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**MANAGER DEVELOPMENT IN YOUNGER, GROWING ORGANIZATIONS**

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**A Research Project**  
**Presented to the Faculty of**  
**The Graziadio Business School**  
**Pepperdine University**

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**In Partial Fulfillment**  
**Of the Requirements for the Degree**  
**Master of Science**  
**In**  
**Organization Development**

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**by**  
**Christine Parcels**

**June 2020**

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This research project, completed by

CHRISTINE PARCELLS

under the guidance of the Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the faculty of The Graziadio Business School in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE  
IN ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

Date: June 2020

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## Abstract

This study explored manager development needs in younger, growing organizations related to challenges with uncertainty, ambiguity, and a rapid pace of change. This research examined two companies: one that had not gone through IPO or acquisition and one that was acquired twice. The primary themes in the findings included adaptive behaviors and communication capabilities, the impact and influence of a company's culture and a changing organization structure on development, as well the need for building relationships and networks to help managers cope with the challenges of a growing organization. By implementing manager development programs early companies can build inclusion, foster networks, and get in front of managerial challenges to help the company and its people operate at optimal performance levels.

*Keywords:* managers, manager development, talent development, complexity, leadership

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Change in today's workplace is constant and expected, but it is the pace of change that is accelerating (Hoffman & Yeh, 2018; Mancesti, 2015). For example, it took 50 years for 50 million people to have a telephone, 22 years for 50 million people to use a TV, but only three years for Facebook to reach 50 million users and 19 days for Pokémon Go to have 50 million users (Desjardin, 2018). Globalization, digitalization from the Internet, and products increasingly relying on software has made everything change faster, change more often, increase uncertainty, and increase the number of competitors (Axon et al., 2018; Dalal & Akdere, 2018; Hoffman & Yeh, 2018; Kotter, 2001). Global markets are more reachable, distribution channels are more accessible, and the proliferation of network effects and virality through social media has made the size of a potential user base grow massively (Hoffman & Yeh, 2018). The discussion around a changing and more complex business world in popular and academic literature is vast and has been around for decades (Kotter, 2001). Given these conditions, the ways in which organizations develop their employees must also adapt and align to the increasing complexity. Indeed, according to Health IQ CEO Munjal Shah, fast company growth means employees need to grow quickly as well, and leaders need to be involved in this process (Abdou, 2018).

This research examines one specific area of the changing business world: people development approaches for frontline and mid-level managers at younger, growing companies. There is various nomenclature for what stage a startup is considered to be at (Dibner, 2018). For the purposes of this research, the companies examined are at a stage of high growth and have either not yet gone through acquisition or Initial Public Offering

(IPO), or went through an IPO or acquisition within the past ten years. The reason for choosing these organizational stages is that the presumed size of the company is large enough to have enough front line and mid-level managers such that they may be at the point of considering, or have already implemented, a coherent development strategy for them. Further, younger companies may be particularly susceptible to issues caused by the modern business environment, which is often characterized by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA).

VUCA was originally used to describe times at war (i.e., the Cold War) but became popularized in the business world after September 11th and the rising focus on terrorism (Schoemaker, 2018; UNC Executive Development, 2017). “An important strategy in VUCA environments is to systematically build organizational capabilities that enable managers, and not just leaders, to sense change sooner, seize opportunities ahead of rivals, and transform the organization when and where needed” (Schoemaker, 2018, para. 5). In an earlier, high-growth stage, organizations need to address areas such as financial stability, potential competition, building a company culture, and/or choosing to maintain or pivot from the original company strategy (Kittaneh, 2018). From a people perspective, supporting employee well-being and talent recruitment and retention are also key priorities of growing companies (Singh, 2019).

Today, a manager’s role is broad and multifaceted. According to Axon et al. (2018), mid-level managers today experience an array of demands and increasing complexity in their role. For example, they need to meet a variety of stakeholders’ conflicting demands, be more directly involved in strategy implementation and identification, and have to manage up, down, and across organization lines. Additionally,

managers play a key role in fostering conditions within a team that contribute to its cohesion and performance. To meet these demands, manager development is key. At Pandora, they view manager development as an important capability and sees that “Teaching new managers to coach, support, and manage their people effectively is [a] primary L&D goal” (Wilson, 2016, para. 12).

Unfortunately, poor management is a top reason why employees leave jobs and/or feel less engaged (Harter & Adkins, 2015; Schwantes, 2017; Wilson, 2016). With poor management leading to lower employee engagement and higher attrition, it is critical to understand how young, growing organizations can develop their managers in order to lead their teams through rapid change and times of uncertainty. Indeed, in a survey from Harvard Business Publishing, 57% of surveyed Learning & Development professionals indicated developing middle managers was a high or very high organizational priority (Axon et al., 2018).

In many young companies, a new manager may be in the role for the first time and may have received little to no training in how to be a manager. There is little research in general about the needs of first-time managers (Yearly, 2017). Further, it may seem that development opportunities are more frequently targeted at senior leadership levels (Lipman, 2016). Lipman argues that more training budget should be allocated to newer managers who do not have the years of experience to learn from. For managers in all phases of organizational growth, many “grossly underestimated just how challenging it would be to develop the myriad technical, human, and conceptual competencies that they needed” (Hill, 2004, p. 122).

## **Key Scaling Challenges Related to People and Management**

Early in an organization's life, the company is small and roles and responsibilities often overlap. With growth comes increasing complexity and a greater need for role differentiation or job specialization. A startup might be able to attract high-performing talent, but they often think in the short-term for more immediate needs rather than thinking about how skills and job roles might evolve (Carucci, 2017). Further, each stage of growth requires a different approach to relationships and leadership (Hoffman & Yeh, 2018). These factors can create challenges in communication and clarity in decision making and accountability across the organization (Margules, 2016). Allen (2016) points out that there is a time when revenue is growing at a faster rate than the actual employee headcount, and leadership rushes to professionalize the company by incorporating management systems, processes and infrastructure into the organization, which can lead to complexity and more bureaucracy. This can inadvertently squash entrepreneurial spirit and innovation (Allen, 2016; Davila et al., 2010).

Scaling the company culture as the business grows is also important, but becomes more difficult as complexity and bureaucracy increase. For many founders, ensuring that a company's culture grows with the company means staying involved in the hiring process for the first 150 hires (Hoffman, 2018) or as long as possible (Abdou, 2018). Values or practices might be easier to ensure when a company is small, but they may need to be articulated more frequently and clearly as a company grows (Mhanna, 2018), which managers will play a key role in doing.

## **The Evolution of Human Resources and Learning and Development**

There are a number of stakeholders involved in developing employees, though the responsibility may often reside in the Human Resources (HR) department. HR typically starts out small or nonexistent when a company is in startup mode, that is, until the need to professionalize becomes evident. HR also might grow more slowly and less strategically than departments directly involved in scaling the product or service. Understanding the role and expansion of the HR function and People Strategy is important to explore in the context of growing organizations and how the company develops managers.

Through a number of conversations with HR/People leaders in high-growth organizations, it seems evident that the first HR or People priority in a young company is often to address fundamental employee needs such as compensation, incentives, and benefits. Once those are in place, it is not always clear at which point HR or People teams can and should start thinking beyond these fundamental employee needs to more strategic aspects, such as retention, engagement, and development. Additionally, the general management or non-HR individuals may not value development as strongly as those in HR or People Teams (Viitala, Kultalahti, & Kangas, 2017).

### **Research Question**

As Bersin and Zao-Sanders (2019) assert, “the urgency of work invariably trumps the luxury of learning” (para. 2). While it may seem like there is no time for learning in younger companies as they try to keep up with growth, how might some form of manager development be built earlier for a more proactive and embedded learning culture? This

research will examine the ways in which younger companies address manager development in the midst of growing through the following research questions:

- 1) What are the ways in which younger companies report they develop frontline and mid-level managers to cope with a rapid pace of change, uncertainty, and ambiguity while growing?
- 2) What are the conditions that led to the implementation of manager development programs?

### **Key Definitions and Terms**

The literature uses a variety of terms when discussing employee development within the workplace, such as talent, leadership, manager, or management development. For the purpose of this study, I reviewed all types of people development literature referring to these terms to acquire a robust knowledge base of the topic, but will refer to “manager development” throughout the paper. The use of ‘manager’ does not mean specifically ‘management’ skill development; rather, it is referring to the category of employee because managers may participate in leadership and management development simultaneously, as explained further below. Manager development is defined as “an intentional future-oriented activity, which utilizes both formal and informal learning experience in order to grow an organization’s managerial expertise, and which continually both shapes and gets shaped by the organizational context in which it takes place” (Luoma, 2006, p. 105).

The term management development is often used interchangeably with leadership development. Gosling and Mintzberg (2003) posit that leadership skills became more emphasized than management skills in the early 2000s, but state that one cannot exist

without the other. Kotter (2001) also emphasizes that management and leadership are distinct, yet complementary and an individual can be good at one, but not the other: “Management is about coping with complexity...Leadership by contrast is about coping with change” (p. 86). Kotter (2001) goes on to define management as organizing, staffing, planning and budgeting, and controlling and problem-solving. This is contrasted to leadership as aligning people through communication and making sense of the organization’s vision, setting direction, and motivating people.

