As an overall application practice, Ashford and DeRue (2012) have suggested that to extract the developmental advantage of learning from challenging situations, leaders must engage with these situations differently by setting learning goals; embracing a learning orientation; purposively heightening their awareness of surroundings, self, and others; committing to ongoing openness and curiosity; and following up with disciplined reflection on the experience from a wide range of perspectives. These are desirable application practices, although recent research (e.g., Heslin and Keating, 2017) calls into question the apparent presumption that with a learning orientation and goals, a leader will somehow rather automatically or instinctively move through action and reflection phases and there is evidence (Jordan and Audia, 2012; Heslin and Keating, 2017; Kernis, 2003) that complex, changing conditions can make leaders frustrated and defensive, more concerned with protecting or boosting their own self-esteem or status than with maximising learning and its benefits to them and to their team or organisation.

Historically, psychology has presented a viewpoint centred on people being attitudinally oriented to their future yet recent research (Gilbert and Watson, 2007; Seligman, et al, 2013) suggests that *prospection*, the ability to scan an array of potential future scenarios or possibilities, is an intrinsic capacity of the human brain and mind. This encompasses the ability to reconceptualise what is possible that might have been previously unseen or unknown. One element of prospection is that it enables an individual leader to sense and envision what Seligman, et al (2013: 119) describe as:

> a branching array of evaluative prospects that fan out before them. Action is then selected in light of their needs and goals. The past is not a force that drives them but a resource from which they selectively extract information about the prospects they face. These prospects can include not only possibilities that have occurred before but also possibilities that have never occurred—and these new possibilities often play a decisive role in the selection of action.

The authors admit this may also be seen as an aspect of common sense and not as a novel idea.

A note on studying senior executives

As noted, there are remarkably few studies of how senior executives learn and apply learning. Contributing to the dearth of studies of senior executives is their perception that their time is exceptionally valuable and limited (e.g., Bruch and Ghosal, 2002; Pfeffer and Sutton, 1999).

Moreover, most studies of senior executives would be conducted in management research, which has been perceived by managers as having limited value to executive or leadership practice or being inapplicable to organisational challenges (e.g., Keiser and Leiner, 2009; Lundberg, 2001; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002). Susmand and Evered (1978:582) reported that academic studies are widely perceived by senior executives and positional

leaders as 'only remotely related to the real world of practicing managers'. Pearce and Huang (2012:3) labelled this 'non-actionable research', and after reviewing more than 400 empirical studies concluded that there is a decreasing value of academic research to management education and that actionable research continues to decline.

Rudolph and Peluchette (1992) suggested that another reason for managers' widely perceived sense that academic research is largely irrelevant to their real-world demands may be the academic researchers themselves, who seem both impractical and misaligned with the actual challenges, priorities and language of managers and companies. In recent decades, the Academy of Management has advocated for studies that are clearly practice-oriented (e.g, Hambrick, 1994; Huff, 2000; Pearce and Huang, 2012; Van de Ven, 2002).

Despite devoting significant time and focus over four years to doing the most thorough literature review I could with the resources available to me, I still came up with next to nothing: I found few rigorous empirical studies that delved into leadership and learning (e.g., MacBeath and Dempster, 2009) and only several (Mintzberg, 2009; McCall, 1988; McCauley, et al, 2014) that seemed related to my primary interest of how senior executives continue to learn and apply their learning. No matter how widespread the assumption that learning is vital to the success of senior executives, I have not found that this presumption has yielded even the most basic of studies regarding how senior executives learn and apply learning in today's changing world. I also want to acknowledge that if I had significant additional time and resources for an unusually expansive literature review, perhaps such studies are to be found.

Envisioning and constructing a conceptual framework

As I will explain further in Chapter 3, I developed both the conceptual framework in this chapter and the corresponding research design described in the next chapter using a constructivist epistemology (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013) aligned with constructivist-developmental theory (Kegan, 1982, 1994). I utilised a qualitative paradigm (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 1990, 2011, 2012, 2015; Seidman, 2013); and an intent to honour the information collected from the perspectives and experiences shared by the senior executives in the study.

As Ravitch and Riggan (2017: xvi) state, the development of a conceptual framework is a 'process through which a researcher identifies the questions and lines of inquiry that matter most…, develop appropriate strategies for pursuing those questions, and monitor and reflect on their learning as the research unfolds'. There are many variations in developing conceptual frameworks. I elected to follow the advice of Ravitch and Riggan (2017) in building a conceptual framework that integrated a spectrum of elements including the researcher's goals, positionality, experience and identity, formal and informal theory, and methods.

I sought to immerse myself in the overall literature of theories of learning and its application so that I could best determine the potential significance and originality of a study that would fall within my research focus. As a result, I would be best prepared to design that study to create the most potentially useful ways of classifying and categorising the findings. I reviewed a broad range of learning theories and assumptions or models yet found them only to serve as points of reference or perspective, not as definitive sources of confirmed knowledge as they related to my subject area.

I constructively anguished over the fact that I could find not studies or theories that were fully relevant; nothing that directly and reliably reported how senior executives learn or how senior executives apply learning. McCall (1988), Seijts

(2014), Mintzberg (2005, 2009) and others provided some anecdotal information directly related to senior executives; and several commentators (e.g., Petriglieri, 2014; Kerr, 2014; Groysberg, 2014; Boyatzis, 2006; Kayes and Kayes, 2011) suggested possibilities related to how senior executives learn and apply learning (or fail to learn or apply learning), but there was no fully relevant validated research directly related to senior executives upon which to build a full theoretical framework for my research.

I identified a large number of general concepts and issues related to learning and applying learning. Those were things that I sensed that I might detect in my study and that, if shown to be significant, might later be included in my findings. Being acutely alert for those mentions and classifications became a primary characteristic of the development of my conceptual framework, informing the creation of my *a priori* research codes; every aspect of designing the study itself; and the subsequent gathering, deciphering, assembling and interpreting the primary data, followed by the reporting of my findings.

Reflecting on my literature review findings, I felt that the conceptual framework for this study must draw on contemporary learning models while offering a broadly integrative or inclusive scaffolding of core elements adaptable to a range of learning circumstances, styles and settings—allowing for assembling and comparing data from the current study of senior executives. This framework enables consideration of variations in perceptions and lived experiences about learning and its application by senior executives. It can account for differences in culture, context and circumstance by participants.

I followed the literature review with reflection and recalibration of my priorities as to the purpose of the study and its context:

> *Working title of study:* 'How senior leaders learn and apply that learning to their practices'
>
> *Why this topic matters*: Learning by executives 'is neither automatic nor assured' (Heslin and Keating, 2017), and senior executives

have an outsized impact on everything that organisations do and everything that organisations do affects billions of people—today and into the future. (Impact Statement)

Practitioner-researcher advantage: As West-Burnham (2005a, 2009, 2012) emphasises, a study designed and conducted by a practitioner-researcher—in this case one who has worked extensively with a large number of senior executives—can have a significantly increased opportunity to engage that group as subjects for a study and to win their trust and condor.

Limited research on the topic to date: Reasons include lack of respect by senior executives for academic research or its relevance/utility to leadership practice (Keiser and Leiner, 2009; Lundberg, 2001; Pearce and Huang, 2012; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Rudolph and Peluchette, 1992)

Next, I inductively developed several options for my conceptual framework. I spent a number of months thinking and journaling on the intersection between my own experiences working with many senior executives in an array of fields and disciplines, what the literature revealed or suggested, and what my best instincts said about creating a conceptual framework that made sense to me, at least as a launching point.

Conceptual frameworks 'possess ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions, and each concept within a conceptual framework plays an ontological or epistemological role' (Jabareen (2009:50). I referred to points made by Morse, et al (2002:1) on creating a conceptual framework in asserting that it must incorporate

> characteristics identified from previous inquiry that provide an internal structure that provides a starting point for observations and interview questions, and for analysis. The researcher proceeds by building on these structures or categories, padding them out or 'giving them flesh' and organizing the ways they fit together.

I drew together a selective set of key themes or factors (Tables 2.1 to 2.3) from the literature review that my experience working with senior executives suggested might be of value to this study. While not intended to serve as

comprehensive or all-encompassing list, this exercise enabled me to begin to identify an array of key themes or elements based on my experience, best instincts, and consideration or emphasis points from the literature review:

Table 2.1 **Ways of learning**
Learning by example (e.g., Kayes and Kayes, 2011; Seijts, 2014)
Experiential (e.g., McCauley, et al, 2014)
Informational (e.g., Northouse, 2018)
Transformational (e.g., Taylor and Cranton, 2012; West-Burnham, 2009)
Observation (e.g., Northouse, 2018)
Formal…Informal…Nonformal (e.g., Merriam and Bierema, 2014)
Shallow…Deep…Profound (e.g., West-Burnham, 2009)
Independent (e.g., Merriam, 2006; Staats, 2018)
Collaborative – communities of practice (e.g., Wegner, 1998)
General interactions (e.g., Northouse, 2018)
Targeted mentoring/guidance from others (e.g., Taylor and Cranton, 2012; Kayes and Kayes, 2011)
Reflection (e.g., Argyris, 1999; Argyris and Schön, 1978 and 1995; Schön, 1983 and 1987)
Challenging assignments (e.g., McCall, et al, 1988; McCauley, et al, 2014)
Hardships (e.g., McCall, et al, 1988)
Coursework (e.g., Northouse, 2018)
Personal experiences outside of work (e.g., Taylor and Cranton, 2012)
Testing ideas to stimulate learning (e.g., Heslin and Keating, 2017)

Table 2.2 **Ways of applying learning**
Construct personal meaning (e.g., Schein, 2010)
Create explanatory mental models (e.g., Senge, 2006)
1986 and 1991; Understand future issues (e.g., Seligman, et al, 2016)
Respond to emerging challenges (e.g., Staats, 2018)
Incrementally improve on past results (e.g., Kayes and Kayes, 2011)
Build on strengths (e.g., Kaiser, 2009; Kaplan and Kaiser, 2013)
Improve on weaknesses or build new capabilities (e.g., Kaiser, 2009; Kaplan and Kaiser, 2013)
Test new ideas (e.g., Kayes and Kayes, 2011; Schrage, 2014)
Become a better leader (e.g., Kouzes and Posner, 2016)
Facilitate learning by others/create 'culture of learning' (e.g., Heslin and Keating 2017; Senge, 2006)
Detect and correct errors (e.g., Kayes and Kayes, 2011; McCauley, et al, 2014)
Be a role model of learning (e.g., Vaill, 2008)

Table 2.3 **Factors affecting learning**
Incentives to learn (e.g., Kayes and Kayes, 2011; Seijts, 2014)
Curiosity, need for cognition (e.g., Dweck, 2006 and 2015; Golman et al, 2015; Heslin and Keating, 2017; Leslie, 2014)
Mindset (e.g., growth vs. fixed) (e.g., Dweck, 2006; 2015; O'Keefe, et al 2018)
Vulnerability/get outside 'comfort zone' (e.g., Gardner, Vaill, 2008)
Self-direction/ learning power (Deakin Crick, 2015; Merriam, 2006; Sitzmann and Ely, 2011)
Effort (Schors, 2015)
Conception of learning journey (e.g., Claxton 1997 and 1999; Deakin Crick, 2015)

Explicit commitment to daily discipline of learning/be in 'learning mode' (e.g., Heslin and Keating, 2017)

Making time for learning (e.g., Bruch and Ghosal, 2002; Kayes and Kayes, 2011; Pfeffer and Sutton, 1999) Wiseman, 2014; Vaill, 2008)

Overcome belief that there is little more that needs to be learned (e.g., Hirst, et al, 2004; Seijts, 2014)

Overcome fear/anxiety (e.g., Coutre, 2002; Schein, 2010)

I next incorporated each of the preceding emphasis areas into a conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 2.9:
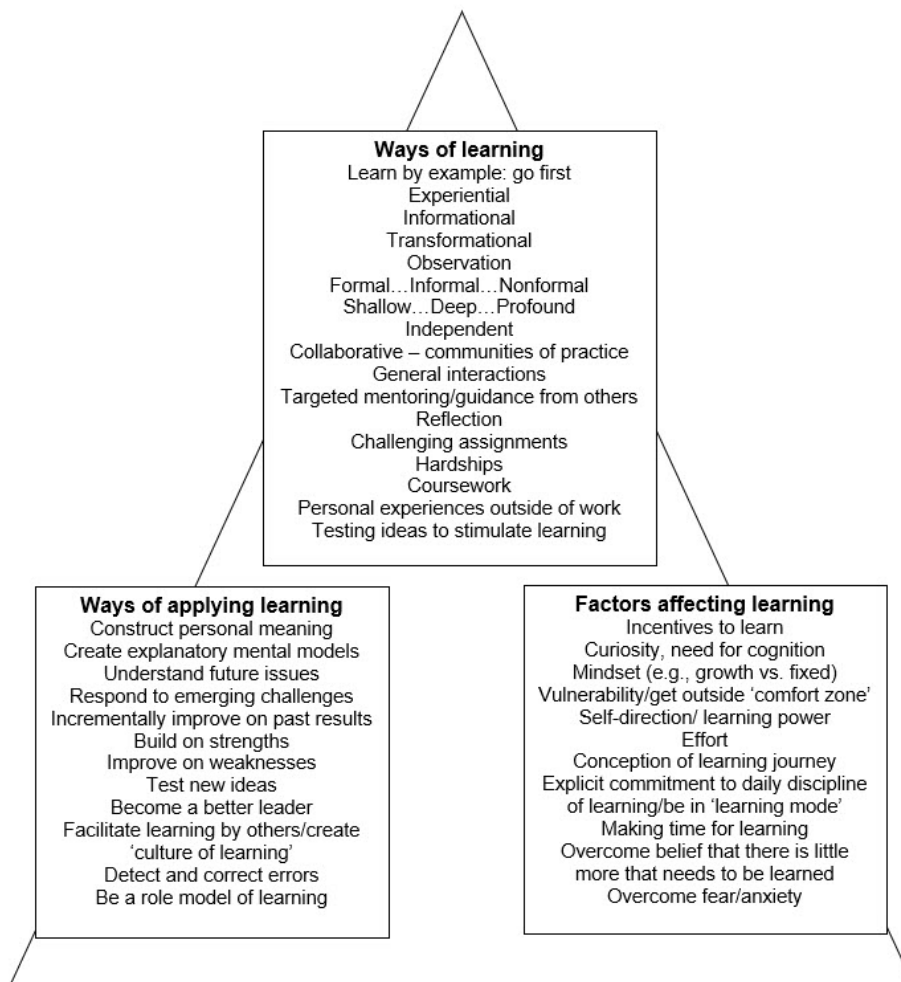
Figure 2.9: Conceptual framework

From here I moved to considering and selecting the research questions.

Research questions

I first drew together a list of more than 100 potential research questions. I assembled them by category and experimented with groups of questions in a questionnaire to either send to subjects as pre-work or to use to structure the interviews. In the end I refocused on my participants, senior executives, and all of my instincts suggested that I had to keep my request to them simple and hope that it could ignite a deeper and more inclusive or extensive discussion. As a result, I condensed more than a dozen of my draft questions on leadership and learning into two:

As a senior executive:

1. How do you learn?
2. How do you apply this learning?

These questions were the result of both the critical literature review and a purposeful distillation process I undertook to simplify the essence of the study. Although I began my thesis with a goal of investigating many additional questions, I consolidated my focus to these two primary questions backed by an array of sub-questions for prompt further exploration of each interviewee's insights, ideas, perspectives and experiences. My intention was to focus in particular on what Maxwell (2013: 79) describes as 'specific beliefs, actions and events that you observe or ask about and the actual contexts within which these are situated, rather than seeing these as simply manifestations of abstract, context-free categories'. Based on previous studies (e.g., Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015) I believed that this focus on a small number of core questions and not more, would help attract senior executives to participate in the study and also would help to create more honest and detailed sharing of how each senior executive made sense of their experiences (Seidman, 2013).

Summary

In summary, this chapter reviewed the multi-year literature review journey, with its trials and travails, incorporating forays into the theoretical, assumptive and empirical literature related to learning by executives, aiming to establish a knowledge base. The literature review also drew me into the problematic aspects of leadership and learning that left me frustrated at how few data-based findings have been set forth on what I considered an important topic: how senior executives learn and apply learning. The chapter began with a review of the general literature on learning followed by a survey of a number of theories and assumptions on adult learning. Related topics were explored including self-directed learning, transformative learning and experiential learning, along with a discussion of literature reporting barriers to learning, which include emphasising strengths and overemphasising past learning rather than looking forward. I then surveyed relationships between and among learning, curiosity, vulnerability and effort, as well as literature on learning as a journey and a way of being. I next moved into highlights of recent research connecting leadership and learning, and how complex and problematic that has proven to date, and discussed a large-scale study of organisations in business, education and sport to assess the sources of performance beyond expectations. I examined data, and the lack thereof, on how senior executives learn, how that learning may impact organisational performance and noted some considerations from the literature as to how such learning may be applied. I then reviewed several documented challenges in studying senior executives and concluded with a discussion of the numerous drafts and elements that were considered in developing the conceptual framework and how this framework drew on the literature review in an integrative way and informed how I selected and finalised my research questions.

The next chapter describes how I established what I believed to be the most efficacious research methodology.

Chapter 3
Research Design and Methodology

This chapter examines the philosophy of the study and the factors that influenced my approach to the research. It begins with a recap of the research questions and then offers a methodological overview that includes the aims, research design and assumptions of the study, along with the underpinnings of constructivist epistemology and constructivist-developmental theory and how my application of this viewpoint and approach was influenced by my own ways of knowing. Next, I describe the selection of participants followed by an assessment of researcher positionality and limitations. Then I summarise the approach to data sources, collection and management. With this backdrop, the chapter then explores issues of reliability, validity and ethical considerations.

Two main research questions

The literature review and conceptual framework, as noted in Chapter 2, served to narrow my focus for this study to a sample group of senior executives and to simplify the type and number of research questions into two primary ones which I will discuss further in this chapter:

As a senior executive:

1. How do you learn?
2. How do you apply this learning?

Philosophical, epistemological and methodological considerations

The research realm of learning is vast and deep. It is also expanding. It affects every aspect of human lives and work. The issues it raises and ponders are numerous, changing, complex and far-reaching, with immense current and future-influencing social significance. This doctoral study used qualitative data analysis to capture and explore the perspectives and experiences of learning by 24 senior executives. Specifically: How do they learn and how do they apply their learning? It is based on a philosophical relationship between the topic being researched, the epistemological issues in researching the questions, and the methodology indicated by the internal logic of the argument for how best to approach studying this little-examined subtopic of a vast field.

Despite a cacophony of claims as to goals and extensively nuanced domain of the philosophy of learning, according to a number of research assessments in the literature (e,g., Carter and Pritchard, 2017; Pritchard, 2013; 2016; Siegel, 2017), the basic epistemic aim in learning is 'understanding'. Pritchard (2013; 2016) expands this phrase to encompass understanding with an intellectual view.

From the outset, I considered a range of philosophical, epistemological and methodological perspectives and approaches. Ultimately, I decided that my epistemological view for this study would be built on an interpretive framework of constructivism—the premise that reality is largely assembled from subjective experiences and meanings (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Let me start with the interpretive lens or framework: Interpretivism asserts that reality is multiple and relative, and that knowledge obtained using this discipline is social constructed into meaning rather than objectively ascertained. Whereas positivists believe that it is possible to obtain clear objective knowledge and emphasise rigid research structures (often

quantitative rather than qualitative), interpretivists set forth a more customised and flexible research structure based on the notion that meaning arises from human interactions, and the researcher and the study subjects are aligned in the research process and are mutually interactive. Interpretivists have the goal of interpreting and assigning meaning to behaviours, perspectives and dialogues that are subjective and bound by both time and context. Interpretivists engage in research with prior insights, experience or conceptions but remain open to new knowledge that is viewed as both emergent and collaborative from the research process itself.

Now to the constructivist epistemology: Constructivists embrace the view that learning is an active constructive process; that is, reality and meanings are constructed, subjective and interpretive.

I also drew upon the constructivist-developmental theory set forth by Kegan (1982, 1994, 2009) and modified by others, including Drago-Severson (2004, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2016). This theory ascribes a framework to how adults make meaning and I felt it made the most sense for this study because constructivism reflects the view that we actively construct or create our individual reality; developmentalism asserts that each individual's way of constructing reality can deepen and be modified across time. In my view, this theory also reflects one of the ways that humans establish perspective based on experience as well as how perception can be clear on certain things yet vague on others. Because I was asking these 24 senior executives how they learn and how they apply learning, the constructive-developmental theory provided a useful lens to help me record and ponder the wide range of ways that these executives express how they think, perceive, feel and take action related to learning.

In an ideal world, the core theme and broad questions of this study would have already been extensively researched and I could have built on that foundation. I would have had the wealth of previous studies, long-established theories,

replicated foundational findings, and extensive breadth and depth of corresponding data, along with plentiful resources and time to incorporate all of these as a launchpad for a new large-scale study that was, to the greatest extent possible, objectivist and positivist. In this vein, one avenue I explored during my doctoral studies was to conduct large-scale survey research involving senior executives. After delving into this from a variety of possibilities, it was simply untenable or infeasible. I had to narrow the focus of the study, realising that I was gathering some of the very first data on how senior executives learn and apply learning. The philosophical assumptions and epistemological lens that I ended up embracing were, of necessity, constructivist, subjectivist, interpretivist and pragmatic.

I considered a wide array of possible research methods: ethnographic observation, case studies, focus groups, interviews, and even taking a retrospective historical perspective for the study by analysing a diverse collection of autobiographies and biographies of senior executives. Among the factors that led me to select semi-structured interviews as the method for this study was a combination of scientific insight and utility. Neuroscientists (e.g., Eagleman, 2017) have described the brain's deep intrinsic drive to assemble conceptual meaning and narrative rationale or perspective from varied, often complex or multi-layered experiences. Bruner (1990: 45) summed it up by stating that we each have a 'readiness or predisposition to organize experience into a narrative form'. The utility factor in selecting the method for this study also hinged on the confirmed resistance—discussed in Chapter 2—among senior executives to participating in academic research. In contrast, the most common form of ethnographic research is participant observation as part of field research. To a senior executive, the notion of having an observer follow them around would likely be off-putting and viewed as undesirable. Placing a hidden camera in an executive's office to record conversations and observations would likely seem even more undesirable. Similarly, a case study of a senior executive feels very time-consuming and laborious—and I doubted that any

senior executives, even those I knew well, would agree to participate. Focus groups might work, yet in my experience at least, senior executives in a room with other senior executives they do not know are likely to be reserved and guarded in what they reveal or discuss. I might also have simply read multiple biographies and autobiographies of senior executives and worked to analyse these. Yet I knew that these publications tend to be retrospective rather than current, and that in many cases external writers are involved who may or may not care about accuracy of what is being told or reported, and that I had no way readily available way to refute or verify such reports. This left me with what felt like one best option: semi-structured interviews.

After I had determined that interviews were the most convenient, viable and least intrusive research approach for me to engage senior executives in this study, I further explored methodology. Given the lack of previous studies on this topic and a corresponding shortage of established theories and data to draw upon directly, I could not rationalise using a deductive approach. I felt it would be a disservice to the research and subjects to design the study with a conclusion or assumption already in mind. Therefore, I elected to take a predominantly inductive approach because I was committed to examining the data without the constraints imposed by needing to test theory. An inductive approach also fits well with the choice of semi-structured interviews as a viable means to collect the personalised perspectives and lived experiences of the senior executives being studied. Using induction, I sought findings that were grounded in the evidence and therefore would potentially lead to conclusions that were high in validity (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Accordingly, data were collected and analysed before reflecting deeply on their relationship to existing knowledge. While I worked to stay as reflexively aware and objective as possible, to some extent my experience of working with executives in diverse organisations and my awareness of current debates in this area and curiosity about the topic itself were reflected in the objectives that were set for the study: determining how 24 of today's executives learn and apply their learning.

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Interviews seemed to be the most efficient and appropriate method of data collection because the research objectives required securing enough subjects willing to devote the time and focus to share personal narratives that reflected each subject's perspectives and experiences of learning.

The design incorporated interviews with the senior executives by telephone, along with in-depth in-person follow-up interviews with three of these leaders— one from each of the three groups: educational institutions, publicly-traded for-profit companies and privately-held for-profit companies. The 24 initial interviews required an average of 32 minutes to complete and the three in-person follow-up interviews each averaged 64 minutes. A necessary limitation of the research was that the respondents were selected by a purposive sample.

Analysis of the data was inductive and primarily thematic, as it was my commitment to identify commonalities and differences in the experiences and views of the respondents. One ethical factor to be considered was confidentiality. Although I intended to use the data for a research project, it was vital to assure the senior executives that their identities would be concealed. The findings were intended to make a contribution to the literature and to theory, but not to be generalised in a broader way or to other executives, organisations, or institutions that may be operating in very different circumstances.

I sought to compile an array of descriptions from senior executives that enabled me to identify and analyse specific perspectives and experiences (Kvale 2009, Maxwell, 2005). To collect such perspectives, I utilised qualitative semi-structured interviews based on the premise that they enabled me to both listen to specific descriptions by individual senior executives and to sense or perceive something of 'the meanings expressed, as well as…what is said "between the lines"' (Kvale 2009: 32).

One other philosophical point of reference was pragmatism, or specifically practical wisdom, influenced my views in this study. Practical wisdom is a way of interacting with learning and life that was described by Aristotle as 'phronēsis' (2011: line 1095b) or the continually committed consciousness to view experiences, challenges, possibilities and problem-solving with purposeful discernment and reflection so that they contribute to excellence in subsequent thought, attitude and practice moving forward. Such a mindset must be chosen again and again. It can be seen as a component of, or catalyst for, reflection and reflection-in-action (Argyris, 1995, 1999; Argyris and Schön, 1978; Schön, 1983, 1987). Others have suggested that practical wisdom cannot be taught but is a learned value and embodied perspective arising from when people commit to their teleological aims as well as to becoming better versions of themselves (Hughes, 2001).

I believe this focus on exploring practical wisdom is especially relevant to the study of senior executives. As noted in Chapter 2, for many of these senior executives, academic research has felt irrelevant to their role and of little practical value to their organisations (e.g., Panda and Gupta, 2014; Pearce and Huang, 2012). Tushman and O'Reilly (2007) have suggested that, as academic researchers, we can and must, work more closely and effectively with senior executives to ascertain questions they would like to see addressed. The theme of the present study arose from more than two decades of my work with senior executives around the world. Too often, it seemed and for an array of possible reasons, their view has been neither sought nor effectively attended to by academic researchers.

After careful thought, I determined that the epistemological lens of constructivism, grounded in pragmatism, was in this case the most appropriate philosophical framework to adopt in light of the lack of previous studies on this topic and in designing a viable approach that could 'tip' the interest of, and willing engagement by, the subject population of senior executives. For this

specific study, I believe that my constructivist and pragmatic philosophy—which would also be informed, where required, by the viewpoints of interpretivism and, at times, subjectivism—offered the most appropriate research paradigm. I believed this approach would enable me to remain as maximally curious and open-minded as possible in discovering whatever the interviews reported or revealed, and that this strengthened my position in inviting each senior executive to draw from, and share, their subjective experiences and meanings.

Rationale for a qualitative approach to research design

The rationale for selecting a qualitative methodology was philosophically, theoretically and practically driven by my commitment to seek to understand the experiences and perspectives of those being studied. The research design was determined pragmatically because of the difficulty of collecting data from busy senior executives. I first learned qualitative methodologies as a graduate student nearly three decades ago with a research supervisor (Patton, 1984) who taught that research explorations seldom begin with theories we wish to test. Instead, research starts when we discover something that intrigues or surprises us—and, upon reflection, seems different from the norm. This curiosity prompts a desire to learn more by research—even if the study is of limited scope and scale—that can illuminate or explore the reality. As part of my UCL doctoral experience, I explored mixed-methods study design and large-scale survey research with quantitative analytics. Yet I ultimately decided that a qualitative approach was a better and more feasible fit for my study timeframe, resources, intellectual goals and epistemological view. Qualitative research enabled this study to be designed with smaller samples, for example, than quantitative studies demand, and helped the study design emphasise lived experiences and context, providing me with rich raw data as well as the chance to more deeply analyse the data. In contrast, I felt that quantitative

studies offer the most value when measuring predetermined relationships and variables.

Because of my constructivist-developmental epistemology and pragmatic philosophical lens, qualitative research also seemed to fit my research questions. The internal logic of the argument is that my choices in research methodology and method were, in fact, very limited because of the real-world concerns of the subject population, senior executives. My goal was to access thoughtful descriptions from senior executives that would enable me to explore individualised yet concrete, contextualised reflecting and illuminating how the senior executives make meaning as revealed in their descriptions of perspectives and experiences (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2015).

At the same time, I was cognisant of specific challenges inherent in qualitative methods—including the fact any generalisations, theoretical implications, conclusions, or interpretations drawn from the research may be of relatively minor value due to being 'simplified and incomplete'. (Maxwell, 2013: 47). This prompted me to remain aware of my own positionality as a researcher and to focus on honouring the perspectives and experiences as the senior executives described them (Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2013). The bias known as reflexivity acknowledges that the research is an active, influential part of the workings and interactions within the study and as such exerts is inextricably tied to all aspects of the research (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Keeping this in mind, I scheduled times each week to reflect on my discoveries to date and sustain my ongoing attendance to this reflexivity.

In every study, the researcher must make assumptions as well as decisions as to the type of knowledge the research seeks to produce. One of the strengths of qualitative data that makes it challenging to analyse is the complexity that it can elicit and capture. As the researcher collects, assembles, deciphers and interprets data, he asks questions not only of the subjects of the study but of

himself and of the data itself because as Flick (2014: 148) asserts, 'the data never speaks for itself'.

I also committed to incorporate some use of counting in my data analysis. In part, I did this as a result of growing support among qualitative researchers to design data analysis to not only reflect qualitative nuances but also provide a reference point as to the numerical frequency of a code reflecting what is being said, how often, how persuasively or passionately and in what context (e.g., Miles, et al, 2014). Silverman (1993) argued that such use of counting helps reduce the likelihood of what he calls 'anecdotalism' or what Barbour (2012) calls 'cherry-picking'.

Research method: Semi-structured interviews

The research interview has historically been viewed as a straightforward method of data collection and made the most sense for this study. While interviews have long been valued for qualitative research (Barbour, 2008; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Gubrium, et al, 2012; Magnusson and Marecek, 2015; Seidman, 2013), a primary reason that I chose interviews as a research method was their flexibility and adaptability (Robson, 2011). The qualitative interview provides a distinctive method of exploring the views or experiences of each subject and asking probing questions to further explore insights, attitudes, reactions, ideas and experiences. Over the past decade, various researchers have delved more deeply into the processes and procedures of empirical inquiry, including the interview method (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Chase, 2011; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, 2011; Gubrium, et al, 2012; Seidman, 2013), exploring, for example, the interactional dynamics, influences on candour, situational responsiveness and discursive depth versus shallowness.

I was also interested in the assertion that there is a dualistic dynamic in effective interviews Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) argue that qualitative interviews require that the interviewer and interviewee must each wholeheartedly participate in the revelations and meaning-making elicited in the interview itself, in an interaction that is more collegial than one-sided or hierarchical. While the need to establish rapport must be balanced against the risk of creating bias, both Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) and Hennink, et al (2011) assert that, despite the fact that the primary aim of the researcher is to draw forth the interviewee's views, questions and experiences, a meaningful, rich and valid interview should feel to the interviewee more like a conversation than an inquiry.

I considered many variations in interviewing techniques. Anticipating that with this set of subjects I would need to make the greatest use of limited interview time, I selected a semi-structured interview format that allowed flexibility in the interview itself aligned with the aim of eliciting the most useful information and insight (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Seidman, 2013).

Semi-structured interviewing has been extensively analysed as a method or technique of collecting rich data as long as there is a commitment by the researcher to observation and honesty as to their positionality, biases, assumptions and purposes, along with a dedication to seek what is true in each individual's perspective, reflections and experiences. I discuss these limitations and positionality concerns in an upcoming section of this chapter.

The semi-structured interview approach can be deepened with a method referred to as in-depth interviewing (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti and McKinney, 2012; Seidman, 2013) which seeks to purposefully elicit substantive insights that are richer and deeper than those typically obtained in surveys, informal interviewing, or traditional focus groups. In-depth interviewing is focused on eliciting the most genuine personal reflections, insights, attitudes, perspectives, questions, experiences,

observations, challenges and opportunities, occupational ideology and reality, as well as patterns or tendencies of action and reaction. In this specific study, the semi-structured in-depth interviews had the goal of encompassing and honouring the constructive nature of establishing meaning or insight 'through the interaction of the partners in the interview conversation' (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015: 71).

Using semi-structured in-depth interviews assisted my intrinsic drive to absorb and learn from the perspectives, experiences and meanings expressed by senior executives in this study. I believed that this interview method would be undemanding enough in the minds of the senior executives that they would agree to participate and therefore this would open 'settings that would be otherwise closed to us' (Weiss, 1995: 1). In this way, I believe the interviews also served as a means of accessing what Vygotsky (1978) suggested when describing how every word people opt to use in sharing an experience or telling their story can be seen as a point of insight or entrance into their consciousness. In essence, the interview not only produces data but also provides a unique and dynamic opportunity for the respondent to explore ideas and observations stimulated by the research questions.

I noted that, as a study design element, the data collection method influences response rates, resources (time, travel, costs) and data quality). I heard from several doctoral researchers at UCL that, in terms of validity and calibre of response, face-to-face or in-person interviews had long been considered the 'gold standard'. Accordingly, my goal at the outset of the study was, where possible, to conduct interviews this way if they were, in fact, shown in the literature to be a superior way to collect data.

Strengths and limitations of telephone interviews versus face-to-face interviews

As with any type of research, there were strengths and limitations. Some researchers contend that in-person interviews provide richer data than telephone interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Groves, et al, 2009; Singleton and Straits, 2011, although I would argue that this may sometimes or even often be untrue for the subject population in this study. After working with senior executives for several decades, and—as noted with multiple references in Chapter 2, knowing the documented aversion senior executives can have to participating in academic research—my instincts were that some or perhaps many of them might prefer telephone interviews.

Although telephone interviews are used extensively in qualitative studies, there seems to be a long-standing view among researchers that face-to-face interviews are superior. Yet, as Novick (2008: 391) states:

> The absence of visual cues via telephone is thought to result in loss of contextual and nonverbal data and to compromise rapport, probing, and interpretation of responses. Yet, telephones may allow respondents to feel relaxed and able to disclose sensitive information, and evidence is lacking that they produce lower quality data. This apparent bias against telephone interviews contrasts with a growing interest in electronic qualitative interviews.

A recent literature review compared the efficacy of telephone and in-person interviews (Rahman, 2015), indicating that both distance (telephone or video conference) and in-person interviews can be similarly effective overall in gathering valid data. Telephone interviews are reported to display less interviewer bias, cost less, require less time and may therefore record less data (Aday, 1996; Novick, 2008; Siemiatycki, 1979); whereas in-person interviews are harder to schedule and, to maximise data reliability and validity, require exceptional skill on the part of the interviewer. Telephone interviews are said to reduce response bias because the interviewer is not physically present (in-

person interviews can be biased by the interviewer's presence influencing interviewee responses) and this may reduce pressure or stress to the respondent which can lead to more accurate and honest data collection (Musselwhite, et al, 2007). Further, as a point of particular importance to my senior executive sample, telephone interviews reportedly raise interview-completion rates for busy subject populations in that calls can, where necessary, be rescheduled far more easily than in-person interviews (Aneshensel, et al, 1982). Because telephone interviews tend to be briefer and more convenient, a larger sample size may be possible—which helps produce more accurate and meaningful results (Colombotos, 1969). I also intended to use verbatim transcription as a data source and check against misinterpretation.

Ultimately, my decision was to 'test the waters' by inviting each of the potential participants to engage in a 60-minute telephone interview and follow the initial set of telephone interviews with at least a limited number of face-to-face or in-person interviews.

An initial invitation to participate in the study was sent by email to more than two hundred individual senior executives who had been recommended by their peers to the researcher, and whose email addresses had been provided by those recommending them. In part, the invitation email read as follows:

> I am conducting a doctoral study under the auspices of University College London's Institute of Education. I am reaching out to senior executives who have been recommended to me by their peers as both respected and high-performing. My request is that we schedule a 60-minute confidential telephone interview—which will be recorded for transcription purposes. The interview will be relaxed, positive and focused on two questions:
>
> As a senior executive:
>
> - How do you learn?
> - How do you apply this learning?

Each executive and organisation will remain anonymous in the study results.

Not one invited subject accepted this request. While many of the senior executives that I had interacted with over the years in work-related settings had seemed to perceive learning as a valuable topic, in this case not one senior executive was willing to commit to participate. After following up with several of the executives I knew, or who responded to decline my invitation, I learned that the request for an hour of time simply felt too burdensome or not enough of a priority, particularly for research that they understood to be 'academic' rather than pragmatically useful. I re-read research contending that executives often perceive their time to be an extremely limited and valuable resource (e.g., Bruch and Ghosal, 2002; Pfeffer and Sutton, 1999) and they may see little tangible value in using that time to participate in academic research (Panda and Gupta, 2014; Rudolph and Peluchette, 1992).

Accordingly, I modified my invitation, reducing the requested interview time from 60 minutes to 15 minutes (only longer if the senior executive requested it). While facing the challenges of getting busy senior leaders to agree to a brief telephone interview, I continued to feel that this study could provide valuable insight, no matter how brief the interviews. I sent the modified invitation to another 50 senior executives—about half of whom had been sent the original invitation email request. My request for an interview was granted and scheduled with 24 of these senior executives.

The context of the interviews that were the basis for these numerical rankings must be remembered. The senior executives in this study were asked for 15 minutes of their time. Even though the average duration of each telephone interview turned out to be closer to 30 minutes, neither the interviewees nor I could know at the beginning of the interview that we would be engaged for more than 15 minutes. Thus, it is reasonable to think that the interviewees discussed what was most salient to them and did not attempt to address all of

the ways that they learned. That salience could have been related to many things: for example, how they were learning or had learned in relationship to a particular issue of significant concern to them; or how they saw themselves at their best as learners. As the interviewer in these brief interactions, I was listening to their stories, not interrupting with checklists or alternatives to consider. In that circumstance, I feel confident that items with high numbers of responses might be fairly reflective of ways that many senior executives learn or apply learning because of their salience to this cross-section of senior executives, but the items with low numbers of responses cannot be assumed not to also be ways that they would have said they learned or applied learning had they been given more time, or if a checklist or survey had been administered. A more expansive study might discover that some or all of the lower-n items are significant—though perhaps secondary—sources of learning by senior executives. These items are not excluded by these results either as ways that executives in general learn, or as ways that these executives learn— they just were not top-of-mind ways of learning for this group.

Building on the research questions

Early in each interview, I again framed the research questions as 'As a senior executive, how do you learn—and how do you apply that learning?', usually in those words but always in words to that effect.

Every structural aspect of the process was framed by those two questions, which I presented to the interviewees in my initial request for an interview, listed in the scheduling email that followed their assent to being interviewed, and stated at the beginning of each interview. After having stated the two questions, I inquired directly about the first of them. Aside from the usual pleasantries, there was no 'warm-up' before I directly asked the first question.

It should be noted that, as I have mentioned, this was real-world research in which I was trying to get busy executives with demanding schedules to agree to talk to me, and then to fully focus during the interview itself. While I developed a lengthy list of secondary questions in case any of the senior executives needed extensive prompting, it turned out that was not the case and having just two questions indicated to them that the interview could be handled relatively briefly, within the 15-minutes I had requested for the interview; I believe this was strategically valuable in obtaining the interviews. Beginning directly with the first question demonstrated to them my intention to use the time efficiently; I believe that prompted them to give their full attention, confident that I was not going to meander.

Beyond the two questions, I did not have pre-established prompts or directions for inquiry. I asked questions for clarification, and, also for the sake of clarity, I sometimes paraphrased what I thought I had heard and asked for the interviewee's confirmation (or non-confirmation) of the correctness of my paraphrase. I often engaged in what seemed like protracted silences to make it clear that I was there to listen, not to over-direct the interaction. I was conscious that lengthy interjections by me would be misusing the interviewee's time.

As I conducted more interviews and themes appeared to be emerging (or to be surprisingly absent), it was tempting to try to obtain subsequent interviewees' perspectives on those themes, to reinforce or contradict my perceptions. However, I strongly resisted that temptation, committing myself to allowing the interviewees to use the limited time to provide their own accounts and leave it for me to sort it out later.

At a point in the interviews when time was running down, I was usually required to directly turn the interviewee's attention to the second question, even though the first question might not have been fully exhausted. It is

noteworthy, I think, that all of the interviews ran past the 15-minute allotment, fully at the volition of the individual senior executives.

Selection of participants

This was, of necessity, a purposive sample. Even though each of the interviewees was identified by peers as a 'respected and high-performing' executive, I was not able to independently verify that characterisation and so I do not contend that my findings apply to high-performing senior executives any more than they would to less successful senior executives. The sample included 11 women and 13 men. There were eight each in educational institutions, publicly-traded profit-seeking companies and privately-held profit-seeking enterprises. Their titles are listed in Table 3.1.

Eight senior executives of educational institutions	Eight senior executives of publicly-traded for-profit companies	Eight senior executives of privately-held for-profit companies
•One university president •Two college preidents •One high school principal •Two elmentary school principals •One managing director of research and assessment at a private college •One managing director of admissions at a large public university	•Three chief executive officers •Four presidents •One executive vice president	•Two board chairs •Two chief executive officers •One chief financial officer •One chief investment and strategy officer •Two managing partners

Table 3.1 Senior executives grouped by category and title

I would have loved to have interviewed a far larger number of senior executives, but the significant time required to find willing participants made that

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impossible and, quite frankly, I was relieved to be able to secure commitments from these 24 senior executives.

Positionality of the researcher and limitations to the study

All researchers and modes of research are faced with a litany of limitations, and this study was no exception. I accepted that I could not be fully objective in this research, yet I could commit to remaining exceptionally attentive through the research design, the conducting of the interviews and the interpretive work, to monitor and reflect on my thinking, instincts and assumptions. Knowing that my biases would influence every aspect of the study, I also kept analytic notes on my approaches, senses, coding choices and interpretative instincts when pondering and analysing the data.

The value of interview research has been both confirmed and criticised. The usual list of limitations includes difficulties in comparing, condensing and interpreting interview data because of researcher positionality or bias and questions as to the reliability of interviewees' accounts.

Regarding the present study, there were both challenges and opportunities for me in staying aware of and monitoring, certain aspects of my attitude and identity—including how I attempted to manage assumptions that may have arisen in this study from my gender, nationality, professional background experiences, researcher bias, positionality, subjectivities and reactivity (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007; Gubrium, et al, 2012; Marshall and Rossman, 2011; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 1990, 201, 2012, 2015; Seidman, 2013). My gender (male) and experience (including over two decades working with senior executives and positional leaders) may have influenced my selection of subjects as well as the directions I pursued during the interviews themselves and my interpretations of the participants' comments, feelings, emphases and, in turn, the data collection and analysis.

Throughout the study, I committed to weekly, and sometimes daily, reflection times. Having worked in a range of organisational settings across educational institutions, publicly traded for-profit companies and privately-held enterprises, I knew that while these experiences had expanded my viewpoints and perspectives, they had almost certainly created unseen biases that influenced this study. For example, my work with small to medium size enterprises made me appreciate leaders who had developed the skill to learn 'at pace' in ways that were agile and anticipatory, rather than slow and reactive, aimed at winning rapidly emerging opportunities and avoiding being left behind. I immediately noticed what felt like a significantly slower and more methodical pace to the learning pattern as described by several of the senior executives in this study who have more than 50,000 managers, professionals and employees reporting to them—and I had to remind myself not to assume this slower pace was necessarily less effective in learning.

One obvious limitation to this study was sample size. With only 24 subjects, my hope was to engage as deeply as possible in limited interview time to gain insight into how these senior executives learn and apply learning. I considered alternative methodologies such as surveys and case studies or extended observation 'in action'. While these proved unfeasible, it also helped me realise that my choice of interview research limited the depth, range and type of insight that this study and its corresponding data analysis and interpretations could develop. While 24 subjects might in some studies seem to be a small sample size, in this study of senior executives it was deemed both an acceptable and sufficient size, in part because of the array of challenges of securing senior executive participants in an academic study.