At an organizational strategy-wide level, Garavan et al. (2011) define talent development as:

the planning, selection and implementation of development strategies for the entire talent pool to ensure that the organisation has both the current and future supply of talent to meet strategic objectives and that development activities are aligned with organisational talent management processes. (p. 6)

### **Deficiencies in the Literature**

Based on several anecdotal conversations with talent leaders in representative organizations, there appears to be an appetite for more understanding about how and when younger companies should build out a people development plan. There is no straightforward approach one can take. There is a general sense that research, definition, and theory in the field of talent development is limited and lacks clarity (Dalal & Akdere, 2018; Garavan et al., 2012; Mehdiabadi & Li, 2016). The term talent management became a popular topic after McKinsey and Co. (1997) published a report on the “War for Talent,” which distinguished the terms between Talent Management and Talent Development (Dalal & Akedre, 2018; Iles et al., 2009; Mehdiabadi & Li, 2016). In their

literature review, Rezaei and Beyerlein (2018) also note that many studies and articles come from outside the United States. Gentry et al. (2014) additionally highlight the fact that the expectations and needs of those actually going through the development are not well researched. This study's aim is to provide insight into developing managers specifically in contexts during periods of high growth and earlier in a company's existence.

### **Outline of the Study**

This current chapter has outlined a number of contextual factors for the importance of developing managers in younger, growing organizations. As the world has changed, so has the workplace and consequently, the way organizations manage and develop people. Chapter 2 reviews the literature around people development in companies. Given the limited research about people development in younger companies, taking a broad approach to researching people development literature allows for a holistic view of the field from which the researcher can extrapolate to the current study. Additional topics in the literature review include an examination of the role of a manager with complexity theory as a theoretical lens and managing through uncertainty and complexity. Chapter 3 then presents the research methodology. Chapter 4 presents the findings from this study. Lastly, Chapter 5 discusses, analyzes the findings, and provides implications for organizations.



## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This study examines the ways in which younger companies develop their managers to cope with VUCA, and the conditions that lead to the implementation of manager development programs. The first section of this chapter reviews the transformation across the workplace, specifically in HR, and overall approaches and considerations for manager development. This includes looking at methods, design, and pedagogical considerations for development efforts. Next, the review then uses elements of complexity theory as a lens to further explore manager development and learning in rapidly changing environments. I chose this theory given the uncertainty, unpredictability, and volatile conditions high-growth organizations experience. Complexity theory offers a point of view for examining emergent and chaotic dynamics in organizations, as well as the interactions between employees and with internal and external environments. Those observations can then be used to focus on development tactics that will better equip managers to handle the dynamics of these particular environments.

### **Transformation Across the Workplace and Manager Development**

Bersin and Zao-Sanders (2019) point out that work is being redefined through factors such as new job structures and the increasing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and automation, causing learning and employee development to be an essential priority of today's workplaces to keep up with these changes. Moreover, the demographics of the workplace are changing; Millennials make up the majority of the workforce and rank learning and opportunities for development and advancement as top benefits in the workplace (Wilson, 2016). As work itself changes along with demographics in the

workplace, the HR function has also been undergoing a transformation. Traditionally, HR is known for serving a transactional, liability, and policy-driven function (Lindzon, 2015) and for being more reactive than strategic (Schmidt, 2018). Many companies, especially in the technology industry, have started to use the moniker “People Teams”, or “People Operations” to shift away from previous bureaucratic and negative connotations of HR (Greenhouse, 2016). As Greenhouse (2016), a Silicon Valley SaaS company, puts it, People teams focus on “maximizing the value of employees and drive business results through strategic talent acquisition, onboarding, and management” (para. 2). Another example of HR transformation is the creation of the HR Business Partner (HRBP) role as a step toward decentralizing and better integrating HR across a business by placing HRBPs within a business unit or department (Mazor et al., 2015). The rebranding and revitalization of HR to People Teams may allow for greater emphasis on the alignment of a people development strategy with business strategy.

In rapidly growing companies, people strategy efforts often focus on talent recruitment to keep up with the workload (Rogers & Paul, 2018). Sometimes, a talent strategy might be an afterthought or allowed to develop organically, but a reactive approach can cause challenges (Ho, 2018). As Ho (2018) describes, it comes as a shock to founders when they realize their talent is not where it needs to be or the right fit to keep the momentum for growth going. In today’s hyper-competitive business landscape, the pace of change creates a complex environment that consequently requires looking anew at how an organization develops its employees and indeed the very skills employees and managers need (Doyle, 2000; Hall & Rowland, 2016; Hodgkinson et al.,

2009; Keene, 2000; Luoma, 2006; McDonald & Tang, 2014; Scholz, 2015; Shanley, 2007).

Today's complex organizations require that people development practices stay flexible and evolve along with the dynamic environment in which the organization exists (Garavan et al., 2012). To accomplish this task, organizations can implement manager development more effectively by aligning manager development with the business' strategy (Dalal & Akdere, 2018; Garavan et al., 2012; Park et al., 2018) or taking more of a system-wide, organization development approach to integrate manager development deeper within the organization (Doyle, 2000; Luoma, 2006; Park et al., 2018; Rogers & Paul, 2018).

One approach to addressing Leadership & Development (L&D) needs in VUCA environments is by making L&D initiatives more personalized and flexible to changing conditions. Wilson (2016) outlines examples from several technology companies about leading L&D through personalizing learning experiences and providing clear paths for career advancement. For example, Salesforce created an in-house customizable program called *Trailhead*, which builds off of an in-person academy program. Yelp emphasizes development as a means for retention, providing mentorship programs and prioritizing promotions from within.

### **Aligning Development Needs with the Role of the Manager**

As work and organizational structures have changed, the role of the manager has evolved. Hales (2005) found that frontline managers' main role was based on supervising with a fairly narrow span of control and ensuring performance. Today, managers still need to manage company resources effectively, such as employees, to produce results for

the company (Symeonidou & Nicolaou, 2017). However, they also need to have deeper strategic influence and know-how (Dalal & Akdere, 2018; Doyle, 2000; Huy & Zott, 2018; Luoma, 2006). Strategic capabilities for mid-level managers are important given their proximity to day-to-day interaction with employees who interface with customers and market trends or changes (Axon et al., 2018).

There are a variety of reports indicating the multifaceted expectations of managers in today's complex environments. In a report from IBM (2010), *Capitalizing on Complexity*, three areas lead to success in handling complexity: creative leadership, the ability to reinvent customer relationships, and building operating dexterity. While this study interviewed CEOs, the skills behind these findings can still be examined within the purview of less senior level managers' responsibilities and roles given the above-mentioned example. To address these nuanced expectations of managers, a 2017 Harvard Business Publishing survey of L&D professionals cited the following as the most important skills and capabilities for managers: 67% said coaching/developing talent; 52% said handling complexity/change; 46% said strategic alignment and execution; 45% said adaptability/agility; 42% said high-performing teams; and 42% said emotional intelligence (Axon et al., 2018, p. 3).

By aligning appropriate content with the specific challenges, development needs, and contexts managers face, organizations can better ensure people development efforts are more effective during times of scaling and rapid change (Gentry et al., 2014). For manager development initiatives to be aligned more strategically within the organization, development initiatives should be contextualized by an organization's external and internal systemic influences (Doyle, 2000). For example, include current and anticipated

market forces and senior-level commitment for development programs. Further, people development efforts should examine the actual realities of what managers need and experience (Luoma, 2006) and be learner-centric to meet individual learners' needs (Garavan et al., 2012; Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning, 2018). As Garavan et al. (2012) emphasize, increasingly, development strategies or interventions are being individualized. This means taking into account "individual needs, learning styles, and current work priorities," (p. 15) requiring a more flexible and less prescriptive approach to address needs such as just-in-time or smaller/shorter formats. To understand these needs, development efforts should also address the individual's attitudes, expectations, and motivation to learn (Gentry et al., 2014; Harvard Business Publishing, 2018).

### **Development Program Approaches**

Talent development programs take place in a variety of formats. Based on their review of talent development, Dalal and Akdere (2018) note that talent development practices should be systematic across the entire organization, aiming to produce financial goals and/or performance mobility. They also note, however, that the research on talent development still lacks in distinguishing what should be used for short-term vs. long-term skills and behaviors. One approach to development is referred to as inclusive, developing all potential talent or more generally across an organization. Another is exclusive, developing specific high-potentials or only key roles (Dalal & Akdere, 2018; Iles et al., 2010; Rezaei & Beyerlein, 2018). In their review of the literature, Garavan et al. (2012) found that most organizations pursue exclusive strategies despite advocacy for more inclusive approaches. They identified four categories: (1) Formal programs: to address

specific skills and behaviors; (2) Relationship-based: e.g., mentorship, coaching peer learning, or sponsorship; (3) Job-based experiences: applying learning on-the-job; (4) Informal and non-formal: ad-hoc, could be with or without intentional learning outcomes. Using on-the-job experience is cited widely as a form of development (Becker & Bish, 2017; Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003; Hall & Rowland, 2016; Hill, 2004).

Not only is learning today more participant-focused, learning is often seen as more of a social experience or process—learning from and with others (Becker & Bish, 2017). Hill (2004) stresses the importance of direct experience, as well as guidance from another individual, such as peers or superiors. Hill (2004) mentions this is especially important for new managers who shift from being an individual contributor to managing relationships within their team and across the organization. Antonacopoulou and Chiva (2007) posit that organizational learning can be seen as a complex social process as it emphasizes connecting forces and the conditions inherent within those interactions. The social complexity is enhanced because of political and organizational culture influences within the organization. There are tensions of power and control when it comes to learning because of the differences in individual and organizational priorities and motives (Antonacopoulou & Chiva, 2007; Luoma, 2006). Given this emphasis on social and relational aspects of learning, the following section uses the lens of complexity theory to further explore how manager development efforts can align with the demands of today's dynamic, complex workplace.

### **Complexity Theory**

Wright and Stigliani (2012) state that growth is an inherently uncertain process with a significant degree of ambiguity. Leaders and managers must be able to respond to

the current day complexities, which means attending to uncertainty and ambiguity (Kennedy et al., 2013). The use of complexity and chaos theory relates to the conditions of “unpredictability, uncertainty, instability, non-equilibrium, disorder, rapid and or dramatic changes, non-linearity, and turbulence for both the complex environment and the behaviour of the systems involved” (Shadid, 2018, p. 1832). An entrepreneurial environment is often characterized by these conditions (Wright & Stigliani, 2012), and this can be particularly true for startups where 75% are likely to fail (Blank, 2013). Given these conditions that younger organizations face, applying tenets of complexity theory provides a lens with which to make sense of what younger firms and their managers may experience.

Examining complexity theory can provide a construct for what skills and competencies may be useful for managers in these organizations. Additionally, the following discussion expands on and can be used to integrate Kotter’s (2001) distinctions between management and leadership mentioned in Chapter 1. It is important to note that there are different branches of complexity theory and it is not used consistently, nor fully accepted across the literature (Burnes, 2005; Smith & Humphries, 2004; Stacey et al., 2000). As Burnes (2005) states, complexity theory is an umbrella term for multiple theories stemming from a number of scientific disciplines such as mathematics and meteorology: “Complexity theories are concerned with the emergence of order in dynamic, non-linear systems operating at the edge of chaos: in other words, systems which are constantly changing and where the laws of cause and effect appear not to apply” (p. 77).

This section of the literature review will not go into all aspects of complexity theory, but will highlight several key authors and concepts, including Complex Adaptive Systems, Complex Responsive Processes, attractor patterns, and edge of chaos.

***Complex adaptive systems.*** Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) is the most discussed in relation to organizational studies (Antonacopoulou & Chiva, 2007) or to leadership and management development. CAS emphasizes a micro-level focus on how individuals, or agents, interact in and with the internal and external environments (systems). While each individual is following his/her own set of rules, interactions amongst people (agents) require adjustments in behavior, resulting in non-linear, unpredictable outcomes (Antonacopoulou & Chiva, 2007; Burnes, 2005). Scholz (2015) states that the human interactions influence complex systems. Luoma (2006) asserts that manager development should be seen as a dynamic system within other organizational systems to identify the interconnected nature between the systems. Consequently, it is important to focus on the human interactions and environmental contexts when determining manager development needs.

***Complex responsive processes.*** In a system view, Stacey et al. (2000) assert that the manager is often outside the system observing and trying to design, or plan, the system or modifications to it. What often happens is that managers become frustrated that despite designing a system, those systems do not seem to work. Managers thus have to find other ways to accomplish what is necessary to get the work done (Stacey et al., 2000). Rather than examining what it was that they actually did, rather than what they designed and planned for, they miss identifying the novelty of what they experience. Specifically, Stacey et al. (2000) states that managers:



put even more effort into identifying systemic obstacles and designing better systems...The experience is of continual, irregular change, but the ways of thinking employed to understand that experience are essentially about stability and regular change... [Managers] do not pay adequate attention to their own participation in what is happening (p. 59).

Further, Stacey et al. (2000) posit that a system or mechanism within the system can only be understood retrospectively.

Rather than using a system lens, Stacey et al. (2000) emphasize the human relational focus on understanding complexity organizational life as a form of processes. They use the term Complex Responsive Processes (CRP) to explain the complex dynamics and interactions of organizations. All members of the organization participate in daily life, co-creating meaning which is unpredictable. Interactions such as communication, value judgements, and power relationships contribute to evolving patterns between people and the environment. These interactions happen amongst constantly changing phenomena that paradoxically shape people and by which people are simultaneously shaped (Mowles, 2015; Stacey et al., 2000).

*Attractor patterns.* Attractors are a repeatable pattern of order in dynamic interactions and structures bringing stability to the disorder (Mangioficio, 2014). It is natural for humans to look for patterns and organize into patterns (Wheatly, 2006). Cultural values, for example, can serve as attractors, which can guide employee's behavior (Dolan et al., 2003). Thus, in a younger company, strong cultural values can serve as a guidepost in the absence of people development work. The patterns, however, are constantly subjected to change and evolution as shifts in the organization occur.

Employees in younger, growing companies may experience constant change and perceive chaos, impacting how work is carried out and thus what employees may need in terms of support and development from HR and management. However, as Mangiofico (2014) suggests, understanding attractor patterns can be beneficial in the sense of “knowing that a predominant attractor state will emerge offers the reassurance... that there is an opportunity to explore new possibilities in the midst of disruption” (p. 42). From a leadership and management perspective, it is important to note that simply stating the values does not ensure behavior. People must practice self-awareness, be aware of how they are acting in alignment (or not) with the values (Wheatly, 2006). If using this lens, development initiatives can align to cultural values knowing behavior modeling such values will encourage desired behaviors in employees to be accountable to them as well.

### **Managing in Uncertainty and Complexity**

Using the notion of CRP, Mowles (2015) posits that employees (people) experience uncertainty because they cannot predict their responses to other people’s actions and, further, know their intentions. One might suspect how people will behave, which, in turn, involves anticipating and shaping actions and responses rendering behaviors unpredictable. Employees and managers alike must cope with this unpredictable and uncertain nature of human behavior, as well as the uncertainty and ambiguity that result from a volatile, uncertain business environment. One of a manager’s fundamental roles is managing relationships and navigating complex interpersonal dynamics in his or her team, as well as across the organization. Consequently, necessary manager skills might include communication, understanding interpersonal dynamics and helping groups navigate conflict (Keene, 2000).

Pederezini (2016) asserts that senior managers are responsible for making sense of changing or uncertain conditions for their employees while realizing that there is a lot that actually lies beyond their control. This is what Pederezini (2016) refers to as the 'leadership paradox'. While Pederezini's (2016) research refers to senior managers, similar responsibility could align to lower levels of managers across an organization. Organizational leaders hope for continuity, but they also expect transformation and change (Mowles, 2015). Paradoxical situations are one element of complexity theory. Mowles (2015) points out that there is a belief that paradox can be manipulated and embraced by managers, while other literature indicates it is unresolvable.

Another example of paradox in organizations as it relates to complexity theory is the search for stability to remain viable in the marketplace while operating in a state of instability. Stacey et al. (2000) posit that both stability and instability are required for novel change or innovation. This is referred to as the 'edge of chaos', another term commonly used in complexity theory. Managers who try to control too much, may prevent novel change or strategies to emerge. Rather than try to maintain order too rigidly, enough instability or disequilibrium may produce the change or self-organization needed (Burnes, 2005; Stacey et al., 2000).

Gosling and Mintzberg (2003) also assert that managers face increasingly contradictory, or paradoxical, responsibilities when it comes to management, such as "be global and local," or "change, perpetually, and maintain order" (p. 55). Due to the emphasis on "action at the expense of reflection" (p. 61), they created a framework of five mindsets to address the fluid, ambidextrous needs of modern managers. Those mindsets are the: (1) Reflective mindset (management of self); (2) Analytic mindset

(management of organization); (3) Worldly mindset (management of perspectives); (4) Collaborative mindset (management of relationships); and (5) Action mindset (management of change). McDonald and Tang (2014) deepened Gosling and Mintzberg's (2003) framework by mapping on implications from cognitive neuroscience for critical manager development needs. These mindsets, along with other key skills and capabilities as they relate to complexity, are discussed below.

With the constant onslaught of information, change, and uncertainty, managers need time to pause and reflect to understand their own reactions to experiences with others better and to make sense and learn from history (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003, p. 57; Mowles, 2015). This is Gosling and Mintzberg's (2003) reflective mindset (management of self). According to Mowles (2015), reflection can be done both individually and in groups. From the individual side, self-awareness helps to develop reflective skills (Hodgkinson et al., 2009; McDonald & Tang, 2014) to better understand one's own reactions and thoughts to others' actions, as well as their team members'. Additionally, mindfulness practice can help ground managers more in the present (McDonald & Tang, 2014). Doyle (2000) posits that a significant amount of change challenges a manager's identity, requiring managers to "reconsider, and re-examine their status, security, and current behaviors" (p. 591). Hill (2004) found that first-time managers had significant adjustments in their professional identity when moving from an individual contributor to a manager.

Hess and Bacigalupo (2010) align these cognitive processes with emotional intelligence, specifically "self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skill" (p. 224). These authors note emotional intelligence as an important competency of

knowledge-based organizations with internal and external complexities. Further, they indicate that emotional intelligence is helpful to possess, especially for managers, in balancing the interests of the organization and the individual, which was mentioned above as an inherent political tension in manager development initiatives. Lastly, Hess and Bacigalupo (2010) indicate that emotional intelligence should be viewed as a process of engagement between individuals, which aligns with Stacey and colleagues' (2000) premise of Complex Responsive Processes.

In addition to reflection, managers must think analytically about the organization. This is Gosling and Mintzberg's (2003) analytic mindset, where one must "take into account soft data, including the values underlying such choices. Deep analysis does not seek to simplify complex decisions, but to sustain the complexity while maintaining the organization's capacity to take action" (p. 58). Managers often do not have all of the information, requiring the need to act more quickly before all information can be collected (IBM, 2010). By paying close attention when novel ideas or situations occur, memory retention is more pronounced. Thus, managers who are able to hone their attention and focus are more apt at learning from novel circumstances (McDonald & Tang, 2014).

Novelty aligns with the search for innovation, which organizations so frequently desire. In his work, Mowles (2015) references Quinn (1988) who posits that solutions are not always obvious and thus ambiguity is a given. Highly controlled environments or predictability will not produce novelty or innovation. Mowles' (2015) use of Quinn's (1998) concept of mastery means a manager can develop an intuitive view of patterns in the organization to have a more holistic view. Though, Mowles (2015) also points out

that there is a certain mysticism in this position, as Quinn (1998) gives no concrete way of how to achieve this meta-perspective. Nonetheless, developing intuitive skills is one proposed method of enhancing managers' cognitive abilities in complex environments to enhance innovation, for example (Hodgkinson et al., 2009; McDonald & Tang 2014).