One content-related assumption I tried to keep in mind was my experience-based belief that the best senior executives—the ones who thrive in their roles and life with respect to high achievement, on and off the job, and in leading their organisations to the top of their fields or industries—continually learn.

Since few empirical studies have been conducted in this context to either support or deter me from that perspective, and knowing that I would be integrally engaged in the interviews , I committed to do my best to make the senior executive participants feel at ease so they would forthrightly share their perspectives, ideas, reflections and experiences, I prepared for each interview with a commitment remain mindful of the reactivity that could be prompted from my questions or comments or simply from my presence; to note if and when this occurred; and to gauge, if I could, how this might have altered the subject's focus or revelations (Patton, 2015; Weiss, 1995).

In advance of each of the interviews and corresponding data collection, I committed to monitor my researcher relationship with each senior executive. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) and Maxwell (2013) contend this is a vital concern in interview research. As a result, I reviewed several studies on navigating potential clarity risks in the dynamic between the interviewer and interviewee (Gubrium, et al, 2012; Luttrell, 2010).

Several sources (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Oppenheim, 1992; Seidman, 2013) report that to elicit rich and useful data from an interview, the researcher must establish a trusting relationship with the interviewee and that requires both commitment and skill to have subjects not only agree to be interviewed but then to converse honestly and openly about the research questions. During the interviews, I worked to build both rapport and trust with the interviewee in the spirit of what Maxwell (2013: 92) described as the 'continual creation and renegotiating of trust, intimacy and reciprocity' with each unique interviewee. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) note that the value and validity of an interview largely depend on whether a genuinely trusting working relationship has been rapidly and effectively built between the researcher and participant—without this, the interview is likely to yield little useful data (Seidman, 2013). I committed to pay special attention to this during the study.

Recent literature on interview research has cast light on the interview not merely as a fact-finding approach but instead as a social dynamic encompassing both the researcher and respondent, at times collegially, construct or influence meanings (Chase, 2005; Clandinin and Connelly, 2004; Dingwall, 1997; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Mishler, 1986; Rapley, 2004; Silverman, 1993). Another issue is what Foley (2012: 314) describes as 'constructing the respondents', whereby the researcher must purposefully attempt to draw forth honest insight and perspective from each interviewee.

Correspondingly, researcher bias describes the extensive array of ways that researchers unconsciously and inadvertently tend to influence the study design, interview setting and the individual interviews. This is also known as reactivity. In each of the interviews I asked the participants to choose times and settings that worked best for them and I attempted to monitor and minimise leading questions.

Rigidity about time is another limitation concern for this study in that busy researchers can inadvertently impose scheduling inflexibility on subjects. I stayed as adaptable as I could in both scheduling and adjusting the pre-scheduled interview times to meet the changing schedules of the subjects. I also committed to frequently pausing to reset my bearings and to reflect on what I had observed, learned and noted. I recalled the admonishment from Maxwell (2013: 94) that an interview is not over until the interviewer has reflected and 'a thank-you note [has been] delivered'.

I made a working list of my researcher positionality and biases and committed to be transparent with interviewees about my experiences and viewpoints as I called upon these as points of my perspective in asking questions or seeking clarity (Brinkman and Kvale, 2015; Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). Prior to the study design and execution, I committed to examining and reflecting on my values, experiences, perspectives, assumptions, identity and expectations (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Maxwell, 1996, 2013).

In a manner that paralleled my attention to reflexivity (discussed in Chapters 6 and 7) to deal with potential reactivity I asked the participants to choose settings that were familiar to them and I monitored and attempted to minimise leading questions (Maxwell, 2013; Seidman, 2013). I noted that relationally oriented interview researchers must assume (Josselson, 1996 and 2013) that each study encompasses the totality of perspectives, experiences and developed meanings brought to the interviews themselves as well as the data analysis that follows. McCracken (1988: 25) noted another factor: 'Who does the respondent think the interviewer is?' I worked hard to minimise the influence of interviewees' conscious and subconscious assumptions and judgments about me, in ways I have previously described.

Strengths and weaknesses of the research design

I devoted considerable time to exploring the overall strengths and weaknesses of the research design and the corresponding implications for the depth and quality of the data collected from this research. To summarise the strengths: I concluded that semi-structured telephone interviews, no matter how brief, had the greatest chance to make the study feasible with its target subjects, senior executives. Other research methods were off-putting to busy subjects who are known to avoid participating in, or valuing, academic research, as confirmed by the universal refusal of my initial emailed request.

As noted previously, interview research has documented limitations. These include the positionality, biases, trustworthiness and influence of the researcher who must, of necessity, be actively engaged in the interviews and in interpreting the data. Studies indicate that telephone interviews can often be as effective as face-to-face interviews (Novick, 2008) and can help put the subjects more at ease and thereby enable them to be more forthcoming, and this method seemed like the most viable one for the subject population of senior

executives. Another obvious limitation was the brevity of the interviews: averaging just over 30 minutes. Conversely, because of the richness of the primary data gathered across the 24 senior executives despite that limited timeframe, as a starting point study on a topic that matters and has yet to be researched, the limited time was acknowledged and accepted as being necessary.

Another set of these limitations arose from relatively scarce resources of my own time and money. With more of both, I might have been able to extend this study to a significantly larger group of senior executives and then facilitate focus groups and/or create some variation of participatory action research. During the doctoral study and exploration of options for research, I initially developed a mixed methods study design that incorporated a standardised survey instrument with the goal of a sample of several thousand executives. That design proved unwieldy and infeasible within the scope and resources for this study.

Based on the limitations of this study method, what are the corresponding implications for the depth and quality of the data collected from this research? At a minimum, the depth and quality of the data must certainly be questioned. As with any study, no matter how carefully designed, the findings are subject to perspective, and at the least would require subsequent studies to substantiate or refute the findings. I realised that my own reflexivity was of concern, and so I consciously and repeatedly committed to do my best to maintain a meta-cognitive awareness of my influence in each interview, taking careful notes throughout. I also paid particular attention to what I felt was the depth and genuineness of the perspectives and lived experienced shared by each senior executive. At no point in any of the interviews did I feel that the senior executive was simply 'going through the motions' or giving prepared conventional answers.

On a final note regarding limitations, I agree with Miles, et al (2014) that social and empirical discoveries are 'messy' and complex and that the hoped-for outcome of an interview study is to find some semblance of clarity leading to insight amidst this complexity. While 'messiness' is surely rife with inherent limitations, qualitative interview research also requires a depth of humanity that enables the interviewees to most candidly express their experiences, ideas and insights. While there are those who have railed for rigid, almost robotic impersonalisation in interview research (e.g., Bradburn and Sudman, 1979;), I believe that, especially for this subject population of senior executives, a more conversational approach to interviewing can engage greater candour and clarity in responses (e.g., Schober and Conrad, 1997).

A number of researchers assert that there is no one best approach or method to create meaningful interview research (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Gubrium, et al, 2012; Magnusson and Marecek, 2015; Maxwell, 2013), but rather that there are many possibilities depending on the views the interviewer and the interviewee bring to the study in attempting to create, decipher or convey meaning, versus the interviewee being viewed as a passive respondent to the interviewer's attempted orderliness and control. As imperfect and challenging as it may be, I wholeheartedly engaged in bringing this study to life.

In summary, I worked to design the interviews so that I could engage with each senior executive as individually, transparently and attentively as possible. In preparing for and engaging in each interview, I made particular note of my positionality. I also committed to frequently reflecting on what I was noticing or observing, and also learning, not only about each senior executive but also about myself and my limitations or biases.

Data collection

The 24 participants in the present study were sent the two research questions via email ahead of the interview, along with assurance of anonymity and confidentiality. The average length of the initial telephone interviews was 32 minutes. The briefest initial interview was 21 minutes; the longest was 64 minutes. Data consisted of verbatim transcriptions and my notes from each interview.

I experienced no resistance to the announcement and confirmation at the beginning of each interview that the interview was being recorded to be transcribed. However, I sensed that if these interviews were in a face-to-face setting with a recording device on the conference table or desk, it might have felt much like a media interview—and I realised from my work experience with a number of other senior executives that many of them had become resistant to that interview format or have unpleasant associations with it (Talmage; 2012).

Approximately six months following the initial interviews, I received agreement from three of the senior executives to schedule a follow-up interview. I was also curious about whatever data I might be able to record if these were in-person interviews, and that is what I requested. Recalling the initial universal refusal of my request for 60-minute telephone interviews, I was pleased that three of the senior executives agreed to these face-to-face follow-up interviews. These in-person interviews averaged 64 minutes each, one with a leader from each of the three subject segments.

The literature suggests that the design of such interviews matters to the data collection and subsequent analysis. I kept the following factors in mind:

First, the choice of location is a rarely discussed aspect of the face-to-face interview process. While it has traditionally been common for the interviewer to dictate the location. Seidman (1991: 53) suggests:

> The place of the interview should be convenient to the participant, private, yet if at all possible, familiar to him or her. It should be one in which the participant feels comfortable and secure. A public place such as a cafeteria or a coffee shop may seem convenient, but the noise, the lack of privacy and the likelihood of the interview's becoming an event for others to comment upon undermine the effectiveness of such places for interviews.

Gillham (2000: 8) echoes this view, stating that if challenges arise with distractions, interruptions or background noise, the interviewer will 'have to adapt'. Accordingly, I opted to schedule these interviews at the interviewee's preferred location. This resulted in one interview being conducted in a hotel meeting room near that senior executive's company headquarters and the other two taking place in the senior executives' offices.

One commonly noted experience by researchers in interview studies using either telephone or face-to-face interviews (e.g., Novick, 2008) is that despite their efforts to thoughtfully craft the research questions, interviewees often spontaneously respond with diverging and sometimes surprising stories and statements that may seem, at first, to have little to do with the question (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Mishler, 1986; Riessman, 2012).

I was also mindful of how the literature has dissected the biases associated with how the interviewee views the interviewer. The literature notes another contextual factor that can affect the interview. McCracken (1988) poses the question, 'Who does the respondent think the interviewer is?' (p. 25). He argues that respondents make conscious or subconscious assumptions and judgments about the researcher's demeanour, presence, appearance, speech, competence and institutional affiliation, as well as about the research questions and the study itself. This is linked to concerns about relational reflexivity where it has been suggested that interview researchers must assume that both the interviewer and interviewee are both generating, influencing and interpreting data.

Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are associated with data accuracy and consistency and have been reviewed and discussed extensively in the literature (e.g. Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Bryman, 2008; Bush, 2007; Cohen et al., 2001; Flick, 2014; Gray, 2005; Gubrium, et al, 2012; Kirk and Miller, 1985; Magnusson and Marecek, 2015; Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2013).

Validity

Qualitative researchers have employed various methods to assure and assess validity resulting in validity. Two aspects of validity are often discussed: internal validity which is characterised by findings that are not a relic or refection purely of the study design; and external validity, which reflects the degree to which any results can be generalised to a larger setting, circumstance or population.

Regarding external validity, I have made it clear that I do not know how generalisable the findings in this thesis will turn out to be. The interviewees were all representatives of a broadly consistent group (higher-level executives with at least five years of executive-level experience); although most of them were U.S.-based executives, they were geographically dispersed so there is no likely local or regional bias; and they were identified to me as being learning-oriented, although I cannot independently verify that they all in fact possess that characteristic. I asked each of them the same core questions and steered them at times to remain within the boundaries of the study's subject areas (how they learn and how they apply learning), but I also allowed them to follow their own narratives within those subject areas.

Interview-based qualitative methodologies, such as the one employed in this study, generally aim to create descriptive outcomes, not concrete measurements of specific phenomena. Interview-based methodologies have been closely examined for their ability to achieve internal validity. Key determinants include whether an interviewee's responses are honest reflections of an objective reality, and whether they are altered by the interview process. The interview itself has been viewed by some as an opportunity for the interviewee to construct a narrative that satisfies either the interviewee or/and the researcher, but that is not necessarily a validly accurate description (Brinkman and Kvale, 2015). Elliott (2005: 13) writes:

> [T]he researcher must still confront the question of whether the accounts produced in a qualitative interview study are 'accurate' or 'valid' representations of reality….[I]n order to decide whether an interviewee is telling us 'the truth' we need to consider what questions or topic are being addressed in the research and what type of truths or insights we are hoping to gain from an interview.

It is also important to note that issues of validity are not only tactical in interview research but are also epistemological with concern to the objectivity of knowledge. Objectivity can be seen as freedom from bias in helping to produce reliable or trustworthy knowledge and is often equated with a researcher who produces well-designed, solid research that is carefully analysed.

One other dimension of validity worth noting here is the issue of trustworthiness. In this case, it is a twofold concern: it involves the trustworthiness of the senior executive subjects themselves and the trustworthiness of the researcher, considering that issues might arise from his personal career, background, connections and interests. In dealing with the former, I required that each of the senior executives selected for this study were nominated by peers as being well-respected and high-performing. Yet I had no way to independently verify this. To reduce the chances for perception of bias or untrustworthiness on my part, I ensured that none of the subjects had been

personal coaching clients of mine and that, should any of them request it later on, such coaching from me was not an option. In each interview I also did my best to convey that while I had past experience in working with senior executives, my role in this study was as a researcher who was keenly interested in whatever lived experiences, questions, and perspectives the senior executives in this study were willing to share regarding how they learned and applied learning.

As noted elsewhere in this chapter, I proceeded with the understanding that, as Brinkman and Kvale (2015:285) state, validation is not 'a final verification or product control' yet may best be seen as being 'built into the entire research process with continual checks on the credibility, plausibility and trustworthiness of the findings'. As Gilbert (2002) has asserted, '[T]ransparency' replaces "validity" as the key concept in ensuring trustworthiness'. Miles and Huberman (1994) stated that researchers must remain mindful of the array of potential biases that can undermine qualitative observations and interpretations. Their list of tactics to test and confirm qualitative findings helped inform my own list: noting my own limitations as well as researcher bias and effects; checking and rechecking for representativeness in findings; weighing the evidence; noting and investigating outliers and single-case narratives; seeking and following up on surprises, including staying observant during data analysis as to my *a priori* codes that proved insignificant and the empirical codes from the data that shed new light on the findings; looking for negative evidence; and being watchful for any point where I sensed a senior executive was talking about learning but did not seem genuinely engaged with the description or discussion.

Reliability

Because qualitative research often has different aims than quantitative research—to describe and characterise rather than to precisely measure—the

issue of reliability for qualitative research has been dismissed by a number of scholars including Golafshani (2003: 601) who contends that the very concept of reliability may be irrelevant in qualitative research. Holstein and Gubrium (1995: 9) add, 'One cannot expect answers on one occasion to replicate those on another because they emerge from different circumstances of production'. Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Patton (2001) caution that, in qualitative research, a study's reliability is a function of its validity and not something that can or should be independently judged. Gubrium, et al (2012: 21) state that '...less rigidly structured [interview] methods may score higher on validity, though this has to be traded off against the greater reliability of the more structured methods'.

Whereas a rigidly structured interview approach might be presumed to reflect a higher level of reliability, it would also likely miss the fresh and spontaneous insights that I hoped to gather and also would likely to be resisted by senior executives used to engaging in or leading conversations, not answering questions. I believe, along with the authors cited above, that the reliability of this study can be viewed through the approaches I took to insure its validity.

Ethical considerations

Ethical practices are both essential and central to education and social science research. This study has been designed and conducted in accordance with 'Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, 4th Edition' published by the British Educational Research Association (BERA (2018). An ethics application form was submitted to the Ethics committee of the UCL Institute of Education (IOE) and approved in June 2017. Subsequently, all responsibilities to respondents have been observed, by ensuring voluntary informed consent, securing anonymity and considering the possible consequences of the study for the subjects (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Gubrium, et al, 2012).

In selecting the interviewees, I took care not to include any senior executive that I had personally coached. Of the 24, I had personally met only eight of them and worked personally with none of them. Our acquaintance was the result of a brief conversation or in meeting at a conference. The foundation of my credibility—in particular for the other 16 senior executives—was established by how I was introduced to them regarding the opportunity to participate in this study. Those introductions were made by trusted colleagues or other senior executives that they knew and respected.

Consent was sought in the acceptance emails that I sent to those subjects who elected to participate. The consent explained the purpose of the research, why participation was helpful, how confidentiality and anonymity would be protected, how data would be collected and used, to whom and in what format findings would be reported, and the right to withdraw. Upon verbal agreement to participate in the study, each of the interviewees was sent a brief overview of the study and consent form.

At the start of each interview, opportunity was given to discuss the study's aims and confirm consent to participate. Confidentiality and anonymity issues were stated and agreed with all participants. The aims and structure of the interviews in this study meet both University College London Institute of Education and BERA (2018) guidelines. In both planning and conducting the interviews, I was particularly attentive to Kvale's description (1996) of the dynamic friction between the researcher's goal of having an interview be deep and probing and the risk of pressuring or intruding on the subject as a person.

Throughout each of the interviews, I was cautious not to press questioning if I sensed that the respondent was uncomfortable. Pauses were included wherever I felt they might be valuable to give respondents time to gather their thoughts. Further, I adopted several ways to help assure confidentiality of the research. One of the ways I committed to helping to protect individual subjects' privacy was by ensuring that no subject or organisational names were made publicly

available and by confirming to each of the subjects that the researcher is, and would be, responsible for data security.

As per UCL guidelines, 'all personal data was stored and processed in compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA 1998)'. Protection of data records (e.g., the interview transcriptions and interviewer notes) was accomplished via storage in electronic files on a secure DropBox account on a private server and by ensuring that all hard copies were securely stored in a locked file by the researcher inside a locked file room. Following publication of the study, the primary data will be securely and permanently deleted by the researcher.

To prevent disclosure of identifies and help assure confidentiality and anonymity, alphabetical codes and categories were utilised in the data analysis for subjects to help protect their individual as well as their organisational identities. Quotations were scrutinised to mask the interviewee's identity. Condensing and summarising the research data was also conducted within an ethical framework, respecting subjects' privacy. In addition, the ethical issues encompassed the descriptive language used in the data analysis and interpretation, which was purposely designed to protect the subjects from harm and be sensitive to potential bias due to gender, ethnicity, or age.

Reflection

Through this doctoral research project, my extensive study of, and reflections on, philosophical and methodological issues truly stretched my mind and senses. In an ideal world, I would have discovered and sorted significant prior research, along with well-developed theories and models that I could build upon. And the subject population would have had a pervasive positive view of, and excitement to participate in, in-depth, structured academic research. But

such was not the case. I found myself struggling with the real-world obstacles in this study and its target subject group. It challenged me to focus on 'building a small bridge' for a resistant subject group to take at least a first brief foray into academic research on a topic where even the most basic of findings might prove valuable, at least as a point or reference and embarkation for future studies. As humble and limited as a small-scale interview study may be, I felt it was the best option for the goals of this research. I found myself testing various research paradigms and philosophical or methodological frameworks 'for size', knowing there are many options and avenues, but all are not equally viable for a specific topic, subject group and research questions.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the literature review and development of the conceptual framework also intensely tested me. At times it felt like I had to fight to establish and keep my bearings in most thoughtfully considering and then designing this original research with a seldom-studied group of subjects and with two simple yet previously-unasked research questions. I spent extra time and effort in creating what safeguards I could in selecting trustworthy senior executive subjects, monitoring to the best of my ability that I felt each interview was genuine and honest, and being certain to interact with each senior executive in the most trustworthy ways I could as an academic researcher who also had a background as a practitioner. I also had to remain highly adaptive through the design and implementation of the study. My initial request for a one-hour interview met with no takers; my modified ask for 15-minutes (more only with the permission of the senior executive being interviewed) enabled the study to move forward. When I asked for a one-hour follow-up face-to-face interview at least six months after the initial telephone interview, three of the senior executives agreed, and that small group added extra depth and richness to the findings.

Summary

This chapter highlighted the philosophical, epistemological and methodological emphases that informed the design and method of the study and discussed factors that influenced my approach to the research. It provided a methodological overview that incorporated the goals, research design and assumptions of the study and how my application of this viewpoint and approach was influenced by my own positionality and limitations. This was followed by selection criteria and approach to data sources, collection and management. I concluded the chapter by discussing issues of reliability, validity and ethical considerations.

The next chapter explores my approach to data analysis.

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Chapter 4

Approach to Data Analysis

This chapter explains the data analysis approach I selected and executed with the goal of assembling, combining, categorising and interpreting the data collected in this study. The chapter begins with an overview of my analytic approach, which is followed a recap of the study sample demographics and plan for verbatim transcriptions of the interviews. Next, I review the element of counting as a valuable, if sometimes minor, factor in qualitative analysis. I then move to a description of the sequenced, multi-layered approach I chose for analysis, followed by an overview of the relevance of writing as part of that analysis. I then set forth the rationale for why, as the analysis proceeded, I decided against using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis. Finally, I demonstrate specifically how my data codes evolved through my analytical process, and I conclude with a list of the codes that I concluded were significant for final categorisation and discussion.

Planned approach to data analysis

The analysis of qualitative data has been described as a curiously complex, effort-laden creative process (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). My experience puts me in agreement with that view. My data analysis in this study could be characterised as a year of ongoing excitement and curiosity joined with periods of constructive anguish as well as several bouts of analytical tedium. I worked through several dozen-rounds of coding, thematic analysis, reflection, re-analysis and re-coding, categorisation and then striving to organise and condense meaning into a manageable form that highlighted the key findings.

Maintaining a constructivist-developmental mindset and an interpretive paradigm, my ontology centred on how I monitored and applied my reflections to construct my understanding. When organising and interpreting qualitative data, my constructivist-developmental approach required a near-continual state of curiosity, questioning, and even soul-searching, which are among the core tenets of reflexivity (Flick, 2014; Gubrium, et al, 2012; Patton, 2015; Peshkin, 1988). My commitment to reflect regularly while analysing data seemed to fit the description of an ongoing 'reflective audit' (Peshkin, 1988). By applying reflexivity throughout the data analysis process, I came to appreciate the observation by Drake (2010: 88) that analysing data is 'not a matter of looking harder or more closely but of seeing what frames our seeing'.

Qualitative research and associated data analysis have long been referred to as a 'craft', albeit a 'complex craft' (Gubrium, et al, 2012). One of the research experiences I have found myself valuing the most is in how qualitative data can provide an otherwise unavailable lens on people's perspectives, ideas and experiences and such rich, seldom-revealed data can serve as a means of discovering the meanings people place on their own experiences and the events of their lives and work, and how they relate those to their goals and expectations, as well as to the social world around them. One challenge I faced throughout the analysis was a lot of self-imposed pressure to discern and convey accurate and cogent descriptions of the data that still revealed principal unknowns, gaps, single cases and contradictions inherent in the life of human subjects. That sensitivity to nuance is particularly important in this context because, as discussed in Chapter 2, each individual's perception of learning experiences—or even what constitutes learning—is profoundly influenced by their distinct and varied life experiences, cultural backgrounds, neural biases and expectations, to name but a few factors.

Many qualitative analyses, including those of interview studies, require that the researcher accept himself as an active factor in the study. I felt honoured to

have been part of each interview as I re-listened to the audio recordings of the interviews and pored over the transcripts and my notes, word by word and pause by pause, in an attempt to enter what researchers have referred to as the world of unique perspectives, experiences and stories of each subject (Brinkmann and Vale, 2015; Gubrium, et al, 2012; Miles, et al, 2014; Patton, 2015). Much of my analysis was done traditionally with pen and paper and centred on spoken and written words linked to emphasis points, hesitations and thoughtful spaces of silence—both literally as well as in the meaning or emphasis placed upon them. I worked to re-set my mind to remain open and curious mind each time I heard, read or reflected on the individual or shared experiences of the senior executives. I worked to compare and contrast them yet allow them to stand apart at the same time as I sought to sense, assemble, reflect on and then distil patterns of knowledge or insight from them.

Throughout the study I remained aware of how, in contrast to traditional quantitative research, qualitative methods can provide the researcher with potentially richer and more nuanced opportunities for analysis and interpretation. As Ragin explains (1994:92):

> Most quantitative data techniques are data condensers. They condense data in order to see the big picture…. Qualitative methods, by contrast, are best understood as data enhancers. When data are enhanced, it is possible to see key aspects of cases more clearly.

Yet I also knew, as noted in Chapter 3, that there could be value in counting in qualitative research—and this study incorporated that.

Study sample demographics

To reiterate: there were 24 participants in this study; 13 were male and 11 were female. All had served in a senior executive role for at least five years. Eight of the subjects were senior executives of educational institutions (where, as noted previously, three private college and university presidents had at least

a partial focus on profit generation on behalf of their schools). Eight of the subjects were senior executives in publicly-traded for-profit companies. Eight of the subjects were senior executives in privately-held for-profit enterprises. Their specific titles or roles are identified below in Table 4.1.

Eight senior executives of educational institutions	Eight senior executives of publicly-traded for-profit companies	Eight senior executives of privately-held for-profit companies
•One university president •Two college preidents •One high school principal •Two elmentary school principals •One managing director of research and assessment at a private college •One managing director of admissions at a large public university	•Three chief executive officers •Four presidents •One executive vice president	•Two board chairs •Two chief executive officers •One chief financial officer •One chief investment and strategy officer •Two managing partners

Table 4.1 Senior executives grouped by category and title

Verbatim transcription of the interviews

As I prepared for the recorded interviews, I was mindful of both the security and confidentiality of the recording process and the verbatim transcriptions of the transcripts. Mishler (1991) contends that there is no single ideal means of transcription of an interview. Ball (2000: 19) notes that a principal challenge in transforming raw interview data into meaningful findings is achieving the 'very fine balance … between abstract conceptualisation and the retention of "authentic" meaning'. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015: 213) suggest asking, 'What is a useful transcription for my research purposes?' They add that verbatim descriptions are essential for linguistic analyses because they can accurately

discern pauses, repetitions and tone of voice, each of which can be relevant for nuanced interpretations of the data.

To strengthen the opportunity to discover useful findings in this study, I wrote narrative summaries of each interview (see Chapter 5 for highlights); I recorded each interview and had a verbatim transcription produced by TranscribeMe (a recommended resource for PhD theses used by graduates of UCL and a number of other universities). I then read each transcribed interview while listening to the audio recording, adding my own notes as to gaps, pauses and emphases by the interviewee. This helped me establish a degree of descriptive validity (Flick, 2014; Gubrium, et al, 2012; Maxwell, 2013). In addition, I noted that Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), Bryman and Bell (2003), Gubrium, et al (2012), and Seidman (2103) suggest that transcription helps the researcher impose a degree of coherence on large quantities, and potentially disparate varieties, of data. In this study, I also employed verbatim transcription to enable me to get closer to the depth and nuances of the data and as an aid in reducing possible researcher bias during analysis. I was interested not only in the interviewees' perceptions and experiences; I also wanted a heightened chance to sense more of their reasons, or even their passion, for making those statements.

Before data collection: Establishing *a priori* codes

My approach to making sense of the data began in advance of data collection with the creation of pre-set, predetermined, or *a priori* codes, and then evolved as I conducted the 27 interviews, consulting my own notes as well as the recordings and transcripts of all of the interviews. While there may be 'no absolute hard-and-fast rules' to coding (Faherty, 2010: 59), Chinn and Brewer (2001: 337) suggest that researchers take responsibility for not only their involvement in the research itself but also in advance by developing 'a cognitive

model of the data according to the perspective of the person who is reporting the data'. I adopted this approach in light of the comments by Morse, et al, (2008) that it adds to validity via continual reflection and self-scrutiny (and, in my experience, moments of constructive anguish) during the data analysis and interpretation.

I began by establishing a framework of coding categories and then assigning parts of the material to specific codes within the categories. This method demanded an examination of every word and segment of every transcription that might in any way be relevant to the research questions, and to continually think holistically about the data (Miles, et al, 2014; Rapley, 2011; Saldana 2015). I believe this helped reduce the risk of viewing the data predominantly through the researcher's known or subconscious assumptions and expectations—and requires a committed focus on deciphering meaning that relates to the overall research questions.

A priori codes are often considered vital to a deductive analysis because those codes derive at least in part from the researcher's conceptual framework and research questions, as well as the researcher's previous experiences, perspectives and reading. I drafted a list of *a priori* codes which identified areas of focus where I anticipated I would see comments from the respondents. In contrast, building the descriptive data codes and corresponding categories during the data analysis itself is considered an emergent or inductive approach.

As a result, while this study initially established a loosely deductive framework, the majority of the data analysis took a principally inductive approach for the reasons I discussed in Chapter 3: because I was committed to exploring and examining the data before considering, or in a few cases re-considering, how it related to existing knowledge in the subject area (Flick, 2014; Gubrium, et al, 2012; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Miles et al, 2014; Moses and Knutsen, 2007).

The following (Table 4.2) is the table of the *a priori* codes I created ahead of data collection both to make visible in advance a set of codes that I sensed might be likely to be observed, and to reflect specific elements within potential code categories that I anticipated might appear in the data, based on both the literature review and my past experience working with senior executives. I return to this aspect of the analysis extensively in the Chapter 5.

Table 4.2: *A Priori* **Codes**

Ways of learning
C: Learn by curiosity CA: Challenging assignments CL: Collaborative learning – communities of practice EL: Experiential learning F: Learn from the failures of others FL: Learn through formal learning (in structured courses or programmes) FSP: Find smart people committed to learning—and learn from them GI: General interactions GM: Learn by giving mentoring/coaching H: Hardships INDL: Independent learning IH: Learn by intellectual humility/vulnerability IFL: Informal learning IL: Informational learning L: Learn by listening LPO: Learn from people and resources outside field LT: Pressure from limited time to learn MI: Learn by media, news inside field/industry MO: Learn by media, news outside field/industry NFL: Nonformal learning O: Learn by observation PE: Learn by professional education/training PEO: Personal experiences outside of work PJ: Learn by reading professional journals PT: Learn by pilot-testing, experimenting QO: Learn by questioning others QP: Learn by questioning what is possible QS: Learn by questioning self RAL: Require application of learning by leadership team members RCL: Require continual learning by leadership team members RI: Learn by reading books inside field/industry RM: Learn by receiving mentoring/coaching RO: Learn by reading books outside field/industry RP: Learn by reflection/reflective practice S: Learn by sharing learning SAV: Learn from seeking alternative views

TL: Transformational learning
WN: Learn by writing, notes, drawing, sketching

Factors affecting learning

CLJ: Conception of learning journey
E: Effort
ITL: Incentives to learn
LM: Explicit commitment to daily discipline of learning/be in 'learning mode'
MS: Mindset (e.g., growth vs. fixed)
MTFL: Making time for learning
OFA: Overcome fear/anxiety
OLML: Overcome belief that there is little more that needs to be learned
SDL: Self-direction/overall learning power

Ways of applying learning

AC: Apply learning to anticipate change
BOS: Build on strengths
CCOL: Facilitate learning by others/create 'culture of learning'
CEMM: Create explanatory mental models
CLL: Apply learning through conversations with leaders who are learners
CPM: Construct personal meaning
DE: Detect and correct errors
GM: Apply learning by giving mentoring/coaching
HO: Apply learning to help others
I: Apply learning to be innovative
IOW: Improve on weaknesses
KGB: Apply learning to keep getting better as a leader
NC: Apply learning to navigate change
PT: Apply learning by pilot-testing, experimenting
PTP: 'Polish the past'
QO: Apply learning by questioning others
R: Apply learning to meet job-related learning requirements
RAL: Require application of learning by leadership team members
RCL: Require continual learning by leadership team members
REC: Respond to emerging challenges
RML: Be a role model of learning
SC: To stay current or keep from falling behind
SHL: Apply learning through selective hiring of learners
T: Apply learning by teaching
UFI: Understand future issues

A sequenced and multi-layered approach to data analysis

I opted for a sequenced and multi-layered approach to the qualitative data analysis that felt linear at times, yet it involved several dozen rounds of re-reading transcripts, re-listening to audio recordings, re-examining notes, re-mapping and re-considering the data, followed by deepened analysis as I sought to continually sort and clarify the findings. All of this was essential to the integrity of my chosen constructivist-developmental approach. Through it all, I committed to ongoing reflexivity, which Lynch (2000) has labelled as the quality of being methodologically or process self-conscious and Finlay (2002a:108) has described as 'immediate, continuing, dynamic and subjective self-awareness'. Ahead of my efforts to condense whatever meaning I could find from the data, I spent considerable time pondering the scope and various approaches aimed at 'meaning interpretation' of qualitative data. My commitment in using the interview methodology was to incorporate an array of ways to record and accurately represent and interpret each interviewee's experiences, perceptions, ideas, stories, views and passions.

As noted in Chapter 3, the analysis itself emphasised 'meaning condensation' (Kvale, 1006:2); data reorganisation (Roulston, 2014); and interpretation of that representation of the data and the spectrum of emphases, surprises and nuances that represent it. Interpretation is a central challenge of qualitative research as it attempts to make sense of the data, although at times the task of doing our best to responsibly make sense of the complex data that qualitative researchers collect can seem, at times, to be almost overwhelming one (Patton, 2002: 440).

Discussions of qualitative interview research data findings and their interpretations must also incorporate reflexivity (Finaly and Gough, 2003; Miles, et al, 2014) in part because, as I have also found during this study, reflexive research practice continues throughout every phase of the design, analysis, compilation of findings and conclusions. Further, the ongoing, angst-

laden tasks of writing up findings and selecting what to underscore, excerpt or quote can, as Josselson (2013) and others (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Gubrium, et al, 2012; Miles, et al, 2014; Seidman, 2013) have pointed out, leave a researcher feeling both pressure and trepidation when having to condense or reduce the subject's comments and stories to a sentence or two. Yet, as researchers, when reviewing, pondering and selectively writing about a subject's unique descriptions through their window on life, experiences, and the world, we must try to distil the essence of what we have learned in the most honest and respectful ways.

The analysis and interpretation of this study emphasised inductive reasoning (Flick, et al, 2014; Maxwell; 2013; Miles, et al, 2014). In this study with its relatively small sample of subjects, the research attempted to move from general questions to individual perspectives, reflections, questions, experiences, instances or examples. In contrast to deduction, abductive reasoning presses to reveal, if possible, the discoveries or premises that contribute to explanation and do not guarantee a conclusion (Sober, 2013).

Writing as analysis

The usefulness of interviews is informed by the power of human narratives. I agree with Cherkowski and Walker (2014:202) when they suggest that researchers should 're-story' their findings in the best way they can to 'honour the voices'. Without the story form, argues Lewis (2006:1), 'humans would have endless unconnected, chaotic experiences'. Such a view receives confirmation from neuroscientists who describe the cortex's narrative drive, its intrinsic need to make sense of and weave stories out of our disparate experiences.

This brings me to the notion of writing as analysis. Although Patton (2002: 457) has argued that, in at least some cases, data should be allowed to 'tell

their own story', I am of the belief that the data cannot speak for itself. To a significant extent, writing must attempt to honestly convey the essence of the research findings. I found myself frequently recalling the comment that writing serves as a method of discovery, reflection, interpretation and analysis (Patton, 1990). Confronted with vast data, possibilities, impressions, reflections, documents and field notes, I found myself struggling at times to make sense and some semblance of order as what had been learned. The literature confirms that the writing process, like the research process, is rife with selection and linguistic distillation challenges as well as ethical challenges. There are reports of the constructive anguish that some researchers may feel when trying to reduce or condense respondents' narratives to a few pages of a thesis or academic article.

Considering interview dynamics as well as single-case narratives

The next phases of analysis and interpretation moved to reflection and study of nuances, surprises, and single-case narratives that, while not statistically significant, still stood out to me in specific ways. For example, representativeness, as a validity concern, pertains not simply or primarily to the data itself or the data sources used but also to the interpretations or theories about the setting or participants that are 'constructions' by the researcher drawn from the data (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Flick 2014; Gubrium, et al, 2012; Maxwell, 2011).

In chapters six and seven, I describe several of the surprises and limited-case narratives that I encountered. An example: Based on my literature review and my knowledge of the amount expended by organisations on management and leadership training and development programmes, I was surprised by how seldom the participants described such 'formal' learning occasions or

programmes as valuable sources of learning. In fact, several of them disparaged such programmes as barely being useful at all. I considered whether this lack of endorsement for such programmes might have been an effect of the interview context, in which perhaps some interviewees wanted to present themselves as being more independent or self-directed in their learning. Recognising, however, that many of the senior executives who were interviewed readily acknowledged how often they learned from information provided by others and from other sources outside themselves, I concluded that the general lack of enthusiasm for formal training programmes was a legitimate expression of the interviewees' judgments.

In the analysis of data derived within a constructivist-developmental approach, a valuable and often overlooked strategy is paying attention not only to frequency of responses but also to the diversity of views, behaviours, or contexts represented in the data, deliberately searching for variability and for data that do not fit prior expectations (Maxwell, 2011; 2012). I reflected on how the interview itself can be viewed as a dynamic social situation, a dialogic mashup or merger of sorts of individualised perspectives, experiences, reactions and tendencies in the relationships between the researcher and the interviewee within the changing dynamic of the day, time, energy, and focus states of the individuals, and the interview environment, research questions and catalytic influence (conscious and subconscious) of the researcher in verbal and nonverbal ways. Understanding, or attempting to understand, this complex interview dynamic and how it affects the interview is crucial to analysis and subsequent attempts at interpretation (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Flick 2014; Gubrium, et al, 2012; Maxwell, 2012; Mishler, 1986; Weiss, 1994).

I worked to transcend thematic codes and categories, building on the point made by Charmaz (2006) that qualitative analysis begins rather than ends when thematic codes are developed.

Meaning interpretation

Barbour (2008) suggested it is vital for qualitative researchers to share honest glimpses into the successive bouts of constructive and perhaps anguished reflection that they believe have contributed to a more accurate or meaningful interpretation not only of the data but also of the researcher's conceptual and experiential journey in doing the research.

One benefit that appeared to me in the analysis was a sense that the codes were numerically distinguishable, either within groups of codes or, upon analysis, aligned into selective codes. I felt this 'counting' was at least a minor benefit to my analysis based on what Maxwell (2010) and Seale (1999) assert is a largely underutilised strategy for building internal generalisation by analysing the data to provide numerical results as an additional lens through which to view the findings, as discussed in Chapter 3.

As a qualitative researcher, I knew that the numerical findings could mask a deeper and truer interpretation of the data. Therefore, as I worked through many passes of analysing the data, I kept stepping back from time to time to distinguish the mere frequency of codes from the number of times a code was not only mentioned but was distinctly emphasised. That not only altered but also enriched or enlivened a number of areas of my interpretation.

This data analysis process convinced me of the value of looking attentively at distinctions in levels and types of interpretation. 'Meaning interpretation' is the term Kvale (1996: 201) gives to qualitative research that pursues expansive, extended and deepened interpretations of perspective and meaning in which the researcher must press himself to explore, decipher and '[go] beyond what is directly said to work out structures and relations of meaning'. Willig (2014:138) called this approach 'empathetic interpretation', stating that this requires the researcher to, in essence, 'enter the phenomenon' and attempt to understand it

'from within' by paying 'special attention to [the data's] features and qualities, by making connections between them and by noticing patterns and relationships'.

I found that one advantage of this process was that, while I had some numerical reference points from the data, the very human effort to absorb, compare and condense meaning from both the overt and more nuanced data analysis searches provided me with a different and I believe richer lens, or mode, of interpretation. I reviewed my analytic notes (Maxwell, 2013) as I searched beyond just the words spoken and transcribed, into more accurately and deeply discerning emphasis points made in tone, hesitation or repetition, for example, by the interviewees.

Patton (1990, 2015) noted that qualitative analyses often stall after thematic codes are developed and frequency is counted—and yet this actually uncovers only a small percentage of what a deeper analysis may reveal. Deeper qualitative analysis depends on an intensive process of not only creating and revising codes, categories, themes and relationships between and among the data, but also of repeatedly comparing and contrasting the frequency with which codes and categories occur in different transcripts, while also documenting who is saying what, with what emphasis and in what context (Charmaz, 2006; Flick et al, 2014; Miles, et al, 2014; Saldana, 2015).

Rationale for declining computer-assisted qualitative data analysis

As I worked through layers of interpretation and struggled to decipher the nuances in the interviews, I decided against using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). I acknowledge that such software has been reported to be useful especially for large-scale studies and research teams due to the software's more complex systems of coding (Seale and Rivas,

2012), and in such studies and team settings it can provide greater efficiency and speed with which codes can be retrieved and compared. But mine was a relatively small-scale study conducted by a single researcher.

I decided not to perform computer assisted qualitative data analysis because I concluded that the frequency counts, the numbers, could not be considered to the exclusion of a few of the personal narrative emphases. I did not want those to get lost because they were a category of one. I wanted to delve more deeply into the narratives of individual respondents so that they did not inadvertently get lost in computer-generated findings. Using software can have an impact on the researcher's management of data and even the direction that analysis takes (Harding and Thompson, 2011). Even when computer software is used, it is still the researcher who undertakes qualitative data analysis (Gibson and Brown, 2009) and it cannot replace the intuition and judgements of the researcher.

Harding (2013: 145) states:

> [I]t is not recommended that the researcher conducting qualitative data analysis for the first time should use specialist computer software. The reason for this is that grasping basic principles of analysis is a demanding task in itself, without adding a decision as to whether the use of such software will help or hinder the process.

Fielding (2000: para. 6) notes that relying on software 'confuses a technical resource with an analytic approach'. Patton (2015: 530-531) states:

> Computer analysis is not necessary and may interfere with the analytic process…so although software analysis has become common and many swear by it because it can offer leaps in productivity for researchers who are adept at it, using software is not a requisite for qualitative analysis. Whether you do or do not use software, the real analytical work takes place in your head.

Before launching the study, I tested NVivo's most advanced software and was left feeling that not only would it take extensive time and cost to master the nuances of the software, but that this time would be better devoted to far

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deeper hands-on analyses of the data. The software left me feeling distanced from the practice or example data rather than closer to deciphering it. I paid heed to a comment I read from Kvale (1996:174), that the use of software in qualitative analysis might, in fact, distance the researcher by isolating key variables out of context from the more nuanced insights of experiences and individualised expressions.

In Chapter 6, I categorise and discuss these findings.

Summary

In summary, this chapter presented my methods of data analysis in this study along with results of the first rounds of that analysis. At every turn, there were challenges and surprises to staying as focused and thorough as possible in my approach. The conceptual framework remained in view as a continual point of perspective and reference. After reviewing the sequenced, multi-layered approach, I provided an overview of the relevance of writing—as well as the constructive anguish required to assemble, compare and condense the meaning of the data from so many different perspectives and layers in analysis. I then set forth the rationale for why, as the analysis proceeded, I elected to work more deeply with traditional pen-paper-reflection approaches rather than use computer-assisted qualitative data analysis. Looking back at my many experiences in this phase of the study, I reflected on how regularly I had recalled the advice of Mason (1996: 6) who pressed for researchers to regularly pause and take 'stock of their actions and their role in the research process' as the labourious analysis work proceeded.

The next chapter provides highlights of the primary data.

Chapter 5

A Presentation of Primary Data

The goal of this chapter is to engage the reader in an immersive exploration of highlights from the diverse backdrop of rich and revealing raw data provided by the senior executives in this study. My intent is that these excerpts serve as an in-depth introduction to the study participants. The excerpts are not intended to directly develop or support specific aspects of the codes that I describe in Chapter 5, nor are they intended to specifically illustrate or substantiate the categorisations of my results that are presented in Chapter 6; rather I have assembled them to give a sense of the breadth and nuance of responses in the interviews, in the interviewees' own words.

The three groupings of interviewees have previously been described—senior executives of educational institutions; senior executives in publicly-traded for-profit companies; and senior executives in privately-held for-profit enterprises. As previously noted, all of the senior executives had served in a senior executive role for at least five years.

In crafting the narrative summaries, I contextualised them from multiple readings and considerations of each of the interviews (Maxwell, 2008). Seidman (2013) describes this profile step as the storytelling the researcher does when the interview is over, and as Seidman suggested, I started the overall analytic process by excerpting and condensing interview text and notes into interesting passages in order to create profiles of individual interviewees 'using the participant's words to reflect the person's consciousness' (2013: 121-122). Brinkmann and Kvale (2015: 322) note that such narratives can be useful as both a mode of reasoning and a means to provide a rich and potentially nuanced glimpse into data. Those were my purposes in creating these summaries after each interview but before beginning formal analysis of the data, and as such they show the interviewees' principal responses but do not

always illustrate conclusions I reached through the later analytical process of coding and categorising the data.