If managers encourage employees across levels to use their diverse viewpoints to question how things have been done in the past, creativity and innovative ideas can be increased (IBM, 2010). This is related to what Argyris and Schön (1978) refer to as double loop learning: individuals can choose to change their mental models by questioning how things were done and adapt to the environment (as cited by Stacey et al., 2000, p. 160). To integrate the above mentioned reflective and analytical skills, Gosling and Mintzberg (2003) propose a worldly mindset (management of perspectives) as a way of “seeing differently out to reflect differently in” (p. 59).

McDonald and Tang (2014) suggest that managers should develop their ability to incorporate the plurality of viewpoints through cognitive exercises, as well as develop metacognitive skills: the ability to think about what and how one is thinking. Such skills will allow them to learn more effectively from their reflections and experiences. Mowles (2015) describes metacognition as reflexivity and its benefits as a managerial skill when facing uncertainty to be able to think more critically and how work evolves.

As previously stated, a relational perspective is necessary in complex environments (Kennedy et al., 2013; Stacey et al., 2000) to handle diverse perspectives, such as a variety of stakeholders or with diverse team members. As managers better understand and manage relationships, they will more aptly develop a collaborative mindset (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003). Antonacopoulou and Chiva (2007) state that

collaboration between people permits more responsiveness to internal and external forces. Further, managers play an important role in employee motivation, supporting their team's own development and growth (Park et al., 2018). McDonald and Tang (2014) pulled together studies to support their propositions that managers who have a better understanding of how empathy works, specifically through mirror neurons, will have better workplace relationships.

Not only are relationships inside of the organization important, but so are external ones. IBM's *Capitalizing on Complexity* study (2010) stresses the importance of understanding and redefining customer relationships, which is an example of engagement with an external force. This study found that interactions with customers have changed largely due to digitalization and increased access to options. Thus, the need to understand and empathize with the customer's needs is all the more critical.

From a neuroscience perspective, change causes status and risk uncertainty which in turn leads to a higher sense of threat (McDonald & Tang, 2014; Rock, 2009). Not only must managers be able to manage and cope with change themselves, but they must also be able to help their teams to do the same (Doyle, 2000; Klagge, 1998; Luoma, 2006; Shanley, 2007). This is Gosling and Mintzberg's (2003) action mindset (management of change). To address uncertainty and change, many authors reference the need for managers to be agile, meaning the need to be flexible and adaptable to respond quickly to internal and external needs (Hall & Rowland, 2016; Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning, 2018; McDonald & Tang, 2014; Ng, 2014; Worley & Lawler, 2010). The challenge with the action mindset is to "mobilize energy around those things that need changing, while being careful to maintain the rest" (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003, p.

61). This is what Stacey et al. (2000) discusses as a stability/instability paradox: organizations want to have some sense of stability, yet a certain level of instability is needed for novel change and transformation.

As it relates to managers and their role, the constant influx and quantity of information that happens during heightened periods of change can impact cognitive processing abilities such as memory retention, as well as the ability to generate novel or innovative solutions (Hodgkinson et al., 2009; McDonald & Tang, 2014; Rock, 2009). Giving feedback that is constructive and candid is an important tool (and skill) for facilitating change (Hodgkinson et al., 2009; Rock, 2009). Asking individuals to change through feedback, for example, has the potential to create a defensive response (Rock, 2009). To minimize the negative response, Rock (2009) proposes approaching the interaction as a way to facilitate positive change and engaging the individual in the process to discover the gaps and opportunities. Such an approach aligns with the collaborative mindset as described above and the relational focus of Complex Adaptive Processes from Stacey et al. (2000).

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The previous section discussed the necessary skills and capabilities managers need in complex environments. A Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning study (2018) found that to handle transformation and change most effectively, organizations needed to build “organizational agility, deliver programs that put learners at the center, and partner in new ways with stakeholders across the business” (p. 2).

The very nature of startups or other young companies implies uncertainty and volatility. Employees and managers act together, constantly responding to and being



shaped by the changing internal and external forces as the business scales and they find their place in the market. Managers thus play a pivotal role in engaging in relationships across the organization, helping to make sense of what emerges, supporting innovation (novelty), and helping the organization to not descend into chaos.

To manage within a knowledge-based organization, soft skills such as emotional intelligence (Hess & Bacigalupo, 2010), communication and being able to help groups navigate conflict (Keene, 2000) are critical. Recognizing power relations as inherent to complex interactions and being politically savvy is an important skill for managers to have (Mowles, 2015). Power relations enable and constrain action, who is included and who is excluded, and how these power relations are interpreted vary across individuals, which results in novelty and creativity (Stacey et al., 2000). To address the multitude of needs and changing circumstances in complex environments, complexity theory would suggest that approaches to developing managers need to be flexible, emphasize relational aspects in organization, and be highly contextualized to both the organization and to the individual learner.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Overview

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the learning and development needs of front line and mid-level managers in younger, growing organizations. Specifically, this study examines the associated challenges managers face in coping with uncertainty, rapid pace of change, and ambiguity, as well as what the conditions were that led to the implementation of development initiatives. Research on talent development is limited (Garavan et al., 2012; Rezaei & Beyerlein, 2017), especially on younger organizations such as startups and the specific demographic of front line and mid-level managers. This chapter first presents the overall research design. Next, this chapter provides the rationale for the chosen method and sampling techniques. Lastly, the data analysis protocol is provided. The following questions guided this study:

- 1) What are the ways in which younger companies report they develop frontline and mid-level managers to cope with a rapid pace of change, uncertainty, and ambiguity while growing?
- 2) What are the conditions that led to the implementation of manager development programs?

### Research Design

The chosen research design is inductive, using semi-structured interviews of managers and key HR and L&D professionals. An inductive approach allows the themes and learnings to surface from the subjects' responses and experiences as the research progresses (Creswell, 2014). By capturing multiple perspectives, the research builds a

more holistic account “to develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study” (Creswell, 2001, p. 186).

I conducted qualitative interviews at two east coast technology companies.

Company A is a late stage technology scale-up with over 900 employees based in two US cities at the time of the interviews. I interviewed eight front line and mid-level managers and three L&D/HR staff at Company A. At the time of the interviews, the company was just preparing to launch its first internal manager leadership development program in late 2019.

At Company B, I interviewed five managers (three current and two former employees) and one former L&D/OD staff member. Company B had approximately 800 people around the time they developed their first manager development program in 2012. The company went through its first acquisition in 2013 and its second in 2015. The parent company currently employs roughly 40,000 employees. Table 1 shows the companies’ profiles.

**Table 1**

***Company Profiles***

	<b>Company A</b>	<b>Company B</b>
<b>Founded</b>	2007	1998
<b>Company stage</b>	Pre-IPO or acquisition	Post-acquisition (twice)
<b># of employees</b>	900+	Part of a ~40,000 parent organization
<b># of managers interviewed</b>	8	5
<b># of L&amp;D/HR staff interviewed</b>	3	1
<b>Range of management years’ experience</b>	3 months - 11 years	7 - 12+ years
<b>Average years of management experience</b>	5.8 years	Over 10 years

**Interviews.** The interviews followed a semi-structured format using open-ended questions (see Appendix A) to gather participants' perspectives and thoughts (Creswell, 2014). The interviewees received the general topic of the interview questions in advance. I recorded and transcribed the interviews, withholding the interviewees' name and any company information to protect anonymity. Each interviewee had a pseudonym in the form of a number and letter. Given the conditions younger, growing organizations face, I wrote a portion of the questions applying a lens of complexity theory to make sense of what younger firms and their managers may experience. This lens provided a construct for considering what skills and competencies may be useful for managers experiencing complexity theory-related dynamics as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, such as uncertainty, ambiguity, paradox, and an unpredictable amount of change.

Interviewees first responded to a series of baseline questions (1 - 4, see Appendix A) to understand the length of experience as a manager and time at the company, as well as general years of work experience. Manager questions 5 - 12 addressed the environmental conditions in which they worked that contribute to ambiguity, rapid change, and uncertainty (VUCA) that they deal with, how they cope, and how the company develops them to be able to cope with these conditions. Manager questions 13 - 20 explored the learning and development experiences of the interviewees. The interviews took around 45 minutes each.

### **Sample Method**

A purposeful approach (Creswell, 2014) was used to identify the types of companies to invite employee participation in this study. The actual participants came from a convenience and snowball approach as I contacted a company with whom I had

connection and fit the company stage in which the research was based. After obtaining permission from Company A, I worked with an internal contact to recruit managers for participation. Company B was a former company of the internal contact in Company A. Given the terms “front line” and “mid-level” manager might mean different things in different companies, I specified one to three levels from the front-line employees.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze highly qualitative data, Creswell (2014) recommends moving from specific pieces of information to more general, utilizing multiple levels of analysis. Both research questions for this study require insight from both the managers and the HR/L&D staff. All data was captured separately from each role, analyzed individually, and then compared and contrasted for alignment. The analysis of the results followed Creswell’s (2014) six qualitative research analysis steps (p. 197-200):

- 1) *Organize and prepare the data for analysis*: I chose to use a mobile application called Otter. This app transcribed the interviews in real time, which I then reviewed and cleaned for accuracy. Virtual interviews were conducted and recorded through the Zoom video conference platform.
- 2) *Read or look at all of the data*: To get a general sense of the information, I reviewed all interviews within each company and took notes before proceeding to the next step.
- 3) *Coding*: Coding is the process of mapping the data to make sense of it in terms of the research questions (Elliot, 2018). In the second pass of reading the interviews, I applied codes on the interviews and collected them onto a spreadsheet.