I conducted the 24 initial interviews by telephone or Skype. The average length of these interviews was 32 minutes. Three longer follow-up interviews took place during in-person meetings with an average duration of 64 minutes. Each interviewee received in advance the two research questions:

1. As a senior executive, how do you learn?
2. How do you apply this learning?

All interviewees are denoted by a letter that does not correspond to their name or organisation. Quotations are edited only to remove verbal hesitations such as 'um' and 'uh', or direct verbal redundancies, such as '... to, to bring about change'. Words in brackets indicate best guesses where the transcription was unclear or are used to disguise specific people and organisations that were mentioned.

In distilling these narrative summaries, I organised the interviewees' responses under subheads that I derived from their comments. I do not intend these to be assignments of weight or particular emphasis to what they said, but only as topic headings that serve to organise some of the interviewees' thoughts, ideas, comments, perspectives and experiences under themes that were meaningful to them, as viewed as single-case narratives.

Senior Executives of Educational Institutions

Within this group, there were two college presidents, two elementary school principals, one university president, one high school principal, a managing director of research and assessment at a private college, and a managing director of admissions at a large public university. One of the college presidents (Executive B) participated in an in-person follow-up interview.

Senior Executive A (Education)

Male principal of a public high school (1,800 students, 200 teachers) that is ranked in the top five in the state. Interview length: 23 minutes.

This leader drew on nearly three decades of experience as a teacher, middle school principal and currently as principal of a large public high school. He emphasised the need to continuously and link learning and future success—for administrators, teachers and students. He stated that his own inner commitment was to lead by example—to regularly and actively engage with innovative new learning opportunities and share them with his team who he challenged to help him implement these learnings.

He framed his overall remarks by saying, 'Learning is always important as a component of what we do. We get better as we live it'. He remarked, '[I]t helps that you have a superintendent...who has really pushed that learning', and he observed the importance of an overall culture of learning:

> It starts with culture, relationships and making sure there's trust there, and then when you start doing these things and going out and you build that...a lot of people will come along.

'Lead learning by example'. Regarding his leadership expectations of learning and the application of learning, he said:

> I have to live it. I can't just go into a meeting and tell them, 'This is what you've got to try', if I haven't tried it myself, and so a lot of these strategies, and some of the things that we are pushing out...we lead learning by example. And this is something, and we...do a lot, this is,...we prescribe this pretty quickly. I mean we actually plan for this as an admin team, within our building and within our district, that so when we are leading, we're not just talking the talk. We're walking the walk and that, I feel, from a leader standpoint, is huge. If you don't, if you're not going to live...what you're asking other people to do, then that's...a problem.

Understanding 'the 21st century learner'. He said that he is studying toward a second master's degree, 'based in technology', so that he can 'understand what our students are going to be doing when they graduate and how their learning is totally different to how we learned and understood education'. He said:

> [I]t's important for us to continue to see what our kids are getting into as they continue on through school and education and going to college and then going on to other careers.... [W]e spend a lot of time developing our skills and understanding what's new and coming, kind of [deciphering or imagining] the 21st century learner...because things are changing in education.... [W]e're always trying to push forward and trying to make people...see that change going on outside us.

He has participated in a broad, multi-country network of administrators committed to learning [EdLeader21], about which he said regarding ways of learning, 'Networking's really big as well...and again, we learn from each other'.

Senior Executive B (Education)

Male president of private liberal arts college. Led a ten-year transformation from struggling institution with 840 students to current 1,650 students while also doubling endowments and raising standards for both students and teachers.

This leader came from a working-class background and earned his master's degree in education and a doctorate in ethics. More than a decade ago he took the helm of a struggling private college with financial burdens and reputational challenges combined with a seeming lack of relevance in curricula and opportunity areas for graduates to succeed in the job market.

This executive also participated in an in-person follow-up interview.

He said that learning was crucial to the future of his organisation and organisations like his:

> If I don't keep learning, or if I haven't kept learning, or if I decided to not keep learning, I mean I think these [organisations like his] are so fragile right now I think that either I would go away or it would go away fairly quickly. I mean, it's just essential to the future of this institution.... [L]eaders are the ones that can sort of see where things are going. Look around the corner. Get out in front....

He described his approach to learning as constantly seeking, noticing and engaging with situations that stimulate new ideas and new approaches:

> [F]or me it really just gets down to absolutely infusing my mind with people and experiences, and ... data, and feelings—and all that goes with living one's life—that are foreign to me. And in so doing, sort of new... avenues of creativity and learning begin.... I just need to continually be bombarded with new stimuli.

He said that he is personally motivated to keep learning by a perpetual sense of concern that he is not accomplishing enough:

> I wake up every day nervous, worried.... And I feel like if I can just be 10 or 15% of what my potential is, I'd be happy. I don't feel like I'm 90% of the way there, or even that my [organisation] is. So there's this passion, that hunger to always get better.... I'm an achiever which means on the good side of things I need to get something done every day. But the bad side of that is, every day starts at zero.

Sharing learning expands learning. He said that sharing his successful practices further motivates him, because it means that he must keep learning to stay ahead:

> I shared it and I said this is how we did it.... I think the reasons why I did it looking back is I thought to myself, the only way that I can get better, that I can stay motivated, that I can get up every morning hungry is by thinking to myself, like, 'The posse's gaining on me'.

He said that his search for better ways to do things has affected others, who have taken up his commitment to noticing things that need improvement and making them better:

I have a number of my staff members say to me fairly frequently, 'You've ruined me.... Now when I go out to the other [facility], or a wedding, or a bar mitzvah or whatever, like I could hardly enjoy it because I'm just constantly noticing what's not right'.

Sparking learning with the mobile phone. He said that he keeps important learning or potential learning in mind by using his mobile phone for taking photos and recording thoughts that he later reflects on:

[W]hat I find myself doing more and more is taking pictures of things that I can learn from. Pictures of things that I want to reflect back on. Pictures of stuff that I can send to my assistant, either when I get back to the office or when I'm out and say, 'Hey, make a physical picture of this, because I want to think about it and talk about it and talk to the staff about it'. The same with recording.... When we didn't have these things in our pockets... you almost had to make a note or write it down, or hope that you remembered it. The technology has made it very easy to be a learner, in my opinion.

Creating learning in a variety of ways. He said that he also learns through creating learning situations, in a variety of ways: by 'speaking up' ('not to suggest I am always right but in speaking up then you sort of provide...a juxtaposition for something. There's someone to...bounce their own ideas against'); by taking risks ('by risking you learn what works and what doesn't work'); by accepting the potential for being embarrassed ('embarrassment is sort of life's way of saying you need to learn and so I've been more willing in recent years to claim embarrassment'); and by sharing ideas ('when you share it forces you to be, in kind of an ironic way, more of a continuous learner'). He also remarked:

We all have to pick our battles. But I think when we do pick them and say, 'Okay...Game on', [knowing] that one can learn from battles. And ...I do go to battle, especially if I feel like it's in the best interests of our students...or institution.

'You think about it all the time'. On the topic of passion and learning, he said:

For me it really sort of begins with Mark Twain's phrase, 'The two most important days of your life are the day you were born and the day you

figure out why'. And I think that for anybody to be a good leader, they need to figure out that why…so that you land in a spot that you love what you're doing so much and you're so enthralled by it and you're so curious about it that you just work even when you're not working. You think about it all the time. You do get up in the middle of the night thinking, 'Hey this is how we can get better'.

He reflected on why he keeps raising the bar on his goals:

> I think that perhaps there's so much information now available that we've overworked the brain almost to the point where almost as a self-defence mechanism it's almost pushing it all away because we don't feel like we can get it in bite-size pieces and we don't want to take in so much we'll explode, so we don't take in anything…. [Fortunately, I am] somebody who remains energized by curiosity, and knowledge, and new stimuli, and all that I think is important to becoming a new leader. And I always think you're always becoming. I think you're never satisfied, right? You never hit the finish line.

Senior Executive C (Education)

Male president of private university with 1,400 students (1,100 undergraduate and 300 graduate). Interview length: 36 minutes.

After several decades of innovative business success with a Fortune 500 company, this leader accepted the role as president of a private educational institution that was under significant financial pressure to survive. In the interview, he shared his experiences in struggling at first to apply real-world business tactics and strategies to help stabilise and then grow this university where his approaches were at first received as being atypical and disruptive. Because he created positive results, his fresh approaches to change were eventually accepted and embraced by his larger leadership team of administrators as well as by faculty.

He listed three primary sources for his learning: '[N]umber one, most importantly, do my job;…number two, seek advice and coaching from others; and number three, read, watch and listen'. Of the three, he ranked 'just doing my job' as the primary way he keeps learning. He noted that, in particular, he has found throwing himself into new and challenging experiences to be vital to his learning.

Regarding his personal motivation to learn, he said: '[P]hilosophically, I do believe our whole life is just a test. I mean, it's…the one game. It's the one opportunity. And everything is sort of a test, I guess'. He said he implements and shares his learning in both his professional life and his personal life, through mentoring, teaching, volunteer work and parenting.

'Learn by doing'. After describing being asked to assume responsibilities at his former Fortune 500 company that were not only new to him but were newly established by the company, he explained:

> I learned to just sort of go and jump in. So I have a high regard for learning by doing and learning by experiencing something where the likelihood of failure far exceeds the likelihood of success.

He noted that in a previous position he 'overthought and then I over-planned', and that that experience taught him to emphasise action over intensive planning:

> And back to the emphasis on doing. I do a fair amount of thinking about things. Yes, I like to plan things, but I now do plans in bullet points on a couple of pages as opposed to documents. And so the emphasis on do and always doing, continuing trying to work hard especially in high failure spaces.

He said that at a relatively small institution with limited funds, actions matter:

> Many times the pilot or the experiment, the bench sample, the market test, we did lots of those. Lots of those. Lots of those. Lots—and then there were times where you couldn't. You [kind of] had to just go, 'All right, let's go. All right. Value, yeah. Impact,

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good. No harm? Okay, keep going. Keep going—and let's see how it unfolds'.

Learn from 'advice and coaching'. The second way he said he continues to learn is through receiving 'advice and coaching' from others. While he noted that some of this occurs as part of his day-to-day job activities, he actively seeks advice and coaching from many other people. He established an annual performance review process for himself—'I love that kind of opportunity to get that feedback from people like trustees', he said. At conferences and other industry functions, he remains curious about how peers at other institutions view the field and approach their jobs, asking many questions.

'Read, watch, listen'. The third way he learns is 'read, watch, listen'. Although he said he views this as 'the least important' method, he noted that 'it's a contributor'. He tries to read one local and one national newspaper every day and also does professional reading in the fields of higher education and management.

'Seek 'opposite space learning…always try to shoulder up with people who are quite different…from a variety of different perspectives'. He said that in each of his three sources of learning, he actively seeks out the opportunity to learn from differing views and perspectives, which he referred to as 'opposite space learning':

> I do my best, always try to shoulder up with people who are quite different than me from a variety of different perspectives because that [conjunction?] or opposite space of perspective contributes to the learning while we do our jobs.

He emphasised that he particularly values insights from friends and family in fields unrelated to education and business, explaining, 'I'm constantly trying to see…from perspectives quite unlike what this one is…what they have to say about issues, opportunities'.

Asked how many of his peers are similar to him in orientation toward learning and creating value, he answered:

> I think it's very common in a very high percent...defined by all forms of learning, and without implying anything negative, arrogant, or pejorative, most of the learning that I would box as more traditional.... [T]hat mentality, I think, is still more predominant than the private sector business model which is, 'Come on folks, let's use our abilities and our brains and our competencies and let's go'.

He said that he has not formally implemented learning as a criterion for recruiting or performance evaluation but said that 'learning agility' is critical to individual success and the success of the university:

> [T]o the extent that someone is agile, begins with an attitude of agility, and then wants to learn up, down and sideways, not just vertical promotion opportunity, really, really matters.

Senior Executive D (Education)

Male president of private liberal arts college with 2,100 students. Previous senior executive roles in six companies in technology, software, media and entertainment industries. Interview length: 31 minutes

This leader brought a diverse innovation background that was highly entrepreneurial to his role as president of a private college that was challenged financially and in curriculum design to attract more ideal students. He displayed a contrarian attitude to what felt like all aspects of the academic institutional status quo. He engaged a diverse array of mentors and 'strategic thinking partners' to help him ingeniously solve what were seen as intractable problems.

'Learn by doing...from people...and by listening...' Reflecting on leadership positions he has held in business and higher education, he identified several principal ways in which he learns:

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> I learn a lot by doing.... I believe a lot of us learn and the way I learn is...doing things and finding out whether it works or not, trying to get feedback, both my own and others...and then adjusting. And I think you can learn most quickly by taking action and then adjusting based on the results of that action.

He said that in one of his earlier CEO jobs, he learned the importance of making decisions quickly, even with partial information:

> [T]hose decisions were not all correct.... [B]ut...a lot of them would turn out to be correct, and it would move us forward quickly. And the ones that weren't correct, you would quickly find out they weren't correct, and then you would change.... I leaned that early on and I've maintained that philosophy ever since.

He said: '[I]f you're not an action-oriented, it's very difficult to be successful today. And when I say "you", it's you and your team, right?' Asked whether he is 'building pilot testing into how you're learning', he answered: 'I'd be careful about the word pilot as a generalisation.... So I wouldn't use that word, but I think what you're getting at, the answer is, yes'.

'[Y]ou have to be a listener'. He cited many types of people from whom he learns or has learned, including professional peers, experienced staff, customers (students, in the case of his college responsibilities) and his wife ('to have somebody who knows you so well, and can give you feedback that you can act upon is a great benefit'). About learning from people, he said:

> [Y]ou have to be a listener in order to do that. And...some people are more naturally listeners than others. I think you have to deliberately concentrate on listening to be able to learn the most from it.

'Reading'. He said he is 'bombarded' with more reading material than he can keep up with—'[T]here's a lot of good, deep information that comes across from publications and online now, many different ways. Can't read it all'. He said that the readings related to his leadership duties overwhelm his ability for 'outside reading':

> [T]hroughout my life, that reading that I chose to do has been a great source of learning. I'm one of those like President Obama who thinks you can learn more from literature than you can from...technical treatises. And...it's very difficult to find the time to read that stuff.

'Learn by teaching...and I don't mean teaching in a class'. He said:

> [Y]ou learn by teaching—you learn more thoroughly by teaching. It becomes more ingrained in your brain. And as a college president and as a CEO, you're teaching all the time. I don't mean teaching in class.

He listed many kinds of teaching that he does—for example, 'teaching people how to be better supervisors; how to appropriately delegate work and hold people responsible and accountable; how not to think you have to do everything for them. He said:

> [M]y subject matter is higher education and by teaching it to other people, that's the way I keep learning and about what's going on and hopefully, about how we can keep evolving and adjusting.

Regarding leading a team, he discussed the importance of creating trust, saying:

> One of the hardest things is to get them to really tell you what they think especially about what you're doing, or what you think, you know, is to challenge what you know, what you think might be right. And at this point I have people who will do that...You know, because I've earned their trust.... [T]hey know that if they differ with me, I'm [going to] appreciate that, not punish them for it. And they didn't know that at the beginning. Even though I said it, saying it wasn't good enough. They had to experience it. And it took them about two years, even though I'm a very trustworthy guy.

Senior Executive E (Education)

Female principal of a public elementary school with 450 students.
Interview length: 28 minutes

This leader had been charged with growing a strong-performing
elementary school into a high-performing 'pipeline school' that
graduates students that raise the standards and rankings of the
upper-level educational institutions in the area. She emphasised her
ongoing learning using social media 'chat groups' and her experience
challenging her entire administrative team and faculty to embrace
and report on their new learning experiences.

She said that her learning is applied in real time:

> You are applying what you know on the go, on the run. So you're
> working, you're in the field, you're learning new things, you're weaving
> them into your current work, you're applying them, you're taking back
> and reflecting what works well, what didn't work well, what do I need to,
> to sharpen? How can I revisit things?

'Embrace vulnerability'. She said that true learners must embrace vulnerability
and the risk of falling short of their goals as they learn and the leader must
embody acceptance of those things:

> [I]t's about becoming a learner…and truly accepting that and accepting
> that as a learner you don't have all the answers, and-so I do think
> there's a piece of vulnerability for the leader to say, 'I'm learning this'.…
> I will often stand in front of my staff and say, 'We've been working on
> this. I'd like to try this. It might fail. It might totally tank'. But having
> that vulnerability and that trust with your staff is so essential because
> they see you as a learner and they see that it's okay for you to fail. And
> if I'm trying to weave that into my culture here, they need to know that's
> it okay for them to fail too.

Relatedly, she said it is crucial to always be testing ideas:

> [T]o be a solid leader and to create a culture of learning, you have to
> always be in that piloting phase.… And now look at the change that's
> just happening nationwide and I think a lot of it is because of this

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constant…piloting, constant learning, constant growing that has been opened up to us.

She stated her belief that trying new approaches is essential for successful educational institutions:

There is a bit of a competitive nature out there to stay alive as a school because there's plenty of other options and I think those who do not engage in continuous learning and do not engage in taking risks and trying new things will find themselves struggling more and more to stay alive.

'Lead mindfully with learning as your focus'. She said that she and her team work to create an environment where learning is valued:

I think staff needs to see that you're a learner and as the leader that gets carried through. I think it's woven into your work, how you address things…. [Y]ou have to be focused on learning and make sure that you select your words and lead mindfully with learning as your focus, not necessarily 'teaching'. ' [She meant 'teaching' in the sense of merely imparting information.]

Using social media as a collaborative learning tool. She provided a lengthy example of building a learning culture by using private conversations with other school administrators and teachers on Twitter ('Twitter chat book studies'). She said that that approach accomplishes several things: it makes the commitment to learning more visible; it allows for 'participation from people with different schedules and preferences'; and it creates a record of learning-related discussions that can be accessed and reviewed. She also embeds hashtags in memoranda and other documents, linked to an internal website, allowing any reader to go to the website and read more about a topic and see what others are doing in those areas.

Senior Executive F (Education)

Female principal of a public elementary school with 400 students. Interview length: 26 minutes.

This leader was placed in charge of an elementary school that had in many ways become entrenched in traditional academic habits and had fallen out of touch with both the families of students and the relevance of 'new learning' as it seemed everything in the world around the school was changing. Among the learning-focused changes she made was involving all of the students' families with their weekly learning outcomes and progress, highlighting improved ways to learn in her weekly meetings with administration and teachers, and, above all, leading this learning by example and being available as both a sounding board and driver of application of new learning.

She said, 'I guess I'm a perpetual learner', mentioning many hours of post-baccalaureate credits she has earned and also saying,

> but even more importantly nowadays is growing my professional learning network and the informal day-to-day learning that I participate in.... Connecting with colleagues around the state and country and frankly, the world.

She said, 'I try to model for my teachers here at my school, which is a model then for my students as well. If I'm continuously learning'. As an example, she said she was participating in a training course that was required of her teachers but not of her, saying she was participating in that '[a]s a learner, not as their leader... I have to be that role model. If I'm asking my teachers to do it, I have to be willing to do that work, too'. She said that embedding continual learning 'is my central focus'.

She described a variety of activities through which she connects with colleagues to learn, including as part of a large and active weekly Twitter-based group and through formal and informal contacts with other education leaders.

Fighting against mere compliance. She observed:

> [E]ducators in general are rule followers. So even people doing the work that I'm doing because of our nature to just—what are the rules we have to follow? It's the same things teaching the creativity out of our kids—we're doing it with some of our education leaders. I have to be compliant. It takes courage to fight against that compliance.

Senior Executive G (Education)

Female managing director of research and assessment at a private liberal arts college with 1,650 students; former director of marketing at large public company. Interview length: 37 minutes.

This leader brought a background of running market growth for a publicly traded company to her role as a senior executive in charge of research and assessments at a private liberal arts college that had fallen on challenging times for a range of reasons—lower past standards related to admission and academic excellence, limited curricular or extracurricular relevance to emerging career opportunities, financial pressures, and more. By assembling a network of strategic thinkers who volunteered time to help, she set in motion an array of research and measurement projects that pointed to specific changes the college could make. With the support of her school's president, these changes were for the most part implemented, and record-setting growth has followed—including a doubling of enrolment and substantially higher entrance standards over the past decade.

She said, '[I]n terms of trying to continue learning, I've been pretty intentional', adding:

> I feel like I'm always learning, trying to learn from others and not just being complacent, so going into things with an open mind and trying to just pick what I can to learn from something.... I think I like to learn, but I also am intentional because I do have a lot on my plate with the family and having kids.

She described the following ways in which she pursues that learning:

> I try to always read and when I wake up early on the weekends and I don't have meetings and stuff I have to do at the computer, I'm in a leadership book club that I organised and it's online so that we discuss a chapter each week on a closed Facebook group.

> [W]e have a lot of opportunities with speakers on campus, so I try and attend those or learn about other people's dissertations and continued research that they do.

> [C]onferences—I go to every session I can and get something out of it and use it.

> [I'll mentor students. And even though I tend to be mentoring them, I still learn from the students.

> [T]his leadership class [at the college where she works].... We have all different fields and learning from those speakers is one thing, but also in the class we do two assessments.

> [T]eaching—I am always using new materials in the class with the students.

> [W]e basically have a hangout. It's like a Google hangout and [an executive from the Gallup Organisation] talks.... [W]e just have different experts join us and that's been a fun way for me to learn. Even though it's for the students, I'm always learning just as much as they are at these calls.

> Just even [being in her job], I feel like I'm constantly learning, looking at data and comparing us to other schools.

'What gives us more meaning?' She said that as she learns at her job, it is in the context of a larger vision:

> [W]e do really look at a different lens in terms of what makes us innovative. So, you know we can compare ourselves to other colleges on, like, retention rates. And we can look at graduation rates and those numbers—or enrolment. But we look at, you know, what's the purpose and what gives us more meaning.... [W]e want students that are happy, not that are in a high-paying job that are unhappy and anxious.... I think there's...a big purpose in goals.... [W]e do compare ourselves to other institutions, but yet we are always trying to think of what would make us more unique? Or what makes us more innovative?

She said that application is always at the forefront of her considerations regarding learning:

> It's like, how can we apply it? And I think—I mean, it's fine if you learn something, but I think if you don't apply it, it's not really useful or what's the purpose, right? Other than just learning it.... I think the learning in terms of applying it is key.

Senior Executive H (Education)

Female managing director of admissions of an executive MBA Programme at a large public university; previously served as executive director of admissions for 16 years at one of the largest public U.S. universities. Interview length: 55 minutes.

This leader has experienced more than a decade of high-pressure challenges related to growing executive MBA Programme admissions at one of the world's largest universities. She emphasised how an array of planned interactions each year with colleagues from other universities has kept re-igniting this drive to grow and also provided many examples of different approaches to make that growth happen. Though it all, her commitment to seek chances to learn directly from interactions with students—rather than primarily from

administrators or faculty—has been a source of sustained energy and motivation as she and her team face what she described as the challenges and opportunities ahead.

She said, '[I]t is our mission to think, 'What can we do better next year, the year after?'' Of the many innovative improvements that have been successfully introduced in her programme, she said: 'You have to take that step out. [I]t is a risk'. She said that others in her sector 'look at us with very scary eyes—"Can't believe they're doing that—We're [going to] be watching you"'. Saying she received job offers from 'two top-ten schools', she observed:

> Neither of those schools were as ready for anyone like me. They were not ready. They could not—they wouldn't have been able to handle me because I would've wanted to do—I would've wanted them to be better and I didn't find they were ready to be better.

Regarding other ways of learning, she said:

> I have learned things from universities, especially in my first couple of years…. I've made presentations [at gatherings of professionals in her field] and people are learning from me. So my best learning is shared with my peers….

> I tend to build friendships, relationships with people who have better titles than I do…because they're probably more like me than my peers, I guess.

> I'm always talking to students…. This is how I learn, number one way. I mean, I wish it could be from my peers, but it's really from our students.

Senior Executives of Publicly-Traded For-Profit Companies

Within this group, there were three chief executive officers, four corporate presidents and one executive vice president. The executive vice president (Executive C) participated in an in-person follow-up interview.

As stated above, I developed these narratives as the interviews were completed, before beginning any formal analysis, and they are presented here to give a

sense of the breadth and nature of the interviewees' comments, not to demonstrate or reinforce the codes that I selected (see Chapter 5) or the categorisations I created (see Chapter 6).

Senior Executive A (Publicly traded)

Male former president of a Global 50 company. Interview length: 27 minutes.

This leader's background is diversified: he worked as a senior executive in all areas of the globe as well as in many roles, including finance, inside one of the world's largest publicly traded companies. His experiences growing the business in under-performing regions— such as Africa and the Middle East, for example—provided him with opportunities to embrace, ahead of most other senior executives, diversity in culture and working relationships, and collaboration across business units, suppliers and unions. He championed emotional intelligence development for all of his leaders starting more than two decades ago when that subject matter first appeared in organisational development.

He said that for him, the foundation of learning arises from being a person who is naturally very curious and then channelling that curiosity toward personal excellence. '[I]f you don't channel that curiosity, yes, you could learn a lot, but then how do you bring it together to help you in your life and others' lives?' He said:

> [Y]ou really have to ask yourself this honest question: Are you really, really committed to something bigger than yourself?... [Y]ou could never be perfect at what you do but if you don't live with that sense of responsibility as a leader then you don't take the hard way to learn so that you could be better.

He said that personal excellence is a 'journey', inspired by two opposing thoughts: 'I'm really committed to excellence, but I know that I'm not and I will never be. So therefore I walk the journey.... I know that I'll never be excellent, so therefore learning will never end'. He referred to this mindset as 'embracing paradox rather than being manipulated by paradox'.

Personal excellence, he said,

> has to cover all life roles one plays that I consider to be important. And so personal excellence is not just about being a good leader at work but also being a good husband, father, whatever roles in life are important.

'[W]e're supposed to discover truth over time', he said:

> [F]or me, learning happens when I'm sure that that truth has become me.... I have a criterion to say, 'Okay. Is it in me?' What that means is that I don't have to think about doing it.

'Be very open'. Saying that 'practicality and learning from life' were essential to his way of learning, he explained:

> [W]hen I observe someone who does such a great job in one area, I say, 'Okay. I wish I could do that well too'. To me, that's the beginning of my learning because I'm aware of something that I want to do.... [O]nce I'm aware of areas that I want to grow and develop, I really try to learn that from real life.

In support of that method, he said, 'I try to be very open so that people can approach me because that's how I learn.... I try to pay attention to that so that people can approach me and give me feedback'.

He described four elements of the overall learning process: 'awareness, quality reflections, quality conversations and personal decision-making'. Elaborating, he said:

> [L]everage quality reflection time. If you don't have that, that's a big miss. And be very intent about the conversations you will have, planning your conversations and reflect on your conversations afterward. And then if that changes anything in what you learned to be

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the truth, change that. And when you're about to make decisions in using this learning, have a process.

Within that overall process, he said, the ability to accept vulnerability is essential: '[I]f you combine that learning with…being authentic, you become really vulnerable because you're learning together. You've got to be comfortable with that'.

Senior Executive B (Publicly traded)

Male former Emerging Markets CEO of Top 10 global bank; twice chairman of Private Investors for Africa; current regional CEO of bank in Africa. Interview length: 35 minutes.

This executive combined a traditional background in finance and financial services with opportunities to lead teams in emerging markets for his company—specifically Africa, but also the Middle East, Asia and India. While working to grow the success of his company and its operations, he also remained actively engaged in entrepreneurial fund-raising initiatives that extended support and hope to the outer geographic reaches of his regions along with educational outreach programmes, and in emphasising social significance commitments from himself and all of his employees in such causes as paediatric AIDS, 'container schools' for townships without education, and more.

He said his 'definition of learning' is that 'It's about being open and not having a closed mind to anything'.

He described the context of his learning by saying:

> I come across situations every day that are completely new to me, even massive…. And of course, the world is changing erratically as well…. I'm the boss in some of the situations and then the collaborator in other situations. So one difference I find, part of the learning, being in

different roles and so I enjoy each and I get a big kick out of each of those situations because I think we're doing some important stuff.

After listing several kinds of formal and structured learning that he has engaged in or still engages in, from earning an MBA to reading relevant reports related to both general and specific topics, he said, 'I like experiential learning: What's gone well, what's not gone well, what can be improved or can't be improved?'

He elaborated on how he connects experimentation to successful outcomes:

> You obviously use this learning to improve the performance of the business and that's the first thing…. But how do you do that?… I think you use the learnings that you have had and the learnings that you pick up going forward on a day to day basis to put together an approach or a series of different approaches to different situations. A kind of framework for dealing with issues and all of these experiences add to that framework and develop it and improve it.

He said that applying innovation, learning from it and handling unsuccessful outcomes are hallmarks of his approach:

> I'm somebody who likes…innovation…. [O]ver my career, I've done quite a lot of different experimentation with different things…. [L]earning from innovation is for me one of the most important…aspects of what I do. So it's not just learning. If you're not reactively [running] from events that are happening to you, it's proactively trying to invent the future and to drive different situations.

Senior Executive C (Publicly traded)

Female executive vice president of global manufacturing in a very large industrial company, overseeing more than 150,000 employees at over 150 sites in 30 countries. Also handles women's leadership development and some significant aspects of labour relations.

This senior executive faces the daily pressures of driving growth and unifying culture in a company and industry with traditionally high costs, union relations challenges, a fading male-dominated factory culture, increasing global diversity of employees and locations, and the demand to establish and deliver hyper-efficient manufacturing, unprecedented collaboration and teamwork, cutting-edge innovations, and the testing and application of technologies that have high potential yet are largely untested.

This executive also participated in an in-person follow-up interview.

Throughout the interviews, she cited reasons why continuing to learn was essential, focused primarily on her responsibility for achieving excellent performance by her team in the present—e.g., 'How do I make sure we're really performing at our highest level?'; 'I want to make sure that I'm maximizing their potential'—and with regard to being prepared for future threats and opportunities: e.g., 'How do I make sure we're . . . actually looking around the corner, and we're anticipating?' She linked those two reasons in a statement:

> I can enable the team to perform at a much, much higher level. And so that we can get the issues resolved a lot faster. And then move on and have more time to be creative. And to think about, 'What if?' and 'What's around the corner?' Because there [are] some days where you just get bogged down in getting through the day and the issue of right now.... I always say, 'Hey, we can just solve these issues faster today and make sure they're sustained. We'll have more time and ability to really drive and push towards the future, which is tough'.

'I don't want to look up and the whole world's changed'. She described being motivated by a sense of worry with regard to meeting the ongoing challenges of her role:

> I'm afraid of looking up one day and maybe being...irrelevant.... I don't want to look up and the whole world's changed, and I'm still operating or behaving maybe in ways that I did ten years ago, or even 2 years ago.... I think I have this—it's almost like a paranoia—making sure that I'm … staying on top of not just things in our industry but what's

happening around because maybe we can learn from it. Maybe it's a kind of a window into what can—what's around the corner for us…. So that keeps me wanting to stay kind of abreast and effective, and learning just to become even more effective and not to lose that….

She said, 'I'm a big experiential learner, where I…have to go and I like to see and immerse myself in different things' and 'I'm hands-on. And I learn most effectively by doing, and by experiencing, and by…putting myself where the opportunity is'. She gave the following example:

> [A]s I interface with my team, I always stress, 'Don't prepare anything for me…. If I can go see—If I can go to your area, go with you, go with your team, I'd rather spend the time and energy, going there and seeing, opposed to you spending hours and hours on presentations, and slides, and things like that'. Because I know, number one, it's a better use of time, but also how I will grasp the real issue as quickly as possible, or the learnings, or even the connection and experience with the people is important.

'Everything I learn will make me better'. She looked to learning as a way to be a better person: 'I just fundamentally believe that everything I learn will make me better. It can make me, not only a more effective leader, but a better person'.

She talked about learning from reading, saying:

> I love to learn new things through readings…so if it's reading a book, reading an article, daily briefs; things like that are really good for me because it will cause me to not necessarily become an expert in that area, but to take the information and then reflect on me, the team, our industry, and what may be applicable as well.

She emphasised that merely abstract learning from reading was of little interest to her:

> It has to be applied, I think, for it to be real…. Reading something is, 'Okay, I digested it'. But I haven't learned. I have to apply it. So my natural thing is, 'So how can I use this? How do I apply it? How does this become what we use, what we do? How does this just become who we are?'

'You create this environment where you really can listen'. She observed:

> [P]eople will tell you a lot of what you want to hear, but I always wanted clarity instead and I think it drove me to behave a different way. So I always felt that I want people to, number one, trust me.... To feel that they can come and tell me what's really happening.... And so I think over time, I'd developed that ability, because I wanted to have that trust and wanted to have the openness to get to the real issues. And then I think when you do that, you also create this environment where you really can listen.... And those things, I think, will build the trust that you want.

She reflected on how questions have helped her speed learning, saying:

> I think in the old days, you know, 'Just do what I tell you'.... How do I learn from them what they need?.... I don't want to be in the way. I want to be an accelerator, or an enabler, or supporter.... [When] I have my one-on-ones with my team, I'll say, 'Well, what do you need from me?' And when I first started doing that, it was a shock. They got quiet. They were like, 'What does she mean by that?'.... But then I had a couple of them come back and say, 'Hey, the last time I was with you, you specifically asked what can you do...I thought about it, and this is what I think you can do'.

Friction plus reflection can drive learning. She said:

> When I step back, if it's a conversation. If it's...an interaction...that didn't feel right for me, or I think it could've been better, then I'll step back and say, 'Well, what did I do?' And then, 'How could I do—what could I do better?'.... I usually do that because I reflect and think about either something someone said after, or their body language, or the feeling I got in the room.

'...to learn from others'. She observed:

> We're taking these solutions from other places that we probably wouldn't have been open to before.... There's this idea of just continuing to get better, continuing to refine, and then just holding yourself accountable, really to be better, to push, to learn from others, and how to be more effective.... We spent some time in China. Oh, my gosh—the energy, the excitement. We were all so excited around 'Are you kidding me? We need to do it this way'. And we left feeling like we can, and, 'What do we need to do?'

Senior Executive D (Publicly traded)

Male president of a multi-billion-dollar company responsible for environmental innovations in global packaging solutions supplying a broad range of packaging products for the food, beverage, healthcare, home and personal care industries. Interview length: 23 minutes.

This senior executive brought a disciplined mindset to his leadership team related to integrating innovative growth and acquisition opportunities with environmental protection breakthroughs in materials and packaging.

He described the importance of learning in his business:

> I think that change is only going to accelerate and if you don't adapt quickly and learn, you're [going to] find yourself in a tough spot.... [T]oday, I think things move too fast to get too fixed on any one direction.... I think the people that perform the best are the ones that are open to learning.... Every new issue or challenge we face has got a learning component to it and how open you are to that. And then how you apply it to learn from either issues or mistakes that have happened. Those that do a better job of learning from those and proactively implementing those learnings probably in the long run are the more successful ones.

He said that he had recently had to dismiss a senior executive because '[h]e just didn't have natural curiosity and as a result, he wasn't learning the business'.

He said that he and his company's leaders learn from many structured practices, including quarterly training on topics such as negotiation or crisis management; spending time with suppliers to discuss the suppliers' perspectives on industry, societal and technological trends; learning from internal teams charged with regularly investigating significant topics in a variety of ways—for example, by reading industry journals and attending trade shows—and sharing that learning; and attending many different kinds of external workshops and seminars.

Test possibilities sooner 'to take learnings away'. He said that rapid response to potential issues is important:

> I probably lean in and go the other way of…acknowledging that we have an issue, maybe earlier than we do, but trying to get a learning and trying to get learnings from that. And also adapting…what we're doing and how we're doing it. And if it doesn't turn out to be as big an issue, there was still some benefit, in my view, that comes out of assuming the worst could have happened and what would we do differently to prevent it? And so if it doesn't blow up into a major issue, that's fine. We've learned something from it and we should adapt…. And we don't necessarily have to wait for a big issue to take learnings away.

Senior Executive E (Publicly traded)

Male CEO of one of the largest global office workspace innovation and home-office furniture manufacturers. Interview length: 43 minutes.

This executive found himself with the task of leading the reinvention of a highly respected brand that was increasingly out of step with today's markets and future opportunities. He had to soul-search and find the previously unnecessary commitment to learn and innovate continually and to develop and in some cases change his team to commit to the same level of curiosity, positive discontent and experimentation.

He said that the nature of competition in his business, with competitors who are less constrained by existing practices and who might not face the same financial considerations his company faces, creates challenges: '[Y]ou have angst about it. If you don't have angst about it every day, I think you're not facing the reality of what, I think, we live in at the time. The present'.

He described his core responsibility by saying:

> I think our job as senior leaders is we have to be great at surveying and making connections from the things that were surveying, scanning around us.... I think the team, over time, you feel them starting to do the same things, saying, 'I saw three things. I'm [going to] connect those dots together'. And sometimes that means we run down rabbit holes, but it gives us a reason to sit back and talk about things that maybe seem unrelated.

He said that he and other executives interact regularly with leaders of large companies, gaining ideas from doing that:

> [W]e sell to some of the best companies around, we get a chance to be influenced by them.... I think maybe one advantage we get is if your eyes and ears are open, you're seeing a lot of other people and how they're evolving their business. I think that's helpful.

'I'd much rather go feel it'. He described himself as someone who learns principally from experience and interactions:

> I have a kind of an innate curiosity that I like to walk around and talk to a lot of people, both inside and outside of the company.... I can read about it, but I'd much rather go feel it.... I'm notorious in some circles [and people say]: 'Schedules don't matter to him'. I'm not...willing to just cut my brain off at that moment with the experience I'm having that's helping me think about something differently.... I'm following my curiosity at the moment. And I think, ...that to me has been probably the key to...getting other information.

He said that he often finds learning to be more effective when there is a tactile element to it:

> I think when you're trying to learn, you're better when you can step away from staring into your laptop or your tablet and you get

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a moment to go to the board and just scratch out something that maybe nobody can even read. But at least for me, I find when I'm trying to follow somebody and I'm scratching out stuff with a pen and a board, my creative energy is better in that case.

He said it was important to him to 'stay fresh enough to explore things that are happening that sometimes feel like a nuisance'. He said this quality was particularly important regarding trends, such as social media activity, that might affect the business even though they are not satisfying to him personally: 'I try to at least put myself in the spot of, if I don't have an understanding where contemporary society is going, how can I possibly keep the business up?'

'You don't have to have it completely figured out.' He said that he pursues learning opportunities spontaneously with his team, even when the ideas are just in emerging stages:

> [A] very common thing for me to do, and what I like them to do with me, is—like if I'm up in the morning and I'm out on a long bike ride and I have a big thought, I [want to] call you and just say, 'This is a crazy idea. Let me connect three things together, tell me what you think about that'. And I think the team, over time, realises that you don't have to have it completely figured out to put an idea on the table and it's not like I'm expecting you to bring me a business plan. Call me with things that you're just kicking around in your own head.

He said that small teams can be a way to expedite the learning process in a highly innovative organisation:

> [T]ypically we have more ideas than we have people on resources. So, you know, I think the thing we have to guard against—and by that, I think the organisation has [to] guard against me with this, to be frank— is he's got more ideas for things that we could do that we can actually absorb…. What we try often to do, and I would say we're getting better at this, although…it's a struggle, [to] pull together small teams that can go run with an idea to figure out, you know, whether there's a there there.

He said he regrets that there is not a more effective collaboration between his company and higher-education organisations:

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[O]ne of the things I've been talking to some of our local higher education folks about is, I think it's one of the things that's really missing today between higher ed and business. Some do this well. But I don't think generally we have a very deliberate exchange of needs and ideas.

Senior Executive F (Publicly traded)

Female president at one of the largest global e-commerce companies. Interview length: 43 minutes.

Before assuming her current position, this senior executive had worked in a wide array of roles and lived in many different places. She emphasised how much her personal life, and family relationships and experiences, had taught her about challenges, losses, resilience, hope and how the world is still falling short of embracing diversity in gender, ethnicity, religion, and other areas. She emphasised growing into a bold go-first mindset as a leader and why she felt compelled to continually stretch and deepen how she learns.

During the course of the interview, she referred to her preferred approach to learning as experimental, integrative, often high in risk, bold, value-based, impatient and oriented toward making an impact. She said:

[M]y pattern for learning has been to always put myself in a risk position and try something new…. I don't think I had words for it until I understood the neuroscience…so I now describe it as a connected thinker…. So that kind of understanding of being someone who can see connections or non-obvious pattern matching, like that…. I feel like part of what I can uniquely offer often is connecting things and understanding that was the value. [T]hat that wasn't something that everybody could do was one of the sort of epiphanies for me. It's like that's part of my special thing.

She said:

> I don't want to do something that ten other people can do and do well
> and already do well. [What I focus on] is where can I make some kind of
> unique contribution either it can be...within a person or a team or in a
> larger societal effort like, 'What is it that will sort of add something
> unique to the pile of contributions that everybody's making?' So that's
> the bar I hold for myself. I don't want to succeed in a little way and for
> whatever. So everything for me has been big.

She noted that there can be substantial personal discomfort associated with
her learning style, saying, 'I generally jump in and get to like, "When I figure
out—oh, my God, I'm [going to] drown"'; and 'I think it's harder because
obviously the fear factor—as you get more senior—of failing'; and 'I think that's
the big part is if you're intentional and you're willing to stay vulnerable and
take risks'.... '[A]ll of these things always have risks associated with it. And
viewing your risk as a positive thing, a positive rather than a negative one.'

She said that she becomes uneasy when her responsibilities are not fully
challenging her:

> [Y]ou'll see that pattern repeat for me as I tend to when I get at all
> comfortable, I find the next thing.... I tend to hard pivot.... [M]y
> husband will joke that I'm a change junkie. I tell people I follow my
> curiosity, which apparently takes me a lot of places. So that's been my
> pattern.

The energising challenges of new learning are high in her current role, she
said, and effective teams are essential for success:

> We don't know what we're doing. We're testing a bunch of stuff. That
> kind of ambiguity for some people is like horrifying, right? But if you
> like to energize and you can see yourself contributing and you kind of
> see how you can take us to the next level, then join me.... I like very,
> very diverse teams.... How can I learn new things? How can I learn from
> the people that I work with that have different life experiences or
> educational experiences than me?... I do find I bring people on teams
> that I share values with, not necessarily skill sets but that there's a
> value comparison to, 'Are you an impact type of person?'

'A virtuous cycle.' She said that sharing ideas with others is central to her learning approach, and it inspires her to learn more and helps her cope with 'painful learnings':

> I find every time I share what I learned with someone else, they share what they learn with me.... [W]e call it a virtuous cycle [at her company].... [M]y deal is if I share my perspective with you, if you try any of it you have to let me know what worked or what didn't.... I then get to feel my impact, right?... I learned something and then I was able to teach it to someone else. They applied it and they were successful. Then that to me is very energizing.... I think part of the reason it's baked in is because I get the reward, right? Like I take in the reward system to my learning systems, so the learning is not so painful. I mean I certainly have plenty of painful learnings but I bake in enough sort of rewards to the way I approach these things that I think I harvest the learning and I try and leverage it, in as broad or wide as I can.

Senior Executive G (Publicly traded)

Female president of a large marketing organisation, former executive vice president of sales development for a media technology delivery company; board member of large credit union. Interview length: 42 minutes.

This leader made a significant shift from serving as a top executive at a major media company to becoming the president of a small start-up marketing enterprise. She emphasised an array of key differences in her roles and responsibilities related to learning—and her pride in how the much-smaller enterprise had to be more curious and ingenious just to survive. She noted how much more actionable learning seemed to be with a smaller, highly committed team than it had been in the more traditional and established company. She also highlighted some of the advantages she saw in women senior executives over their male peers.

Having previously been an executive at a large company before starting her own business, she contrasted the learning opportunities in those two settings:

> When you're in a big company, there's bigger budgets for things like training and development. There's HR emphasis around training and development. And when you transition to a smaller company, leadership and training is somewhat redefined because in a small business, jobs have more overlap and budgets are more nebulous and volatile, I would say. And you have to be committed to continuing to learn or you won't. And it's really easy in a small business where people say, 'So I don't have time to train or keep learning because I'm running a small business and it's painful'. Well, it is painful. But you also have a lot of flexibility that you don't have when you're in the corporate cog.

She said that industry associations provide substantial support for learning by small business leaders:

> [I]n a smaller company with smaller budgets and smaller resource base…we tap into our industry associations…. [T]here's more research than you can even digest and free courses or webinars that you can participate in live. Or you can dial back in later because they're all recorded…. And then we also have intensive multi-day training sessions that are tailored toward whatever might be relevant to what you're working on.

She said that another way she has 'embraced learning' is by serving on the board of a large financial services organisation and sharing experience and expertise:

> [Y]ou do realise as you are in this group with other people that are all different backgrounds and if you allow yourself to learn from them and offer what you know in, in your expertise, it applies to your business. It applies to your life. It applies to all these different things and it's worth making the time for.

She said that at training events provided by others, '[Y]ou get to meet new people that have a new perspective', and those new perspectives can be very valuable. She described a businessperson whose ideas and mentoring helped her substantially expand her customer base and she said that being open, transparent and vulnerable in that setting had led to her successful learning experience:

> [M]y point in that story is that without training, had I not been committed to go into training, and meeting with other people and opening new ideas…and having open and transparent conversations and being vulnerable, and telling people, 'Hey, I'm concerned about this area of my business', nobody can really help you with your business unless you're able to tell them what you're concerned about.

The younger generation seems to have continual learning in their DNA. She observed:

> I think it's common in the next generation of leaders that are coming because that's part of their DNA, is that appetite for continued education. I think there are people at my age and older who feel like, 'I did my education. I've paid my education dues'.… I see the younger generation and their appetite for learning, it's just insatiable. Like they are just spongy. They want to know things.

She remarked regarding understanding the future that is going to be created by today's youth ('the elementary school and middle school kids'):

> I am convinced that we're so busy trying to solve the current problem that we have not anticipated the impact of the future problem, which doesn't have to be a problem if we would collaborate and relate with it now instead of being a by-product or a victim of whatever's [going to] happen—trying to get on the journey with them. I would sure love to be along for the ride and learn it at the same time instead of this catch-up stuff. Playing catch-up is no fun for anyone.

Senior Executive H (Publicly traded)

Female CEO of a consulting firm; coach of senior leaders and teams; former president and CEO, entertainment publications company. Interview length: 32 minutes.

This leader stepped away from her role as executive of a media entertainment company because of health challenges. She explained how difficult that transition was and how it awakened in her a drive to apply her hard-won wisdom—for example, about health, energy, and personal life as factors impacting work—to other leaders by starting her own executive coaching firm.

She described herself as 'a voracious, almost insatiable information gatherer', who is 'always looking for, what's the best practice? What's the cutting edge? What's the new thing?'

She said that effective organisations keep learning and growing, or else they will 'get run over':

> There is a stark difference between the organisations that are a learning culture, a growing culture, where it is about CI [continuous improvement] and whether that's technical skill learning or behavioral skill learning and leadership…. [T]hey're just leaps and bounds ahead of the other companies…. I don't think people can exist in today's environment, frankly, for very long. They certainly aren't going to be happy for long. You just have to change and adapt and grow or you will get run over.

For her, she said, there is a necessary action component of learning:

> [P]utting myself in challenging situations where I actually have to practice and put the information, the knowledge, the things that I'm learning into action, into practice…. [W]ords don't teach; action and experience do. And it's through that action and experience that it's solidified and you learn to adjust and maneuver.

Risk-taking is an essential aspect of that kind of learning, she said:

> [A]s I have continued to learn and watched learners and watched people who have actually grown and I've seen them grown to the next level of their ability and capability, it's those who step out and are more willing to make mistakes, who are more willing to take risks, who don't fear as much looking stupid or not doing it right the first time.

She observed that leaders she has known have consistently learned from a willingness to take risks:

> [W]here they've learned the most, they always recount situations or experiences they had. They don't [emphasise]… 'I had a great leader who was a role model', or 'I read this thing'. But the real learning they recount, it's always the toughest situations that they had to put themselves through or went through.

She said that interacting with other learners was also essential for her:

> [T]he real learning, I think putting myself in circles with really interesting, thought-provoking people staying truly open-minded and learning the skill of starting to question previous beliefs or things that I experienced in the past and how I might do it differently now based on where I've come between then and now.

Connect the near and the far. She said that the ability to combine a future orientation with present awareness is a major factor in the learning of successful leaders:

> [Y]ou have to be scanning the horizon as a president or senior leader everywhere, and it's coming at you from all different directions. [Y]ou'd have to be really practiced and skilled—talk about learning!—to be able to step back and almost remove yourself from the here and now, be so in the moment.

She said that reflection—'to freeze frame on those moments and watch them with a very, very specific, narrow perspective'—is a crucial aspect of an overall learning process, which she described in the following way:

> [Y]ou start with [having] an intention, start your day, start with an intention. Intention, intention. Then there's practice. Practice is [going to] go well, and practice is not [going to] go well. And then, there's

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reflection.... Reflect on what happened. What worked? What didn't work? Then back to the intention. Re-intend.

Senior Executives of Privately-Held For-Profit Companies

Within this group, there were two board chairs, two chief executive officers, two managing partners, one chief financial officer and one chief investment/strategy officer. One of the chief executive officers (Executive A) participated in a follow-up interview. I want to reiterate that I developed these narratives as the interviews were completed, before beginning any formal analysis, and they are presented here to give a sense of the breadth and nature of the interviewees' comments, not to demonstrate or reinforce the codes that I selected (see Chapter 5) or the categorisations I created (see Chapter 6).

Senior Executive A (Privately held)

Male CEO of a fast-growing company in the high-technology sector. He has more than 20 years' experience in that sector and was previously CEO of a high-tech company that was recently acquired by a large professional services firm.

This leader has experience as a serial executive entrepreneur in the complex, fast-changing software field. His challenges centre on the pace and complexity of change, the need to experiment and execute excellently in the present while continually speeding his leadership team's progress toward opportunities that can quickly disappear if they are not seized.

This executive also participated in an in-person follow-up interview.

He said he views learning as an essential responsibility of his job:

You have to accept that there is a learning scale as a CEO that you need to take very seriously. And I think it's an element of success or failure in technology companies. I accept that as part of my day-to-day, 24-hour job. That I need to have learning embedded [in] the work I do.... This is a part of my disciplined job as a CEO, to have learning as part of my work. And I gear that toward what do I need to learn, at the pace I need to learn it, to be armed to make decisions and lead this company?

He observed that failure to carry out the right kinds of learning creates a dangerous lag in decision-making, one that could make or break a company:

[I]f you're not focused on learning, your decision process becomes slowed down because you don't have any kind of support system to make decisions. [N]ot having the need to pause, go learn, come back to that decision—that's a success/failure inflection point in my experience.

He noted that learning has to be based on anticipation of what will be needed for the organisation to succeed—'anticipating change is what we need to do'. He added:

I spend a small amount of my time focused on what's now. I have an engineering team that's driven by a technical road map. So then it leads to, 'What do we need to be thinking about so these things are in place to continue to grow?'.... And that's extremely important, because there's things we need to do now to start making sure we can be ready for that. And I'm trying to spread myself very wide to see, what are the indicating effects in the market right now that lead me to believe with data, that we should start looking into this?

He said of executives of high-technology companies:

I think a lot of them are winging it and hoping, because if you look at the success rate, I think the success rate is aligned to who has the discipline to stay ahead of this and make decisions based on learning.

He commented that a number of well-known CEOs had recently failed because 'they could not learn at pace...they got so far behind they could never catch up.... They [seemed] really good until they weren't'. He added, 'Anticipating change...you have to be conditioned for change.... I'm trying to get everyone conditioned for change because it is going to be a constant environment'.

'There is no playbook for what's in front of me'. He observed:

> This is the second company I've been in as CEO where we're in a very intense growth and scaling of a complex technology company, and a cloud-based company. And I think there's some relevance there because the speed at which cloud-based software companies need to grow in today's environment is so intense. So as a leader there's no playbook for it.... There's no playbook for what's in front of me because you're moving at a pace that, you know, the tracks just aren't laying down fast enough.... I've taken fundamental lessons learned from the last time [he was a CEO], but what I found is it's only given me a sense of where I need to build from.

He emphasised that his learning is pragmatic, not abstract:

> This is not about [senior executives] go[ing] off to a course to relax and do some learning. Not reading a book over the weekend about management.... I'm not a fan of [traditional management books] because I think we're moving at a pace where you can't rely on that kind of stuff.

He named several types of sources that he turned to for focused learning: blog posts, podcasts, targeted books and articles—'[I]f you start seeking those [less common ways of learning] out you will find ways to stay ahead of stuff'—and also 'listening and learning from other people'. He described a carefully structured process that his organisation had undertaken to learn from customers, and he also mentioned that he was '[b]roadening the spectrum of where you're [going to] learn from' by carefully observing companies outside of his company's industry sector.

'Give me the real feedback'. He discussed the necessity of having a learning-oriented team, where truth and trust support learning:

> Hard truths, candour and if you can get to a place where everyone's interest is the strength of the company, so let's have conversations around how we get there, and give me the real feedback ... and I want you to tell me the truths around what's going on. You can build an incredible company like that.

He noted: 'You have to be tremendously vulnerable—the kind of company I built, which I'm very proud of, is pointing out where I need to learn'. He said that many executives fail to learn with full effectiveness in part because they can't create or thrive in what he called a 'high candor environment'.

'We're at the edge of collapse or chaos'. He said:

> You have to be very upfront with people that this is an environment you are going to be uncomfortable often. And when you feel like we're on the edge of collapse or chaos, you're probably—I mean, we are. We are working on the edge. And I think there is a subset of people that just can't deal with that. They can deal with it maybe briefly and then they can't. And then, there's another group of people that completely thrive on it.

He stated:

> We talked a lot in the early days in this company, that we are going to try a lot of things….We're going to make decisions based on really pragmatic analysis of what we're about to do, but we're [also] going to be okay that some of the stuff's not going to work. And when it doesn't we're also going to plan what our trigger points are for pulling out or doubling down. I think a lot of people that get too committed to decisions.

'Where could we have done something different?' He reflected:

> Where could we have done something different? Where can we do things in parallel? Where did we waste time? Just by being really honest and critical of what happened…. And those were our wins, but we still know, even from the win that we are going to learn.

Senior Executive B (Privately held)

Male managing director and chief investment officer of a venture capital firm; a former member of the United States House of Representatives. Interview length: 31 minutes.

This leader moved from a senior government role to a senior executive position at a venture capital firm that invests in inner-city developments and partners with social organisations. This context creates great pressure to strategically plan each development because the profit margins are very limited while the expectations are exceptionally high. With more than a hundred projects selected and enacted each year, the challenges of learning are crucial to many aspects of his day-to-day work.

He described his company as operating in a fast-moving entrepreneurial space, with no precedents to follow:

> I am every single week faced with brand new industries that I know nothing about, that I am trying to get my hands around well enough to make a decision.... Every week they're just coming at you and there's [got to] be new deals and it has to keep moving.... [T]here's nobody that's very closely replicating what we're doing because we're just doing something that we are so far sincerely unique.

His company's investments are based on assessments about the future:

> How can you get from a company that has 25 employees today to 100, three, four, five years from now, right? That's the impact we're looking for. So you've got to be trying to envision the world down the road.

Consequently, he said, learning is essential: '[M]y job—which is, interestingly, and in that it's very intentional from my perspective—my job is to learn'. He said that being in an environment that requires constant rapid learning is consistent with his personality:

> I'm a steep learning curve kind of person. That's just what I have always gravitated toward in my professional life.... I always [want to] see just a super steep learning curve because that's—it's my personality to need that constant stimulation.

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Overall, he said, he has become very good at asking questions. Describing a chance encounter at a wedding reception, he said:

> I started quizzing him and five minutes in the conversation he's like, 'You ask really good questions'. And I was like, 'Oh, well, this is what I do for living. It's pester people about their businesses'.

He said his questioning skills are applied in a number of learning contexts, including the following:

> *Tutorials from experts*: 'I do it mainly by trying to find really smart people to give me short tutorials that I can steal from'.
>
> *'Triangulating'*: 'We try very quickly to triangulate by getting different people to kind of tell you their perspective on what's supposed to be the same story and see if it matches up'.
>
> *Retaining outside advisors*: '[W]e hire outside experts a little bit to educate us on these things;.. we use professional resources for learning, right? We have services that provide organised information to us'.

From the sources mentioned above, he has to create a novel solution, which is not likely to be the conventional approach that most people might take. Speaking of his discussions with his team about how his business could best be structured, he said:

> I spend a ton of time asking people, 'How should we be organized?' [I]t's interesting to see people fall back into the patterns they're familiar with and how they think the world should be organized. I spend a lot of my time refereeing the guys who go, 'Well, those guys are doing it wrong. That model will never work. It doesn't work the way this business has worked for me in the places I worked before I came here'. And I'm like, 'Yeah, well, we're not exactly like that'.... [I]t's interesting to see people fall back into the patterns they're familiar with and how they think the world should be organized, and those people seem to struggle to understand why there's another model.

Senior Executive C (Privately held)

Male founder, president and CEO of one of the largest privately held companies in the world—setting records for over 20 straight years in private equity investments and then, over the past five years, switching focus to owning, holding and leading a portfolio of market-leading companies with combined revenues over $5 billion. Interview length: 43 minutes.

This leader led a transformation that seldom ever occurs—taking a highly successful investment company and turning it into a high-performance management enterprise that must lead, staff and operate a collection of companies in five industries. Although he felt he was driving his team to regularly learn, during the interview he committed to making learning even more central going forward.

He said his organisation is making a 'complete pivot', to 'build a legacy not only for ourselves but for those who join us'.

> [T]hat means there's a lot more responsibility on building a talent pipeline and then talking about culture and making sure that you're not just thinking about employees or putting the banners up, but you're actually showing those employees each and every day that what they're doing is more important than what you're doing.

He said that because of the shift in the nature of the business, he and his team were now able to act in a more future-oriented way than they had in the past:

> We've always thought long-term, but, you know, we had investors, so, you know, they wanted us to buy and they wanted us to build, but then they wanted a return. And now we don't have to do that.

'Just change everything'. He said that in order to help himself make the transition from old ways of thinking to new ways, he initiated many sharp alterations in his routines, including changing his habitual times of day for doing things (jogging in the evening instead of the morning, for example);

changing staff's assigned responsibilities; and powerfully shaking up all of his office routines:

> I literally hired a brand-new assistant...and I said, 'All right, you've been in a high-tech environment, I'm low tech, I do everything backwards'. I said, 'Just change everything. I'm not [going to] like it, it's [going to] be awful, it's [going to] hurt'.

Create a 'bias for learning' and test lots of new things. 'We're trying everything...just changing and shifting and trying different things and testing', he said. He noted that his company's culture statement had consisted of three fundamental ideas—'entrepreneurial, bias for action, and trust'—but that he would add 'a bias for learning' as a fourth element:

> There's a bias for learning and I'm just [disappointed] that I never thought about it on our culture statement, because it's really—you know what I'll do is I'll use that as a subheading to bias for action, but I'll talk to our people—it would be a really neat [change]. We've done a decent job with our top like 160 people; we're having troubles getting, you know, deeper than that, that's a great—that would be a great segue, that bias for learning. I love that.

He said that he urges his team to focus attention on the places where it would have the biggest impact:

> Got to look at what you can affect and what's most important, where those intersect, that's where to spend your time and energy. We've used that a ton because, you know, just saying a bias for action isn't good enough. You have to step back and say, 'Hey, where's my best use?

He said that he could surmise from his experience that many executives do not learn as much as they could:

> [I]f you look at like a lot of our top guys here and women, they were running big companies. ...some of the biggest in the world. And I would say that they—a lot of them—have a template or model they use. They go in and they use it and I have to remind them more often than I would have assumed I had to...to step back and think about what this means long-term for the people and products and brand. . .

He said that those executives and others often use the wrong criteria to assess their effectiveness:

> I'm shocked at all these top executives that...they're scheduled every minute of the day and evening. So...all they're doing is going back and forth to meetings, back and forth to meetings, quick decisions, quick decisions, quick decisions. They don't get to do what I get to do, which is I spend a couple hours a day just thinking and going through, what's most important, where do I need to spend my time, how should I do this?...[T]hey just keep asking for more, more, more and their badge of honor is how busy they are, how much they fly, how tired they are, all that stuff.

In contrast, he said that the most effective people in his office create time for thinking and learning—and that not using a computer during that time makes a difference:

> You'll see people in the morning come in and they spend a couple hours just doing stuff, thinking—they spend a couple hours just really planning things out, thinking through things and then they get down to business. And one of the keys I've noticed, is not turning on their computer. Once you turn on the computer, your day's being scheduled.

Senior Executive D (Privately held)

Male managing partner of a top regional accounting and professional services firm. Interview length: 27 minutes.

This leader was challenged to lead a regional accounting services and consulting firm from a modest ranking to the upper echelon of *Fortune* magazine's "Best Places to Work" list. Accomplishing that required him to step outside his normal industry learning channels and seek out innovative learning that he could share and apply with his leadership team. He also championed getting more leadership voices from younger members of his profession into his leadership discussions.

He named sources of learning throughout the interview, saying he is a 'voracious reader' of books, newspapers and periodicals; that he listens to radio broadcasts that include National Public Radio and BBC Radio; that he listens to podcasts; that he has attended very valuable training events; that he seeks out learning from his 'peers in similar-sized firms'; and that he looks to learn from 'anything that stimulates my mind and anybody that does—that's what I'm looking for more of'.

He said: '[P]robably the most stimulating now for me is…regular interactions with younger people, tech-savvy, that [have not] learned what I learned and don't have to unlearn it'.

He also said that he learns from regular visits to clients ('probably 100 clients a year') and that these interactions can be particularly valuable. From meeting with clients during the international financial crisis in 2008/2009, for example, he said, 'I got a much better stance from talking to people than I did reading the papers and listening to the experts'.

'Get the real story,' He said:

> When I was not the CEO, I've observed somebody [when] they expressed a point of view, then I observed them express it in front of our managing partners, like, 'Wait a minute. That's different. You've just catered to what they [want to] hear'. And so [as CEO] I always tried to realise that that's human nature. And so make sure I try to cut through that and get the real story and get not what people think I [want to] hear but what's really happening…. I think people who think that way are more likely to be lifelong learners and put it into place.

He said he has noticed another form of information distortion, which he refered as 'CEO syndrome':

> W]hen you get that, you don't listen to other points of view…. And people who think they know it, or are told they know it all the time, or are told how good they are all the time—those are the people that I think struggle with that.

Acknowledging what they don't know is important for leaders, he said:

> I've observed a lot of great leaders and when they admit they don't know
> something you know, or they're not afraid that you know more than
> they do, that's really powerful. That unleashes—that empowers people
> to come out with ideas and thoughts, and I mean that to me, that's it.

'If you don' fail a lot, you haven't tried and earned enough'. He said:

> I believe that if you don't fail a lot, you haven't tried [and learned]
> enough. And I think you want to be able to fail—just don't fail big. I
> could tell you probably more failures that I've had than successes; it's
> just that the successes have been big and the failures have been small.

Regarding a quotation from the founder of his company—'Mistakes are the
tuition of experience. Just don't pay the tuition twice'.—he said, 'I just love
that, you know, because it gives you license to make mistakes'.

He advocated using pilot tests: [W]e do have some disciplines at the firm
around new ideas and then getting small teams to implement that—to try to
pilot. You know, we pilot a lot of things'.

When looking for leaders, he said, 'I try to make sure that they're not afraid of
change. People that aren't afraid of change generally aren't afraid to learn'. He
said in a methodology that his company recently implemented for developing
successors for top leaders, a core question that is asked is, '[W]hat is it that
they haven't done, or haven't learned, or what's their gap?' And then, he said,
the company is 'really intentional about getting them training, getting them
experiences. I'm a big believer in experiential learning, so let's get them the
experiences they need to be able to do that role'.

He added:

> [A] lot of people will say 'We're world-class' [while] pointing out
> somebody's faults. And I think most organizations…aren't necessarily
> world-class in helping them fix them. And those—I studied the people in
> our firm who have developed the most new partners and they are very
> good at saying: 'Here's where you are. Here's where you need to be. And

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I'm [going to] give you a bunch of experiences along the way because you're not going to get there linearly. It's [going to] be a step process with very uneven steps'.

'I love people that are curious', he said. 'Because it's the beginning. It doesn't mean you're going to be a great leader but…it's a good start'.

Senior Executive E (Privately held)

Male chairman and chief executive officer of a privately held manufacturing-engineering company generating billions of dollars in revenue each year. Interview length: 25 minutes.

This executive had devoted more than a decade to leading the growth of premier-quality product offerings and creating innovative solutions for industries that include ones where mistakes can result in major environmental damage. He and his executive team developed and championed a distinctive way of giving organisational leaders territorial rights across the Americas and beyond while keeping those leaders in competition with each other to innovate and win new market opportunities.

Regarding how he learns, he said:

It's about being a life-long learner. So I take that very seriously…. [H]ow do I do that? I do a ton of reading, a ton…. [F]ive books a month; like that type of thing. Maybe two of them would be fiction or historical fiction, then a couple of books on topics that might interest me. I think when I was about four, [my father] said, 'There's no such thing as a stupid question'. And I'm sure my father regrets saying that, wherever he rests in peace. But I can ask a lot of questions quickly…. I observe, take a lot of inputs. I try to correlate different things.

Related to asking questions, he said:

[Y]ou know, I'm not afraid to be vulnerable.... I think a lot of leaders don't [want to] be vulnerable. So...I think it limits their ability to learn because then you're [going to] have to [hang around] by yourself or with...a small set of people you might be comfortable with, whereas if you're more vulnerable about it, you probably have a broader opportunity to learn because it opens up so many more doors.

He said he also encourages questioning, by being an example to others:

[I]f I try to understand something and ask questions, read about it, usually then, I'll ask a question, a correlative question, at a meeting that maybe somebody else wouldn't have thought about or somebody will say, 'Boy, that's a challenging [question]'. And so people can observe that in action.

Regarding the context in which his company operates, he said:

The pace of change is certainly accelerating quite a bit.... [It] seems like you're always swimming upstream. [E]ither it's so much coming at you and it's the information—it's ...how you get and obtain information [that] has changed so much in my 40-year career. It's just amazing.

He said that when responding to emergent issues, 'I don't try to have a solution. I try to figure out a pathway.' He continued:

I'll say, 'You know, this particular thing is happening. How might we really talk about that? Who should be in the room? What can we analogize to? Who's kind of done that? What would be the upside [and the] downside? How can we experiment?' I typically don't say, 'Okay. Now I'm being directive and this is the absolute way to go'. I tend to be very collaborative, going back to asking a lot of questions...I just try to think about different pathways of helping get to the answer....

Regarding practices that he encourages at his company, he said:

[W]e mandate, so to speak, some reflection as part of our onboarding process. ...We've had people even try blogging to do that. And there's a little bit of that [reflection] in [the leadership competency model his company uses], so it's not mandated 100%.... [W]e do talk about curiosity and we like people to be curious and explore things and, you know, not just settle at the surface. So we talk about it a lot. Again, we

don't have a really good measurement system [for this] and it's probably not as uniform as it could be. But we certainly talk about it a lot.

He described his personal practices with regard to reflection:

[P]eople like to say, 'How do you have time to reflect?' When I work out with a trainer three day a week, I reflect. I don't really like [the exercise] so I use the time to reflect. When I drive into work and I'm not doing voicemails, I reflect. When I take a walk of a Sunday morning, I reflect. So I think there's tons of time to do it if you just train your mind, so to speak, to do it.

He wondered whether younger people are as good as he is at learning:

I have 27-, 25- and 21-year-old children. …They certainly can take in a lot of information. They have a lot of ways to do that, but the ability to really experience something and be reflective on it, I don't see that on the upswing, quite honestly.

Senior Executive F (Privately held)

Female co-managing partner of one of the two largest global law firms; former senior counsel to two Fortune 500 companies. Interview length: 25 minutes.

This senior leader acquired extensive experience working within the senior executive teams of Fortune 500 companies. She was outspoken as to the intentional or unintentional barriers many male senior executives seem to put in the way of learning, respect, inclusion, diversity and innovation. She talked about the array of practical workarounds she had created to deal with such challenges and resistance. In particular she emphasised her belief that the best leaders take risks on people and help them surpass previous limitations.

She said that major sources of learning for her have been observing, asking questions and listening:

> I've spent a large part of my life and my career watching other people do things that I am not familiar with and then deciding whether it's something useful or not. And if it is I'll learn it, incorporate it....

> I'm much more open to asking questions and to admitting I don't know something, and that goes along with the learning.

> [L]istening, to me, is one of the most important things I do.... I think key for leaders, as I said, is the ability to not just listen, but hear and read body language.... I think people who can read body language in a room have so much more ability to understand the dynamics of what's going on.

She described a 'willingness to be vulnerable' as an important asset when one is learning through asking questions, and she said regarding vulnerability, '[T]hat isn't a particularly positive thing for a woman in a man's world, frankly'.

In general, she distinguished her learning approach and overt curiosity as being different from what she has seen in male leaders, saying, 'I sometimes wonder when I'm in business situations how some of these guys can actually remain in the positions that they're in'.

> I think leaders often don't listen enough because so many times, so many times, Robert, they're guys. And so many times, they think they really have it all under control. I don't think that way.... I've worked for a lot of CEOs. I have been in board rooms with a lot of CEOs. So many of the CEOs I unfortunately have been exposed to are driven largely by their own egos and how everything around them impacts them as opposed to how they're impacting others. And not only that but go from one CEO job to another when they never really were successful in the first one or the second one. And I attribute that, in large part, to the fact that, you know, once you're in that world, you stay in that world. You tend to stay in that world unless you, you know, are a serial killer or something, right? I mean, you end up having at least enough supporters around you, or members of the board who you cater to as— for lack of a better term, that you get, even a small circle and that small circle stays. People use the referrals and that kind of thing. And so I find that to be an unfortunate aspect of that—the clubbiness of the male leadership—and that's all male, there's no question in my mind.

'Reach down and pull people up around you'. Of her leadership approach, she said:

> [T]he ones who succeeded with me were the people who listened, who were team players, who shared with their teammates, who actually didn't hog the credit, but actually nurtured other people and gave them credit. And when I say nurture, I mean reach down and pull people up around you and make them better than you, and that's your legacy. And you do that consciously every time you do something.

She noted that failure is always a possibility and it can lead to important learning:

> [A] good leader knows that you've [got to] take a risk on people. You have [got to] take on chance on people. You have [got to] let them succeed or fail. And if they fail, it's even more important that you're there to either figure out what happened with them, or go a different direction and there's a million different paths that lead from that.

Senior Executive G (Privately held)

Female chief financial officer for one of the top three entrepreneurial start up, venture capital funding and mentorship platforms; former VP of finance of one of the top three social media companies. Interview length: 22 minutes.

This executive brought a highly disciplined business analytics and finance mindset to how entrepreneurial start-ups can best be launched and grown. She emphasised constructively disconcerting questions as a means of igniting deepened learning. She has worked to impart a highly adaptive start-up mentality to her executive team, which selects and helps guide top technology start-up companies.

She sees herself as constantly learning and highly driven by curiosity. She said, '[B]oredom is poison for me. And so I can't [even] do a simple, boring task. I won't do it well because it doesn't interest me'.

Because she is such a such a voracious learner, she said she intentionally creates time to 'settle and focus', explaining: 'I think for me that's where I can best absorb or solidify what I've learned or take my learning to a deeper level'. She does this through meditation and also through athletic activities like hiking or bicycling. 'When I intentionally try to turn my brain off to ingesting information or advice…the things that bubble up are very clarifying thoughts and questions', she said.

She described her professional learning process as experimental in nature and focused on impact:

> [I] am constantly learning and wondering, 'What will work better? What's most impactful?' And you sort of take your hypothesis and you start testing it out and you start seeing like, 'Yep, that's exactly what I thought, but maybe not the impact that I expected'.

'Give first'. She said that both the nature of the organisation where she works and its core values place learning at the centre of the organisation's activities and influence its hiring and retention policies:

> [O]ur leading value is give first. And, you know, that can mean a lot of things, but very, very generally to us it means that you're willing to give your experience and your knowledge freely, willingly to help others succeed. And so I think that's probably the leading characteristic that we screen by.

She described her organisation as one in which reciprocal learning takes place through conversation and 'a virtuous cycle of giving allows you to be a recipient of knowledge and experience'. In an e-mail sent after her interview, she clarified that she learns most from her colleagues: 'I learn most from the brilliant folks that I'm surrounded by and asking questions and trying to soak up their experiences and pull the knowledge out of their brains'.

'Just try it out and see'. Because she has worked in a number of fast-growing organisations that were based on innovation and 'doing something new and different', she said she is accustomed to workplaces in which failure or being wrong can be a productive and valuable source of new information:

> [Y]ou have to be open to learning and being wrong and quickly adjusting to new bits of input...with a willingness, as we say around here, to fail fast.... That allows you to collectively move much faster. So putting out there the hypothesis and the—just try it out and see, being open to it not being what you thought and it being exactly wrong will just help you get to the right place faster.

She said that she affects the culture of learning in her team and others by 'demonstrating an ability or a willingness, or a vulnerability to be wrong'. She added, 'If I can demonstrate that myself, then in my team, hopefully, they see that as an example and they are more bold in making a fast decision'.

She said a number of her organisation's corporate partners value her organisation's capacity for rapid learning:

> [W]e hear things like that fairly regularly from our corporate partners. They have a strong desire to move more quickly to either catch up on the curve or get ahead of the curve. And so they work with [us] as an innovation partner to help get some start-up DNA injected into their blood to help them move faster.

Senior Executive H (Privately held)

Female chair and former CEO and president of a multi-billion-dollar service-based franchise company (owning more than 2,500 franchise-based businesses). Interview length: 28 minutes.

This senior executive inherited her leadership role sooner than expected, when her father died at a young age, and she credits learning for enabling her to succeed and build a values-centred company that outperforms the rest of her industry.

Regarding the company, she said:

> [The company'a CEO] sees [the company] as a 'leadership factory'. It's all about training, training, training.... [W]hat we call the growth team, which is [the CEO's] executive team,.. they've [got to] constantly be learning.... [W]e actually have a university built within [the company], that's all about helping these coaches, you know, because they're really business coaches, who must learn and grow, so that they can help [the customers] continue to learn and grow and be more successful in their businesses.... There's a real focus on constant, never-ending learning here and I don't have to drive it. It's being driven because of the systems that have been created.

One fundamental feature of that learning orientation is constant testing, she said:

> [W]e're constantly testing [better ways forward]. We're doing these small fast tests.... In the old days we would come up with an initiative and we're [going to] go brandwide. And we had not even tested it really with one of the brands. But we're much smarter about the way we do that in the work environment.

Another aspect is collaboration:

> [T]here's so much more collaboration going on as it comes to learning, where there's somebody who's great on our team at dealing with behavior and so that person gets up and part of [the company's] university is they teach the rest of the leadership team how to deal with behavior, etc.

She described several ways that she advances her own learning:

> I go away and be with a group of other like-minded entrepreneurs from many different industries, mostly none from [the industry her company is in] and put myself in an environment of being coached through some tools to help me think bigger about my future both professionally and personally.

> I grew up listening to motivational tape programs—all these great leaders who got you to think along the same lines, bigger about your future and how to deal with issues in hand. So that's something I just carried forward. I've got in front of me right now an audiotape business book summary.

I attend conferences still. Many times it's a conference I'm speaking at.... And then I sit and I listen to all the other speakers. So I get so much more from those events than I could possibly be giving because I'm always learning.

[I]n my co-chairman job...the experience still continues to be a great learning. As the company has grown 100% in the last 3 years, I've had to work very hard to let our CEO and the team do what they do and to cheer them on and not get in the middle of the great work that they're doing.

[W]hen I think about personal growth, it's being humble and being willing to stand back and learn from others who are doing things differently than maybe I would've done them and being okay with that.

Regarding her current exploration (which she described by saying: 'I believe we're all called to do something.... What is this next thing where I can really make a contribution and get my—work hard to get my ego out of the way?'), she said:

I spend a lot of time at church.... I attend mass five days a week on average and [am] going to more spiritual retreats. Many of these [are] with my husband, which is a beautiful thing. And I'm finding silence. It's the greatest retreat. So we've got a retreat we're attending [soon], a 40-hour retreat of silence.... I attended one a year and a half ago and it was the best 40 hours of my life. Best vacation I've had in a long time. It was just being quiet, getting away from the noise of the world and getting into what you might call the classroom of silence.

Vulnerability is huge.... [I]t's easy to be attached to an identity of who you've been, but being okay to let go of that and saying, 'This is what I'm supposed to do next. It's [going to] be different'.

I'm actually going to test myself by taking the rest of the month off.... But that feels like a big stretch to me. But I would say it's a test. I'm [going to] test myself because what I [want to] do is get away from it all...spending more time studying and reflecting and really just praying about the future and what is that next test.

She said of other leaders she has seen:

They're so busy being busy that they're not stepping away and being thoughtful about what really needs to happen to grow their businesses

and their people. I mean, the business doesn't grow unless the people grow.

Summary

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, I created these 24 summaries to begin the analytical process in a way recommended by several experts (e.g., Seidman, 2013; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015), and the summaries are not presented here to illustrate or substantiate my coding or categorisation decisions (discussed in Chapters 4 and 6, respectively), but to show the nature of the interviewees' descriptions. Neither the content nor the subheadings are intended as assignments of weight or particular emphasis to what they said.

For further depth and detail on the primary data, see Appendix C.

Chapter 6

Making Sense of the Data

In this chapter, I present my main findings. To begin, I describe how as the data analysis proceeded, I added empirical codes to the *a priori* codes based on what emerged from the interviews, how I condensed and consolidated the findings and how I then identified what I considered to be the primary codes for inclusion. I then describe how the codes were categorised into broader subject areas, and I discuss the relationship of those categories to the literature review and conceptual framework. The chapter ends with a discussion and interpretation of the data.

Creating empirical codes: Initial code expansions

Empirical codes are identified or created while investigating the data, as points of emphasis and commonality are discovered. Empirical codes are created through an iterative process that involves comprehensive reading and note-making, focused categorising and coding, reflection, writing and re-reading (Flick, 2014). Therefore, empirical codes are more likely to be used in inductive research, where the data are examined and analysed before consideration of the existing theory and literature. Yet these two forms of coding are also seen as interrelated, and in my case they were: when using empirical codes, for example, my prior knowledge and experience likely helped me press for a deepened perspective as well as influenced, albeit unconsciously, at least some of my decision making (Brinkman and Kvale, 2015; Gubrium, et al, 2012; Harding, 2013; Gibson and Brown, 2010).

I initially analysed the collected data by reading my notes from each interview and transcript; underlining key phrases and thinking holistically about the data; constantly comparing and contrasting; summarising each transcript;

doing some initial interpreting; looking at my own notes for emphasis; reading the transcripts using empathy to try to perceive their meaning; and sensing commonalities of meaning where that would amount to little more than slightly restating the specific words that had been used.

As I read my interview notes and the verbatim transcripts word by word, I noted the codes in the margins, drawing attention to commonalities and potential relationships in the data set. I then eliminated unmentioned codes and created new codes that were empirical—drawn from the interviews themselves. As the data collection and analysis began, I reflected on the *a priori* codes primarily as points of reference while I intently read the transcripts word by word, made notes on tone, pauses, hesitations, and points of emphasis, and began to assemble emergent or empirical codes (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Miles et al, 2014; Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). In creating or identifying a code that reflected the most likely meaning of an individual senior executive, I noted both the context and individualised emphasis of what was expressed, realising that in many cases a code may simply restate or very slightly rephrase the spoken words (Brinkman and Kvale, 2015; Harding, 2013). I was mindful of the fact that nuances here can matter, because when a code is chosen to identify a common theme within the data it also provides a demarcation that can nudge the researcher to more closely and reflectively examine or re-examine differences in the data.

The first set two sets of empirical codes—developed after several rounds of closely examining the data—are found in Tables 6.2 and 6.7 below. Table 6.2 shows the empirical codes for the first research question, regarding the ways that senior executives learn; Table 6.7 shows the initial empirical codes for the second research question, regarding the ways that senior executives apply learning. Tables 6.1 and 6.6 show the *a priori* codes for each of those two research questions. As part of this exercise, due to a sense of overlap, I incorporated my original *a priori* category 'Factors affecting learning' into 'Ways

of learning'. I also removed some of the original *a priori* codes where they seemed to fit within a clearer empirical code from the data.

Throughout the analysis and interpretation in this study I was reminded that within qualitative data analysis, numbers can be useful for identifying, weighing and communicating the results of a study (Becker, 1970; Brinkman and Kvale, 2015; Flick, et al, 2014; Heider, 1972; Sankoff, 1971; Zentella, 1990). As discussed in Chapter 4, I noted that there is growing support for at least a limited form of counting in qualitative data analysis.

Flick (2014: 545) asserts that utilising numbers in this way is not 'statistical', and therefore is not an attempt to make a qualitative study quantitative in the conventional sense of that term (Maxwell, 2010). Rather, as Flick states (2014: 545),

> it simply makes explicit, and more precise, the implicitly numerical nature of claims such as that a particular activity, theme, or pattern is common, rare, or prevalent in the setting or interviews included in the study.

I also separated the findings that appeared with the greatest frequency. If I found that, for a number of the *a priori* or empirical codes, more than half of the senior executives shared a specific perspective, experience or view, then I would separate the findings based on that dividing line of $n = 12$ or greater. If, alternatively, that grouping of a significant number of codes fell at greater than one-third of the senior executives, then I would assemble the codes that demonstrated $n>8$.

I worked several more times through the data to reconfirm findings to date and then to begin subtracting or streamlining the codes. I also reviewed my reflective memos from the interviews themselves and from the stages of analysis. Seidman (2013) suggested separating interviewing and analysis, but I sided with Miles, et al (2014) in conducting ongoing analysis across the months that the final interviews were being recorded and transcribed, in part because

it compelled me to keep re-visiting and re-considering the data, codes, relationships and themes. Some codes that had at first appeared both in 'Ways of learning' and 'Ways of applying learning' were centred under just one of these categories. I then re-sorted the codes to reflect numerical significance.

The relatively small sample size and design of this study afforded me an additional analytic lens: during thematic analysis, when I established categories for the data codes and relationships among them, I also used numerical tallies, or counting, for each of the codes to help 'condense' the data and create comparisons based on frequency of certain responses. Taken together, these approaches helped me deepen both my analysis and interpretation perspectives.

When clarifying and, where relevant, condensing codes, I tried to examine the context and emphasis of statements or passages by each individual respondent at a higher level of interpretation, resulting in combining some slightly different codes into one, or re-confirming why specific codes should stand on their own, as discussed below.

These and other thematic analyses that drove data reduction and confirmation efforts helped me not only more clearly to value the detail of individual cases, but also to move beyond them to decipher and prioritise broader codes and categories of responses (Richards, 2009).

A Priori Codes and Initial Empirical Codes

1. Ways of Learning

In this section I will address the starting point of the analysis of ways of learning as reported by the interviewees. I will address the same topic regarding ways of applying learning in the next section.

My *a priori* codes represented the summation of what my literature review suggested I might encounter in the senior executives' responses during the interviews. Table 6.1 shows the 44 *a priori* codes I created based on the literature review related to ways of learning, after integrating all relevant items, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 4. I integrated the items from the original category identified in Chapter 2, 'Factors affecting learning', into the category 'Ways of learning'. After a careful first review of the interviews, I added 30 initial empirical codes related to ways of learning. Those are listed in Table 6.2. Tables 6.3 and 6.4 show, respectively, the numbers of responses to each of the *a priori* and empirical codes, and Table 6.5 shows all the codes ranked by number of mentions.