- 4) *Use the codes to generate descriptions of settings, people, categories, and themes for analysis:* I looked for common words or short phrases that could be clustered into themes. Using those themes, I then started to make meaning of the managers' experience and learning, as well as the contextual elements and conditions that led to implementing development initiatives.
- 5) *Develop the narrative of the data findings:* This includes tables of the themes, frequencies of responses, and quotations from interviewees that support the themes.
- 6) *Make an interpretation of the qualitative research:* The interpretation and analysis of the findings are included in Chapter 5. I included additional implications for other organizations.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the research design, company profiles of where interviewees were located, the research methodologies, and process for analyzing the data. This study used an inductive approach with semi-structured interviews to allow for themes to emerge and more fully capture managers' and L&D professionals' experiences.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this research is twofold: to examine manager development in younger, growing organizations and how managers cope with rapid change, ambiguity, and uncertainty. This chapter presents the findings from interviews with managers and L&D/HR staff at two technology companies. This research addressed the following two questions:

1. What are the ways in which younger companies report they develop frontline and mid-level managers to cope with a rapid pace of change, uncertainty, and ambiguity while growing?
2. What are the conditions that led to the implementation of manager development programs?

Across the two companies, five key findings emerged from the analysis, in addition to the general findings to each question. One unique finding emerged from Company B: the added complexity and impact of an acquisition on managers' development and role.

### Background of L&D Implementation at Each Company

*Company A.* In late 2019, Company A was just preparing to launch its first internally led manager development program and had hired its first director of L&D in July 2019, three months prior to these interviews. The company had been doubling headcount over the past two years (personal communications, Parcels, Oct. 2019). Interviewees described the growth and change they experience as “thunderous”, “up and to the right”, “insane”, and “constant.” Prior to hiring their first L&D director, Company A had been providing some opportunities for learning and development, though these

initiatives had been geared toward basic managerial skills and learning more about the company - not necessarily coping with VUCA. All eight of the managers interviewed, as well as most managers at the company, had participated in a three-day program taught by an external vendor for general managerial skills, such as how to have difficult conversations and practice active listening.

To design and build the new formal learning program that would address skills needed for coping with VUCA, the L&D director conducted a needs analysis, focus groups, and engaged many stakeholders in conversation. The research helped to determine what managers wanted and needed in terms of development and HR support at the company and which managerial levels to approach first. The core content would focus on emotional intelligence, building strategic capacity, and influencing within systems. As the L&D Director stated, one important goal will be to “focus on what we glean from and how we learn from the things that did not go the way we thought they were going to go -- whether they are failures or not. It is how do you make meaning of what you expected versus what actually happens.” The program would span a number of months starting with one pilot department. Each month the managers would come together for two intense days for interactive, experiential sessions on leadership development. There was an emphasis on experiential and interactive learning.

**Company B.** Interviewees had all participated in formal internal leadership development programs in 2012 and 2015. The first leadership development program took place during a period of rapid growth, prior to the first acquisition. Over six to eight months, participants gathered for a couple of days at a time. Knowing an acquisition was likely (which occurred in 2013), the goal of this program focused on opening people’s



minds to see the bigger picture including strategy, thinking beyond one's self, and developing an awareness of self and others. This format followed a learn then experiment and apply on-the-job approach. In the second acquisition in 2015, the company became a part of a company that was over 40,000 people in size. After the integration, according to one interviewee, employees across companies made a lot of assumptions about each other and experienced difficulties connecting and integrating. Thus, a primary focus of the second leadership program was to break down stereotypes and to address integration of the different office cultures.

The curriculum of these programs built from the individual level, to the group, and then to organizational levels - all with an emphasis on translating the learnings into leadership style. Both programs were highly experiential and interactive with a small cohort format. According to managers, the following elements of the program helped them cope with their challenges: build networks with others, participate in peer coaching, and talk through issues. As the former L&D/OD staff member stated, important components of the programs that addressed the VUCA-like conditions at the time included: being fully customized to what the managers and the organization needed at that time, providing an avenue for managers to process their circumstances, and create a space for managers to realize they were not alone in their struggles. For example, in one of the programs, after a big hiring decision for the company the L&D staff members scrapped the plan for an entire day to address attendees' concerns and thoughts.

### **Adaptive Behaviors for Coping with VUCA**

In addition to what development opportunities there were, managers at both companies employed adaptive behaviors to cope, and help their teams cope, with VUCA

in a variety of ways as detailed in Table 2. At Company B, for example, one manager recalled that in the early years of the company, both the founders and employees matured and learned and adapted together. Two managers expressed appreciation for the founders learning together with the rest of the organization. For them, this created a sense that the company was in it (the growing pains) together. The interviews at Company B primarily focused on the impact of the acquisitions on development needs, which is discussed in more detail in a later section.

**Table 2**

*Adaptive Behaviors*

Sub-themes	N= 8 (A) N=5 (B) (managers only)	Quotes
Build structure around or shield the team from uncertainty; helping to prioritize, manage change	5 (A) 5 (B)	<p>“I see that as the role of the manager...the middle, between the individual contributors and leadership...the entire job of everybody in the middle there is to put structure around the vision... how does it get down into the actual execution.” (Manager A3, Company A)</p> <p>“You want to shield them from uncertainty as much as you possibly can. I think that's what a good, strong leader should... where like you know you want to be transparent with them and let them know what's going on, but you also, you do want to shield them from any sort of uncertainty.” (Manager B1, Company A)</p>
Better understand resistance from their team (and their own)	1 (A) 3 (B)	<p>“Understand the resistance that you hold and then figure out how to take responsibility, about how you actually deal with that for yourself and then how do you assess that in your team...” (Manager D2, Company B)</p> <p>“One of my biggest learnings was to modify my approach to more of a coach...Then really just having more frequent one on ones, especially with those who, you know, were in resistance mode to really understand their fears and kind of put it into perspective.” (Manager D3, Company B)</p>
Model behavior/observed others modeling behavior	4 (A) 3 (B)	<p>“It's easy for a manager to project their own struggles [with change]. It's just as hard for managers. They want answers, but they're not getting them either... and it's really hard to keep a face on that is supportive and models professionalism when you're not feeling it yourself...how do you train that in a management training?” (Manager D2, Company B)</p>

Sense-making activities/convos	4 (A) 5 (B)	“So as a manager, my biggest challenge was keeping my teams focused and energized and inspired, while also seeing inconsistencies and inequities out there...It was managing perception, managing through ambiguity.” (Manager D1, Company B)
Initiated their own L&D program/assessment/competency plan	3 (A) + 1 L&D	“We’re already starting to see where people build things on their own which is great, but want to stop it before the separate philosophies take hold. We’re at that breaking point.” (L&D Staff, Company A)  “I basically stole what I used at my last company because it worked really well for my team there, and then I just built on it from... like customize it based on like our needs here. Yeah, so I built that out and I've actually shared it with a lot of teams here because that's not something that a lot of teams had or had done.” (Manager B1, Company A)
Self-directed, ad-hoc learning: e.g. reading, peers, conversation	8 (A) 3 (B)	“[Managers are] really craving situational guidance... and they're also craving learning... So there have been managers that have done book clubs, there have been managers, these are higher level managers, directors maybe and above, where they try to create learning environments within their teams.” (CPCO, Company A)
Used manager for mentorship and guidance	7 (A) 3 (B)	“In terms of direct, like, support or development that I've gotten, honestly, it's been from my boss. She has always put my personal and professional development even on, like, the top of her list. Even when she's super busy...” (Manager B1, Company A)  “My boss is really good at guiding us to being leaders, like basically being leadership training. He's amazing. But you know, he's obviously very busy...” (Manager A3, Company A)  “I think my learning was trial and error. And I think that's probably typically what happens with managers, and then you're lucky if you

		get a good manager mentor.” (Manager D2, Company B)
Adapt management styles to team’s different needs	6 (A) 3 (B)	“I’ve recently heard this term...called, sort of, toxic positivity; like when you just need to sort of coach someone and let them vent versus like ‘no, no but see that it's going to be good because blah, blah, blah...’ Once I heard that term and thought, ‘Wow, I wonder if this is how I’m perceived.’ I started to sort of shift my approach to curiosity and inquiry of more digging into why they might feel fear.” (Manager D3, Company B)
Apply learning from previous experience	7 (A) 5 (B)	<p>“[As a newer manager] I made a lot of mistakes. I dealt with things really poorly. Lost trust of my people, you know and and but I did other things really well. The one thing that I did really well that saved me was I just learned every time I made a mistake and I never made the same mistake twice.” (Manager B2, Company A)</p> <p>“I come from a very corporate background, so this is so different for me. But I think things were just more clear and I felt like I could be more organized outside or in previous companies and then coming here and like things are different... but you can't necessarily define what our data strategy is for the company here” (Manager A2, Company A)</p>
Frame growth, change, and uncertainty in a positive light.	6 (A) 2 (B)	“I was pretty excited about [the growth] because, you know, it was this new opportunity to kind of take on something new that was really going to help with the growth, and, like, what we're trying to achieve for the year. So, I was excited in that aspect.” (Manager A4, Company A)

## **Adaptive Communication Capabilities**

Of all adaptive behaviors, communication was mentioned by all interviewees (N = 17) and how growth impacted communication within teams and across the organization, which is described in more detail in Table 3. Interviewees referenced communication challenges and/or ways in which they, or the company, had adapted communication processes as they scaled. Five of eight managers at Company A and all five managers interviewed at Company B discussed engaging with their teams to have open, candid dialogue to help increase clarity around decisions. Even if managers did not have all the answers, they would try to be upfront in communicating with their teams.

At Company B, two managers mentioned how they frequently tried to let their team know what action they took on team members' concerns when they did not have immediate answers. Managing expectations and perceptions were cited at both organizations, particularly when it came to misinformation or hearing information through the grapevine as mentioned by Company B. Sensemaking became necessary at Company B, especially with the introduction of another company's strategic priorities. At Company A, sensemaking was important due to shifting priorities while adapting to market influences. Managers often had the responsibility to help their teams understand what was going on and minimize uncertainty.