Table 6.1: **Ways of learning: *A priori* codes**
C: Learn by curiosity
CA: Challenging assignments
CL: Collaborative learning – communities of practice
EL: Experiential learning
F: Learn from the failures of others
FL: Learn through formal learning (in structured courses or programmes)
FSP: Find smart people committed to learning—and learn from them
GI: General interactions
GM: Learn by giving mentoring/coaching
H: Hardships
INDL: Independent learning
IH: Learn by intellectual humility/vulnerability
IFL: Informal learning
IL: Informational learning
ITL: Incentives to learn

L: Learn by listening
LPO: Learn from people and resources outside field
LT: Pressure from limited time to learn
MI: Learn by media, news inside field/industry
MO: Learn by media, news outside field/industry
MS: Mindset (e.g., growth vs. fixed)
NFL: Nonformal learning
O: Learn by observation
OFA: Overcome fear/anxiety
OLML: Overcome belief there is little more that needs to be learned
PE: Learn by professional education/training
PEO: Personal experiences outside of work
PJ: Learn by reading professional journals
PT: Learn by pilot-testing, experimenting
QO: Learn by questioning others
QP: Learn by questioning what is possible
QS: Learn by questioning self
RAL: Require application of learning by leadership team members
RCL: Require continual learning by leadership team members
RI: Learn by reading books inside field/industry
RM: Learn by receiving mentoring/coaching
RO: Learn by reading books outside field/industry
RP: Learn by reflection/reflective practice
S: Learn by sharing learning
SAV: Learn from seeking alternative views
SRR: Seek the right resources for the learning
TL: Transformational learning
WN: Learn by writing, notes, drawing, sketching

Table 6.2: **Ways of learning: The initial set of empirical codes**

AAR: Extract learning from after-action reviews
AL: Learn by associating with leaders who are learners
ALGR: Learn by accepting that learning is a general responsibility of leaders in any organisation
AN: Learn from active network of peers
BE: Learn by example: go first
BI: Follow best instincts on what to learn
CD: Learn by constructive discontent
CI: See learning as useful irritation
DC: Learn by dialogues/conversations
ERL: Give extra recognition or reward for learners
FCC: Facing challenging situations

FF: Test faster, fail faster, learn faster
HL: Hands-on learning
L: Learn by listening to the shared learnings of others
LA: Learning attitude or mindset
LBA: Learning by asking: Are we focused on earning or on repeating what we did yesterday or on being right?
LC: Continually committing to learning
LG: Learn because of learning goals
LI: Learning as means to be more innovative
LNTA: Learn by engaging with challenging situations
LOCZ: Learn by stretching outside your comfort zone
LP: Learn on purpose
LRPH: Learn by reassessing past habits and behaviours
LSO: Learn by scanning for opportunities and 'daylight'
LUC: Get comfortable being uncomfortable and thereby stretching to learn
OLML: Overcome belief there is little more that needs to be learned
P: Learn because of a passion for learning
PD: Learn by pondering differences
SHL: Selective hiring of learners
W: Learn by wondering

Table 6.3: **Ways of learning: Responses for *a priori* codes**

* designates that the code was mentioned by at least 12 of the 24 interviewees

C*: Learn by curiosity (n=17)
CA: Challenging assignments (n=4)
CL*: Learn collaboratively (n=15)
EL*: Experiential learning—by doing (n=17)
F: Learn from the failures of others (n=2)
FL: Formal learning (n=7)
FSP*: Find smart people committed to learning—and learn from them (n=13)
GI: General interactions (n=6)
GM*: Learn by giving mentoring/coaching (n=14)
H: Hardships (n=5)
IH*: Learn by intellectual humility/vulnerability (n=15)
INDL: Independent learning (n=11)
ITL: Incentives to learn (n=0)
L*: Learn by listening to the shared learnings of others (n=16)
LA*: Learning attitude or mindset (n=22)
LC*: Continually committing to learning (n=21)
LPO: Learn from people and resources outside field (n=5)
LT*: Awareness of limited time to learn forces focused learning (n=18)
MI: Learn by media, news inside field/industry (n=3)

MO: Learn by media, news outside field/industry (n=3)
MS: Mindset (e.g., growth vs. fixed) (n=5)
NFL: Nonformal learning (n=5)
O: Learn by observation (n=4
OFA: Overcome fear/anxiety (n=2)
OLML: Overcome belief there is little more that needs to be learned (n=2)
PE: Learn by professional education/training (n=2)
PJ: Learn by reading professional journals (n=3)
PT*: Learn by pilot-testing, experimenting (n=17)
QO: Learn by questioning others (n=2)
QP*: Learn by questioning what is possible (n=16)
QS: Learn by questioning self (n=0)
RAL: Require application of learning by leadership team members (n=0)
RCL: Require continual learning by leadership team members (n=0)
RI: Learn by reading books inside field/industry (n=0)
RM*: Learn by receiving mentoring/coaching (n=14)
RO: Learn by reading books outside field/industry (n=4)
RP*: Learn by reflection/reflective practice (n=21)
S*: Learn by sharing learning (n=19)
SRR: Seek the right resources for the learning (n=3)
SAV: Learn by seeking alternative views (n=5)
TL: Transformational learning (n=6)

Table 6.4: **Ways of learning: Responses for empirical codes**
* designates that the code was mentioned by at least 12 of the 24 interviewees

AAR*: Extract learning from after-action reviews (n=13)
AL*: Learn by associating with leaders who are learners (n=16)
ALGR*: Learn by accepting that learning is a general responsibility of leaders in any organisation (n=15)
AN: Learn from active network of peers (n=4)
BE*: Learn by example, going first (n=20)
BI: Follow best instincts on what to learn (n=3)
CD*: Learn by constructive discontent (n=20)
CI: See learning as useful irritation (n=3)
DC: Learn by dialogues/conversations (n=2)
ERL: Give extra recognition or reward for learners (n=2)
FCC*: Facing challenging situations (n=19)
FF*: Test faster, fail faster, learn faster (n=13)
HL*: Hands-on learning (n=17)
LBA*: Learning by asking: Are we focused on earning or on repeating what we did yesterday or on being right? (n=15)
LG*: Learn because of learning goals (n=13)

LI*: Learning as means to be more innovative (n=13)
LNTA*: Learn by engaging with challenging situations (n=19)
LOCZ: Learn by stretching outside your comfort zone (n=4)
LP*: Learn on purpose (n=14)
LRPH*: Learn by reassessing past habits and behaviours (n=13)
LSO*: Learn by scanning for opportunities and 'daylight' (n=15)
LUC: Get comfortable being uncomfortable and thereby stretching to learn (n=4)
P: Learn because of a passion for learning (n=7)
PD: Learn by pondering differences (n=4)
SHL: Selective hiring of learners (n=4)
W: Learn by wondering (n=3)

Table 6.5: **Ways of learning: Ordered responses, both codes**

(highest n to lowest)

[AP] designates a code from my *a priori* coding based on the literature review

[E] designates a new empirical code, based on my experience and my initial analysis of the interviews

22	Learning attitude or mindset [AP]
21	Continually committing to learning [AP]
21	Learn by reflection/reflective practice [AP]
20	Learn by example: go first [E]
20	Learn by constructive discontent [E]
19	Facing challenging situations [E]
19	Learn by engaging with challenging situations [E]
19	Learn by sharing learning [AP]
18	Awareness of limited time to learn forces focused learning [AP]
17	Learn by curiosity [AP]
17	Experiential learning—by doing [AP]
17	Hands-on learning [E]
17	Learn by pilot-testing, experimenting [AP]
16	Learn by associating with leaders who are learners [E]
16	Learn by listening to the shared learnings of others [AP]
16	Learn by questioning what is possible [AP]
15	Learn by accepting that learning is a general responsibility of leaders [E]
15	Learn collaboratively [AP]
15	Learn by intellectual humility/vulnerability [AP]
15	Learning by asking: Are we focused on learning or on repeating what we did yesterday or on being right? [E]
15	Learn by scanning for opportunities and 'daylight' [E]
14	Learn by giving mentoring/coaching [AP]
14	Learn on purpose [E]
14	Learn by receiving mentoring/coaching [AP]

13	Extract learning from after-action reviews [E]
13	Find smart people committed to learning—and learn from them [AP]
13	Test faster, fail faster, learn faster [E]
13	Learn because of learning goals [E]
13	Learning as means to be more innovative [E]
13	Learn by reassessing past habits and behaviours [E]
11	Independent learning [AP]
7	Formal learning [AP]
7	Learn because of a passion for learning [E]
6	General interactions [AP]
6	Transformational learning [AP]
5	Hardships [AP]
5	Learn from people and resources outside field [AP]
5	Mindset (e.g., growth vs. fixed) [AP]
5	Nonformal learning [AP]
5	Learn by seeking alternative views [AP]
4	Learn from active network of peers [E]
4	Challenging assignments [AP]
4	Learn by stretching outside your comfort zone [E]
4	Get comfortable being uncomfortable and thereby stretching to learn [E]
4	Learn by observation [AP]
4	Learn by pondering differences [E]
4	Learn by reading books outside field/industry [AP]
4	Selective hiring of learners [E]
3	See learning as useful irritation [E]
3	Learn by media, news inside field/industry [AP]
3	Learn by media, news outside field/industry [AP]
3	Learn by reading professional journals [AP]
3	Seek the right resources for the learning [AP]
3	Follow best instincts on what to learn [E]
3	Learn by wondering [E]
3	Learn by writing, notes, drawing, sketching [AP]
2	Overcome fear/anxiety [AP]
2	Overcome belief there is little more that needs to be learned [AP]
2	Learn by professional education/training [AP]
2	Learn by questioning others [AP]
2	Learn by dialogues/conversations [E]
2	Give extra recognition or reward for learners [E]
2	Learn from the failures of others [AP]
0	Incentives to learn [AP]
0	Learn by questioning self [AP]
0	Require application of learning by leadership team members [AP]
0	Require continual learning by leadership team members [AP]
0	Learn by reading books inside field/industry [AP])

Discussion

As noted in Chapter 3, the context of the interviews that were the basis for these numerical rankings must be remembered. The 24 telephone interviewees were asked for 15 minutes of their time. Even though the average duration of each telephone interview turned out to be closer to 30 minutes, neither the interviewees nor I could know at the beginning of the interview that we would be engaged for more than 15 minutes. Thus, it is reasonable to think that the interviewees discussed what was most salient to them and did not attempt to address a more expansive range of the ways that they learned. That salience could have been related to many things: for example, how they were learning or had learned in relationship to a particular issue of significant concern to them; or how they saw themselves at their best as learners. As the interviewer in these brief interactions, I was listening to their stories, not interrupting with checklists or alternatives to consider. In that circumstance, I feel confident that items with high numbers of responses might be fairly reflective of ways that many senior executives learn because of their salience to this cross-section of senior executives, but the items with low numbers of responses cannot be assumed not to also be ways that they would have said they learned given significantly more time, or if administered a comprehensive checklist or survey. A more expansive study might discover that some or all of the lower-n items are significant—though perhaps secondary—sources of learning by senior executives. These items are not excluded by these results either as ways that executives in general learn, or as ways that these executives learn—they just were not top-of-mind ways of learning for this group. For example, not one respondent said to me that they had learned by reading a book dealing with subject matter inside their field or industry, but it is quite possible that if pressed further they might indeed have recalled learning from such a book.

I discuss and categorise the 30 items that received high numbers of responses later in this chapter, and also discuss the disposition of codes that had fewer than 12 responses when I discuss condensation and consolidation of the codes.

2. Ways of Applying Learning

Table 6.6 shows the *a priori* codes I created based on the literature review related to ways of applying learning. Table 6.7 shows the initial empirical codes I created. Tables 6.8 and 6.9 show the numerical responses for, respectively, the *a priori* codes and the empirical codes. Table 6.10 shows the combined codes, ranked by number of responses.

Table 6.6: **Ways of applying learning: *A priori* codes**
AC: Apply learning to anticipate change
BOS: Build on strengths
CCOL: Facilitate learning by others/create 'culture of learning'
CEMM: Create explanatory mental models
CLL: Apply learning through conversations with leaders who are learners
CPM: Construct personal meaning
DE: Detect and correct errors
GM: Apply learning by giving mentoring/coaching
HO: Apply learning to help others
I: Apply learning to be innovative
IOW: Improve on weaknesses
KGB: Apply learning to keep getting better as a leader
NC: Apply learning to navigate change
PT: Apply learning by pilot-testing, experimenting
PTP: 'Polish the past'
QO: Apply learning by questioning others
R: Apply learning to meet job-related learning requirements
RAL: Require application of learning by leadership team members
RCL: Require continual learning by leadership team members
REC: Respond to emerging challenges
RML: Be a role model of learning
SC: To stay current or keep from falling behind
SHL: Apply learning through selective hiring of learners

Table 6.7: **Ways of applying learning: Initial empirical codes**
AT: Anticipating threats
BBEL: Become a better executive leader
BBP: Become a better person

CBF: Create a better future for the organisation
C: Coursework
CA: Challenging assignments
E: Effort
EWP: Envision what is possible
FI: Faster implementation
FID: Fuel innovative ideas
FL: Get feedback on learning
INDL: Independent learning
LABP: Learn by aiming beyond best practices
LB: Learn because you are becoming, not arriving
LIL: Learn as a way to improve my leadership
LEL: Use learning to be more effective as a leader
LPBF: Learn by pondering the best future
LTBB: Learn as the way to be better than your past
LUC: Learn so you never get comfortable
PEO: Personal experiences outside of work
POFB: Protect the organisation from falling behind
REA: Reassess past habits, behaviours, attitudes and approaches
RM: Apply learning by receiving mentoring/coaching
S: Apply learning by sharing learning and listening to reactions of others
SDL: Self-direction/overall learning power
SAV: Apply learning by seeking alternative views
SFL: Start [constructive] fights by telling others about learning

Table 6.8: Ways of applying learning: Responses for *a priori* codes

* designates that the code was mentioned by at least 12 of the 24 interviewees

AC*: Apply learning to anticipate change (n=14)
BOS: Build on strengths (n=6)
CCOL: Facilitate learning by others/create 'culture of learning' (n=4)
CEMM: Create explanatory mental models (n=0)
CLL: Apply learning through conversations with leaders who are learners (n=16)
CPM: Construct personal meaning (n=5)
DE: Detect and correct errors (n=7)
GM: Apply learning by giving mentoring/coaching (n=12)
HO: Apply learning to help others (n=18)
I: Be Innovative (n=18)
IOW: Improve on weaknesses (n=2)
KGB: Apply learning to keep getting better as a leader (n=10)
NC: Use Learning to navigate change (n=0)
PT: Apply learning by pilot-testing, experimenting (n=17)
QO: Apply learning by questioning others (n=0)

R: Required to keep job (n=0)
RAL: Require application of learning by leadership team members (n=0)
RCL: Require continual learning by leadership team members (n=0)
REC: Reconceptualise what is possible (n=16)
RML: Be a role model of learning (n=9)
SC: To Stay current or keep from falling behind (n=17)
SHL: Selective hiring of learners (n=3)

Table 6.9: **Ways of applying learning: Responses for empirical codes**

* designates that the code was mentioned by at least 12 of the 24 interviewees

AT*: Anticipating threats (n=14)
BBEL*: Become a better executive leader (n=18)
BBP*: Become a better person (n=15)
CBF: Create a better future for the organisation (n=21)
C: Coursework (n=5)
CA: Challenging assignments (n=5)
E: Effort (n=5)
EWP: Envision what is possible (n=14)
FI: Faster implementation (n=11)
FID: Fuel innovative ideas (n=18)
FL: Get feedback on learning (n=3)
INDL: Independent learning (n=3)
LABP: Learn by aiming beyond best practices (n=4)
LB: Learn because you are becoming, not arriving (n=1)
LIL: Learn as a way to improve my leadership (n=5)
LEL: Use learning to be more effective as a leader (n=4)
LPBF: Learn by pondering the best future (n=6)
LTBB: Learn as the way to be better than your past (n=3)
LUC: Learn so you never get comfortable (n=4)
PEO: Personal experiences outside of work (n=5)
POFB: Protect the organisation from falling behind (n=17)
REA: Reassess past habits, behaviours, attitudes and approaches (n=13)
RM: Apply learning by receiving mentoring/coaching (n=14)
S: Apply learning by sharing learning and listening to reactions of others (n=18)
SDL: Self-direction/overall learning power (n=0)
SAV: Apply learning by seeking alternative views (n=13)
SFL: Start [constructive] fights by telling others about learning (n=2)

	Table 6.10: **Ways of applying learning: Ordered responses, both codes**

(highest n to lowest)

[AP] designates a code from my *a priori* coding based on the literature review
[E] designates a new empirical code, based on my experience and my initial
analysis of the interviews

21   CBF: Create a better future for the organisation [E]
18   BBEL: Become a better executive leader [E]
18   FID: Fuel innovative ideas [E]
18   HO: Apply learning to help others [AP]
18   I: Be Innovative [AP]
18   S: Apply learning by sharing learning and listening to reactions of others [E]
17   POFB: Protect the organisation from falling behind [E]
17   PT: Apply learning by pilot-testing, experimenting [AP]
17   SC: To Stay current or keep from falling behind [AP]
16   CLL: Apply learning through conversations with leaders who are learners [AP]
16   REC: Reconceptualise what is possible [AP]
15   BBP: Become a better person [E]
14   AC: Apply learning to anticipate change [AP]
14   AT: Anticipating threats [E]
14   EWP: Envision what is possible [E]
14   RM: Apply learning by receiving mentoring/coaching [E]
13   REA: Reassess past habits, behaviours, attitudes and approaches [E]
13   SAV: Apply learning by seeking alternative views [E]
12   GM: Apply learning by giving mentoring/coaching [AP]
11   FI: Faster implementation [E]
10   KGB: Apply learning to keep getting better as a leader [AP]
9   RML: Be a role model of learning [AP]
7   DE: Detect and correct errors [AP]
6   BOS: Build on strengths [AP]
6   LPBF: Learn by pondering the best future [E]
5   C: Coursework [E]
5   CA: Challenging assignments [E]
5   CPM: Construct personal meaning [AP]
5 E: Effort [E]
5 LIL: Learn as a way to improve my leadership [E]
5 PEO: Personal experiences outside of work [E]
4 CCOL: Facilitate learning by others/create 'culture of learning' [AP]
4 LABP: Learn by aiming beyond best practices [E]
4 LEL: Use learning to be more effective as a leader [E]
4 LUC: Learn so you never get comfortable [E]
3 FL: Get feedback on learning [E]
3 INDL: Independent learning [E]

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3   LTBB: Learn as the way to be better than your past [E]
3   SHL: Selective hiring of learners [AP]
2   IOW: Improve on weaknesses [AP]
2   SFL: Start [constructive] fights by telling others about learning [E]
1   LB: Learn because you are becoming, not arriving [E]
1   CEMM: Create explanatory mental models [AP]
1   NC: Use Learning to navigate change [AP]
0   QO: Apply learning by questioning others [AP]
0   R: Required to keep job [AP]
0   RAL: Require application of learning by leadership team members [AP]
0   RCL: Require continual learning by leadership team members [AP]
0   SDL: Self-direction/overall learning power [AP]
```

Discussion

As noted above, the relative brevity of interview duration for this study increased the likelihood that the senior executives emphasised salient points above all and this therefore likely resulted in a lessened attempt to address a more comprehensive view of the ways that they applied learning. That salience could have been related to whatever was front of mind for them in how they were applying learning or had applied learning as it related to a specific or general challenge or opportunity that was particularly relevant to them; or how they perceived themselves at their best as executives applying learning. As the researcher, I committed to hearing their expressions and experiences rather than interrupting them with a rigid checklist of questions or alternatives to discuss. Because of these factors, I feel confident that items with high numbers of responses may be suggestive of ways that many senior executives apply learning because of their salience to this cross-section of senior executives, but it's also vital to note that items with low numbers of responses cannot be assumed not to also be ways that they would have said they apply learning given significantly more time for each interview, or if I had been able to administer a detailed checklist or survey. A larger-scale and more comprehensive study might reeal that some or all the lower-n items are in fact important—though perhaps secondary—in the overall revelation of ways that senior executives apply learning. Less frequently noted items in this study are

therefore not excluded by these results either as ways that executives in general apply learning, or as ways that these executives apply learning—they just were not felt to be most salient as ways of applying learning for this group. For example, only one respondent said to me that they applied learning to create explanatory mental models, but it is quite possible that if pressed further others might indeed have recalled applying learning in that way.

Later in this chapter, I discuss the disposition of codes that had fewer than 12 responses (two of which were eventually included as primary findings, for reasons that will be described), and I will also discuss the consolidation of the 19 codes that were mentioned more than 12 times. Here, I think it is worth acknowledging that there were some significant similarities between a few of those 19 codes: for example, 'fuel innovative ideas' is not strongly distinguishable from 'be innovative'; 'anticipate change' is possibly related to 'anticipating threats'; and 'reconceptualise what is possible' is very similar to 'envision what is possible'. In all of those cases, one of the two similar items was an *a priori* code, and the other item was an empirical code. This suggested to me that I might have been overzealous in attempting to capture every possible nuance of meaning in the scores of codes I had created, and in my multiple revisiting of the data. I had to return to the items that showed similarities and scour them for their most precise meaning to avoid unwarranted differentiation. I further concluded that some of the items, when examined further, needed to be integrated into my considerations of how they learn, rather than remaining in this category. That applied to 'receiving mentoring/coaching', 'seeking alternative views', and 'conversations with leaders who are learners'.

Condensation of the codes

My analysis next moved into condensing the data while being closely aware of what Barbour (2008) reminds researchers to be wary of: that while the descriptive comprehensiveness of codes matters, what can matter more is the reflective awareness that the researcher has engaged in a conceptual journey that includes successive bouts of constructive anguishing or 'worrying away' at the data in the hope of producing a more accurate, comprehensive and nuanced interpretation. Kvale (1996: 188-209) explores this as 'meaning condensation', whereby the researcher works to decipher perspectives, experiences, ideas and possibilities expressed by interviewees into coherent and distinctive representations. Thus, continued focus on coding helped me, at least in this way, advance the analysis. This process has also been called data reduction (Hennink, et al, 2011). conducted the subsequent rounds of coding work as I developed, clarified, and revised codes, categories and relationships I found in the data. Miles et al. (2014) describe this as condensing the text, whereas Seidman (2013) labels it as reducing the text—in both cases the aim is to separate what is insignificant or uninteresting from the data while identifying and emphasising what is most important.

I feel it is important to note that thematic analysis is generally not viewed as a method of analysis in itself—because systematically identifying and extracting themes from a dataset is only one element of analysing and interpreting data. As Ayres (2008: 867) puts it:

> Thematic analysis is a data reduction and analysis strategy by which data are segmented, categorised, summarised and reconstructed in a way that captures the important concepts within a data set.

In an early step of condensation that was previously described, I incorporated the items that were listed in the original conceptual framework as 'Factors affecting learning' into the category, 'Ways of learning', combining some from the former category with some from the latter category and placing some from

the former category into the latter category in their original form. This condensation is reflected in the previous tables.

After completing the tabulations presented above, I reviewed the items in both categories that were mentioned by fewer than half of the interviewees (Tables 6.11 and 6.12), checking for which might merit inclusion on their own and for further opportunities to condense and strengthen the data by either combining lower-rated codes into one with a higher number of responses, or by integrating lower-n items into higher-n items without losing the accurate meaning of either.

As I exhaustively considered ways that lower-rated codes might possibly be combined with others to result in a new code or in a higher number of responses to an existing code, two things became evident. The first was that the meanings of the lower-ranked codes were generally different enough from the meanings of the higher-ranked codes that the codes could not be combined without diluting their meaning. The second was that quite often when I considered an item for integration into another one, I found that they both had been said by the same interviewee. My elaborate coding had captured possible nuance, but the 'n' did not change, or barely changed.

Table 6.11: **Ways of learning mentioned by fewer than half of the interviewees**	
11	Independent learning [AP]
7	Formal learning [AP]
7	Learn because of a passion for learning [E]
6	General interactions [AP]
6	Transformational learning [AP]
5	Hardships [AP]
5	Learn from people and resources outside field [AP]
5	Mindset (e.g., growth vs. fixed) [AP]
5	Nonformal learning [AP]
5	Learn by seeking alternative views [AP]
4	Learn from active network of peers [E]
4	Challenging assignments [AP]

4	Learn by stretching outside your comfort zone [E]
4	Get comfortable being uncomfortable and thereby stretching to learn [E]
4	Learn by observation [AP]
4	Learn by pondering differences [E]
4	Learn by reading books outside field/industry [AP]
4	Selective hiring of learners [E]
3	See learning as useful irritation [E]
3	Learn by media, news inside field/industry [AP]
3	Learn by media, news outside field/industry [AP]
3	Learn by reading professional journals [AP]
3	Seek the right resources for the learning [AP]
3	Follow best instincts on what to learn [E]
3	Learn by wondering [E]
3	Learn by writing, notes, drawing, sketching [AP]
2	Overcome fear/anxiety [AP]
2	Overcome belief there is little more that needs to be learned [AP]
2	Learn by professional education/training [AP]
2	Learn by questioning others [AP]
2	Learn by dialogues/conversations [E]
2	Give extra recognition or reward for learners [E]
2	Learn from the failures of others [AP]
0	Incentives to learn [AP]
0	Learn by questioning self [AP]
0	Require application of learning by leadership team members [AP]
0	Require continual learning by leadership team members [AP]
0	Learn by reading books inside field/industry [AP])

Thirty-seven codes received seven or fewer mentions. That is a significant demarcation, which I took to mean that after a further review for the possibility of combining some, I could remove those 37 from further consideration as independent topics in this thesis, although I looked carefully to see whether some of them could be combined into other topics. I carefully assessed the one item with more than seven mentions but fewer than 12 mentions, 'Independent learning' (n=11), concluding that it did not merit inclusion in the forthcoming rounds of analysis because it described a general condition that lacked concrete descriptive power, and it was reflected more usefully in many of the more particularised items that were retained for further analysis, where self-

directed 'independent learning' took place, such as learning by reflection and learning by pilot testing ideas.

Table 6.12: **Ways of applying learning mentioned by fewer than half of the interviewees**
11   FI: Faster implementation [E]
10   KGB: Apply learning to keep getting better as a leader [AP]
9   RML: Be a role model of learning [AP]
7   DE: Detect and correct errors [AP]
6   BOS: Build on strengths [AP]
6   LPBF: Learn by pondering the best future [E]
5   C: Coursework [E]
5   CA: Challenging assignments [E]
5   CPM: Construct personal meaning [AP]
5 E: Effort [E]
5 LIL: Learn as a way to improve my leadership [E]
5 PEO: Personal experiences outside of work [E]
4 CCOL: Facilitate learning by others/create 'culture of learning' [AP]
4 LABP: Learn by aiming beyond best practices [E]
4 LEL: Use learning to be more effective as a leader [E]
4 LUC: Learn so you never get comfortable [E]
3 FL: Get feedback on learning [E]
3 INDL: Independent learning [E]
3 LTBB: Learn as the way to be better than your past [E]
3 SHL: Selective hiring of learners [AP]
2 IOW: Improve on weaknesses [AP]
2 SFL: Start [constructive] fights by telling others about learning [E]
1   LB: Learn because you are becoming, not arriving [E]
1   CEMM: Create explanatory mental models [AP]
1   NC: Use Learning to navigate change [AP]
0   QO: Apply learning by questioning others [AP]
0 R: Required to keep job [AP]
0 RAL: Require application of learning by leadership team members [AP]
0   RCL: Require continual learning by leadership team members [AP]
0   SDL: Self-direction/overall learning power [AP]

I carefully reviewed the items with 11, 10, and 9 mentions, returning to my annotated transcripts and other notes to evaluate their possible inclusion. Viewed from the emphasis given to them by the interviewees, I decided to include 'faster implementation' (n=11) and 'keep getting better as a leader'

(n=10) in the continuing analysis. Further, as I examined other codes with fewer than 12 mentions, it became clear to me that there was additional support for 'faster implementation' and 'keep getting better as a leader' within those items. 'Faster implementation' included some aspects that I had coded as 'detect and correct errors' (n=7), where the interviewee had noted that doing this quickly during implementation was important (n=4). I would have kept this code in any event because of the emphasis that interviewees gave it when I talked with them, but the greater number of responses identified through my additional evaluation further solidified that status.

Regarding the latter ('keep getting better as a leader'), I saw that some of the responses that I had coded as 'Build on strengths' (n=6); 'Learn as a way to improve my leadership' (n=5); and 'Learn as the way to be better than your past' (n=4) could appropriately be integrated into the 'keep getting better as a leader' code, and five of those 15 responses were said by different interviewees than I had assigned to 'keep getting better as a leader', so the number of responses attributable to 'keep getting better as a leader' increased substantially. As with 'faster implementation', I would have kept this code in any event because of the emphasis that interviewees gave it when I talked with them, but the greater number of responses further solidified that status.

Final code consolidation

Throughout the data analysis and interpretation, I incorporated several primary aims of thematic analysis (Patton, 2015): first, examining commonality—drawing together all aspects of a data set that have something in common—and then analysing these further; second, examining differences—identifying and considering differences across the dataset and working to gauge their relevance in light of the research question; and finally, examining relationships—considering how various parts of the data set align and may be combined to advance an understanding of key themes or issues. I searched for

commonalities, differences and relationships in the data set. I began to sense and confirm certain conceptual themes as I reflected on codes in light of the review or analysis of illustrative issues.

In some cases, a conceptual theme was not referred to directly. For example, in this study no respondents used the phrase 'constructive discontent', but that phrase summarised my sense after hearing numerous subjects describe the mood or drive underlying some, or much, of their learning. It is also important to note that conceptual themes are often not pinpointed on the first reading of the transcripts. The identification and analysis of such emphasis points or themes can only occur when the researcher repeatedly reviews, reflects on, and re-visits and potentially re-analyses the data (Barbour, 2008; Brinkman and Kvale, 2015; Gubirum, et al, 2012), resulting in Tables 6.13 and 6.14 below, showing the final consolidated codes.

Table 6.13: **Consolidated list of codes for ways of learning**
Learning attitude or mindset Continually commit to learning Learn by reflection/assessment/reflective practice Constructive discontent Learning by example: going first Learn by not turning away from challenging situations Share learning and listening to reactions of others Awareness of limited time to learn forces focused learning Learn by curiosity Experiential learning Learn by pilot-testing, experimenting Hands-on learning Learn by associating with leaders who are learners Conversations with leaders who are learners Learn by questioning what is possible Learn by intellectual humility/vulnerability Learn by scanning for opportunities and 'daylight' Use collaborative learning Ask: are we focused on learning or repeating what we did before or being right? Learn by accepting that learning is a general responsibility of leaders in any organisation

Receive mentoring/coaching
Learn on purpose
Reassess past habits, behaviours, attitudes and approaches
Test faster, fail faster, learn faster
Learn by after-action reviews
Find smart people committed to learning—and learn from them
Learn from people and resources outside field
Seek alternative views

The consolidated codes for ways of learning fully reflected the most frequently mentioned items as previously identified and discussed. Regarding the ways of applying learning, I determined that while 'protect the organisation from falling behind or failing' might be a subset of 'create a better future for the organisation', both items deserved inclusion because they not only may reflect different mindsets, they may also reflect the kinds of differences in the specific expectations that are faced by senior executives in different organisations, as discussed in Chapter 2 (e.g., Groysberg, 2016). I concluded that 'fuel innovation' was a more accurate statement than 'be innovative', in part because being innovative/acting innovatively is satisfactorily incorporated in the items addressing pilot tests and implementation of new ideas. I concluded that 'be an effective executive' satisfactorily incorporated both the positive 'keep getting better as a leader' and the more defensive 'stay current or keep from falling behind'. I joined 'reconceptualise what is possible' into 'envision what is possible'. 'Apply learning to help others' became a general category, 'support the growth and success of others', in the categorisations presented in the next section, with 'share learning' and 'mentor and coach' as items included in that category.

Table 6.14: **Consolidated list of codes for ways of applying learning**

Create a better future for the organisation
Protect the organisation from falling behind or failing
Envision what is possible

Anticipate threats
Fuel innovative ideas
Design and implement pilot tests
Facilitate faster implementation of new ideas
Share learning
Mentor and coach
Be an effective executive/leader
Become a better person

Categorising the primary responses

I will briefly describe in the next section how I categorised the primary responses related to how the senior executives said that they learn and the responses related to how the senior executives said that they apply learning. I will describe how each category relates to items from the literature review and conceptual framework that are described in Chapter 2.

I will show how these categories are consistent with principal aspects of the responsibilities and practices of senior executives (and in some cases, of other managers and leaders). I believe that they are useful ways of capturing and integrating information from my research that would otherwise be more fragmentary and unconnected. They may also provide subject areas for future researchers to build on what I have reported. Finally, they provide a basis for advancing the conceptual model, as I discuss in Chapter 7.

How they learn

The ways that more than half of the interviewees said they learn can be placed into four broad categories, which are described below. Briefly stated, those categories are as follows: from *experience*, from *guidance from others*, from *reflection*, and through *supportive attitudes and practices*.

It should be noted that for most of these ways of learning, the approach to learning can be individual or it can be collaborative. Collaborative learning was mentioned by 15 interviewees. For example, one interviewee said:

> Even more importantly nowadays is growing my professional learning network and the informal day-to-day learning that I participate in—you know, connecting with colleagues around the state and country, and frankly, the world.

As noted in the literature review, learning collaboratively is facilitated by contemporary technology that allows for many kinds of interactive learning, from jointly participating in online courses to, as several of the senior executives in this study reported, participating regularly in specialised groups within such social media venues as Facebook or Google. Beyond the broader collaborative opportunities and occasions, intra-organisational collaboration among senior executives is highly valued as a core aspect of senior management success, as discussed in Chapter 2 (e.g., Center for Creative Leadership, 2018).

And 13 interviewees said that they learned from people and sources outside of their usual experience. One of the interviewees said:

> I do my best, always try to shoulder up with people who are quite different than me from a variety of different perspectives because that opposite space of perspective contributes to the learning while we do our jobs.

Below, I have labelled one of the general categories 'supportive practices and attitudes', because the senior executives described many ways in which their learning practices could be supported by certain ways of thinking or acting.

I have provided one illustrative quote from an interviewee for each item.

Learning from experience

Some interviewees explicitly described themselves as 'experiential' or 'hands-on' learners. This approach is exemplified by this statement from a senior executive of a publicly-traded for-profit company:

> [I]f I can go to your area, go with you, go with your team, I'd rather spend the time and energy, going there and seeing, as opposed to you spending hours and hours on presentations, and slides, and things like that. Because I know, number one, it's a better use of time, but also [it's] how I will grasp the real issue as quickly as possible, or the learnings, or even the connection and experience with the people is important.

The interviewees described a number of ways in which they would create experiences from which they would then extract learning. They said that they would create pilot tests of new ideas to stimulate learning, and also that they would share their ideas with others and learn from those others' reactions to those ideas.

This category, which is congruent with the general item 'Learning from experience' in the original conceptual framework, includes the following items:

> *Learning by example: going first*

> I can't depend only on others learning and reporting to me… I have to make time to stretch my mind to learn more about how to meet current objectives as we navigate change—and also to anticipate what's ahead.

> *Sharing learning and listening to the reactions of others*

> I do find a big part of impact is trying to share what I learned with other people…and I find every time I share what I learned with someone else, they share what they learn with me.

> *Facing challenging situations*

> I have a high regard for learning by doing and learning by experiencing something where the likelihood of failure far exceeds the likelihood of success.

Hands-on learning

> I'm a big experiential learner where I have to go and I like to see and immerse myself in different things…. I'm hands-on. And I learn most effectively by doing, and by experiencing, and by putting myself where the opportunity is.

Pilot testing, experimenting

> [L]earning from innovation is for me one of the most important aspects of what I do.

This category is generally consistent with observations about executives. Kolb (1984), Merriam and Bierema (2014) and others have noticed that the learning styles of positional leaders tend to be characterised more by experimentation and "action learning" than by abstract thinking and theorising. Those observers have noted that this learning predilection is truer of executives and managers than it is of the population as a whole. It could be that individuals with this predilection are more drawn to, and perhaps more successful at, responsibilities that require a steady stream of action throughout the day, as the senior executive role does require.

It is noteworthy that these executives do not merely react to situations that have learning potential, but they actively create learning interactions by pilot testing, engaging with others, and embracing challenge—by 'putting myself where the opportunity is', as one of them said.

Learning from guidance from others

The interviewees expressed the importance of learning-oriented interactions with others, where they either were the direct recipients of guidance through mentoring and coaching or where they participated in conversational exchanges or other forms of interactive learning.

This category includes the following items:

Interacting with others who are learners

> I learn most from the brilliant folks that I'm surrounded by and asking questions and trying to soak up their experiences and pull the knowledge out of their brains.

Receiving mentoring/coaching

> You really have to ask others to help yourself change your pattern.

The first item is consistent with the observation by Staats (2018:72) that learning requires senior executives to 'surround yourself with talented people who hold different perspectives...[and are] willing to tell you what they think'.

In Chapter 2 I discussed at some length the perceived importance of mentoring and coaching for senior leaders, and the relative infrequency with which formal mentoring and coaching programmes for senior executives are successfully utilised by organisations (e.g., Keller and Meaney, 2018; Lofgren, 2018). The senior executives in this study generally described their learning from guidance by others not as the result of such formal programmes, but rather the result of personally developing informal relationships for receiving mentoring and coaching.

Learning from reflection

The senior executives described three kinds of reflective learning: personal reflection about their own internal and external experiences; reflection focused on reviewing the outcomes of actions and determining how they might be carried out more effectively; and reflective scanning directed toward noticing openings for new initiatives.

This category includes the following items:

Reflecting

> So you're working, you're in the field, you're learning new things, you're weaving them into your current work, you're applying them, you're taking back and reflecting what works well, what didn't work well, what do I need to sharpen? How can I revisit things?

Scanning for opportunities

> I spend a couple hours a day just thinking and going through—all right, what's most important, where do I need to spend my time, how should I do this?

Holding structured after-action reviews

> [We] take in fundamental lessons from the last time, which give us a sense of where we need to build from...

As discussed in Chapter 2, reflection is understood to be a crucial aspect of effective learning (e.g., Argyris and Schön, 1995; MacBeath, et al, 2008). Many of the senior executives not only described personal reflection as a source of learning, but also described structured processes for forward-looking and backward-looking reflection.

The interviewees' emphasis on reflective practice is consistent with many observations in the literature concerning transformational learning. In contrast to informational learning, which focuses on accumulating facts and data, transformational learning occurs when learners engage in reflective and critical thinking about what, how and why they are learning, questioning their assumptions and priorities (Staats, 2018; Mezirow, 2000; Petriglieri, 2014).

Recent research discussed in Chapter 2 suggests that forward-looking reflection of the kind described by many interviewees is essential to the ability to evaluate potential future scenarios and opportunities, known as *prospection* (e.g., Gilbert and Watson, 2007; Seligman, et al., 2013). As Seligman explains '[t]he past is not a force that drives them but a resource from which they

selectively extract information about the prospects they face' (2013:119). This practice is seen in the interviewees' informal personal reflection and in the more structured reviews of past actions and initiatives.

Supportive practices and attitudes

The interviewees described many ways in which their learning practices could be, or needed to be, supported by certain ways of thinking or acting. Many of these items were among the ones that were most frequently mentioned by the interviewees. They saw these attitudes and behaviours as central to learning.

When these executives described themselves as learners, they spoke of being oriented toward learning as an inherent personality trait, of goading themselves to keep learning as a necessary response to their circumstances and responsibilities, and of being willing to accept personal risks associated with learning.

Their descriptions of learning as an inherent trait were as follows:

> *A Learning attitude or mindset*

>> I just fundamentally believe that everything I learn will make me better...not only a more effective leader but a better person.

> *Learning because of an innate sense of constructive discontent with aspects of the way things are*

>> You have to live in what I call a permanent state of dissatisfaction...

> *Learning because of an innate sense of curiosity*

>> [T]he foundation really as I thought about this is...curiosity and commitment to personal excellence.

They described the ways they pushed themselves toward continual learning in the following ways:

Continually committing to learning

I just [keep] reflecting on 'How can I learn better?'

Being aware of limited time to learn

We have so much to get done so fast.... There's now more of an openness and willingness to go...see, learn, find a way, use it, adapt it.

Questioning what is possible

There's [always] more possibility.... You don't ever want to get the feeling that 'We have arrived' or, 'We're comfortable'.

Learning on purpose

I [keep asking myself]: 'Am I as good as I can be?'.... We need to keep pushing more of this learning and application.... Let's get better into it.... It's starting to build.... The environment that's being created is learning and applying is expected, and we have to.

They described the organisational and situational stimuli to continue learning in these ways:

Accepting that learning is a general responsibility of leaders in any organisation

You have to accept that there is a learning scale as a CEO that you need to take very seriously.... I accept that as part of my day-to-day, 24-hour job, that I need to have learning embedded as part of the work I do...to be armed to make decisions and lead this company.

Asking, 'Are we focused on learning or on repeating what we did before or being right?'

Learning beats repeating. Just today: We have this deadline. We've got this list of projects that we want to get approved. [And we're debating] are we getting our share versus [other departments] or--? And then one leader...said the right thing [we could learn to ask but had not asked before]: What's the value that we're creating with the dollars that we're spending?

They described their acceptance of possible personal consequences of learning in the following ways:

Accepting personal vulnerability/being willing to 'fail'

I do think there's a piece of vulnerability for the leader to say, 'I'm learning this. I don't, I—you know'. I will often stand in front of my staff and say, 'We've been working on this. I'd like to try this. It might fail. It might totally tank'. But having that vulnerability and that trust with your staff is so essential because they see you as a learner and they see that it's okay for you to fail. And if I'm trying to weave that into my culture here, they need to know that's it okay for them to fail, too.

Reassessing past habits, behaviours, attitudes, and approaches

I've continued to learn by just insisting that I speak up, to provide [a position] for people to challenge their ideas against.

Three of the items within this overall category were mentioned by 20 or more of the interviewees, making them three of the five most frequently mentioned items that I encountered. Regarding 'A learning attitude or mindset' (n=22), many of the responses were pointed and passionate in describing why this chosen trait felt individually important to them. Regarding 'Continually committing to learning' (n=21), not one response expressed that this was assured or automatic, and many of the responses emphasised the energy it took the senior executive to keep glancing up from daily tasks and urgencies to recommit to learning. The third of these items, 'Learning because of an innate sense of constructive discontent with aspects of the way things are' (n=20), conveyed what a number of the senior executives expressed as a necessary edginess to embrace learning as a way to transcend the status quo, stay

abreast of changes in the industry or field, and consider innovation opportunities.

Most of the items in this category are consistent with many of the descriptions in Chapter 2 of the internal and external factors that stimulate learning. While most respondents reported an innate, natural curiosity and desire to learn consistent with MacBeath and Dempster's observation that learning is 'an inherent impulse... which continues... throughout or lifetime' (2009:2), as many interviewees stated that learning required continued recommitment, and a purposeful approach towards continual progress. This tension between natural curiosity and the more effortful, disciplined approaches to learning perhaps reflects the common perception in andragogy that all or most adult learning is, to some extent, self-directed (Merriam and Bierema, 2014). The type of focus required for continued adult learning has been termed 'mindful agency', described as 'to take responsibility, to plan and manage learning processes' and as the opposite of 'robotic' (Deakin Crick, et al.. 2015).

The contrasting demands of having an innate impulse toward learning and the need to continually call upon and focus that impulse can also be seen in the growing recognition of the distinction between 'incidental learning', which occurs almost by accident while the learner is primarily focussed on doing something else and 'informal learning', which occurs intentionally or by design, but outside the formal confines of the classroom or seminar room and is considered by some authorities to comprise the majority of learning in the workplace (e.g., Merriam and Bierema, 2014; Staats, 2018; Taylor 2012).

Numerous authorities have concluded that the disposition most conducive to meaningful learning is one of vulnerability, in which the learner moves beyond their comfort zone or a defensiveness reliance on past success (e.g., Seijts, 2014; Brown, 2014). Despite the increased pressures and shortened timelines

for success for people in executive leadership positions that were described in Chapter 2 (e.g., Williams, 2010; Osborn, et al, 2002, Porter and McLaughlin, 2006), most of the interviewees echoed those observations, stating that they consciously incorporate willingness to fail and to reassess past habits and approaches into their own learning mindsets and encourage it among their teams. From a broader organisational perspective, Schein (2010) has suggested that the leader's acceptance of vulnerability helps others deal with anxiety, particularly during stressful change:

> Unfreezing an organization requires the creation of psychological safety, which means that the leader must have the emotional strength to absorb much of the anxiety that change brings with it and must also have the ability to remain supportive to the organization through the transition phase, even if group members become angry and obstructive.

These categorised findings are presented in Figure 6.1.

Main Findings

(i.e., mentioned by more than half of the 24 senior executive interviewees)

HOW THEY LEARN

Learning from experience
Learning by example: go first (n=20)
Sharing learning and listening to the reactions of others (n=19)
Facing challenging situations (n=19)
Hands-on learning (n=17)
Pilot testing, experimenting (n=17)

Learning from guidance of others
Interacting with others who are learners (n=16)
Receiving mentoring/coaching (n=14)

Learning from reflection
Reflecting (n=21)
Scanning for opportunities (n=15)
Holding structured after-action reviews (n=13)

Supportive practices and attitudes
A Learning attitude or mindset (n=22)
Continually committing to learning (n=21)
Learning because of an innate sense of constructive discontent with aspects of the way things are (n=20)
Accepting that learning is a general responsibility of leaders in any organisation (n=18)
Being aware of limited time to learn (n=18)
Learning because of an innate sense of curiosity (n=17)
Questioning what is possible (n=16)
Accepting personal vulnerability/being willing to 'fail' (n=15)
Asking, 'Are we focused on learning or on repeating what we did before or being right?' (n=15)
Learning on purpose (n=14)
Reassessing past habits, behaviours, attitudes, and approaches (n=13)

Figure 6.1: Main Findings to Research Question 1: 'How do you learn?'

In this section on 'How They Learn', I discussed key findings that were cited by more than half of the senior executives in a particular code within one of four specific categories: learning from *experience*, from *guidance from others*, from *reflection*, or through *supportive practices and attitudes*.

How they apply learning

While it might be assumed that senior executives apply learning in everything they do, without being consciously aware of it, I was unable to find any studies confirming this. Most of the senior executives in this study responded early in the interviews by describing ways in which they apply learning, and throughout the interviews, even as they were describing ways in which they learn, they often referred to the application of learning that was supported or advanced by that learning. More than one interviewee expressed the view that if there is no application, there has been no significant learning. As one remarked:

> It's like, how can we apply it? I mean, it's fine if you learn something, but I think if you don't apply it, it's not really useful or what's the purpose, right? Other than just learning it.... I think the learning in terms of applying it is key.

This perception reflects a sense described in Chapter 2 that genuine learning ought to be manifested in some kind of action or change (e.g., Illeris, 2017:3). It can be noted that the emphasis on practical application of ideas is consistent with the 'action-learning' orientation that was previously discussed as one characteristic of how senior executives learn. Pertriglieri (2014) and others have noted that this orientation is typical of instrumental learning, but can inhibit transformational learning, which does not always promise an immediate action corollary. Below are categorisations of the responses that were cited by the senior executives in response to research question 2. 'How do you apply learning?' Briefly stated, the categories are applying learning to *advance the organisation's*

effectiveness, to *create constructive change*, to *support the growth and success of others*, and to *personally improve*.

Advance the organisation's effectiveness

Learning is applied in the following ways to make organisations more effective:

Create a better future for the organisation

> You obviously use this learning to improve the performance of the business and that's the first thing, because you're employed to effectively do that.

Envision what is possible

> [I]t is [absolutely] our mission to think, 'What can we do better next year, the year after?'

Protect the organisation from falling behind or failing

> If I don't keep learning, or if I haven't kept learning, or if I decided to not keep learning, I mean I think these [organisations like his] are so fragile right now, I think that either I would go away or it would go away fairly quickly.

Anticipate threats

> I am convinced that we're so busy trying to solve the current problem that we have not anticipated the impact of the future problem, which doesn't have to be a problem if we would collaborate and relate with it now, instead of a by-product or a victim of whatever's gonna happen.

The first two and the second two of these responses can be viewed as representing two sides of executive responsibility—proactively moving the organisation forward in the cases of 'create a better future' and 'envision what is possible', and averting negative occurrences in the cases of 'protect the organisation from falling behind or failing' and 'anticipate threats'. These responsibilities are commonly identified in the literature related to executive

roles, as discussed in Chapter 2. For example, the Center for Creative Leadership (McEvoy, 2015) defines three primary areas of responsibility for senior positional leaders, one of which, 'strategic focus', includes the following functions: 'establishing vision'; 'balancing risk and innovation'; 'anticipating future needs and opportunities'; and 'ensuring future sustainability of the organisation'.

Create constructive change

Learning is applied in the following ways related to constructive change:

Fuel innovative ideas

> How do we come at this big unknown?...If someone puts on the whiteboard six challenges you didn't know you have coming, that's all pretty daunting, so [you get] curious and creative.

Design and implement pilot tests

> You have to always be in that piloting phase.

Facilitate faster implementation of new ideas

> [A] willingness, as we say around here, to fail fast allows you to collectively move much faster. So putting out there the hypothesis, and the...just try it out and see, and being open to it not being what you thought and it being wrong will just help you get to the right place faster.

Leaders in general are very highly valued when they are able to bring about needed change quickly and effectively. As Appelbaum and Paese (2001:1) state:

> Contrasted with operational leaders, whose primary role is to manage day-to-day business operations, leaders who transition from operational to strategic leadership must assume a variety of key roles to achieve longer term strategic business results in pursuit of profitable sales growth, increased market share, implementation of change, and the strategic alliances that will help achieve these goals.

Gleeson (2018: 54) stated: 'Most business leaders today would agree on two things: (1) organisational change is constant, and (2) leading change is one of the most difficult burdens of a leader's command'. For these senior executives, learning helped them to identify innovative change possibilities, test opportunities for improvement, and expedite 'getting to the right place faster'.

Support the growth and success of others

Learning is applied in the following ways to support others:

Share learning

> [O]ur leading value is give first. That can mean a lot of things, but very generally to us it means that you're willing to give your experience and your knowledge freely, willingly to help others succeed.

Mentor and coach

> [R]each down and pull people up around you and make them better than you, and that's your legacy. And you do that consciously every time you do something.

As previously noted in this chapter and discussed further in Chapter 2, sharing learning, mentoring, and coaching have been identified by many as vital elements of an organisation's success. Chief executive officers have been urged to mentor and coach the senior executives who report to them: 'By taking an active role in their growth, even if it's connecting them to the proper individual for mentorship, you ensure they have access to the right resources to reach their next level' (Lofgren, 2018:77).

Personally improve

Learning is applied in the following ways to bring about personal improvement:

Be an effective executive/leader

> [D]o my job more and better tomorrow is how I use the learning.

Become a better person

> Every time I learn I become a better leader and better human being.

These items reinforce two widespread convictions: that learning leads to better job performance and that learning can make one a better person. Regarding the first, Bell, et al (2016:8) state:

> Senior leaders with high learning intelligence, strong learning teams and learning-oriented organizational cultures are essential in today's rapidly changing environment.... Learning intelligence enables senior leaders to make the best possible decisions—and deliver better results for the entire business.

Among others, Nicholas and West-Burnham (2016) have made a similar argument, that learning and application are particularly important in this era of rapid change within organisations and within the organisations' relevant environments.

Regarding learning as a contributor to becoming a better person, one could go back to ancient societies or forward to today's educational leaders: writings and studies abound (e.g., Aristotle in Irwin, 1999; Gardner, 1981 and 1986; Long, 2002; Staats, 2018; Vaill, 1996).

In this section on 'How They Apply Learning', I discussed key findings that were cited by more than half of the senior executives in a particular code within one of four specific categories: applying learning to *advance the organisation's effectiveness*, to *create constructive change*, to *support the growth and success of others*, and to *personally improve.* The findings are presented in Figure 6.2.

Main Findings
(i.e., mentioned by more than half of the 24 senior executive interviewees)

HOW THEY APPLY LEARNING

Advance the organisation's effectiveness
Create a better future for the organization (n=21)
Envision what is possible (n=19)
Protect the organisation from falling behind or failing (n=17)
Anticipate threats (n=14)

Create constructive change
Fuel innovative ideas (n=18)
Design and implement pilot tests (n=17)
Facilitate faster implementation of new ideas (n=12)

Support the growth and success of others
Share learning (n=18)
Mentor and coach (n=12)

Personally improve
Become an effective executive/leader (n=18)
Become a better person (n=18)

Figure 6.2: Main Findings to Research Question 2: 'How do you apply learning?'

Figure 6.3 presents a summary of main findings in both categories: 'How They Learn' and 'How They Apply Learning.'

Figure 6.3 Overall Main Findings

The figure contains two panels:

Main Findings

HOW THEY LEARN

Learning from experience
- Learning by example: going first
- Sharing learning and listening to the reactions of others
- Facing challenging situations
- Hands-on learning
- Pilot testing, experimenting

Learning from guidance of others
- Interacting with others who are learners
- Receiving mentoring/coaching

Learning from reflection
- Reflecting
- Scanning for opportunities
- Holding structured after-action reviews

Supportive practices and attitudes
- A learning attitude or mindset
- Continually committing to learning
- Learning because of an innate sense of constructive discontent with aspects of the way things are
- Accepting that learning is a general responsibility of leaders in any organisation
- Being aware of limited time to learn
- Learning because of an innate sense of curiosity
- Questioning what is possible
- Accepting personal vulnerability/being willing to 'fail'
- Asking, 'Are we focused on learning or on repeating what we did before or being right?'
- Learning on purpose
- Reassessing past habits, behaviours, attitudes, and approaches

Based on data from interviews with 24 senior executives

Main Findings

HOW THEY APPLY LEARNING

Advance the organisation's effectiveness
- Create a better future for the organisation
- Protect the organisation from falling behind or failing
- Envision what is possible
- Anticipate threats

Create constructive change
- Fuel innovative ideas
- Design and implement pilot tests
- Facilitate faster implementation of new ideas

Support the growth and success of others
- Share learning
- Mentor and coach

Personally improve
- Be an effective executive/leader executive/leader
- Become a better person

An answered unasked question

Virtually all the interviewees (n=22) responded early in the interviews by answering an unasked question: Why learning was important for them. To suggest the prevalence of this type of response and indicate how significant it apparently was to the interviewees, I show here responses from the first person I interviewed in each of the three categories of interviewees. In each case, the quoted remarks come from the interviewee's first substantive response (beyond initial pleasantries).

The first education executive I interviewed:

> [W]e spend a lot of time…understanding what's new and coming—
> you know, kind of the 21st century learner, because things are
> changing in education.

The first executive of a publicly-traded corporation who I interviewed:

> [T]he foundation really as I thought about this is . . . curiosity and
> commitment to personal excellence.

The first executive of a privately-held corporation who I interviewed:

> You have to accept that there is a learning scale as a CEO that you
> need to take very seriously. And I think it's an element of success
> or failure in technology companies. I accept that as part of my day-
> to-day, 24-hour job. That I need to have learning embedded as part
> of the work I do…to be armed to make decisions and lead this
> company.

The reasons for learning given by these three executives are different. In the first case, it is understanding how 'things are changing'; in the second, it is about 'curiosity' and 'personal excellence'; and in the third, learning is broadly for 'mak[ing] decisions and lead[ing] the company'. There is nothing particularly surprising about the content of those comments. The reasons given are consistent with general views about the importance or significance of learning by executives, as I indicated in Chapter 2 [literature review]. But it was striking to me how consistently the interviewees began with, or addressed, their reasons for learning. I will speculate about why the interviewees so frequently answered that unasked question later in this section and discuss there what I consider to be the significance of those responses.

Deepening this finding were the three in-depth face-to-face in-person follow-up interviews. Each of these senior executives (who were not the executives mentioned previously as the first executive interviewed in each category) also seemed to spontaneously add more depth and clarity to why learning was important to them.

Recognising that part of an interviewee's approach to an interview is to construct a coherent narrative that goes beyond the production or recitation of factual data, I suspect that the senior executives were providing a narrative frame through which their responses could be better understood. They were establishing who they were, professionally and/or personally, vis a vis learning.

I further suspect that in some cases these instinctive opening comments from the senior executive subjects reflected that they were establishing their reliability and legitimacy as interview subjects, demonstrating that they had strong credentials for the answers they would provide: that they were, in effect, credible witnesses. That is, they told me the compelling professional and/or personal reasons for learning in order to build a foundation for the veracity of what they would say about how they learned and how they applied learning. It is rational that interviewees talking with an interviewer who they generally did not know would want to establish such a foundation.

An additional or alternative possible explanation is that significant learning is generally or often embedded in a larger context that includes the reason for the learning—that it is perhaps difficult for people to think about how they learn without thinking about what they intend to do with what they are learning.

Advancing existing knowledge and understanding

My synthesis of the data has been driven by an attempt to identify themes and patterns that are related to the conceptual framework. This chapter has explored how I have made sense of the primary data and the extent to which, and how, they confirm or advance the existing knowledge and understanding about the processes and impact of senior executives' workplace learning, and its application, on their own practices, and by extension, their organisations.

The findings of the data analysis prompted me to revisit the original conceptual framework multiple times and, progressively, to advance or reshape it as I sensed that the meanings had become clearer. The presumptions that coalesced to form the initial conceptual framework from the literature review and *a priori* codes have been transformed into what the data in this study actually reported. As I noted previously, I created *a priori* codes that reflected those expectations; I subsequently integrated the category 'Factors affecting learning' into the category 'Ways of learning'; and I also adduced new possible codes within 'Ways of learning' and 'Ways of applying learning' based on what I was hearing from the senior executives in the interviews.

As I synthesised the data and reflected on the conceptual framework in light of the main findings of this study, I was drawn into making connections or comparisons with the original conceptual framework inclusions. In an array of specific ways, the findings confirm and advance the existing knowledge and understanding about the processes and impact of senior executives' workplace learning on their own practices, and by extension, their organisations.

Reflecting on the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2, when I align the main findings from this study, and with some degree of creative license look for similarities with the conceptual framework that informed the launch of this study, I believe the findings may coincide with or support the following elements (highlighted in bold) as shown in Figure 6.4:

Ways of learning
Learn by example: go first
Experiential
Informational
Transformational
Observation
Formal…Informal…Nonformal
Shallow…Deep…Profound
Independent
Collaborative – communities of practice
General interactions
Targeted mentoring/guidance from others
Reflection
Challenging assignments
Hardships
Coursework
Personal experiences outside of work
Testing ideas to stimulate learning

Ways of applying learning
Construct personal meaning
Create explanatory mental models
Understand future issues
Respond to emerging challenges
Incrementally improve on past results
Build on strengths
Improve on weaknesses
Test new ideas
Become a better leader
Facilitate learning by others/create
'culture of learning'
Detect and correct errors
Be a role model of learning

Factors affecting learning
Incentives to learn
Curiosity, need for cognition
Mindset (e.g., growth vs. fixed)
Vulnerability/get outside 'comfort zone'
Self-direction/ learning power
Effort
Conception of learning journey
Explicit commitment to daily discipline
of learning/be in 'learning mode'
Making time for learning
Overcome belief that there is little more
that needs to be learned
Overcome fear/anxiety

Figure 6.4: Primary findings that coincide with the conceptual framework

Looking ahead to Chapter 7, I anticipate that future larger-scale research may shed light on the extent to which such correlations may or may not exist.

Reflections

I continue to awaken in the night thinking about this chapter. I wish I could be in a meeting room with McCall (1988); Heslin and Keating (2017); Hirst, et al (2004); Mintzberg (2009); MacBeath and Dempster (2009), Seijts (2014), and others who shed light on the gaps or unknowns in how senior executives learn and apply learning: perhaps they unconsciously hoped to see a study, no matter how small, such as this one. As noted in depth in Chapter 2, each of these researchers made observations either about the connection between leadership and learning or about the unknown extent of the disposition not to learn by senior executives, or their distraction from learning by the rising pressure just to 'get things done' or the neural-bias that, with experience, makes learning harder, and the wonderment, or puzzlement, as to why a few leaders systematically learn from their experiences and most do not.

What I still think about is why each of these experienced researchers stopped where they stopped. Shinning a light on a gap in how leaders learn would seem to ignite a curiosity about what's in the way, and what would it take to get them to lean into learning and its application in ways that they, and their organisations, and society beyond, all benefit? Perhaps, somewhere in the indecipherable back rooms of educational and organisational research they are, in fact, following up with these studies. But, if so, I could not find them.

So my instinct was to simply move forward with this one small-scale study that might shed some light on this original and meaningful topic. Conceptually, much is possible. As to the conceptual contribution of this study, even my very basic conceptual diagram in its evolved or advanced form that draws on the findings of this small-scale study, might be seen as a worthy launching-off point for future research on an under-studied and, I believe, vital topic for researchers.

One data collection area of this study that I examined but that I did not integrate into the findings was the statements expressed in different ways by all but three of the senior executives, who said that relatively few of their peers shared the level of commitment to learning and its application that they did. In hindsight, I could have formalised a question on this for the interviews, but I did not. Some subjects talked statistically as they estimated the low number or percentage of learners at their level in their field, and others spoke more generally about wishing more of their peers were truly energetic learners.

Although it was not a purpose of this study to assess differences in the ways that sub-groups learn or apply their learning, I was nonetheless naturally curious to see whether any such differences were seen in the data, particularly with regard to possible differences in responses between the eight executives from the education field and the 16 interviewees from business entities; and differences between the responses of women and those of men. When I did review the data with regard to those groupings, there was nothing that stood out as a substantial difference. Yet I would certainly be curious about any such differences that might appear in larger-scale research.

Some of the findings in this study were not anticipated. Several of them stayed with me across the year of data analysis and reflection since the interviews began. For example, as I reflected on how many of the *a priori* codes that I listed ahead of the study were found to be non-factors (as listed in Tables 6.5 and 6.10), I realised the value in setting forth anticipated codes ahead of the findings—because it allows sharp contrast with the reality of the data as it is revealed. Examples of the *a priori* and empirical codes that were eliminated as the analysis proceeded and the findings were condensed are shown in Table 6.15 below:

Table 6.15: **Examples of *a priori* and empirical codes noted by few senior executives in describing how they learn and apply learning**
Apply learning by writing, notes, drawing, sketching (n=3)
Be a role model of learning (n=9)
Facilitate learning by others/create 'culture of learning' (n=4)
Follow best instincts of what to learn (n=3)
Learn by building on strengths (n=6)
Learn by challenging assignments (n=4)
Learn by constructing personal meaning (n=5)
Learn by coursework (n=5)
Learn by creating explanatory mental models (n=0)
Learn by detecting and correcting errors (n=7)
Learn by effort (n=5)
Learn by formal learning (n=5)
Learn by improving on weaknesses (n=2)
Learn by independent learning (n=3)
Learn by media, news inside field/industry (n=3)
Learn by media, news outside field/industry (n=3)
Learn by observation (n=4)
Learn by overcoming fear/anxiety (n=2)
Learn by overcoming the belief that there is little more that needs to be learned (n=2)
Learn by personal experiences outside of work (n=5)
Learn by questioning others (n=2)
Learn by questioning self (n=2)
Learn by seeking alternative views (n=5)
Learn by Transformation (n=6)
Learn by writing, notes, drawing, sketching (n=4)
Learn from active network of peers (n=4)
Learn from hardships (n=5)
Learn from incentives to learn (n=0)
Learn from self-direction/overall learning power (n=0)
Learn from the failures of others (n=2)
Learn to navigate change (n=2)
Seek the right resources for the learning I/we want to do (n=3)
Selective hiring of learners (n=3)

As I condensed the data, I kept learning from it. I committed to remain reflective as to which codes were eliminated—knowing that they can still matter in the larger landscape of findings or in encouraging future research.

Throughout the data analysis and interpretation, I wondered whether with a larger sample or in a study with different subjects, some of the responses to these codes might have risen. And what other codes, not visible in this study, might appear?

I also made it a point to consider the time constraints of the interviews. While I had asked for 15 minutes and stated that the interview could last longer at the interviewee's prerogative, I was interested that the average telephone interview length was 32 minutes. I reflected on how often in the usual timeframe of 20 to 45 minutes, deep follow-on questions were not possible. People gave unprompted narrative perspectives and shared experiences beyond the two primary research questions and beyond my questions. This led to a range of emergent and empirical codes, and single-case narrative insights.

Because qualitative research can offer distinctive depth in recording individual perspectives and experiences, I found several of the single examples or stories to be both interesting and compelling. In terms of numerical data, these were not shown to be relevant within this sample of 24 senior executives. Statistically, perhaps these were outliers or anomalies. On the other hand, I found myself thinking about the comments or perspectives or questions and perhaps they serve as invitations for further study.

In my reflections on so many passes through the data and layers of notes, listening and re-listening to the interview recordings, I was struck by an array of very limited points of insight that while statistically insignificant in the present study, lived on in that they made me curious about the possibility of follow-up studies. These were themes that I felt pushed 'the farther reaches of learning' as noted in Chapter 2 and felt to me to be topics that were interesting and relevant and warranted further exploration:

> Several of the subjects described how they build and interact with learning-oriented teams.

General online resources were mentioned by very few as sources of learning.

'Learn from personal experiences outside work' appeared five times; and I remain struck by the passion expressed by several of the respondents about how the larger realms of learning beyond their role or position could be of great importance and value.

'Learn from hardships' or a variation of that phrase was mentioned by five respondents—and ultimately included within 'Learn by facing challenging situations' yet the stories of extracting meaning and learning from extreme difficulties—usually off the job yet applied also on the job—stayed with me.

'Be a role model of learning' was a code mentioned in slightly different forms by 11 different respondents. I included it within a different heading—'Go first, learn by example'—but it could also be argued that being a role model of learning might be different and deeper in some ways that could be explored in future studies.

Two interviewees commented on how important strong team relationships were, so that the executive could confidently focus on doing his/her job: as one said, 'I need a team that can tell me things that I know are not b----s---- so I don't have to micromanage or investigate them'.

Two reported that—given how busy they are—whenever they could get things done faster and more efficiently, it created space for creativity and reflection.

It was suggested more than once that male-dominated executive teams or organisational boards knowingly or unknowingly make it

more difficulty for female senior executives to learn and apply learning.

While a number of the subjects stated that forceful disagreement/argument/sharp challenge was a central source of learning, few gave any examples, and I would like to explore this more thoroughly, although it was beyond the scope and resources of the present study.

One senior executive expressed that, at least for her, learning became stronger as she developed into a more experienced senior executive: I found myself wondering if this was more broadly true—might it be considered a weakness in a newer leader to show strong interest in learning, and to admit that you do not know certain things and want to learn more to explore them?

Several senior executives discussed the learning value of candid feedback and mentioned that executive coaching can be useful in applying learning from such feedback—where a senior executive can discuss openly any perceived weaknesses or shortcomings as well as learning needs.

I wonder whether the large number of expressions by subjects on some variation of 'constructive discontent' as a drive to learn were actually an 'artefact' of the interviews, in which they were for example thinking of learning only as a positive experience, or they did not want to talk about the rougher side of it, or it just did not occur to them in the limited timeframes of the interviews.

The code that centred on 'Facilitate learning by others/create a "culture of learning"' was noted in some form by four of the participants; and although it missed the 12-or-more respondents dividing line for these data findings that I selected based on the

number of codes that applied to more than half the senior executives in the specific study, yet I continue to wonder what future studies may reveal about this, and what the power might, in fact, be in organisations that more actively and continually embraced, and even required, a 'learning culture'.

Summary

This chapter is the result of more than a year of soul-searching, reflection and analysis of the data. I presented a detailed and systematic analysis of the data, relating it to the conceptual framework identified in Chapter 2. There is an abundance of valid and reliable data that needs sophisticated treatment in order to demonstrate logically derived insights and conclusions. The chapter addressed how the *a priori* codes were modified based on emergent codes, along with factoring in counting. This was followed by describing my approach to condensing the data and sorting relevance in both frequency and emphasis of key findings. The chapter then moved into a discussion and interpretation of the data including distilling and displaying the main findings. Themes and patterns related to the evolving conceptual framework were identified, and I demonstrated the extent to which, and how, the findings confirm and/or advance the existing knowledge and understanding about the processes and impact of senior executives' workplace learning on their own practices, and by extension, their organisations. Research findings and their meaning were correlated with the knowledge base in the existing literature. The originality and conceptual contributions of this research were discussed.

The next chapter addresses conclusions and implications.

Chapter 7

Conclusions and Implications

This chapter aims to serve as coda and reflective summation of my sense of the significance and originality of this thesis. Its primary sections address the following topics: a synthesis of the research findings and critical commentary; a description of the originality and significance of the research, and how this study has added to the empirical base for studies on how senior executives learn and apply learning; contribution to the field and knowledge base; implications; contributions of thesis data to theorisation about senior executive learning; implications for senior executives and their practices; and research implications.

A synthesis of the research findings and critical commentary

In this section I present a summarised context, possible ways of synthesising my research findings, and a critical commentary. In later sections of this chapter I expand on the topics that are briefly touched on as context in the opening paragraphs of this section.

My principal purposes in this study, which is the first of its kind. were to add to the empirical and knowledge bases regarding how senior executives learn and how they apply their learning. I have previously discussed the consequentiality of these topics: senior executives run the organisations that shape our lives; learning is how they can discover better ways to do that; and they must apply their learning for it to have an effect.

In fact, because there is virtually no existing empirical or knowledge base about how senior executives learn and apply their learning, and there is assuredly no consolidated base of that data or knowledge, it can fairly be said not that I am

'adding to' the base but that I am creating the base—placing the first stake in the ground in this subject area for future researchers to critique, revise and/or expand.

'There is no roadmap for what I'm doing here, Robert', one of my interviewees said to me about his leadership of a high-technology company. I felt much the same way about my research. 'We try to answer the question "What do we know about learning?"', MacBeath and Dempster wrote, 'and consider why, after centuries of research the answer still remains so elusive' (2009: 2). I believe that I have contributed to the answer to MacBeath and Dempster's question at what has been called the 'micro level' (e.g., Klein and House, 1995) of identifying some individuals' mindsets and behaviours. The limitations of my study and the limitations of existing knowledge and theory make an original contribution at the 'macro level' of theory impossible.

My findings, which were presented at length in Chapter 6, are consistent with the philosophy and learning models developed by Illeris (e.g., 2009; 2017), whose view regarding the main areas of understanding learning are shown in Figure 7.1.

STRUCTURE OF THE THEORY

```
                        BASIS
                       BIOLOGY
                      PSYCHOLOGY
                    SOCIAL SCIENCE


 INTERNAL                LEARNING              EXTERNAL
 CONDITIONS                                    CONDITIONS
                        STRUCTURES
 DISPOSITIONS         LEARNING TYPES         LEARNING SPACE
 LIFE AGE               BARRIERS               SOCIETY
 SUBJ.SITUATION                               OBJ.SITUATION


                      APPLICATION
                       PEDAGOGY
                    LEARNING POLICY
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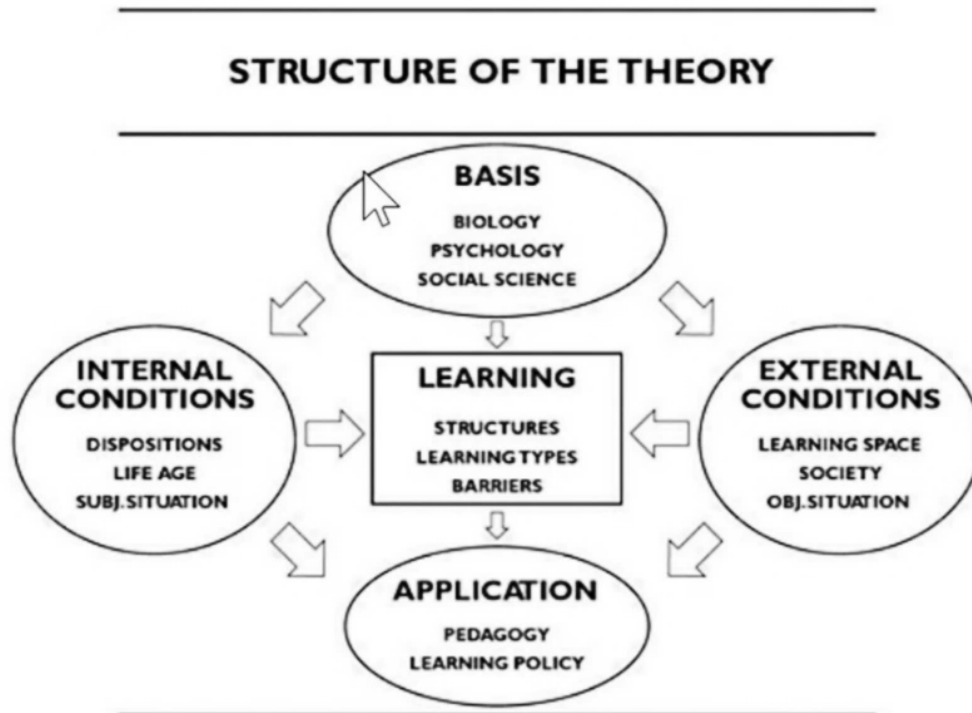
Figure 7.1: The main areas of the understanding of learning.
Source: Illeris (2018: 15)

Illeris's emphasis points are also consistent with other understandings of aspects of learning as discussed by other observers and theorists, which I also discuss below with Illeris's model as the overall framework. For ease of reference, Figures 7.2 and 7.3 recapitulate my primary findings as reported in Chapter 6, and Figure 7.4 displays these findings together with Illeris's visual for his 'Structure of the theory' (2009:8 and 2018:15).

Main Findings
(i.e., mentioned by more than half of the 24 senior executive interviewees)

HOW THEY LEARN

Learning from experience
Learning by example: go first (n=20)
Sharing learning and listening to the reactions of others (n=19)
Facing challenging situations (n=19)
Hands-on learning (n=17)
Pilot testing, experimenting (n=17)

Learning from guidance of others
Interacting with others who are learners (n=16)
Receiving mentoring/coaching (n=14)

Learning from reflection
Reflecting (n=21)
Scanning for opportunities (n=15)
Holding structured after-action reviews (n=13)

Supportive practices and attitudes
A Learning attitude or mindset (n=22)
Continually committing to learning (n=21)
Learning because of an innate sense of constructive discontent with aspects of the way things are (n=20)
Accepting that learning is a general responsibility of leaders in any organisation (n=18)
Being aware of limited time to learn (n=18)
Learning because of an innate sense of curiosity (n=17)
Questioning what is possible (n=16)
Accepting personal vulnerability/being willing to 'fail' (n=15)
Asking, 'Are we focused on learning or on repeating what we did before or being right?' (n=15)
Learning on purpose (n=14)
Reassessing past habits, behaviours, attitudes, and approaches (n=13)

Figure 7.2: Main Findings to Research Question 1: 'How do you learn?'

Main Findings

(i.e., mentioned by more than half of the 24 senior executive interviewees)

HOW THEY APPLY LEARNING

Advance the organisation's effectiveness
Create a better future for the organization (n=21)
Envision what is possible (n=19)
Protect the organisation from falling behind or failing (n=17)
Anticipate threats (n=14)

Create constructive change
Fuel innovative ideas (n=18)
Design and implement pilot tests (n=17)
Facilitate faster implementation of new ideas (n=12)

Support the growth and success of others
Share learning (n=18)
Mentor and coach (n=12)

Personally improve
Become an effective executive/leader (n=18)
Become a better person (n=18)

Figure 7.3: Main Findings to Research Question 2:

'How do you apply learning?'

Aligning the primary findings of this study— 'How do senior executives learn and apply learning to their practices?'—with Illeris's Theory (2009 and 2018) on 'The main areas of the understanding of learning'

STRUCTURE OF THE THEORY

BASIS
BIOLOGY
PSYCHOLOGY
SOCIAL SCIENCE

INTERNAL CONDITIONS
DISPOSITIONS
LIFE AGE
SUBJ.SITUATION

LEARNING
STRUCTURES
LEARNING TYPES
BARRIERS

EXTERNAL CONDITIONS
LEARNING SPACE
SOCIETY
OBJ.SITUATION

APPLICATION
PEDAGOGY
LEARNING POLICY

Ways of learning
Primary findings of study:

Learning from experience
- Learning by example: going first
- Sharing learning and listening to the reactions of others
- Facing challenging situations
- Hands-on learning
- Pilot testing, experimenting

Learning from guidance of others
- Interacting with others who are learners
- Receiving mentoring/coaching

Learning from reflection
- Reflecting
- Scanning for opportunities
- Holding structured after-action reviews

Ways of learning
Continued:

Supportive practices and attitudes
- A learning attitude or mindset
- Continually committing to learning
- Learning because of an innate sense of constructive discontent with aspects of the way things are
- Accepting that learning is a general responsibility of leaders in any organisation
- Being aware of limited time to learn
- Learning because of an innate sense of curiosity
- Questioning what is possible
- Accepting personal vulnerability/being willing to 'fail'
- Asking, 'Are we focused on learning or on repeating what we did before or being right?'
- Learning on purpose
- Reassessing past habits, behaviours, attitudes, and approaches

---

Ways of applying learning
Primary findings of study:

Advance the organisation's effectiveness
- Create a better future for the organisation
- Protect the organisation from falling behind or failing
- Envision what is possible
- Anticipate threats

Create constructive change
- Fuel innovative ideas
- Design and implement pilot tests
- Facilitate faster implementation of new ideas

Support the growth and success of others
- Share learning
- Mentor and coach

Personally improve
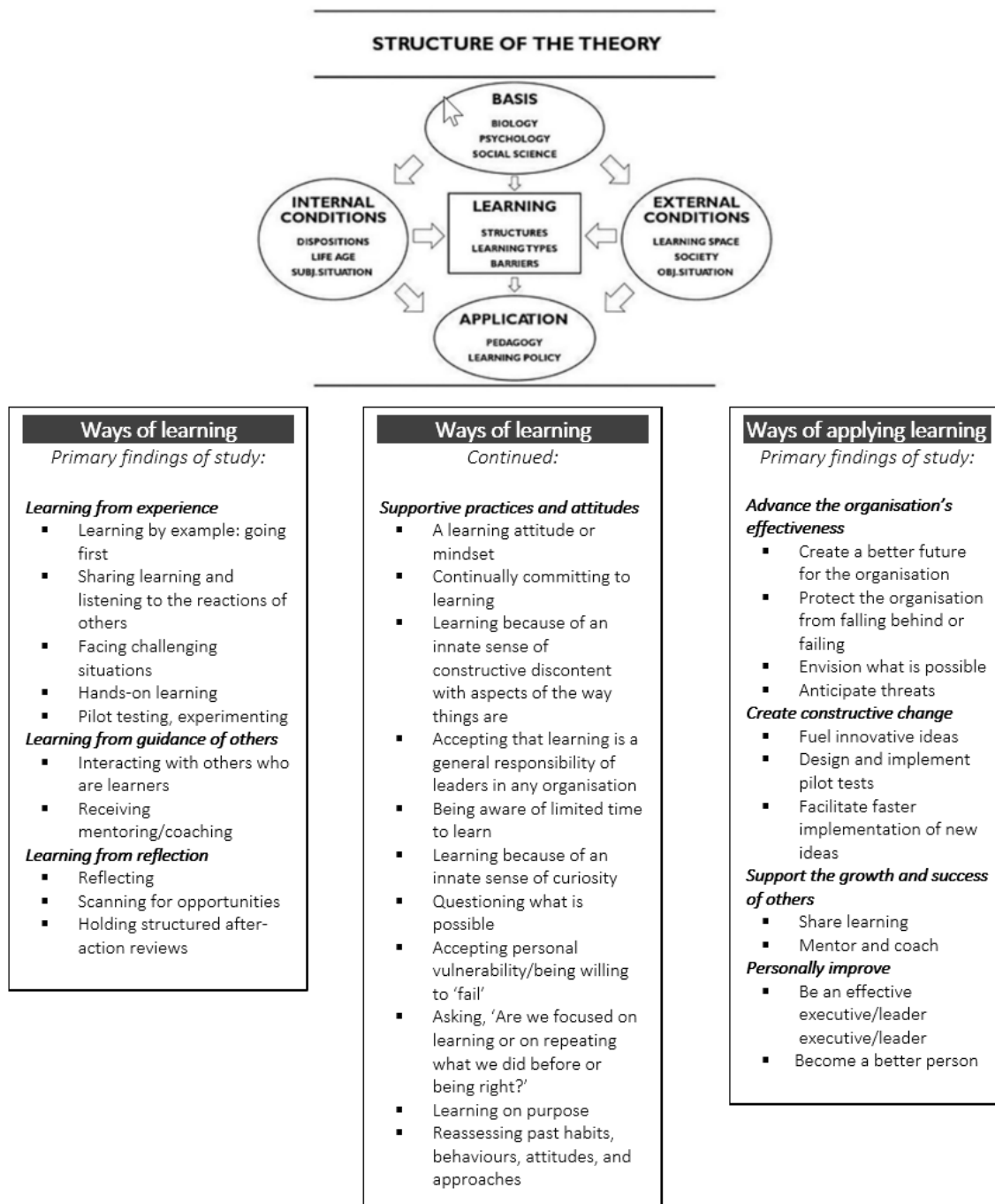- Be an effective executive/leader executive/leader
- Become a better person

Figure 7.4: Aligning the primary findings of this study—'How do senior executives learn and apply learning to their practices?'—with Illeris's Theory (2009:8 and 2018:15) on 'The main areas of the understanding of learning'

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Internal Conditions

Illeris's category of *internal conditions* (shown in Figure 7.1), which includes the dispositions of the learners and their subjective perception of the situation, strongly reflects the 11 'supportive practices and attitudes' described by the senior executive interviewees as important for how they learn (Figure 7.2), and also relates to other several items in my findings related to how the interviewees said that they learn and apply learning.

The 11 'supportive practices and attitudes' frequently cited by the senior executives I interviewed included the following items—and others—that are 'dispositions' in Illeris's terms: 'a learning attitude or mindset', 'continually committing to learning', 'learning from an innate sense of constructive discontent', and 'being aware of limited time to learn'.

Pursuing this further, it is useful to consider the views of Hattie and Donoghue (2018:133). Although their discussion is focused principally on classroom learning by students, they offer three potentially generalisable concepts to encompass the personal inputs required for effective learning. The first of those they call 'skill', which refers to what is brought to a potential learning experience in terms of existing knowledge and other factors. Another is "thrill"—the degree to which it is motivating to learn the thing in question. The third is 'will', which they describe as 'dispositions, habits of mind, or tendencies to respond to situations in certain ways'.

The executives I interviewed spoke little about the 'skill' element as it is defined here. They seemed to accept implicitly that their previous experiences had prepared them for the learning situations they encountered. The 'thrill' factor was unsurprisingly important for them; they communicated to me that it was motivating for them to acquire knowledge that they could apply to accomplish vital results such as those identified in my findings (Figures 7.2 and 7.3), which include creating a better future for the organisation, developing

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innovative ideas, protecting the organisation from negative possibilities, developing the capabilities of their team members, and accomplishing other important goals inherent to the responsibilities of their positions.

Despite those compelling sources of motivation, however, the interviewees still placed a very strong emphasis on the importance of 'will', as reflected in the 11 'supportive attitudes and practices' listed and described in my findings and discussed earlier in this section. Learning has been described as 'neither automatic nor assured' (Heslin and Keating, 2017:378). I would say that often, or in many cases, it must be willed, by executives who (to cite some of the items in my findings about 'supportive attitudes and practices') continually commit themselves to learning, sustain a sense of constructive discontent with aspects of the way things are, deliberately question what is possible, accept personal vulnerability, and resist the temptation to simply do what had been successful in the past.

In the context of their work, some or many senior executives seem to need to deliberately discipline themselves to keep learning. They have—or appear to believe they have—the skill, and the thrill can be there when the learning will help them accomplish something important but will is perhaps more essential than some have theorised. I have mentioned that more than half of the executives I interviewed subsequently observed to me that simply thinking about the two questions I had asked them—How do you learn? And How do you apply learning?—had increased their focus on learning, lending some credence to the idea that amid the pressures of senior executive roles, learning can be neglected—'the most celebrated neglected activity in the workplace' (Pertriglieri, 2014: 47)—unless the will to learn is consciously engaged. Future theorists might wish to explore this in greater depth.

Continuing with Illeris's category of 'internal conditions' from Figure 7.1, that category also includes the learner's 'subjective situation'. My interviewees told me that they applied learning (Figure 7.3) in order to, for example, 'protect the

organization from falling behind or failing', or to 'anticipate threats'. A fear that the organisation might fall behind or fail, or that it might experience significant threats, can be objectively warranted, but it is also a subjective perception of the situation that might be likely to be reflected in increased or more focused learning activity. That is, a perceived external, objective situation—whether or not it is perceived accurately—becomes part of the 'subjective situation' described by Illeris as an internal condition affecting learning. Similarly but on a more personal level, the subjective belief that learning will make one a better leader or a better person, as also reported in my findings about how the senior executive interviewees said they applied learning (Figure 7.x), could result in a drive to learn. The 'subjective situation' would be the perception 'I am not as good of a leader as I could be', or 'I am not as good of a person as I could be', or some variant of those perceptions.

Learning

The *learning* dimension of Illeris' s model is affected by structures, learning types and barriers, as Figure 7.1 shows. While the structures and barriers affecting learning by senior executives are not explicitly addressed in my findings, I have addressed them extensively as contextual considerations.

A central question, mentioned at several places in this thesis, is whether senior executives learn differently from other leaders, or differently from people in general, owing in part to the distinctive demands and barriers of the senior executive role within the overall organisational structure. Alternatively, it might be true that some distinctive aspects of their ways of learning have led to the selection of certain individuals to fill senior executive positions.

As I have said, there is insufficient reliable evidence to answer either of those questions. The general literature about senior executives portrays them as overextended, highly stressed, and vulnerable in their roles, but a careful case

by case assessment would be necessary to correlate specific demands and barriers with specific methods for learning and applying learning. As I note in a section below, some of the data I have presented, which shows not only how the interviewees said they learned and applied learning but also shows many anticipated ways that they might have learned and applied learning but did not say to me that they employed, might help future researchers evaluate whether and why the learning and application of senior executives differs from that of other organisational leaders.

Related to Illeris's mention of the significance of 'learning types', my findings show a potentially strong relationship to the experiential learning models of Kolb, Mumford, and Honey. As illustrated in Figure 7.5, in his experiential learning model Kolb (1984) described an idealised learning process of learning from experience. That idealised process begins with a concrete experience, proceeds to observing the facets of that experience and reflecting on them, continues to creating an understanding of the experience in a broader meaning context ("generalisation and abstraction") as a result of the observation and reflection, and then proceeds to application and testing in which the new or solidified understanding is put into practice, leading to a new experience that can re-initiate the learning cycle. Kolb proposes, as also shown in Figure 7.5, that each person has a preferred learning style that results from the semi-dichotomous preference options of the model's two axes: learning from direct concrete experience vs. learning from abstract generalisation; and learning from contemplative reflective observation vs. learning from active application and testing. Those styles Kolb called diverger, assimilator, converger, and accommodator.

The Kolb Learning Styles
David Kolb

Concrete Experience

Accommodator

Doing & Feeling

Diverger

Watching & Feeling

Converger

Doing & Thinking

Assimilator

Watching & Thinking

Applying & Testing

Observation & Reflection
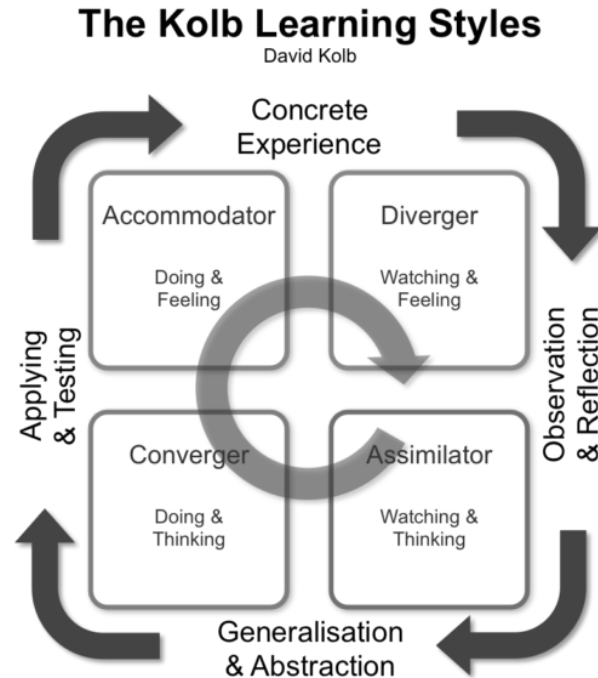
Generalisation & Abstraction

Figure 7.5 Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle and Styles.

Source: Kolb (2012)

Subsequent work, perhaps particularly the work of Mumford (1997) and Honey and Mumford (1982 and 1986), drew from Kolb's model, renaming the elements of the model to associate them more closely with the experiences of organisational leaders but essentially retaining all of the essential aspects of the model, as shown in Figure 7.6. Honey and Mumford's self-assessment 'Learning Style Questionnaire' is widely used, as is Kolb's 'Learning Style Inventory').
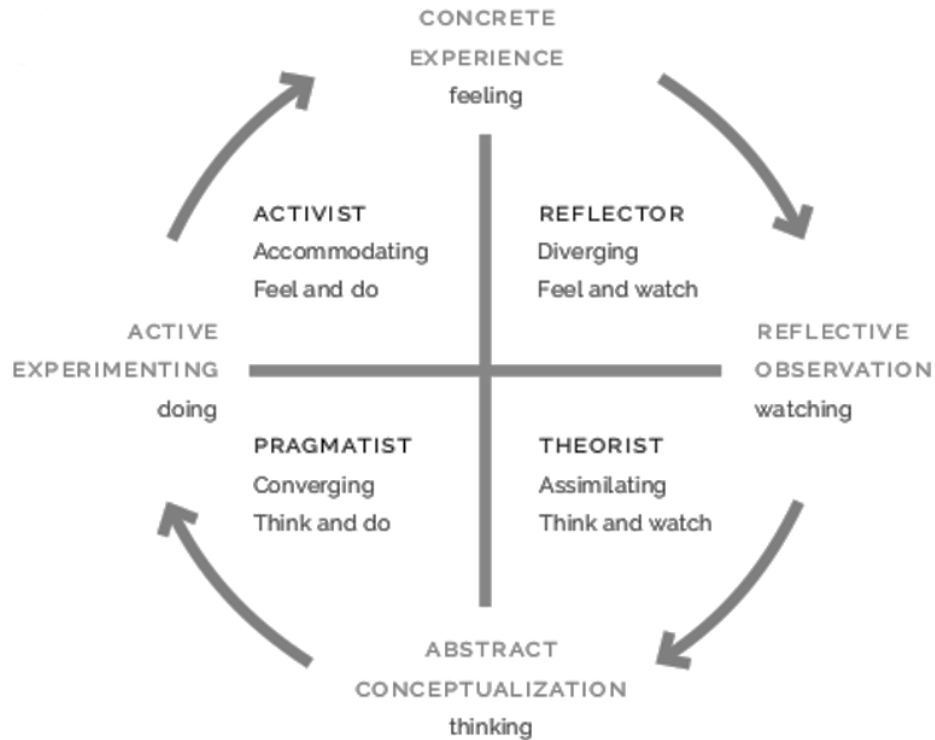
Figure 7.6 Honey and Mumford's Learning Styles or Preferences.
Source: Brouwer et al (2015).

While the models and the questionnaires have been critiqued from many perspectives, as I described earlier in this thesis (such as the relative ineffectiveness of knowing one's learning style, or teaching to others' learning styles, for actually increasing learning), the essential descriptive characteristics that I have just described have generally withstood scrutiny. These models integrate aspects of the two elements of my study, because the 'active experimentation' left side of the model can be considered to be a form of the application of learning. As I mentioned previously, Kolb has offered the observation that people in managerial and supervisory positions, more than people in other kinds of careers, tend to prefer the 'accommodator' learning style, which principally employs active experimentation and concrete experience (labelled the 'activist' style by Honey and Mumford), in contrast to learning styles that emphasise reflection and conceptualisation. That observation is reinforced by Gino and Staats (2015: 13) who wrote:

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When we surveyed participants in our executive education classes, we found that managers feel more productive executing tasks than planning them. Especially when under time pressure, they perceive planning to be wasted effort. This bias toward action is detrimental to improvement …. Being 'always on' doesn't give workers time to reflect on what they did well and what they did wrong.