Table 3

*Communication Capabilities*

Sub-themes	N=11 (A), N=6 (B)	Quotes
Reducing ambiguity and uncertainty, sense-making	7 (A) 6 (B)	<p>“I think [the greatest challenge is] trying to... trying to reduce ambiguity. I think because we're moving so quickly, a lot of ideas and concepts and plans aren't fully fleshed out and a lot of people have trouble dealing with that. So that's something that I'm trying to get better at, is trying to reduce ambiguity for people and hold people accountable to deadlines and things and making it as clear as possible like when we need to get things done by, and what our actual goals are and making sure that's as clear as possible, even if it's not that clear to me.” (Manager A2, Company A)</p> <p>“I listened and I answered questions...It was taking the time to explain to people why we were growing here and not there...All these questions, they got answered. And I think that helps everybody buy-in more and understand why, why the change was being made and how it was going to impact them.” (Manager D5, Company B)</p>
Manage/set perceptions and expectations	4 (A) 5 (B)	<p>“One of the things I learned early on in my career that's important is managing up... it's like setting expectations with your manager and making sure there's clear requirements there and voicing your opinion if you notice something that you think it's worthwhile of their attention.” (Manager A5, Company A)</p>
Communicating and decision making without all the info	5 (A) 4 (B)	<p>“In the absence of information, people are going to make their own conclusions...so keeping things as simple as we can because just the day to day throws all the complexity at us that we want to deal with.” (Manager D5, Company B)</p>

		<p>“The transition from being a small organization in two states to across the country, and not being the decision maker [was a challenge]. So, when your team asks you, well, what does that mean, and you don't know, or you don't necessarily know the ‘why’ behind it... [then it] became more [of a] directive of this is what we're doing. And it was very hard to support your team when you weren't a part of that conversation, or maybe you don't even agree with it.” (L&amp;D staff, Company B)</p>
<p>Scaling challenges with communication (e.g. cross-functionally, sheer growth impacts, vision changes)</p>	<p>7 (A) 3 (B)</p>	<p>“In the last month I got a new manager because my department kind of changed. So my new manager is kind of figuring out the expectations, and what she wants for me and what my expectations are. There's a lot of, like, Am I doing that? Am I doing enough? and I think it's just having constant communication.” (Manager A4, Company A)</p> <p>“So I think what becomes challenging is you hear more through the grapevine. It's individual contributors, like one of my team members works really closely with two very siloed departments and I've had a hard time engaging and networking with the leaders of that organization because they're very focused, heads down, own what do and look at their team. They don't like to reach out and help each other.” (Manager D4, Company B)</p>



## Company Culture

These adaptive behaviors were guided, in part by the company culture, which had an impact on managers' ways of working and the timing of the development implementation (see Table 4). For example, at Company A multiple managers mentioned the company value related to experimenting, which led to a certain level of autonomy and empowerment to try new projects and processes. Experimenting also meant taking risks for something that might not get implemented possibly due to shifting organizational priorities. Consequently, some employees felt like they continued to waste time, or - as one manager pointed out - not have enough momentum to move that experiment forward resulting in the project dying out.

Preserving the culture was a concern at both companies. At Company A, two of three L&D staff cited that the CEO and co-founder had this top of mind when establishing HR and L&D. At Company B, five of six interviewees referenced the company culture being impacted by the company's growth and/or due to the acquisitions, consequently shaping managers' interactions with each other and their teams. For example, three respondents referenced clothing as a noticeable indicator of company culture and consequently a fear of change. These cultural shifts and confusion contributed to the implementation of the second leadership program at Company B as noted earlier.

Table 4

*Cultural Impact*

Sub-themes	N=11 (A), N=6 (B)	Quotes
Impact/Influence from Cultural Values and/or norms, especially transparency and experimenting	10 (A)	<p>“On one hand, [the leadership is] super transparent, and that's wonderful... and so that level of sharing is great because people feel included and involved, but often it means that they're getting kind of brought into ideas very early when they're not fleshed out yet.” (Manager B2, Company A)</p> <p>“[I was] facilitating a group of leaders, as they unearth some of the myths that have been embedded in their culture that keeps them from moving forward.” (L&amp;D staff, Company A when talking about utilizing OD interventions to build their leadership program)</p> <p>“One of [the cultural values] is [being helpful] and trying to stress the importance of what to me [that] means. [Being helpful], doesn't mean doing everything that someone asks of you, but trying to understand the value that it brings and going after the true value of it.” (Manager B3, Company A)</p> <p>“Every female in HR had a tight black dress on, full face of make-up, nails done, pearls and heels. And I walk in there with, you know, skinny jeans and a blazer and I'm like... everyone is staring at me...So, I think that there is this cultural difference that a lot of people had to adapt to. And people made a lot of assumptions based on what they saw...” (L&amp;D staff, Company B)</p>
Preserving Culture	3 (A) 5 (B)	<p>“The fact that I am empowered to see our culture in the direction that I want it to go is really really cool.” (Manager B1, Company A)</p>

		<p>“It was trying to get the work done, but also retain a culture that was... that was... the linchpin was creating this cool cultural environment here where people could come in at 10am because they skied all morning. Ping Pong tables and organic Cafes and no dress code, no ties. You know, so it was cultivating that while trying to mature your leadership, and your teams and make sure we get the work done...So it was how do you lead through this kind of change? How do you, how do you keep a culture and engender a culture like that?” (Manager D1, Company B)</p> <p>“We lost our culture, but we also lost the ability to train managers as we got too big and started integrating with other companies. They started introducing more mentors. So, they started pairing them up with, you know, somebody who is totally unrelated to our business, but yet works for our umbrella company. And so, we lost our culture.” (Manager D4, Company B)</p>
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## Conditions Leading to L&D Implementation

Research Question 2 asked what the conditions were that led to the implementation of manager development. At Company A, the CPCO was hired in 2018, and they noted that there were other people-related priorities she had to first address, such as compliance and policy matters. Additionally, it was important to have CEO/founder buy-in and executive-level alignment to invest in further L&D beyond the externally-led program mentioned earlier. Before the internal leadership development program began, Company A offered informational sessions about various of-interest topics to employees, such as stock options or diversity and inclusion. The company was also in the process of creating a business 101 course to help employees better understand the business side of the company. New hires also have the opportunity to do “ride-alongs”, or shadow people in other teams to learn more about other departments. At the time these interviews took place (October 2019), Company A had just launched an e-learning platform with online content for on-demand learning.

In addition to these internal learning offerings, there are a handful of alternative opportunities for development that interviewees cited. Two managers cited departmental-level meetings as a way to know what people are learning and how to apply and adapt these learnings going forward. One manager noted former all-manager meetings from when the company was smaller as a useful tool to learn from one another in addition to having greater insights into the company. Three of eight managers mentioned the encouragement and support they receive to participate in conferences and seminars in their field to stay up to date on trends.

In the case of Company B, many of the reflections from interviewed managers who were still at the company (three of five) focused on the impact of the acquisitions, joining a much larger company, and losing the support of custom L&D programs. The L&D/OD department was actually cut, and development rested mainly with managers themselves. Table 5 outlines the various conditions the two companies experienced as a result of scaling and rapid growth which could be considered to have led to the impetus for needing L&D initiatives.

**Table 5**

***Conditions Leading to the Implementation of (or need for) L&D***

<b>Sub-Theme</b>	<b>N=11 (A), N=6 (B)</b>	<b>Quotes</b>
Changes to organizational structure: e.g. new management levels, acquisition (B), re-orgs, reporting structure changes	9 (A) 4 (B)	“We’re kind of outgrowing the current structure-- say you're going like three layers to four; that's when you know, middle management is really important, but maybe not being hired at the same pace as like individual contributors. Like oh we need to grow...but you also need people to manage those people, and those are, those are forgotten about.” (Manager A4, Company A)
New Managers: e.g. promoting managers too soon, hiring Individual Contributors at a faster rate than managers	7 (A) 3 (B)	<p>“You're kind of just thrown into it. It's like one day you're again, you're just doing your own thing and then, boom, now you're a manager. So, I guess I was promoted to be a manager. I didn't apply for it. But it was kind of alright. You're off. Like go make things happen, and that brings a lot of uncertainty.” (Manager A1, Company A)</p> <p>“It really is a combination of knowing who is not quite ready, but ready, versus who's not ready. And then for the... when you do put the not quite ready but ready person in... What that level of support looks like because you can't micromanage and you can't hold their hand through everything. You can't do everything for them because they're not going to learn, right, but you also can't just be like, good luck.” (Manager B2, Company A)</p>
Increased organizational needs for performance and accountability/lack of metrics	4 (A) 2 (B)	“It was not a steady consistent level of growth across the organization. It was like sound bars on an equalizer where, you know, certain folks were maturing quickly in leadership roles and others weren't. And so there was a lot of inconsistency around how that was managed and measured. And, again, I think that also gave rise to this leadership program.” (Manager D1, Company B)
Evidence/requests from managers needing more	8 (A) 3 (B)	“They're really craving, craving situational guidance, from particular and, you know,

<p>situational and development guidance, new managers not getting guidance</p>		<p>things and they're also craving learning, like, how can I be better?" (L&amp;D staff C2, Company A)</p> <p>"It's almost like on one hand, well, I haven't been trained and I don't know how to do this and it's really hard. But, you know, I don't have time for training... that was part of the challenge for me and the other role...you could identify training, but nobody really... nobody really wanted to take time to take training. But then they also wanted training." (Manager D2, Company B)</p>
<p>Need for more strategic capabilities</p>	<p>6(A) 2(B)</p>	<p>"So for the brand-new managers, or even going from supervisor to manager level, we've seen as well. Going from managing individual contributors to managing managers. And going from the more tactical day-to-day to the strategic. That's where the biggest opportunities I think we have are...I mean we still, we expect our supervisors to be pretty strategic..." (Manager B2, Company A)</p> <p>"There's managing up and managing down, but you also have to kind of manage your peers and then trying to make sure that you're aligned with the expectations of other departments and other teams and stuff. We kind of use that, sort of, thought process within our departments." (Manager A2, Company A)</p> <p>"I think managing uncertainty is one of the biggest things that I focus on in my role today... getting from the top down, that's where it really matters: is getting buy-in on what our goals and our objectives are going to be as an organization next year, and then locking them in so that we can commit to those things...Getting that vision locked in is probably the biggest piece of uncertainty that we have because we've just shifted so many different times in the last few years." (Manager B1, Company A)</p>

## Organization Structure

In both companies, the changes to the organization's structure led to uncertainty and ambiguity, leading to an impact on clarity of managers' roles and departments' responsibilities, as well as the approach for building out development programs.

Interviewees listed increasing headcount, increasing team size, departmental specialization, and increased departmental siloes as impacts to how work was done. In turn, this impacted the development and support they needed. Table 6 shares some of these impacts.

Some additional changes at Company A included recently creating the VP level and another middle manager level. There are now five manager levels, excluding the executive level: a team lead, supervisor, manager, director, and VP. The Technology department recently specialized into multiple different departments, including areas such as data analytics and IT. One manager pointed out that the customer service department went from 50 individuals to 550 in four years.

At Company B, growth, a likely acquisition, and resulting structural and cultural shifts played major roles in leading to the first development program. Four of six interviewees referenced structural challenges such as uncertainty in role changes, layoffs, re-organizations, and the matrix structure. As previously mentioned by the L&D director, integrating offices following the acquisitions, including organization structures and cultures, contributed to a primary focus in the second leadership development program of breaking down stereotypes, bringing people together from different offices.



**Table 6**

***Organization Structure***

<b>Sub-theme</b>	<b>N=11 (A), N=6 (B)</b>	<b>Quotes</b>
Level and role changes	<p><b>6 (A)</b> <b>3 (B)</b></p>	<p>“It’s our manager level right now, [which is two levels up]. And it's not unique again to [this company], it's like any fast-growing company. That's generally the very first place you will approach the challenge of leadership development. They have the greatest span of control in the organization if you look south on the org chart from managers.” (L&amp;D staff, Company A)</p> <p>“They're being asked to do things. Their roles were changing in ways... It's like that wasn't the job that I got hired for. My role is now completely something that when I accepted even two months ago. So they were confused...And I would say morale definitely dropped.” (Manager D3, Company B)</p> <p>“[The teams within the technology department] all have different goals, different team structures and things that they're trying to achieve, but within technology as a whole, we're trying to all do KPIs and roadmaps and everything... there's managing up and managing down, but you also have to kind of manage your peers and then trying to make sure that you're aligned with the expectations of other departments and other teams.” (Manager A2, Company A)</p>
Changing headcount, team size, team changes, overall structure	<p><b>5 (A)</b> <b>4 (B)</b></p>	<p>“It's definitely been one of our biggest challenges, I would say, is figuring out how to take all of the things that we're doing and scale them at this rapid rate of growth... Some things we're still doing that we used to do when we were smaller that we shouldn't be, and we're constantly trying to figure out how to make those right size changes.” (Manager B2, Company A)</p> <p>“[We are a] matrix organization where we don't have our control over everything that we do anymore. Because of these acquisitions and sometimes, you know, the work gets complex.” (D5, Company B)</p> <p>“A director at the original company level of 250 people is the same thing as a supervisor in a 40,000-person company. And the responsibilities and authority you have and decision-making power within that, change drastically.” (L&amp;D staff, Company B)</p>

## **Relationships and Networking**

Nine of 11 respondents at Company A and all six respondents at Company B referenced the importance of relationships, whether in the context of learning from others, building inclusion and relationships to network across the organization, and/or as a way to cope with VUCA. Seven of eight managers at Company A cited their relationship with their own manager as an important source of learning and/or support to some degree. Three of those specifically mentioned that they feel lucky their own managers give as much time as they do (despite busy schedules) to support and guide them.

Growth and office expansions made it harder to have consistent and effective information sharing and collaboration across teams, consequently impacting relationships. One manager at Company A noted that even having people on different floors was contributing to greater difficulty in interacting with one another and that the department was big enough now that not everyone knew each other.

In both companies, managers cited they felt like the company was investing in them by including them in these development programs. This sentiment of inclusion by being invited to the development programs seemed particularly strong after the rounds of acquisitions at Company B. Four respondents at Company B commented on the political nature of becoming a manager. Building networks and alliances was important to help with the politics of being a manager and in the aftermath of the acquisitions as cited by all six interviewees at Company B. At Company A, several managers also cited the sense of support and investment they felt when either being encouraged to attend external conferences or seminars, or getting to participate in the external vendor program held at

the company early in their tenure at the company. Table 7 shares some of the interviewees' quotes around these topics.

**Table 7**

***Relationships & Networking Impacts***

Sub-themes	N=11 (A), N=6 (B)	Quotes
Manager and/or Peer learning and networks	<b>5 (A)</b>	<p>“I have a lot of good peers that I can lean on, and just kind of asked for advice. Sometimes going to your own manager is more difficult with uncertainty to bring that up.” (Manager A1, Company A)</p> <p>“I like peer knowledge sharing a lot. And I feel like that's actually been the most... that's what I've gotten the most out of definitely in terms of learning.” (Manager B2, Company A)</p>
Building networks and alliances, a sense of inclusion.   Benefit of L&D programs for helping do this	<b>6 (B)</b>	<p>“Being aligned with the right people, building good strong alliances, some of its luck; some of it's being a part of the business that maybe is more insulated from change.... it's all of those things.” (Manager D1, Company B)</p> <p>“It felt like an investment in me, which made me feel more proud to be part of the organization and very fortunate to be part of the program.” (Manager D2, Company B)</p> <p>“I felt like [the leadership program] started making us feel like a part of the greater organization...So I still identified myself as my original company employee, even though it might have not been and there were other parent company owned companies inside of that office that I hadn't met yet...And so it was like, wow, this is, this is awesome. A feeling of appreciation and connection was like very welcome.” (Manager D3, Company B)</p>

## **Impact from Acquisitions: Company B**

The acquisitions at Company B created a variety of sources of ambiguity and uncertainty for managers and their teams, which impacted their work and development needs as described in Table 8. One manager perceived that after the second acquisition, the parent company wanted to implement their own processes and models regardless of whether it would work for the acquired company. Three of five managers cited the lack of connection with people from other departments and the need for better relationships or alliances after the acquisitions, which the leadership programs helped with. Further, as the former L&D/OD staff member noted, the leadership development program and OD work gave managers a common language to connect what they were experiencing - it gave them a way to process together and make sense of what was going on in the organization.

At the time of the interviews, the internal formal learning offerings under the parent company have been with outside vendors as more off-the-shelf type training, according to two managers. All interviewees cited that the L&D/OD department had been cut. Consequently, three of five managers (all of those still working at the company) commented on how few opportunities there are for front-line and middle managers today, how self-driven development is, and how much responsibility rests on managers to develop their team members. One manager also cited the expectation of needing to already know everything, that support and guidance is limited.

**Table 8**

***Impact from Acquisitions***

Sub-theme	N=6	Quotes
Structural (e.g. Role and title changes, Restructuring, Layoffs)	4	<p>“Some are very uncertain about if their job is safe or what team members are going to get cut and whatnot. So, in trying to help them when I don't have the clear answer or clear vision is very unnerving for everybody...I tell them, you know, I could win the lottery tomorrow... Like I used to say, I could get hit by a bus...” (Manager D4, Company B)</p> <p>“We worked in a... matrix organization where we don't have our control over everything that we do anymore. Because of these acquisitions and sometimes, you know, the work gets complex.” (Manager D5, Company B)</p>
Communication: transparency; not having all the answers	6	<p>“A lot of the departments have become a lot more siloed and there is a lot more misunderstanding of what each other does as a team...So I think what becomes challenging is you hear more through the grapevine.” (Manager D4, Company B)</p> <p>“It's just as hard for managers. They want the answers, but they're not getting them either. And it's really, really hard to be... to keep a face on that is supportive and models professionalism.” (Manager D2, Company B)</p>
Politics: managing perceptions, building alliances, cultural differences	5	<p>“There always seems to be a disconnect between... you can't just say, 'oh this is what I think they need' and then do it, and not really go the other way around. Like you can't meet expectations if you don't know what they are.” (Manager D2, Company B)</p> <p>“You have less control, right, and so now you're trying to implement a strategic goal of a larger organization and the further away that the people that are making these strategic visions are, you know, the more layers there are, the more difficult it is to implement.” (Manager D2, Company B)</p>

<p>Loss of control/authority; distance from decision making</p>	<p>4</p>	<p>“It was really challenging... just kind of trying to... not just toe the line, but really get invested in all the changes when I got further and further from the point of decision making... I didn't really have a seat at the table. There was no stakeholder inclusion, like in terms of what &amp; why don't we ask the managers in [a non-HQ] office what they think, how this might be different for them.” (Manager D3, Company B)</p> <p>“And as the company grew and as we went into different locations like physical buildings, a lot of that growth and culture in what is expected of you as a manager started shifting slowly but surely...” (Manager D4, Company B)</p> <p>“A director at the original company level of 250 people is the same thing as a supervisor in a 40,000-person company. And the responsibilities and authority you have and decision-making power within that, change drastically...Some people wanted the bigger title...” (L&amp;D staff, Company B)</p>
<p>Direct L&amp;D Impacts: Became managers' responsibility; Changes to learning opportunities; Department was cut</p>	<p>3 3 5</p>	<p>“Because now I'm a director and I have several managers and the burden of training them, and giving new managers those tools, is all on me. It's not... I can't lean on anybody else because we don't have a training department anymore.” (Manager D4, Company B)</p> <p>“I think this is the big difference between what the parent company had when we came in and what we do. We don't buy content off the shelves. So, the parent company went to an organization and said can we buy your leadership development program. So they had scripts of what to say...I think the beauty of, you know, internal customized, fully customized leadership development is you are really there for the people and you're focusing on where the energy currently is.” (L&amp;D staff, Company B)</p>

## Summary of Findings

This chapter presented the findings of the qualitative research conducted at two high-tech, east coast companies. The research seeks to understand how younger companies report the ways in which they develop their managers to cope with a rapid pace of change, uncertainty, and ambiguity. The research found that formal learning programs were limited in scope in earlier years. Company A was just preparing to launch their first internally led development program to take place several months after these interviews took place. Company B was at a different stage, having gone through two acquisitions and some interviewees no longer working at the organization.