The multitude of examples in my findings, as shown in Figures 7.2 and 7.3, of interviewees saying that they learned from hands-on experience, and particularly from experimentation (pilot-testing; experimenting; going first; facing challenges) might be seen as potentially supporting the view that senior executives might favour an "accommodator" or "activist" learning style.

This assertion is challengeable by the fact that many of the interviewees also named reflection as an important aspect of their learning. To that I would offer three cautious replies: first, if my findings, reported in Chapter 6 and summarised in Figures 7.2 and 7.3, were tested in a disciplined way across populations, it might be that the frequent mention of the accommodator style might be more prevalent among senior executives, but I only studied senior executives and therefore cannot speak to the prevalence of this style among other leaders; second, two of the three types of reflection that I described—scanning for opportunities and holding structured after-action reviews—are disciplined applications that executives find valuable but which might not be fully natural to them as their preferred ways of learning (for more about this application of discipline, see the next section); and third, often the reflection that was described was not fully contemplative thinking but was in reaction to something they had done—a 'pilot test' or 'experiment'. So, action followed by a new experience preceded reflection in those cases. It is not at all inconsistent with Kolb's and Honey/Mumford's observations that people, by preference, tend to enter the experiential learning process at the place that is most comfortable for their preferred learning style.

External Conditions

Regarding the *external conditions* category of Illeris' s model, which addresses the learning space, societal factors and expectations, and the objective situation of the learner, many of the interviewees described how they learned (and sometimes or often learned best) within a considerably broader learning space than their immediate personal organisational roles—by sharing learning and listening to the reactions of others, for example, and by interacting with others who are learners. Quite often, as noted in earlier chapters, those 'others' were people from different organisations, and in different sectors than where the interviewees worked. As I mentioned when reporting the findings in Chapter 6, 13 interviewees said that they learned from people and sources outside of their usual experience. As one of the interviewees said, 'I … try to shoulder up with people who are quite different than me from a variety of different perspectives because that opposite space of perspective contributes to the learning while we do our jobs'. It could be (a possible subject for future research) that getting away from the direct experience of the barriers and demands of their jobs creates a different learning space that breathes some fresh air into senior executives' learning.

The 'objective situation' mentioned by Illeris as falling within this 'external conditions' category can also be seen to impact learning by senior executives, not least in the obverse of the possible situation I mentioned above—the organisation might in fact objectively be falling behind or failing or facing real threats. It is certainly part of the objective situation of senior executives, and an expectation of at least some parts of the broader society, that executives will do the things that they described as ways they apply learning (Figure 7.3), such as creating a better future for the organisation and facilitating faster implementation of new ideas. Pilot testing and experimenting, which as shown in my findings were frequently mentioned by the interviewees both as ways of applying learning and as strategies for learning itself, are both learning-related

interventions in the 'objective situation', ways of determining whether something that has been learned as actually impacting the objective situation.

Illeris included the learning space, societal factors and expectations, and the objective situation of the learner as relevant 'external conditions' affecting learning, and I have shown here how the findings of my study are consistent with each of those conditions.

Application

My findings address Illeris' s *application* dimension (Figure 7.1) in depth. Some of the same questions that affect the learning-related elements discussed above might be examined regarding application. For example, what are the barriers, if any, that might prevent senior executives from applying their learning? One of them is suggested in my 'how they learn' findings shown in Figure 7.2—a substantial majority of the interviewees discussed the importance of accepting vulnerability and being willing to fail. Application is the place where failure is most visible. Although the business literature is replete with exhortations to accept failure as a way of learning, leaders in general are often reluctant to accept that challenge, and that might be truer of senior executives, whose actions generally have larger consequences than those of others in the organisation. The pilot-testing mentioned as an application (and learning) method by many of the interviewees in my findings may be highly valued in part because it reduces the possible consequences of 'failure'.

Moreover, it might be hypothesised that applying the type of learning that has been characterised as 'transformative' would carry more potential risk of failure than applying learning that is less profound. Transformative learning could lead to large-scale disruptive change, as opposed to more incremental change occasioned by the application of other types of learning. As Illeris illustrates in Figure 7.1, there are reciprocal relationships among all of the elements of the

model, and so it might be asked whether the awareness that transformative learning could lead to higher risk actually discourages senior executives from pursuing transformative insight in the first place.

In another reciprocal relationship within Illeris's model, the impact of the 'learning space' should also be assessed in terms of application. In my study, many of the interviewees mentioned sharing their learning with others as a form of application—many, but far from all. Two interviewees described organisational and personal credos in this regard:

> [O]ur leading value is give first. That can mean a lot of things, but very generally to us it means that you're willing to give your experience and your knowledge freely, willingly to help others succeed.

> [R]each down and pull people up around you and make them better than you, and that's your legacy. And you do that consciously every time you do something.

Where these values exist within the organisation, these forms of application seem likely to be more common.

The specific questions I have raised regarding Illeis's category of application are part of a possible larger set of questions for future researchers: How strong is the connection among senior executives between learning and then applying their learning, and what might explain the strength or weakness of those connections?

Summary

I have shown here how the findings of my study are fully compatible with Illeris's model of the main areas of the understanding of the study of learning, and how other understandings of learning-related phenomena, such as those from Hattie and Donoghue, Kolb, Munford, and Honey, can also be associated with my findings within the context of Illeris's model.

Limitations

My observations above may be viewed in the context of possible limitations of my study, all of which I have previously acknowledged and are briefly summarised here. I have acknowledged the structural and methodological limitations of my study, including the small-scale sample, the limited time available for most of the interviews, and the absence of identified commonalities among the interviewees except for their roles as senior executives. As I have explained, these were not limitations that I chose but ones that were forced on me by the reluctance of senior executives to participate in extended research interviews, which I learned first-hand in my initial attempts to arrange interviews. It was concluded that the goal of the research of contributing to knowledge about learning and its application by senior executives could still be satisfactorily achieved within those limitations, and therefore the study was worth pursuing.

I might have used a different methodology, such as a questionnaire instrument or analysis of the recollections of senior executives in books and interviews. The first of those proved impracticable when I pursued it, and the second seemed less reliable than direct first-hand accounts from interviews with current practicing senior executives. It was concluded that the goal of the research of contributing to knowledge about learning and its application by senior executives could be satisfactorily achieved using the chosen method.

In the discussion above, I have acknowledged many ways in which another study (under different conditions) might have approached the topics differently. For example, it was not feasible for me to inquire with each interviewee about how they specifically applied a specific way of learning or form of learning that they described to me, but such research would have value in more clearly

identifying or suggesting the barriers and incentives related to the application of learning.

I have also described the limitations of the existing literature, which required me to hypothesise more than 100 *a priori* and empirical codes to possibly account for and categorise what I might hear and did hear in the interviews. Having such a broad conceptualisation of possible findings meant that I had to keep the interviews as open as possible at a general level, reducing the full opportunity to ask follow-up questions or pursue connections among the interviewees' observations.

My ultimate categorisations of the findings, as discussed in Chapter 6 and recapitulated in Figures 7.2 and 7.3, can be critiqued and challenged, since in some cases I created categories that subsumed different ways in which interviewees expressed thoughts that I felt were congruent in their meaning.

My role as a researcher-practitioner might have created limitations as well as being advantageous (West-Burnham: 2005a, 2009 and 2012). It helped me obtain senior executive interviewees, helped me understand what they were describing to me without frequent time-consuming requests for explanation or clarification, and helped me to categorise my findings in ways that are consistent with the practices of senior executives. It is certain that I was influenced to some extent in hearing and sorting the data by what my many years of practitioner experience had suggested I might be hearing or what I considered most important from those years of practice. To try to avoid that possible limitation, I engaged in all the forms of reflexivity and general thoroughness that I have previously described, and while I believe I was successful in holding a disinterested position, others might disagree.

My basic research data is presented in this thesis in quotation-filled pen portraits and verbatim transcripts, so other researchers may examine, critique, and/or propose revisions to my findings as they see fit. It is my hope that my

study has contributed to the vital endeavour of understanding, and ultimately making improvements to, the ways in which senior leaders learn and apply their learning.

Originality and significance of the research—and how this study has added to the empirical base for studies on how senior executives learn and apply learning

In this section, I briefly describe what I consider to be the originality and significance of my research, and then I discuss specifically the related subject of how it has added to the empirical base for studies on how senior executives learn and apply learning.

Originality and significance of this research

Senior executives have not previously been studied in a way that provides substantive evidence of how they learn and how they apply learning. Understanding how senior executives learn and apply their learning is a critical first step toward improving how they learn and apply learning. Their learning and its application are widely understood to be central aspects of how effectively they function in their roles, which have disproportionate impact on the success of their organisations—organisations that affect the lives of billions of people throughout the world. Among other things, learning is understood to affect how accurately senior executives understand the environments in which they function and compete, how well they improve what their organisations offer (in terms of quality, cost, and other factors), and how appropriately they define and guide their organisations' impacts on the organisations' direct and indirect stakeholders.

I do not imagine that this study is the last word regarding its subject matter, but it is the first to systematically ascertain and report on how senior executives say they learn and apply their learning, and as such it is a step toward the significant outcome of analysing and potentially improving how they do those things.

Contribution to the empirical base

Aside from this study, there is virtually no empirical research literature that focuses specifically how senior executives learn and apply learning. While there is some literature about how leaders in general learn and apply learning, it is not known how that literature applies to the learning and application of learning of the subset of leaders who are senior executives. There are reasons, which I mentioned in the previous section and will briefly reiterate here, to think that learning and its application by senior executives will have different characteristics than learning and its application by leaders in general. It is conceivable that senior executive learn and apply their learning in the same ways that people in general learn and apply their learning, but here again, there are more reasons to expect those practices to be different among senior executives than within the general population than there are reasons to think that they would be the same.

I review each of those topics below:

The existing empirical base regarding how senior executives learn

Seijts (2014) interviewed 31 executives, many of them 'senior executives' by the terms of this thesis. These interviews were not part of a formal study but rather were for a book that is full of exhortations that leaders must be learners, containing many examples of things leaders say they learned but including

virtually nothing about how they learn or how they proceed to apply what they have learned. McCall and others also asked leaders—some of whom were senior executives by the terms of this thesis—about experiences that changed them, but how they learned from those experiences and is not really discussed. The literature about 'leadership and learning' (e.g., MacBeath and Dempster 2009) is generally about leaders—some of whom are senior executives—doing the 'leading' and students doing the 'learning'; there is no organised empirical information about how leaders learn and apply learning within that literature.

Empirical information does exist about how senior executives learn, but it is untapped. It could perhaps be found, for example, in new slices of existing empirical studies that might touch on learning behaviours, such as certain widely used personality assessments, 360-degree evaluations, and other instrumented analyses. The challenges of retrospectively discovering the traits of senior executives from such materials are very daunting. Empirical information on the topic is also scattered among books, articles, and other literature that might contain in profiles, biographies or interviews ways that senior executives have said that they learn. To the best of my knowledge based on my thorough searches, that information has not been consolidated as a practical contribution to the empirical base, and it was not the methodology that I chose for this study.

The existing empirical base regarding how leaders learn

There is also virtually no empirical literature related to how 'leaders' at any organisational level learn. Such literature would not be directly applicable to my research; nor would my research, focused as it is on senior executives, necessarily be applicable in the broader context of understanding learning by everyone who holds a position of leadership or acts as a leader in any capacity.

The existing empirical base regarding how people learn

It is plausible that senior executives learn in the same ways people in general learn. As shown in Chapter 2, the empirical and theoretical literature about how people learn is vast. Even regarding the subset of all learning that they describe as 'optimal learning', Hattie and Donohue (2016) wrote: 'There is much debate about the optimal strategies of learning, and indeed we identified over 400 terms used to describe these strategies'.

Put another way: 'We try to answer the question "What do we know about learning?", and consider why, after centuries of research the answer still remains so elusive' (MacBeath and Dempster, 2009: 2).

Contribution to the empirical base regarding learning by senior executives

Given the absence of a single agreed-to conceptualisation of how learning takes place by individuals—much less how learning by 'leaders' in general or by senior executives in particular occurs—it became the purpose of my initial research, as shown in Chapter 2, to identify strategies and methods commonly utilised by learners from the literature about learning and my own empirical observations of executives learning.

With that background, I created the lengthy list of possible methods that might be used by senior executives to learn that is included in my conceptual framework and led to my *a priori* codes. I then extracted from the 27 interviews that I conducted the methods most commonly described by the interviewees and categorised and discussed those methods in my findings.

The findings of this thesis contribute little to the vast literature about learning in general. I had no intention of making such a contribution. With the reservations previously described, they do potentially add significantly to the previously virtually non-existent empirical base regarding how senior

executives learn, and by extension they might provide a touchpoint for a broader empirical base about how leaders in general learn. The only commitment of this thesis regarding the subject of learning, however, was to add to the empirical base regarding how senior executives learn.

To my knowledge this is the first empirical research to focus explicitly on identifying how senior executives learn as a primary outcome of the research. It is possible that future research discoveries about how senior executives learn and apply learning might end up revealing that there is, in fact, no difference in ways of learning and applying learning that can be correlated with the level of a leader's responsibilities and influence—and therefore no need to separately analyse the practices, attitudes, habits, behaviours and tendencies of those highest-level executives. But at this point, we don't know. And an empirical base is meant to provide clarity and context that at least begin to reduce that dearth of knowledge.

The existing empirical base regarding how senior executives apply learning

A similar iteration to the one presented above regarding learning by senior executives can be presented regarding the other topic of this thesis: how senior executives apply learning. Just as everyone learns, everyone applies learning, and there are many concepts, ideas, and even examples of how that might happen, but there is not a consolidated empirical base at any level of analysis—individuals, leaders in general, or senior leaders in particular.

So I followed the same process I described above, identifying a large number possible methods and approaches related to the application of learning from the large literature base; incorporating them as a priori codes; expanding them with empirical codes; listening carefully to what the interviewees in this study said; practicing extensive reflexivity in my reflections; and presenting my findings as well as my data for examination by scholars and others.

From the outset, I believed that this study could add some initial discipline, utility and perspective from its findings as they relate to this distinctive group at the helm of the world's organisations, large and small, public and private. Ultimately, I have set forth eight categories and 33 specific modalities that these 24 interviewees commonly reported to be associated with their learning and their application of learning. I hoped such a study would provide an initial basis for other researchers to join in the important endeavour of better understanding these two central aspects of senior executive effectiveness.

My research also identified a number of behaviours and approaches that might be assumed to be associated with learning by senior executives, which the executives in this sample generally did not report as being significant for them.

Recognising that individual studies rarely generate substantial new insight into educational or social phenomena (e.g., Flick, et al, 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Miles, et al, 2014; Patton, 2015), it is hoped that this knowledge might be valuable in itself as well as providing input for future studies. As I reflect on the time spent delving into the methodology, data collection, and analysis, in the end I can only report the findings as thoroughly, honestly and accurately as possible. As Flick (2014) asserted, such findings still make a valuable contribution, albeit possibly a small one, to new knowledge and theory about the social world.

This original research provided uncommon access to a small yet rich array of perspectives and experiences of senior executives in hopes of identifying even the most basic of practices, mindsets, patterns, themes and questions with regard to learning and application.

Contribution to field and knowledge base

I have shown how my findings and the supporting data might contribute an empirical base to the narrowly focused but highly important field of senior executive learning, and I have shown how those findings and supporting data might contribute to future studies examining leaders in general. I have been explicit throughout this thesis that it was not my intention to directly contribute to the intersectional field of leadership and learning, except insofar as these senior executives sometimes enact leadership as one of their roles, and therefore my research might help those studying the intersection of learning and leadership by providing some findings and data with regard to how these particular 'leaders' learn and apply their learning. I did not examine the 'leadership' side of learning and leadership in my research: I asked and answered only the questions 'How do senior executives learn?' and 'How do they apply learning?' I asked and answered those questions in the broad context of all of their duties, not particularly with their leadership roles in mind. So when the interviewees told me that—amongst my many other findings as shown in Figures 7.2 and 7.3—they learn by pilot testing and experimenting and they apply learning to envision future possibilities, it might be said by some that in some contexts those are leadership functions, and I will be pleased if researchers in the field of leadership and learning can make use of those findings. But the ideas that my interviewees said they pilot-test are not necessarily 'leadership' ideas—they could, for example, be ideas about personal productivity or about analysing a financial projection—and the new possibilities they envision might or might not be put into effect through their leadership. Only if everything a senior executive does is understood to be a 'leadership' activity—a proposition I find invalid on its face—can my study be said to directly reside in the field of leadership and learning. How this study contributes to that field will depend on how future researchers use it in that specific regard.

The senior executive subject group of this study reportedly faces increasing demands, distractions, complexities, performance pressures and turnover. Some of those challenges are functions of the world as it is today—vast access to information, global interconnectedness and competition, and workforces, customer bases, and investors with new kinds of desires and expectations, to name a few. The contemporaneous nature of this research, based on interviews with current senior executives, perhaps makes a timely addition to existing knowledge.

Future researchers in executive learning might wish to use my verbatim reports, as contained in the pen portraits and transcripts I have included, as the basis for developing their own research projects. They might want to study a specific subset or subsets of the topic areas of my thesis. They might even want to reconceptualise the categories and items into which I distilled the hours of interviews into the findings presented in Chapter 6 and recapitulated in Figures 7.2 and 7.3 or use those categories and itemisations to study different populations of leaders. Providing all of the information for doing any of that is, in my view, a significant contribution of this thesis to the knowledge base.

I believe that I have made a perhaps small but potentially useful methodological contribution as well. When working to engage a subject population that generally has little faith in the practical value of academic research, with corresponding resistance to participating in such research, is it not worth starting with the most basic of research questions and briefest of non-threatening methods such as semi-structured interviews, as done in this study? This small-scale study has served as a method to engage senior executives in learning-related academic research in a realistic way for them.

Implications

Every researcher must make assumptions in a study as to the type of knowledge the research project seeks to produce and then, reflectively, at the end of the study, ask if the findings have relevance beyond the confines of the study and sample. As first discussed in Chapter 3 on methodology, due to this study's limitations, I acknowledge that the findings and interpretations are not generalisable beyond the sample of 24 senior executives (Maxwell, 2013; Miles, et al, 2014).

Internal generalisability

Internal generalisability is often linked to validity. Knowing this, to strengthen the study's validity I employed a strategy that has been said to be underutilised in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013; Miles, et al, 2014; Seale, 1999): analysing the data to provide not only interpretive analysis but also numerical results about the frequency and distribution of observations and experiences or perspectives, or the number of instances of a broad or specific challenge, opportunity or concern. This subject was discussed extensively in previous chapters.

Theoretical or 'face' generalisability

In contrast to 'statistical generalisability' which claims to reveal or confirm a universal finding, 'theoretical generalisability' can simply pose a question for future research or introduce a tentative framework or hypothesis. Throughout this study I have reflected on whether or not my analytic categories seem to suggest any more general insights. Flick (2014) maintains that such questions are worth posing, if only to encourage future studies.

Qualitative studies such as this one may also sometimes yield what Singer (2003) called face generalisability: there is no obvious reason not to believe that the results apply more generally to similar cases or settings (Flick, et al, 2014: 549). I remain keenly aware of how, as a researcher, my presence, process and decisions have created myriad points of influence on the study's execution and findings. I realise more clearly why reflexivity (Finlay and Gough, 2003) or reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983, 1987) matters so much—and how many places in this thesis are reflective of my commitment to those activities, and why social scientists have been increasingly called to observe, reflect on and honestly discuss their own role in collecting and analysing data and producing findings (Fontana and Frey, 1994).

Utilisation orientation

West-Burnham (2012: 6) states:

> The effective learner knows how to learn and has a disposition to do so… She continuously questions herself and others as to whether she is employing the best methods. She can explain the process of her learning and its outcomes to her peers and others, when such demonstration is required.

Particularly because the subjects of this study were busy senior executives, who as a group have been shown over the years to doubt that academic research holds practical value to them or their work, I decided that applicability both of the research questions and any related findings would matter to them. Based on comments received from the participants during as well as following their interviews that the two research questions alone had energised in them a sharpened focus on how they learn and apply learning, in accordance with West-Burnham's observation, I believe this study has contributed in some way to the utilisation/application relevance that senior executives seek from research.

Perspectives beyond the original conceptual framework

Here I summarise my perspective on how the evidence and findings from this research relate to the original conceptual framework. As noted in Chapter 6, my synthesis of the data has been driven by an attempt to identify themes and patterns that are related to this conceptual framework. I have discussed how I made sense of the primary data and the extent to which, and how, it confirms and advances the existing knowledge and understanding about the processes of senior executives' workplace learning and its application on their own practices. Aligning the primary findings from this study with the original conceptual framework, I believe the findings lend credence or support to the elements that are highlighted in bold text in Figure 7.7, aligning the conceptual framework for this study with its primary findings on learning and its application by senior executives.
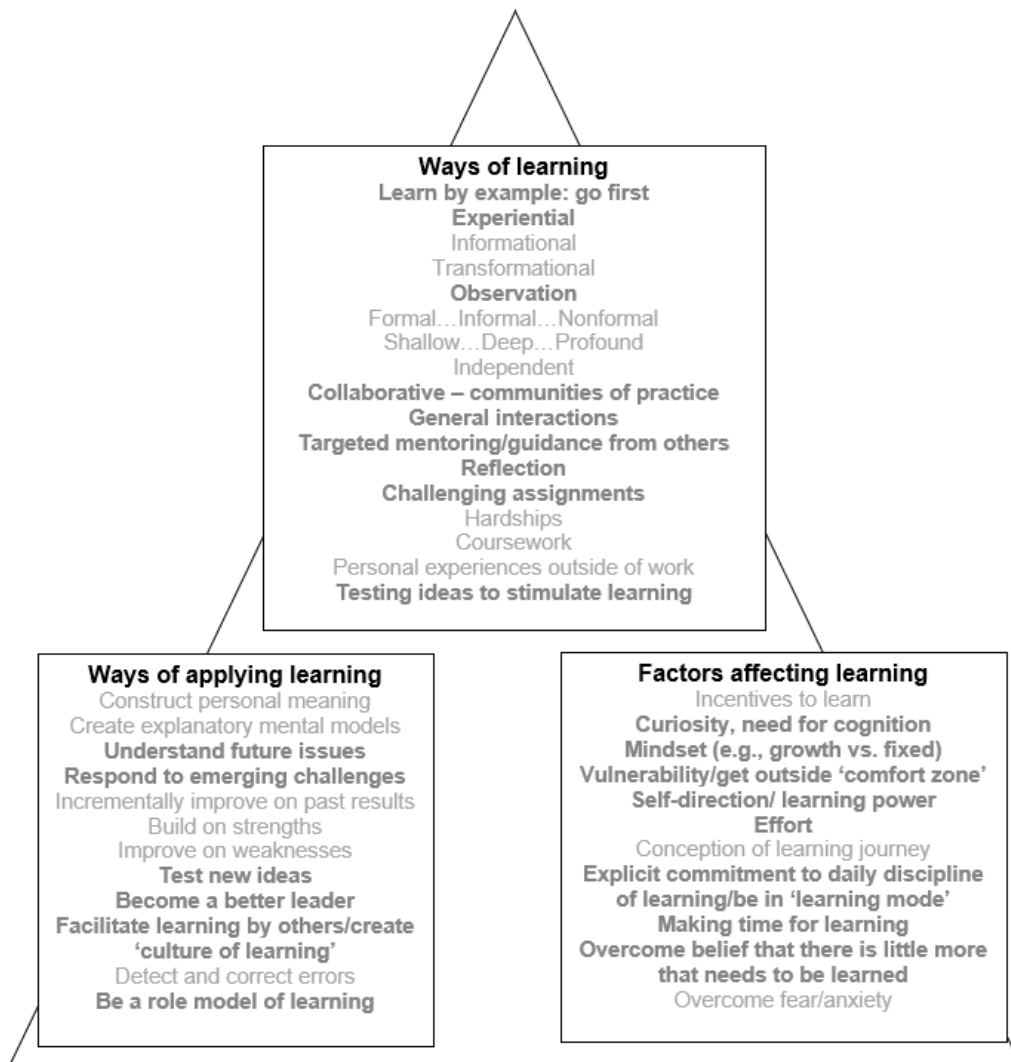
Ways of learning
Learn by example: go first
Experiential
Informational
Transformational
Observation
Formal…Informal…Nonformal
Shallow…Deep…Profound
Independent
Collaborative – communities of practice
General interactions
Targeted mentoring/guidance from others
Reflection
Challenging assignments
Hardships
Coursework
Personal experiences outside of work
Testing ideas to stimulate learning

Ways of applying learning
Construct personal meaning
Create explanatory mental models
Understand future issues
Respond to emerging challenges
Incrementally improve on past results
Build on strengths
Improve on weaknesses
Test new ideas
Become a better leader
Facilitate learning by others/create
'culture of learning'
Detect and correct errors
Be a role model of learning

Factors affecting learning
Incentives to learn
Curiosity, need for cognition
Mindset (e.g., growth vs. fixed)
Vulnerability/get outside 'comfort zone'
Self-direction/ learning power
Effort
Conception of learning journey
Explicit commitment to daily discipline
of learning/be in 'learning mode'
Making time for learning
Overcome belief that there is little more
that needs to be learned
Overcome fear/anxiety

Figure 7.7: Aligning primary data with the conceptual framework

In the views and perspectives shared by the senior executives in this study, I realised, for example, that the 'factors affecting learning' were, in the executives' experience, embedded to various degrees in 'ways of learning' and to a lesser degree in 'ways of applying learning'. I also discovered that elements from the literature review that had seemed to be distinctive and were represented in the conceptual framework under either 'ways of learning' or 'ways of applying learning' were, in the view of many of the senior executives, present to at least some degree in both 'ways of learning' and 'ways of applying learning'. What also stood out

was the realisation that to the majority of the senior leaders in this study 'ways of learning' felt inextricably tied to 'ways of applying learning'—as so many expressed the view that they could not envision engaging in learning in a merely abstract way, without an application purpose in mind.

The exploration of learning theories that led to the itemised lists in my conceptual framework was exceptionally beneficial in helping me to notice and frame subjects that arose from the interviews, and it was also beneficial in helping me to notice and frame what did not arise even though it might have been expected to. It is possible to notice things that one does not already have words or concepts for—and I think in some cases I did that during this study, detecting themes that did not appear during my literature review and hence were not included in my conceptual framework—but being able to mentally scan a very broad landscape of possible ways of categorising thoughts expressed by the interviewees facilitated the process of identifying the main findings (Figures 7.2 and 7.3). It can be said that my research moved from the large number of possible findings contained in the conceptual framework to the smaller number of actual findings that I arrived at, but the latter would not have occurred without the former.

I explained in Chapter 6 my speculations regarding why some items from the conceptual framework might have been mentioned frequently enough and with enough emphasis by the interviewees to have reached a level of primary significance, but it was not the place of this study to definitively identify why some modes of learning and applying learning were more frequently or emphatically mentioned than others. I also explained that the 'lesser' items could not be determinatively eliminated, given that the nature of the research design might have led the interviewees to mention some types of items that were most salient to them in the interview

context and not mention others which might indeed have been found to be significant to them using a different methodology (e.g., longer interviews or a checklist of ways of learning/applying learning). I certainly was curious about why some items from the original conceptual framework earned inclusion in my findings and other items did not, but it is my hope that future researchers will pick up where my study has left off and answer some of those questions, as well as the others that I have identified previously and later in this chapter.

Contribution of thesis to theorisation about senior executive learning

The principal focus of this thesis was to gather, assess, sort, and present empirical data about how senior executives learn and apply their learning, with the understanding that 'discovery is the prelude to theory' (Boer, et al 2015: 1238).

I began by reviewing the literature about those thesis topics, identifying what the works of leading theorists and other observers suggested I might find when I conducted my interviews. The results of that review are presented in Chapter 2. By gathering information directly from senior executives, assessing it and organising it into categories, and including all the background information from the interviews in both pen portraits and transcripts within the thesis, this study provides a substantial base of information and opinion for theorisation by others about how this highly influential subgroup of 'leaders' might learn and apply learning.

What was not found might also contribute to theorisation about learning and its application by senior executives. As discussed in Chapter 2 and thereafter, and mentioned in a previous section of this chapter, the *a priori* codes with

which I began this study were a thorough itemisation of the existing ways in which learning and applying learning have been said to occur. Relatively low numbers of responses related to those items suggest that although they are theorised to be ways of learning and applying learning, and they might be commonly used by other 'leaders' or individuals, they might not be the preferred learning methods or application priorities of senior executives. Tables 6.11 and 6.12 show the items that were mentioned by fewer than half of the interviewees, and there is follow-up discussion after each table regarding how those items were evaluated.

Future researchers might elect to test this data and develop theories about why some potentially expected responses did not occur. For example, it is undoubtedly true that the kinds of learning described by Mezirow (2018), West-Burnham and Coates (2005), and Petriglieri (2014) as 'transformational', 'transformative' or 'profound' does occur. Individuals can find that their ways of understanding the world are deeply changed, and their subsequent thoughts, actions, and perceptions are markedly different as a result. Very few of the executives I interviewed described such learning experiences to me (one of them described her pursuit of profound learning outside of her executive role through spiritual practice). There are many possible explanations for why that is so—among other things, I didn't directly ask the interviewees about transformative learning and the nature of the interview was such that they might have felt the time was better spent discussing the more pragmatic day-to-day experiences of their learning; such learning is perhaps relatively rare and therefore missed in this small-scale sample; or, alternatively, there might be something about this study population that inhibits such learning—maybe the pressures and demands of their jobs are too intrusive or maybe they are selected for their positions in part because they are not the 'type of person' to experience the kind of learning that could upset their routines and the routines of others. Theorisation about this topic and other items with low responses is potentially very valuable, but it was outside the borders of my study.

Theorisation is potentially strengthened and encouraged by what I found and didn't find, and together these can be seen as a significant contribution.

Implications for senior executives and their practices

Throughout every phase of my classwork, research, and writing, I kept a journal of things that I sensed might be potentially valuable ways for individual senior executives or their teams or organisations to stimulate or support learning and its application.

I read an early article about the vaunted concept of 'learning organisations' (e.g., Senge, 1990), and highlighted this passage:

> [T]he topic in large part remains murky, confused, and difficult to penetrate. Scholars are partly to blame. Their discussions of learning organizations have often been reverential and utopian, filled with near mystical terminology. [https://hbr.org/1993/07/building-a-learning-organization]

As someone who may now be asked for his perspectives as a 'scholar' regarding executive learning, I want to identify several of the most efficacious and least 'murky' methods of fostering learning and its application. For me, based on the feedback I received from the interviewees, this begins with just the process of executives reminding themselves regularly of the importance of learning amidst the 'present shock' pressures of their everyday busy-ness, stepping back at moments each day to ask, 'How am I learning?' and 'How am I applying learning?' Executives who find value in asking themselves those questions may then want to introduce them to their teams, or to incorporate the questions into formal and informal coaching and mentoring activities.

It is said that Admiral Hyman Rickover was a demanding guiding force behind America's development and deployment of nuclear submarines. He used to ask the participants in meetings to say at the beginning of the meeting what they expected to be surprised by in the meeting (Spear, 2009). This question is said to have increased the participants' attention to important new learning. It might or might not be the right question for any senior executive to use with their team, but it is probably important for executives (and other leaders) who care about learning to do something to reinforce the importance of learning and applying learning as values, and bringing up those subjects at the beginnings of meetings is one way to accomplish that. That could happen by the executive/leader reflecting on his/her own recent learning, asking other meeting participants to reflect on their own learnings and applications, or in other ways.

If a company utilises mentoring or coaching, it would be relevant to ask in evaluating such programmes what the participants learned and how they applied it. It could also be valuable to ask those giving the coaching and mentoring what they were learning and applying to grow their own effectiveness.

Other ways of helping more senior executives to maximise learning and application based on the findings of this study might include addressing many of the items in my findings (Figures 7.2 and 7.3)—for example, providing them with a simple structured process for pilot-testing ideas; helping them to accept the vulnerability that may accompany learning and sharing learning; helping them to notice where their learning is growth-oriented and where it is merely 'polishing the past'; helping them to adopt and foster an attitude of 'constructive discontent' that might create a few more waves than their current culture permits; and perhaps helping them to see that there are many opportunities for reflecting on learning in mundane aspects of the day, such as

when walking into the workplace, when caught in traffic, or when waiting in line.

I was also taken by many specific examples of learning- and application-related practices that I heard from the interviewees, for example the executive who uses his mobile phone to capture photos of people he has met or things he has seen that he wants to ponder later; the senior leader who learned the importance of foregoing 'what' and 'how' questions until the more fundamental 'why' question had been answered; and the leader who accelerated his own learning by hiring a new assistant and giving that assistant licence to 'change everything'. 'I'm not [going to] like it, it's [going to] be awful, it's [going to] hurt', the executive reported having said, knowing that the discomfort would also create fast and dramatic learning.

Research implications

This study emerged from the realisation that senior executives are faced with growing, rather than diminishing, challenges and opportunities. For more than two decades, I have been advising and coaching individual executives, and providing insight and advice for the effectiveness of commercial and social enterprises. Learning is considered to be vital to the success of senior executives in their jobs, and, in turn, to the success of the organisations they lead. This small yet original study advances understanding of how senior executives learn and apply learning, and therefore it may be used in ways that are beneficial to senior executives personally; it may contribute to the success of commercial or social enterprises where they work; and above all it is hoped that the insights generated by this doctoral study may serve to inspire other researchers to investigate the learning-related attitudes and actions—and corresponding untapped potential—of senior executives on a larger scale.

That research will require exploring theoretical and dynamic perspectives that take seriously the team, organisational, social, societal and cultural contexts within which senior executives learn and work in hopes of understanding and then improving specific outcomes for the executives themselves as well as for the organisations, industries, fields and/or larger communities of which they are part. Beyond the two research questions asked in this study, other questions to be explored might include:

In what ways, for what reasons, and with what application of time, focus and resources, are senior executives learning and applying learning?

How are senior executives mandating learning and its application as part of their organisations' selection, development, innovation, feedback and promotion processes?

Are there organisational, community and societal costs resulting from senior executives who do not continually learn and apply learning?

As broad as such questions may be, and as limited as the scale and findings of this initial study have been, I believe the research questions could be used, evaluated, validated, contradicted, revised and advanced as other researchers build on those questions and this work. My recommendation is that researchers ask the research questions of larger samples, in different contexts and fields and across all levels and roles of leaders and leadership, not only with senior executives.

This chapter has provided a synthesis of the research findings and reflectively summarised my view of the significance and originality of this thesis. It explored how this study has added to the empirical base for studies on how senior executives learn and apply learning; its contribution to the field and knowledge base; implications; contributions of thesis data to theorisation about senior executive learning; implications for senior executives and their practices; and research implications.

The next and final chapter provides reflections on the journey and some thoughts on what's ahead.

Chapter 8

Reflections on the Journey

This final chapter provides a reflective summation of the personal learning that has occurred during this doctoral endeavour and glances ahead at where these experiences lead.

This phase of my lifelong learning journey began nearly seven years ago during a gathering of a small group of experienced advisors, consultants, and coaches, at which we each identified what we viewed as the biggest questions affecting our work. My principal questions, arising from more than three decades of interactions with senior executives around the world, had to do with learning. How much of our work actually resulted in new learning for the top leaders we advised? How dependent was the effectiveness of our work on those leaders' willingness and capacity to learn? Did executives who learned from us apply that learning in effective ways? Was there any difference in the receptiveness of executives to learning or in their willingness to apply learning in contemporary times, compared to what those qualities had been like earlier in our careers?

As my peers at that gathering thought with me about learning and applying learning, it brought up many lines of inquiry that seemed central to our work and our clients' success. I also noticed that we ourselves as a group of influential advisors might have lost touch to some extent with our own learning; I was reminded of how easy it can be to become so involved with doing our jobs that we fail to observe what we are learning, or could learn, or wish we could learn.

Learning became a topic I couldn't shake off after the gathering had ended, and it came up for me more and more in my work. In a discovery that was startling to conventional wisdom, neuroscientists had recognised that the brain changes its shape to accommodate things that people learn the most about (e.g., *Doidge,*

2007) and another breakthrough discovery showed that new cells are produced in the brain every day, but they die unless they are vitalised by what the scientists called 'effortful, successful learning' (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3191246/). Now I had additional evidence-based visual correlates for my thinking. How were my clients' brains growing or shrinking? Were their brain cells building important new circuitry every day, or were their new cells dying, as it were, right before my eyes? And what about my own brain and my own new cells?

In my early graduate work in the 1990s, one of my research supervisors (Patton, e.g., 1990, 2011, 2012, 2015) taught me that meaningful research tends to originate when you stare into the unknown and some question, idea or concept emerges that takes hold of your mind and heart and won't let go. That became the case with me and executive learning and its application. I came to feel compelled to explore and then to do whatever I could to ascertain the current state of that learning compared to what might be possible.

I first used my company's online research tools to look for answers about senior executive learning and its application, but I found little of practical significance, and no specific studies, on the subject. The more I thought about it, the more I felt that something as widely assumed, as it seemed to be, that senior executives learn and apply learning, should be studied and given specific focus in the knowledge base. My interest grew. I hoped that some scholar, somewhere, would have drawn together existing research on this topic, or completed some initial research.

On late evenings over the next several months I searched online for that 'some scholar, somewhere' and nothing appeared. There came a point when I concluded that I needed to study this topic with the full discipline and resources of the best scholarly setting I could find. After researching that, I concluded that UCL would be the best place. I discussed it with my wife—who is also my business partner—and wondered aloud, 'What if I pursued a second

Ph.D. and enrolled in the UCL doctoral research programme in learning and leadership and made this topic my focus?' She realised that my passion for exploring the power and potential of where learning meets leadership in senior executives was still very much alive and she graciously consented to support this endeavour. From my first conversations with Professor Peter Earley I felt this institution and programme fit my goals.

The doctoral coursework stretched me—in parallel to the themes of this study, and in part because of the nearly three decades since I had previously completed such coursework. I found myself marvelling at the expanding scope and depth of online searches and digital libraries, as well as the proliferation and correspondingly problematic debates that had grown regarding research methodologies, theories of learning, and more. But every step of the way I also kept my notes growing on what I was observing with keen interest in the senior executives I worked with, and in myself. This raises the uncommon yet potentially beneficial practitioner-researcher link (e.g., West-Burnham, 2005a, 2009, 2012) that afforded me contrasting vantage points from which to conduct this original study. At the same time as I was designing and then executing this research, I was also engaged part-time in my 'other work' up close with senior executives in organisations around the world. While I strove to keep the study separated from my 'day job', I had the distinct sense of working on academic research for part of a day and then metacognitively observing other senior executives for the rest of the day. In other words, this research focus became consuming.

As for the study itself, I explored many options before settling on the research questions and the semi-structured qualitative interview method for this thesis. I pilot-tested different methodologies and methods as part of my graduate coursework: I drafted an ethnographic study but felt it was too intrusive for my subject population of senior executives. I delved into phenomenology-based studies, where an entire thesis could be based on phenomenologically

grounded conversations with one subject. Yet I wanted to study a larger sample.

I next devoted months of study and exploration in the opposite direction. I drafted a potential mixed methods research design that centred on a survey that would require participation by several thousand senior executives. I drew up that research plan to incorporate a well-established survey instrument on mindful learning agency and learning power along with a section of open-ended questions. I eventually realised two things: first, the time and expense of such a study were daunting and, second, I found myself growing increasingly anxious about the likelihood that I could generate acceptance by several thousand senior executives to participate—especially after reading the research noted in Chapter 2 on how resistant senior executives generally are to participating in academic research of any kind, and their lack of perceiving any value to their practices from such research.

Even after three years into my doctoral study I still harboured some doubts as to what I was finding during my critical literature reviews—that there was so little existing research on the topic I had chosen. Eventually I acknowledged that I could make a contribution to the study of executive learning and its application even with a relatively small-scale yet well-designed qualitative study that would produce some rich primary data. In parallel with my literature searches, I continued drafting a lengthy list of research questions that might produce new knowledge. As I reflected on those queries, and imagined asking them of senior executives, they seemed to build off two primary inquiries:

How do you learn?

How do you apply learning?

Since developing research questions can serve as a means of establishing internal coherence in a study, I soon felt that the two primary questions would be better than multiple lines of questioning, particularly given that what I

hoped to accomplish was to conduct interviews that evoked open, honest and meaningful lived perspectives and experiences from my study's subjects.

Despite my many years of experience working with senior executives, looking back at the study design and approach I chose, I did not anticipate the substantial difficulty I would have in getting senior executive subjects to participate in the study. Yet it still felt meaningful and coherent to me to start with a relatively small sample of several dozen senior executives. I chose to select them from three broad realms—those leading educational institutions, those leading publicly-traded for-profit companies and those leading privately-held for-profit enterprises. I also felt, from personal experience with senior executives across fields, industries and disciplines, that some kind of convergence was happening—that differences in the requirements for executive success were becoming less distinctly contextual to specific industries, fields, and organisations than in the past and, instead, seemed to be converging across all industries, fields and individual organisations. I noted findings by Rushkoff (2013) that 'present shock' was creating a nearly universal state of information engulfment, distraction and interruptions; I read studies highlighting growing executive churn and the risks of increasing, even incessant pressures, to navigate change and get things done (Mintzberg, 2009; Staats, 2018) at the possible expense of failing to anticipate change. So I entered the study also curious about any clear differences I might discover, despite the small sample size, between or among these three broad realms of senior executive practice—leading educational institutions; for-profit publicly-traded companies; and for-profit privately-held enterprises. This also raised my curiosity as to what direction learning and its application are truly headed today. In the words of Illeris (2009: 14):

> Another problem is that much intended learning does not take place or is incomplete or distorted. In schools, in education, at workplaces and in many other situations, very often people do not learn what they could

learn or what they are supposed to learn. ...Today much non-learning and mislearning...have a background in some general conditions that modern society creates, and in some respects the investigation and understanding of such processes are definitely as important as more traditional learning theory to understand.

As the primary data were collected, I began analysis; adding new data as it was compiled, and then re-analysing the data as a whole. Over the course of a year I made dozens of passes through the primary data. I awakened innumerable times in the night to reach for my notepad and jot a concept or idea for the next day's work. I used more than 15 colours of pens, and every available tape flag and highlighter colour. I created my own hieroglyphics system for comparative notes, and attempts to assess, align and condense meaning.

I re-listened to the interviews so many times that as I went through my day I found that I could hear the interviewees' voices in my subconscious, replete with pauses, emphases and passionate spontaneous observations. The limitations of the English language were underscored by my attempts to develop precise categorisations of what I was striving to understand and capture. As I drew together themes and compared what I was observing to the descriptions from the literature in my conceptual framework, I experienced many wonderings and at times headaches. Which, if any, of this fell clearly into alignment with existing theories of learning; and where did the findings intersect with research on the intersection between leadership and learning? At times it felt like I was cast adrift in a philosophical labyrinth: I found myself returning for comfort, however scant, to MacBeath and Dempster's (2009:1) formulation that a definition of learning is 'elusive'. I reflected on what the primary data of the study and thesis revealed and how the depths and scope of the process actually worked for me from start to finish—in hard-earned personal and professional insights that mostly came from soul-searching and

assessments followed by reflection and re-assessments the research process and what it might be revealing in terms of possible findings.

As noted in Chapter 6, I was struck by the fact that, without prompting on my part, most of the senior executives talked first about how they used learning to do things that were particularly important to them. I realised that the constraints of the interviews—in particular the requested minimum time of 15 minutes—may also have encouraged the senior executives to emphasise what was most salient to them.

Thoughts on the in-depth follow-up interviews

Looking back, and as noted in Chapter 2, my own initial experiences working with senior executives coincided with what the literature asserted: that many, perhaps most, busy senior executives today see little usefulness or utility in participating in academic research. This, along with a perception of being too busy, seemed to be key factors in the persistent resistance by potential senior executive subjects to respond affirmatively to my requests to participate in the study. I was surprised by how few even enquired to learn more about the study before declining. It ultimately required more than four months of work for me to secure the total of 24 senior executive participants. I was pleased that three of them seemed to find enough value in the initial interview that they readily agreed to the longer in-person follow-up interviews that I requested. With further time and resources, I would have liked to have been able to arrange more follow-up interviews.

The three in-person interviews intrigued me as to what changes in attitude or approach to learning—if any—had taken hold in the minds of each senior executive since the first telephone interview. In my own experience over several decades working with thousands of senior executives, most brief exchanges— be they presentations, meetings, events, or learning experiences—tend to

quickly fade from mind. This did not prove to be the case for these three senior executives, each of whom reflected in their own words, without prompting, on several common themes:

How many more ways they had found to learn and apply learning on topics, challenges or opportunities that mattered to them, on a regular basis, than they had prior to the first interview;

How much faster the work world seemed to be moving in the six months since the first interview;

How increased learning had helped give them a clearer perspective on their work, goals and lives;

How the pressures of their roles and the complexities and uncertainties in front of them seemed to have increased;

How much more learning they wanted to promote in team members; and

The ongoing value (in their own mind and awareness, in meetings, in performance reviews, in decision-making, and more) of the two relatively basic-sounding research questions as a trigger, reminder or prompt to their ongoing daily awareness of the value of re-committing to learning and its application.

The journey ahead

I began this discussion by looking back to the gathering of professional advisors where my interest in a deeper understanding of learning and its application by senior executives was intensified enough to lead to this study and thesis. In conclusion, I will glance forward to some of the ways in which my own learning will inform my practice.

The world needs senior executives to be learning at the peak of their capacities within the constraints imposed by the demands of their jobs. A majority of the people I interviewed said that they did not think that their peers were learning to that level or degree.

In my ongoing work as an advisor to executives, I have found that merely asking them to think about the two research questions from this thesis—How do you learn? How do you apply learning?—has been motivating for them, serving as a reminder of an essential executive responsibility that can be neglected in the crush of everyday responsibilities. This pair of questions might be seen as a threshold requirement for the 'will' I described above, sparking the many supportive practices and attitudes itemised in my findings.

In my consulting, coaching, mentoring and training, I have become more insistent about the institutionalised practices in the 'how they learn' category—structured after-action reviews, diligently developed and monitored coaching and mentoring practices and ways to more purposefully scan for opportunities and sharpen best instincts as to where and how to innovate and make improvements in the midst of uncertain, complex and changing conditions. These practices, and others, mandate important forms of awareness, focus and learning that might otherwise be neglected if left to the organisation's more informal ways of doing things.

For similar reasons of strengthening learning, I will stop while discussing a topic in a classroom and ask the participants to discuss in pairs what they understand that content to be and how important it might be to them. I will do the same myself in one-to-one interactions, or in an organisational meeting I am leading. I also now emphasise pilot-testing even more with my clients and audiences. I rarely let 10 minutes pass in a personal or classroom interaction without asking, 'If this learning matters, how might we most quickly and effectively test what we're discussing now?'

As part of this process in a classroom setting, I ask the participants to pair up and discuss what they will do, to incorporate more sharing and interacting between learners, because those are two important learning methods identified by my research. I will often do something similar on an individual basis with my executive clients, for example asking them to bring in a trusted peer or near-peer to discuss possible pilot tests at the end of a meeting.

There is another reason for my practice of requiring paired interactions by my students and clients about learning and its application: Because learning is embedded through interactions with others and one form of applying learning comes from sharing it with others, I want them to practice describing their learning and their implementation ideas so that they are more comfortable taking that next step outside the relationship with me or the classroom setting, confidently discussing and exploring their learning with others with a continual eye on how such learning and related ideas might be pilot-tested and thereby confirmed in their usefulness and value. I believe that asking senior executives to grow their experience by sharing such things with others in a relatively safe setting, makes them better able to clarify their intentions, transcend any awkwardness that comes from 'not yet knowing' and then expand as well as consolidate their learning.

As I noted previously in this chapter, I now possess a wealth of anecdotal information that can be brought forth in many situations, its impact perhaps increased because it relates to actual experiences of high-level executives. I have also continued to scour the academic literature for new items about learning and its application. Research by Bönstrup, et al (2019) suggests that a more rapid form of 'offline learning' for knowledge and skill consolidation is possible, writing that a simple reflective practice 'may extend the concept of consolidation to a time scale in the order of seconds, rather than the hours or days traditionally accepted'. Duckworth (2019) indicates that brief reflective self-reports can help learning to take hold.

While the intensely challenging and often enlightening experience of formal doctoral research reaches its end, I will not stop pursuing opportunities to rethink my intuitions, assumptions, and findings as I put them into practice in my everyday work and commitment to lifelong learning.

There are also many personal aspects of this journey that have been especially meaningful to me. After several decades of working with organisations and leaders, this UCL research programme provided me with the opportunity to pursue a second doctorate and explore new findings in the expanding array of research methodologies and academic discoveries as well as emerging complexities and possibilities in the field of learning and leadership. I have been able to apply findings through the lens of current academic research to investigate a sample population seldom studied. Along the way, my many and varied forays into the literature made me appreciate the expanding complexity and nuanced diversity of this field. As I worked to understand disparate viewpoints, philosophies and degrees of rigour, I felt my vantage point elevate as my learning—and its application—deepened.

Through nearly five years of my doctoral study's interactions with my research supervisors, I also developed a greater depth of curiosity and knowledge than I had previously experienced. In particular, this came into focus for me as I recorded and witnessed the heartfelt sharing of experiences by the remarkable volunteer participants in this study. One particular remark from one of the senior executives in this study has stood out in my mind as a reminder of the purpose of this research and its goal of helping senior executives and, in turn, the organisations they lead:

> [R]each down and pull people up around you and make them better than you, and that's your legacy. And you do that consciously every time you do something.

Probably like a number of researchers who live their subject matter, I find myself many times a day hearing something in conversation, or reading about or observing someone's actions, and wondering to myself how or why that person is learning. I also find myself interrogating my own methods, aims, and applications. Sometimes I think that I would like to do more studies, because there is so much richness in this field which I have only begun to investigate.

While I was growing up, my father was absent frequently for work on the hospital ship USS HOPE, with missions to Nicaragua, Tunisia and other destinations. He would return home and, beginning when I was very young, he would ask me to ask him, 'Was it worth investing a piece of your life in?' Following each of these voyages his answer was 'Yes'. As I think about what this doctoral pursuit and corresponding study has meant to me, personally— and I hope in some way to the literature—my answer to that question is also 'Yes'.

Late in his life, my grandfather shared a quote with me that he had kept at the front of his mind through his years as a superintendent of schools, a quotation from Van Doren (1951) that I recognised as expressing a theme that served as a guide for him as he helped me—and many others—to learn, apply learning and grow:

> The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery.

It is my sincere hope that the findings of this study will inspire further research as well as prove to be of value as a point of reference or reflection to the global population of senior executives, and their teams, in their quest to lead the way forward. I believe that our collective future is tied in key ways to how senior executives learn and apply learning to not only aid their mission to perform beyond expectations but also to unlock more of their own potential, and the potential of others, to make an enduringly positive difference in their organisations and the larger world.

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Appendix A

Here I provide definitions for some core terms used in this thesis: 'to learn'; 'learning'; 'application of learning'; and 'senior executive'.

To learn (v.) is to incorporate new information into existing knowledge, skills, behaviours, and/or attitudes. The 'new information' may be derived from experience, observation, study, reflection, or other sources. It is entirely possible for a person to 'learn' something without being consciously aware that s/he has in fact incorporated new information into existing knowledge, skills, behaviours, and/or attitudes.

As a noun, *learning* refers to a person's body of acquired knowledge, skills, behaviours, and/or attitudes, or some part of that body of acquired knowledge, skills, behaviours, and/or attitudes. As a nominal phrase, 'new learning' refers to the body of knowledge, skills, behaviours, and/or attitudes that has been acquired within some defined recent time period.

Application of learning refers to thought or action based on a person's body of acquired knowledge, skills, behaviours, and/or attitudes. *Application of new learning* refers to thought or action based on a person's body of knowledge, skills, behaviours, and/or attitudes acquired within some defined recent time period. It is entirely possible for a person to apply learning (or new learning) without being consciously aware that s/he is doing so.

Senior executive characterises a person who is within the top three levels of responsibility and authority in his or her organisation (as it is depicted, or would be depicted, in a table of organisation or organogram), and who has held a position at that level within his

or her organisation, or some other organisation, for at least five years.

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form Ph.D. dissertation research

UCL Institute of Education

London Centre for Leadership in Learning

Please complete this form after you have read the explanation about the research.

Project Title: How Senior Executives Learn and Apply that Learning to their Practices

Researcher: Robert Cooper

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this research. Before you agree to take part, the person organising the research must explain the project to you. You are being asked to take part in a research study of how senior leaders keep learning and apply that learning. We are asking you to take part because you responded to a personal invitation for this study.

If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you to decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What the study is about: The purpose of this study is to learn about how senior executives of organisations learn and apply that learning. To take part in this study you must be a senior executive.

What we will ask you to do: If you agree to take part in this study, Robert Cooper will conduct one interview with you. The interview will be relaxed, positive and constructive, and will be focused on two questions:

- As a senior executive, how have you kept learning?
- How have you used this learning?

The interview will require 15 minutes (and, if you choose, up to a maximum of 30 minutes) to complete. With your permission, we would like to record the interview.

Risks and benefits:

There is no risk to participating in this study. There are potential benefits to you, such as contributing to the advancement of the field of leadership.

Compensation: None.

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. The research findings will be reported in a doctorate publication. In any sort of report made public the researcher will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research notes will be kept in a locked file; recordings, transcripts and related digital data will be stored securely in Drop Box. Only the researcher will have access to the records. Once the interview recordings have been transcribed, the researcher will destroy them; which is anticipated to be within two months of recording.

Taking part is voluntary: Involvement in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

If you have questions: The researcher conducting this doctoral study is Robert Cooper. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Robert at [email address] or [telephone number].

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study. I also consent to having the interview recorded.

Your Signature _____ Date _____

Your Name (printed)

Signature of researcher/interviewer   Date_____

Appendix C

Primary Data from the Three In-Depth Follow-Up Interviews Conducted in Person

I held an in-person follow-up interview with one interviewee from each of the three groups. Those, which averaged 64 minutes each, took place more than six months after the three senior executives had participated in their first interviews. In this section I summarise content from both the initial interview and the follow-up interview.

I again sent the two research topics to these interviewees ahead of the face-to-face interviews:

> Since our first interview, have you had further thoughts on:
>
> 1. How you keep learning?
>
> 2. How you apply that learning?

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, I created these summaries to begin the analytical process in a way recommended by several experts (e.g., Seidman, 2013; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015), and the summaries are not presented here to illustrate or substantiate my coding or categorisation decisions (discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, respectively), but to show the nature of the interviewees' descriptions. Neither the content nor the subheadings are intended as assignments of weight or particular emphasis to what they said.

Quotations are edited only to remove verbal hesitations such as 'um' and 'uh', or direct verbal redundancies, such as '...to, to bring about change'. Words in brackets indicate best guesses where the transcription was unclear or are used to disguise specific people and organisations that were mentioned.

'Learning is essential to the future of this institution'.

He said that learning was crucial to the future of his organisation and organisations like his:

> If I don't keep learning, or if I haven't kept learning, or if I decided to not keep learning, I mean I think these [organisations like his] are so fragile right now I think that either I would go away or it would go away fairly quickly. I mean, it's just essential to the future of this institution.

'Seek, notice and engage with new ideas and approaches'.

He described his approach to learning as constantly seeking, noticing and engaging with situations that stimulate new ideas and new approaches:

> [F]or me it really just gets down to absolutely infusing my mind with people and experiences, and … data, and feelings—and all that goes with living one's life—that are foreign to me. And in so doing, sort of new… avenues of creativity and learning begin…. I just need to continually be bombarded with new stimuli. New people, new events, new campuses, new readings, new books that almost invade my thinking almost in a way that I'm almost sort of blown away by what I'm seeing'.

This exposure to new stimuli is so fundamental to his organisation's success, he said, that

> I tell my own board of trustees… 'If I'm in the office any more than one or two days a week…. ask me if I'm really doing my job', because it's really in getting out that I meet people, that I see opportunities, that I am sort of forced to consider things in new ways.

'Creating learning by speaking up and embracing embarrassment'.

He said that he also learns through creating learning situations, in a variety of ways: by 'speaking up' ('not to suggest I am always right but in speaking up then you sort of provide…a juxtaposition for something. There's someone to…bounce their own ideas against'); by taking risks ('by risking you learn what works and what doesn't work'); by accepting the potential for being embarrassed ('embarrassment is sort of life's way of saying you need to learn and so I've been more willing in recent years to claim embarrassment'); by accepting conflict ('one can learn from battles'); by reading ('I've always got a book or two….very, very different books'); and

by sharing ideas ('when you share it forces you to be, in kind of an ironic way, more of a continuous learner').

'Man, whatever you do, don't screw this thing up'.

He observed regarding his professional peers, '[M]ost of them, the vast majority of them… are committed to learning, continuous learning, lifelong learning, … being learners', but he said that he has been disappointed with those colleagues' limited sharing of ideas ('they keep their cards close to their vest'); and

> they can find a lot of reasons why not to put their learnings into practice…. [I]t's, 'We don't have enough money', or 'It's too big a risk', or 'I'm scared', or 'I'm fearful it'll fail', or, 'Maybe I'll be embarrassed', or 'What if it doesn't work?' And so… things don't change and that's not consistent with a vibrant, active environment that promotes learning.

He suggested that a possible reason that some or many of his peers don't take action is that they are perhaps too comfortable with the perquisites of their positions, which can include a home, a car, an expense account and other valuable items provided to them, as well as prestige and other less tangible emoluments:

> What could happen with a lot of these individuals is they get up in the morning and they…amble into their bathroom and they look in the mirror and they think to themselves, 'You know what? This is a pretty sweet gig'…. I mean, I'm convinced like 98 out of every 100 are just like, 'I got--', The other thing is that they're looking out for themselves. They get up in the morning. They go, 'I got the nice office. I got the nice car. I got the nice--, Man, whatever you do, don't screw this thing up'.

'I wake up every day nervous, worried'.

He said that he is personally motivated to keep learning by a perpetual sense of concern that he is not accomplishing enough:

> I wake up every day nervous, worried…. And I feel like if I can just be 10 or 15% of what my potential is, I'd be happy. I don't feel like I'm 90% of the way there, or even that my [organisation] is. So there's this passion, that hunger to always get better.

'It fuels me to then have an antenna up every single morning, noon and night'.

He said he is motivated by caring passionately about the sector he's in:

> [T]hat energy that I derive from thinking [about the field he's in and the people affected by it], I think fuels me to then have an antenna up every single morning, noon and night for, 'How do I make this better?'…. I'm an achiever which means on the good side of things I need to get something done every day. But the bad side of that is, every day starts at zero.

Sharing learning expands learning.

He said that sharing his successful practices further motivates him, because it means that he must keep learning to stay ahead:

> I shared it and I said this is how we did it…. I think the reasons why I did it looking back is I thought to myself, the only way that I can get better, that I can stay

motivated, that I can get up every morning hungry is by thinking to myself, like, 'The posse's gaining on me'. You know, 'Now all these people know the secrets of Coke so now I've got to deliver a better Coke'.

'You've ruined me'.

He says that his search for better ways to do things has affected others, who have taken up his commitment to noticing things that need improvement and making them better:

> I have a number of my staff members say to me fairly frequently, 'You've ruined me.... Now when I go out to the other [facility], or a wedding, or a bar mitzvah or whatever, like I could hardly enjoy it because I'm just constantly noticing what's not right'.

Learning requires identifying and prioritising leverage points.

He talked about prioritizing and finding the right leverage points for learning and creating change:

> When I got here [13 years ago], I thought to myself, 'Well, for this place to get better, like 200 things need to change, but I can't change 200 things, but if I could just change two or three things, maybe the other 197 will change'.

Sparking learning follow-ups with the mobile phone camera.

He has established ways to remind himself about important learnings or potential learnings, by encouraging others to keep him on course— 'I surrounded myself with people who will remind me'—and by using his mobile phone for taking photos and recording thoughts that he later reflects on:

> We now have, at least for me, a new tool that has been incredibly helpful, even though I'm not very good at using it in terms of learning, and that is my phone. And what I find myself doing more and more is taking pictures of things that I can learn from. Pictures of things that I want to reflect back on. Pictures of stuff that I can send to my assistant, either when I get back to the office or when I'm out and say, 'Hey, make a physical picture of this, because I want to think about it and talk about it and talk to the staff about it'. And so I'm on the road so much, either talking to people or donors, or people involved in education. I've just learned so much from the physical facilities that I've been in because of—this position has forced me to—I mean, I'm going to [a top technology company] later today with a big deal we've got going on with [that company]. And I'll spend two days in New York City with [them] and to the extent that they'll let me take pictures of what's going in [their company], I will, because that helps me. The same with recording.... When we didn't have these things in our pockets, you know, 15 or 20 year ago, you almost had to like make a note or write it down, or hope that you remembered it. But oh, I'll tell you, the technology has made it very easy to be a learner, in my opinion.

'Never duck fights'.

He remarked:

> We all have to pick our battles. But I think when we do pick them and say, 'Okay...Game on', [knowing] that one can learn from battles. And ...I do go to battle, especially if I feel like it's in the best interests of our students... or institution. And so those are things that I've done that I hope to learn from.

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No annual performance reviews

In reflecting on the changes he has made in his executive team, he said:

> There's only one woman who was here the first day that I was here on the senior leadership team. Everybody has been replaced or moved on. What I have found in my own leadership team...would fall under three or four general categories.... Number one, I have found in them a willingness to...lead by example. I'll give you an example of what I'm talking about. In 13 years here, I've never...done a formal evaluation of any staff member. I've never sat down and said, 'Okay, let's go through, these 15 [performance] scales]'. I mean, never. I think they're awkward, I think they're weird and I think if people don't know where I stand with them then I'm not doing my job right. And so pretty much everybody can wake up in the morning on my senior leadership team and go, 'Well, you know, [my president] is happy with me because yesterday he patted me on the back and said, "That was incredible what you did"'. Or, 'Man, I think [the president]'s [ticked] off because...he told me late yesterday I screwed this up'. Or whatever. And so my senior leadership team ...responds well to the five minute manager motto. And that's what I've looked for, is people who can both handle a pat on the back but take a punch. So that's been important to me. Secondly there are people who are willing to get in on the bus and take their own risks and lead by example with their own teams, but let me lead by example with them. And so whether that happens both overtly with, 'Hey, you know, Frank. Take some risks with enrolment. Get out, start a recruitment team, buy some property on a lake, see if you can get 50 men and 50 women to [row] crew'. And he sort of saluted and, 'Yes sir', but then he does his own thing by starting a bass fishing team or whatever. I mean, all of that is both how I do things and how things have worked.

No standing (regular) meetings.

He added:

> I've also never had a standing meeting. And so all of my staff—and I have a bunch of vice-presidents—none of them is like, 'Okay, on Tuesdays at, you know, 2:30 we meet for an hour to go over this and that.' It's a totally fluid, open door, come in when you need me, call me when you need me; if it's ten at night that's okay. So I need people who can live without that kind of structure. Now I have people who meet with me, sometimes twice a week, on standing meeting because they need that. And I've got others who I may not see for weeks on end because they're low maintenance. So I've needed staff members and teams that can live with that kind of leadership. And I think the last thing that I would say is I need a leadership team that understands that [and is] comfortable in its own skin.

'This ship is sinking'.

One of the clear calls to action that he described was this:

> You reminded me of [the hockey analogy that] I don't go where the puck is, I go to where it's going. And the leaders are the ones that can sort of see where things are going. Look around the corner. Get out in front and I will use my own industry right now.... This ship is sinking.

What's your 'Shoe Dog'?

On the topic of passion and learning, he said:

So for me it really sort of begins with Mark Twain's phrase, 'The two most important days of your life are the day you were born and the day you figure out why'. And I think that for anybody to be a good leader, they need to figure out that why…so that you land in a spot that you love what you're doing so much and you're so enthralled by it and you're so curious about it that you just work even when you're not working. You think about it all the time. You do get up in the middle of the night thinking, 'Hey this is how we can get better'. Or, 'This is something that we could do, or these are people that we need to bring on board so that we can make this effort', whatever it be. Whether in business, or the church, or education, or whatever.

The thing that struck me when I read [the book] *Shoe Dog* was that this was a guy who was just obsessed with shoes and the people that he surrounded himself with just— like when people would walk in the room, they'd notice their shoes. So I don't have any interest in shoes. Zero. I'm glad that I have shoes on. When I look in my closet, I'm glad that there's shoes there. I don't care how they're put together. I just want shoes, but this guy to this day can't get enough of shoes and so he builds this amazing shoe company and writes about it in *Shoe Dog*. So if you sort of take that same concept that we all have our shoes in this life and mine is higher education and campuses and kids 18 to 22 and all that goes with putting together a great education environment. I guess one might say that I'm obsessed with that.

'Run with it'

He said:

I'm so happy when I've got people around me that I can say, 'Hey here's an idea. I got this thing started but run with it', and then they do something with it'.

'A permanent state of dissatisfaction'.

He said:

The sort of the sad side or downside though to what I've learned, my type of leadership leads to and it's…good to never feel you've arrived, but then you also live in what I call a permanent state of dissatisfaction…. Here's an example: I remember I was sitting in a hockey game about a year and a half ago. We built a hockey rink and we [created with my leadership team and sponsors] a national hockey program team and all that. And the mayor of [our small town] happened to go to this game with me. And he's lived in [our town] forever. It so happened that the game was a big game, and it was a sell out and people were going crazy, and the game was really close, and we won at the last minute or two of the game. And the crowd was going nuts. The kids were happy, and the kids were jumping on each other and whatnot. And then people started to file out. And he looked at me and he goes, 'You know, this must make you so happy. I mean, all these people came. They had a great night out. They spent time with their family, and all this excitement, and all that. It must give you a great sense of achievement'. I looked at him and I said, 'You know, it really doesn't'. And he said, 'Well what do you mean?' I said, 'I don't know why. I don't get that much sort of internal satisfaction from that'. I go, 'Maybe I should'—but this is the part of never being satisfied. Right?

The neuroscience of possibility

He stated:

Now one thing that you've studied that always has intrigued me about leadership. It has to do with tapping into the neuroscience of change, and the neuroscience of inspiring others in ways that we don't have to—and just go with me for a minute on this, sort of re-create the wheel... I thought, 'I need more students'. You good? I need smarter students who don't drop out, flunk out, leave. And I need more money. And if I could change those three things, now I'm into something. Now I've got more money and I can do the other stuff I want to do and whatever.

But then I thought, 'Well, how do I get more students?' And what I decided to tap into in respect to—and you call it neuroscience. I don't know what I call it—evolutionist. I made the assumption that people are just born competitive, and that if we can create a college in which people can continue to explore their competitive urges, if you will, then we will bring them in in droves. So obviously, athletics is an easy one, right? So we're going to start a bunch of sports in which kids who are, let's just say, lacrosse. They [and] their parents built their social life around lacrosse. Lacrosse is their thing. They get up in the morning with their stick in their hand, whatever. We say, 'If you come here, you get a great education, but you can also play competitive NCAA [National Collegiate Athletic Association] lacrosse'. That I will get 30 kids a year going, 'I want in on that'.

You know what I mean? And I'm like a band dude. And same is true with you know like student government or student newspaper. You want to be the one that gets published, not the guy next to you, in the student newspaper. So I really tried to tap into that, and I felt like that really worked because generally speaking we get very competitive kids here because of how I've leveraged these co-curricular activities, thinking that when they would go on to professional schools they would be like, 'Man I want to win'. Like, 'I get into med school'. You know what I mean?

They don't even know that they're thinking this way, but they just are. So that was something that was interesting to me, but the other thing that was interesting—and this is where neuroscience can help a bit—is that it seems to me like human beings have wired into them a desire to be...altruistic. I don't know why, but it really hit me many years ago when my sister was married...to a guy who was an engineer at Chrysler. Now I'm about the farthest thing from an engineer from Chrysler that you can find, and this thing, a carburettor, back when they had them, and he always wanted to make a better carburettor. I don't even like cars. A to B is what I'm interested in. You know what I mean? It's just weird growing up in Michigan. Cars are not my thing. I'm not enthralled by them. I could care less about carburettors, but over Christmas dinner one night this guy told me, 'You know what? I was thinking about these carburettors that I'm building, and I was thinking about how they're really important, and that families who now live apart can get in their car and go see people they love. They can spend time with their kids. They can take people different places'. And I thought, 'This guy is like finding an altruistic reason to build a carburettor which is important to him.

'You never hit the finish line'.

He reflected on why he keeps raising the bar on his goals:

I think that perhaps there's so much information now available that we've overworked the brain almost to the point where almost as a self-defense mechanism it's almost pushing it all away because we don't feel like we can get it in bite-size pieces and we don't want to take in so much we'll explode, so we don't take in anything. I mean, that's been sort of my look at what's going on information-wise. [Fortunately, I am] somebody who remains energized by curiosity, and knowledge, and new stimuli, and

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all that I think is important to becoming a new leader. And I always think you're always becoming. I think you're never satisfied, right? You never hit the finish line.

If you haven't arrived yet, and the horizon keeps going out there, and then you have to keep going…. I had one leader describe it as the vanishing point keeps going up. So every one of these, you suddenly are noticing things that you didn't see yesterday'.

Senior Executive C (Publicly traded)

Female executive vice president of global manufacturing in a very large industrial company, oversees more than 150,000 employees at over150 sites in 30 countries. Also handles women's leadership development and some significant aspects of labour relations.

This senior executive faces the daily pressures of driving growth and unifying culture in a company and industry with traditionally high costs, union relations challenges, a fading male-dominated factory culture, increasing global diversity of employees and locations, and the demand to establish and deliver hyper-efficient manufacturing, unprecedented collaboration and teamwork, cutting-edge innovations, and the testing and application of technologies that have high potential yet are largely untested. Calling on a deep commitment to learning, she emphasised how much she loves the challenges before her.

'More time and ability to really drive and push toward the future'.

Throughout the interviews, she cited reasons why continuing to learn was essential, focused primarily on her responsibility for achieving excellent performance by her team in the present—e.g., 'How do I make sure we're really performing at our highest level?'; 'I want to make sure that I'm maximizing their potential'—and with regard to being prepared for future threats and opportunities: e.g., 'How do I make sure we're . . . actually looking around the corner, and we're anticipating?'

She linked those two reasons in a statement:

> I can enable the team to perform at a much, much higher level. And so that we can get the issues resolved a lot faster. And then move on and have more time to be creative. And to think about, 'What if?' and 'What's around the corner?' Because there [are] some days where you just get bogged down in getting through the day and the issue of right now…. I always say, 'Hey, we can just solve these issues faster today and make sure they're sustained. We'll have more time and ability to really drive and push towards the future, which is tough'.

'I don't ever want to be ineffective as a leader'.

She also described being motivated by a sense of worry with regard to meeting the ongoing challenges of her role:

> I'm afraid of looking up one day and maybe being…irrelevant. Not me as a person, but I don't ever want to be ineffective as a leader. Right? I don't want to look up and the whole world's changed, and I'm still operating or, you know, behaving maybe in ways that I did ten years ago, or even 2 years ago…. I think I have this—it's almost like a paranoia—making sure that I'm … staying on top of not just things in our industry but what's happening around because maybe we can learn from it. Maybe it's a kind of a window into what can—what's around the corner for us…. So that keeps me

wanting to stay kind of abreast and effective, and learning just to become even more effective and not to lose that…. [T]hat's what can drive me.

'Everything I learn will make me better'

She looked to learning as a way to be a better person: 'I just fundamentally believe that everything I learn will make me better. It can make me, not only a more effective leader, but a better person'.

'I'd rather spend the time and energy, going there and seeing'.

In the early part of the first interview, she listed a number of ways in which she had recently learned: earning an MBA; attending an executive programme at Harvard; watching/reading TED talks; serving as a corporate director at a Fortune 100 company. As the interviews progressed, however, her focus was more on the experiential learning she had described as her preferred method: 'I'm a big experiential learner where I…have to go and I like to see and immerse myself in different things'; and 'I'm hands-on. And I learn most effectively by doing, and by experiencing, and by…putting myself where the opportunity is'. She gave the following example:

> [A]s I interface with my team, I always stress, 'Don't prepare anything for me…. If I can go see—If I can go to your area, go with you, go with your team, I'd rather spend the time and energy, going there and seeing, opposed to you spending hours and hours on presentations, and slides, and things like that'. Because I know, number one, it's a better use of time, but also how I will grasp the real issue as quickly as possible, or the learnings, or even the connection and experience with the people is important.

'I love to learn new things through readings'.

She also talked about learning from reading, saying:

> Then the other thing I do is, I love to learn new things through readings…so if it's reading a book, reading an article, daily briefs; things like that are really good for me because it will cause me to not necessarily become an expert in that area, but to take the information and then reflect on me, the team, our industry, and what may be applicable as well.

Learning 'has to be applied'.

She emphasised that merely abstract learning from reading was of little interest to her:

> It has to be applied, I think, for it to be real…. Reading something is, 'Okay, I digested it'. But I haven't learned. I have to apply it. So my natural thing is, 'So how can I use this? How do I apply it? How does this become what we use, what we do? How does this just become who we are?'

Higher expectations.

She remarked on how much she had personally grown, and how her approach to learning became different when she shifted her expectations of herself:

> I'm having fun more now than, I would say, even three, four years ago. And part of it is because I think I wasn't maybe looking at that I'm constantly getting better. That maybe I felt like I had to already be there. Like as a leader, I had to already be that

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leader that I thought I should be, or that everyone is when you reach a certain point in your career.

'You create this environment where you really can listen'.

She observed:

> [P]eople will tell you a lot of what you want to hear, but I always wanted clarity instead and I think it drove me to behave a different way. Right? So I always felt that I want people to, number one, trust me.... To feel that they can come and tell me what's really happening. Don't come and tell me a bunch of bull crap. I really don't [want to] hear it. I [want to] know what's really happening so we that can get to the bottom of it. So I believe that I worked on that, on being approachable, being able to listen, and to not try and give you the solution, but to really get to what's happening. And not make assumptions. And so I think over time, I'd developed that ability, because I wanted to have that trust and wanted to have the openness to get to the real issues. And then I think when you do that, you also create this environment where you really can listen and say 'Wow'. Or, 'I missed it'. Or, 'I was thinking it was something totally different'. And so you create that. And the people see that. And then they'll say, 'Oh, my gosh. She's awesome. She listens. She got it. She connected. She really cared'. And those things, I think, will build the trust that you want. But it also creates the environment that you want to have with people.

Friction can drive learning

She said*:*

> When I step back, if it's a conversation. If it's...an interaction...that didn't feel right for me, or I think it could've been better, then I'll step back and say, 'Well, what did I do?' And then, 'How could I do—what could I do better?' And I will talk to the person or the team about it. To say, 'Hey, look. This is my intent. I'm not sure how did you receive it?' Or, 'Hey, I know I said this, but I want to make sure, above all else, we do this'. And so I usually do that because I reflect and think about either something someone said after, or their body language, or the feeling I got in the room'.

'As leaders we want to move fast'.

She recounted an anecdote about slowing down to learn:

> I will tell you it's hard for me to really be as present as I can to really assess what's happening and take that opportunity to be better, to improve, or even to double down in some cases, where I may get good feedback. And then to learn to take advantage of that opportunity to keep pushing the team. Or to allow the situation to unfold. Because you learn so much about other people, and more about what's the real issue. And it's hard to do, sometimes, because I think as leaders, we want to move fast.

> And so one of the leaders on my team, he said, 'Hey. I really want to understand if we're spending all this money, where's the value created?' [H]e added up the numbers. He says, 'Hey. If I'm supposed to get so many dollars of value, where is it? Why don't I know about it? Where is it showing up? And how is this helping me?'

> And it was very interesting, because I stepped back and I looked at him. And I said, 'At the end of the day, that's what we—that's why we're reviewing this. Right? What's the

value that we're creating with the dollars that we're spending?... How fast can we see if it's working? Could we adjust along the way?'

And so...I looked at him, and I said, 'That's what we need to be talking about'. But it was so funny. Because after that happened, I thought about it. And I said, 'Wow. I could learn from that'. ...They're watching you.... I felt very comfortable in saying, 'You know what? He's right'. First of all, I had to say, 'Okay. Let's make sure we're going that path, because that's right'. But on top of that, I stepped back, and I learned from that, to say, 'You know what? How can I make sure that I'm helping?' Number one, I was happy that that came out, because we had the environment where people can debate, and challenge, and go back and forth. So that was good. But at the same time, I said, 'Okay, so how do I—how can I help make that; let's get there faster?'

To me that was a learning opportunity. And then at the end I told the team, 'Hey, look. I want us to be able to have that debate'. So I said, 'Hey, let's be clear. That debate that we had, that challenging, that frustration, was great'. I said, 'But we got to get to what's the point of it; how do we get there faster? And how do we move forward?' I said, 'So that's what we've got to make sure that we are helping to get there faster'. And I'm perfectly fine wherever it came from. We ended up where we needed to be.

'I think the learning is building'.

She observed the necessity of sustaining the personal and organisational impetus for growth, and the importance of creating and participating in and leading a learning-oriented culture: 'We want to make sure that we keep winning, and that we...keep pushing ourselves, because you don't ever want to get the feeling of that, "We have arrived". Or, "We're comfortable"'. Expanding her comments from her immediate team to the organisation as a whole, she said:

We're taking these solutions from other places that we probably wouldn't have been open to before. [A]nd we're able to get solutions in faster. I'm seeing that.... [T]his humility to say, 'Hey, this doesn't have to be my idea, but I just want it, and I need it, and I [got to] get it done today'.... There's this idea of just continuing to get better, continuing to refine, and then just holding yourself accountable, really to be better, to push, to learn from others, and how to be more effective. And not to be complacent or self-satisfied. I don't ever want to get to the point where I just figure, 'Okay, I'm just done'.

She also noted that it felt easier to get in a rut of doing in the earlier years as an executive: 'Early on, it's the doing, doing, doing. You would run right past some of those moments'.

Matters of diversity and women leaders

She said:

[O]ne of the roles that is really interesting for me, that I'm starting to play more in the company, is, being an advocate for women. And, I'm the executive champion for our women's ERG (Employment Resource Group]. And, I think it was about three years ago, and I've been doing this, maybe, for five or six years, working with the ERG itself. But I reached out to maybe 20 senior women [in the region of the state of our headquarters] to solicit their support and their engagement with working [with our organisation's] women's ERG. And it was interesting how there was this interest to do it, but also a reluctance.

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And I fast forward to where we are today, three years later, and the bond, number one, that we formed with this group, but this sense of responsibility as women to help create the environment [here in our organisation], for everyone. Where…we have inclusion and opportunities, and not saying, 'Oh, I don't want to be part of that women's group because I don't want that to be viewed negatively'. Because I heard that, to where it's all like, 'Hey, well whatever we do is going to help the company. It's going to help [our company]. And it's going to help us be the company that we say that we want to be. And we're going to demonstrate it, and we're going to be bold about it, right?' And I'm seeing that with that group. And it's so interesting. And I'm excited to watch, because it's even beyond what I anticipated. But it's also this learning idea…that unless we unlock all this diversity, we're still missing pieces of this. So I think unless there's a group…that stands up and says, 'I wonder how we… could we like give a piece of this learning and creativity beyond our day jobs?'

She also reflected on the learning that happened when her leadership team had recently taken a trip to tour their facilities in China:

We spent some time in China. Oh, my gosh. The energy, the excitement. We were all so excited around 'Are you kidding me? We need to do it this way'. And we left feeling like we can, and, 'What do we need to do?' It just built our team to be even tighter.

'Just do what I tell you' versus 'What do you need from me?'.

She reflected on how her questions have helped her speed learning, saying: 'I think in the old days, you know, "Just do what I tell you, you know. You do A, B, C, in the manufacturing world". Later she added: 'How do I learn from them what they need? Hear from them, learn from them what works, what doesn't work, and then keep adjusting so that we can move and be better'. Her reasoning: 'I don't want to be in the way. I want to be an accelerator, or an enabler, or supporter'.

'The way I see it play out is, I see more of a one team'.

She described important progress she had made toward building a learning team:

One of the things I started doing, and I've probably been doing it for a couple of years now…[when] I have my one-on-ones with my team, we'll go over where we are, what we need. And then I'll say, 'Well, what do you need from me?' And when I first started doing that—-it was a shock. They got quiet. They were like--'What does she mean by that?' They were, 'Um'. But then I had a couple of them come back and say, 'Hey, the last time I was with you, you specifically asked what can you do…[well[I thought about it, and this is what I think you can do'. Right. I absolutely love that, because that gives me an opportunity to help, and to contribute, and to make a difference in a way that you think can help. So I think because we have to get so much done so fast, I think there's more of an openness and a willingness to go see, learn, find a way, use it, adapt it. And I'm seeing that. And the way I see it play out is, I see more of a one team.

Senior Executive A (Privately held)

Male CEO of a fast-growing company in the high-technology sector. He has more than 20 years' experience in that sector and was previously CEO of a high-tech company that was recently acquired by a large professional services firm.

This leader has experience as a serial executive entrepreneur in the complex, fast-changing software field. His challenges centre on the pace and complexity of change, the need to experiment and execute brilliantly in the present while endlessly speeding his leadership team's progress toward opportunities that can quickly disappear if they are not seized.

'I need to have learning embedded in the work I do'.

He said he views learning as an essential responsibility of his job:

> You have to accept that there is a learning scale as a CEO that you need to take very seriously. And I think it's an element of success or failure in technology companies. I accept that as part of my day-to-day, 24-hour job. That I need to have learning embedded [in] the work I do…. This is a part of my disciplined job as a CEO, to have learning as part of my work. And I gear that toward what do I need to learn, at the pace I need to learn it, to be armed to make decisions and lead this company?

'There is no playbook for what's in front of me'.

He observed:

> This is the second company I've been in as CEO where we're in a very intense growth and scaling of a complex technology company, and a cloud-based company. And I think there's some relevance there because the speed at which cloud-based software companies need to grow in today's environment is so intense. So as a leader there's no playbook for it. That's what separates scaling technology companies from…your more static big companies…. There's no playbook for what's in front of me because you're moving at a pace that, you know, the tracks just aren't laying down fast enough…. I've taken fundamental lessons learned from the last time [I was a CEO], but what I found is it's only given me a sense of where I need to build from.

You must be able 'to learn at pace'.

He noted that a number of well-known CEOs had recently failed because 'they could not learn at pace…they got so far behind they could ever catch up…They [seemed] really good until they weren't'. He added, 'Anticipating change…you have to be conditioned for change…. I'm trying to get everyone conditioned for change because it is going to be a constant environment'.

'I'm not a fan of [traditional management books] because I think we're moving at a pace where you can't rely on that kind of stuff'

He emphasised that his learning is pragmatic, not abstract:

> This is not about senior executives] go[ing] off to a course to relax and do some learning. Not reading a book over the weekend about management…. I'm not a fan of [traditional management books] because I think we're moving at a pace where you can't rely on that kind of stuff.

He named several types of sources that he turned to for focused learning: blog posts, podcasts, targeted books and articles—'[I]f you start seeking those [less common ways of learning] out you will find ways to stay ahead of stuff'—and also 'listening and learning from other people'. He described a carefully structured process that his organisation had undertaken to learn from customers, and he also mentioned that he was '[b]roadening the spectrum of where you're [going to] learn from' by carefully observing companies outside of his company's industry sector.

'A success/failure inflection point'.

He observed that failure to carry out the right kinds of learning creates a dangerous lag in decision-making, one that could make or break a company:

> [I]f you're not focused on learning, your decision process becomes slowed down because you have to—you don't have any kind of support system to make decisions. And if I had one observation about where this concept you're talking about of learning where's the inflection point to operations? It's being able to stay in context of decisions. And not having the need to pause, go learn, come back to that decision, that's a success/failure inflection point in my experience.

'Give me the real feedback'.

He discussed at length the necessity of having a learning-oriented team, where truth and trust support learning:

> Hard truths, candor, and, you know, if you can get to a place where everyone's interest is the strength of the company, so let's have conversations around how we get there, and give me the real feedback and we're [going to] build this company, and I want you to tell me the truths around, you know, what's going on. You can build an incredible company like that.

He noted that such a team also contributes to his learning process, saying: 'You have to be tremendously vulnerable because often I have my direct leadership team—the kind of company I built, which I'm very proud of, is pointing out where I need to learn'.

He said that many executives fail to learn with full effectiveness in part because they can't create or thrive in what he called 'a high candor environment'. 'I don't think a lot of people are equipped for that. I really don't', he said.

'The success rate is aligned to who has the discipline to stay ahead of this and make decisions based on learning'

He said of executives of high-technology companies:

> I think a lot of them are winging it and hoping, because if you look at the success rate, I think the success rate is aligned to who has the discipline to stay ahead of this and make decisions based on learning.

'Anticipating change is what we need to do'.

He noted that learning has to be based on anticipation of what will be needed for the organisation to succeed—'anticipating change is what we need to do'—and he said that among the consequences of failing to successfully anticipate change is having to try to go back to an earlier point to remedy issues— 'If you don't get some footing, going back

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becomes very hard while you're scaling'—or having to act faster than is good for the organisation: 'So we don't find ourselves where we're trying to run faster'.

'A part of your CEO time must be doing what I would call "reconnaissance"'.

He said:

> I spend a small amount of my time focused on what's now. I have an engineering team that's driven by a technical road map. So then it leads, what do we need to be thinking about so these things are in place to continue to grow, 6 months, 12 months. And that's extremely important, because there's things we need to do now to start making sure we can be ready for that. And I'm trying to spread myself very wide to see, what are the indicating effects in the market right now that lead me to believe with data, that we should start looking into this?

'We're at the edge of collapse or chaos'.

He said:

> Do you fit, and can you mentally operate in the environment we're bringing? And we've been more cautious with every hire to really be upfront with people on what this is and what this isn't. And, you know, it takes all kinds and some people say, 'Well, you can't bring a big company person into a start-up. It just doesn't work'. I don't agree with that. You have to be very upfront with people that this is an environment you are going to be uncomfortable often. And when you feel like we're on the edge of collapse or chaos, you're probably—I mean, we are. We are working on the edge. And I think there is a subset of people that just can't deal with that. They can deal with it maybe briefly and then they can't. And then, there's another group of people that completely thrive on it. But as we get more educated on what we're doing, as we get more self-aware of how on the edge of chaos we are, we try to embrace it culturally. That's where we're at.

'We're going to try a lot of things…and support it with data'.

He stated:

> We talked a lot in the early days in this company, that we are going to try a lot of things. And we're going to support it with data. We're going to make decisions based on really pragmatic analysis of what we're about to do. But we're [also] going to be okay that some of the stuff's not going to work. And when it doesn't we're also going to plan what our trigger points are for pulling out or doubling down. I think a lot of people that get too committed to decisions.

'Convey the bigger picture'.

He emphasised:

> Every week you have this opportunity. I'm willing to share, and our leadership team is going to share, and here's the platform you have to know what's going on or ask what's going on. And that's changed the dynamics of this culture just having that opportunity for transparency in our learning…. [I]f a sales guy comes back from a week on the road, and is able to say, 'Here's what the software is doing. I sat across from the company president and here's what he's saying about our software'. And those stories [are vital]. And we needed to find a way to do that because this idea of

learning and that's often how we translate down to these junior developers that are writing code all day. That's their opportunity to know the bigger picture.

'If people can learn [where their work leads] they will do amazing things'.

He stated:

[To know] that our software's changing the way a public company does business is amazing, and that really has made an impact. So I encourage finding forums to do that kind of stuff. But try to make a connection to that guy to the product he's building and, and if he understands that how his code fits into the software that's changing a customer' business—if you can make that connection to everyone on your team and staff...these people will do amazing things.

'My biggest worry is can we get there in time'.

He stated:

My biggest worry about being successful is, will we get there in time? As I talk with my board and say, 'I know we have something here...' Can we get there fast enough to really take advantage of what we have?

'Even with each win, we are going to learn'.

He reflected:

Where could we have done something different? Where can we do things in parallel? Where did we waste time? Just by being really honest and critical of what happened— [even from our wins, not just our mistakes or missteps]. And those were our wins, but we still knew, even from the win that we are going to learn.

In this chapter, I presented highlights of the primary data as revealed in the individual interviews. The next chapter describes my approach to analysing the primary data and provides highlights of the first rounds of analysis.