There were several emergent themes illustrating the ways in which managers coped with VUCA and supported their teams in a rapidly growing environment. Those included a variety of adaptive behaviors, an emphasis on cultural values and/or cultural preservation during growth, and employing adaptive communication strategies. The use and/or benefit of networks and relationships aligned with both research questions: they provided a way for managers to learn informally, cope with VUCA, and the need to form better connections across the organization.

The second research question asked what possible conditions led to the impetus for implementation of development initiatives. At Company A, some of the conditions leading to the manager development initiative included structural changes, promoting new managers too soon, the need for more situational guidance, consistent performance metrics, and the need for more strategic skills. At Company B, sheer growth, preparing for the first acquisition, strategic capabilities, and building connections and breaking down assumptions were primary reasons leading to the development initiatives. Company

B also had the unique finding of how the acquisitions impacted managers' development and their role as a manager.

Chapter 5 discusses the conclusions and interpretations of these themes and will discuss the possible implications. Chapter 5 also discusses the implications of the study's findings for other younger, growing organizations.



## Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this thesis was to examine manager development in younger, growing organizations, particularly the ways in which learning and development could help managers cope with a rapid pace of change, uncertainty, and ambiguity. This chapter presents the discussion and conclusions of the findings and the literature review.

### Discussion

Based on the literature review, interviews, and anecdotal conversations conducted for this study, there is limited research or guidelines to suggest when is the right time to begin manager development initiatives in a younger, growing organization. The conditions are contextual to the individual company and its internal and external environments. At the companies interviewed in this study, the appropriate timing of such initiatives seemed to be a matter of individual perspective. On the one hand, the development initiatives came at the “right” time, or just-in-time. On the other hand, some thought they probably could/should have come sooner to get ahead of some critical development needs, such as managers being promoted too soon.

As discussed in Chapter 1, younger companies face a number of scaling challenges. Some of aforementioned challenges that occurred at the interviewed companies include role differentiation and department specialization, communication challenges across departments, different value perceptions of HR and L&D, and concerns about preserving and scaling company culture. There are a number of considerations and benefits to early implementation of development initiatives based on the findings from this research. These include, but are not limited to, employee retention, inclusion,

fostering networks and collaboration, and getting in front of managerial challenges to help the company and its people operate at optimal performance levels.

***Building blocks to L&D and impact from growth.*** There is no linear path to implementing manager development programs at a growing organization. Due to growth and/or acquisition, both companies' structures changed frequently; roles and responsibilities became less clear and restructuring occurred regularly. Processes changed or needed to be built out often. Cross-functional communication and awareness became more difficult or, in the case of Company B, had to integrate following acquisitions. The need for consistent performance metrics and accountability became bigger issues as the companies grew. Specific People/HR issues such as retention, promoting managers too soon, transitioning a lot of individual contributors to managers, and the greater need for building connections and networks all appeared due to high growth and change.

Both companies appeared to take ad hoc approaches to development prior to the formal initiatives, such as reading, utilizing peers, managers, and mentors for guidance. It was equally important at both companies to have founder-level buy-in and support for developing learning initiatives, which influenced whether a learning culture was implemented and how. One area lacking in development as cited by interviewees at both companies was the tendency to promote individual contributors to managers before being ready and then not having formal support in place to guide them. In the absence of a formalized internally led development program, the offerings and encouragement to look outside the organization for development opportunities, as was the case at Company A, served as a stepping stone to a more robust L&D strategy.

**Company culture.** Company culture is an important aspect an organization must consider when implementing a people development strategy. As discussed in Chapter 1, scaling culture is a primary challenge and concern in growing companies (Mhanna, 2018). The more people there are, the less control there is over preserving that culture (Kittaneh, 2018). Interviewees at both companies talked about the desire to preserve the culture while growing and post-acquisition in the case of Company B.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, cultural values can act as *attractors*. These are patterns of behavior giving order to the disorder managers and employees experience by guiding behavior, decision making, and management philosophy. At Company A, there is enough instability through rapid growth and change to create simultaneous disorder and innovation through the autonomy managers have to get work done as they need to while still experiencing successful growth. This is the ‘edge of chaos’ as discussed in the complexity theory literature (Burnes, 2005; Stacey et al., 2000). Many managers talked about trying to plan for the future, set goals and plans for the upcoming year, but that it was also difficult to predict the future needs. Decisions often had to be made without having all of the necessary information or 100% certainty. In the case of Company A, the cultural values had essentially been serving as a template on how to be a manager and how to make decisions in the face of uncertainty or ambiguity. The culture has a strong and overall positive presence with most managers mentioning the values in their interviews.

Company A is also at a stage where the cultural values may start to cause some friction with processes, or not be interpreted exactly the same way given how many people are in the organization. As discussed in Chapter 2, managers must often deal with

paradoxical demands or situations (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003; Mowles, 2015; Pederezini, 2016). For example, at Company A, the value of experimenting led to autonomy and empowerment, but it also meant some employees felt like time was easily wasted on projects that would go nowhere. The cultural value of transparency paradoxically create ambiguity and, at the same time, managers use it to cope with uncertainty through motivation and inclusion. On the one hand, employees welcome the transparency of leadership's big ideas and it makes employees feel included and involved in the excitement of the company growing. On the other hand, it can give the perception that leadership does not always fully flesh out the big ideas, or priorities shift too often, which can lead to uncertainty and misinterpretations about what is happening with the company's direction. All managers who cited the ambiguity from so much transparency indicated they would prefer more transparency over less. Thus, the ambiguity was co-created and shaped by members of the organization in their actions of upholding the value of transparency at the same time their behaviors and actions are being shaped by the uncertainty and ambiguity. These circumstances align with Stacey et al.'s (2000) Complex Responsive Processes emphasizing the relational interactions between employees and co-creation of the internal environment conditions.

Considering these aspects of culture and applying a complexity theory lens, a company might ask itself the following questions as it gets ready to implement development initiatives: (1) How do culture and values impact processes, procedures, and performance and how can we address those in development initiatives? (2) What friction and/or behaviors does our culture create in the work and interactions of our employees that requires further dialogue and/or assessment? (3) How does the company want to

grow and how does (or could) the culture change as it grows? and (4) How can learning and development initiatives align with, support, and help preserve the culture?

*Adaptive behaviors.* In the rapidly growing, complex environments of these two companies, dynamics emerged which could not be controlled, let alone predicted as suggested by complexity theory. Even with best laid plans, it could be difficult to follow that plan or strategy - whether long or short-term in the day-to-day. In general, managers today have to manage up, down, and across the organization - it is an increasingly complex role (Axon et al., 2018). Gosling and Mintzberg (2003) assert that managers face increasingly contradictory, or paradoxical, responsibilities, which requires a nimble, dynamic approach to managing. These facets manifested in the findings at both companies. Among many skills and capabilities, managers discussed the need to translate strategy to execution, manage change, shield their team from uncertainty, model behavior (even when they did not necessarily agree), and help their teams make sense of ambiguity and complexity.

A particularly important adaptive behavior and mindset that came up in the interviews and as it connects back to the literature review, is a strategic mindset capability. Strategic influence and know-how were mentioned frequently in the literature (Dalal & Akdere, 2018; Doyle, 2000; Huy & Zott, 2018; Luoma, 2006). In Company A, this ability was especially highlighted once becoming a manager, even at the lowest level. A manager at Company A needs to be able to translate the company's vision into execution of that strategy. That includes communicating back up to senior levels about the day-to-day operations and the impacts on their work. Thinking strategically can be difficult if the vision itself is uncertain. At Company B, this strategic mindset capability

was further influenced by the acquisitions and the rapid changes to adapt to the parent company's way of doing things. Multiple managers at Company B cited the importance of modeling behavior and keeping their teams motivated in the face of so much change, even if they did not agree with the change themselves.

Another adaptive capability that younger organizations should consider addressing early on is the transition and mindset shift from individual contributor to manager. Hill (2004) points out that this shift is significant in that it shapes the individual's future leadership style and philosophy and also requires an identity shift as an employee. A manager goes from being responsible for themselves and their own actions to being responsible for a group of people. Both companies cited many managers being promoted before possibly being ready and/or not receiving guidance. One of a manager's fundamental roles is managing relationships and navigating complex interpersonal dynamics in his or her team, as well as across the organization. Further, under the premise of Complex Responsive Processes, employees cannot readily predict their responses to other people's actions and, further, know their intentions (Mowles, 2015). This uncertainty and complexity in human behavior can make managing and coaching people a challenging endeavor. Yet, as a Harvard Business Publishing study cites, coaching and developing talent as a critical skill for managers (Axon et al., 2018). Keene (2000) also suggests that communication and helping groups navigate conflict are important manager skills in complex environments.

At both companies, the managers engaged in sensemaking on a daily basis as well. They set expectations for their team and would explain, or rationalize, the frequent changes that occurred. This helped them manage and/or explore potentially strong

emotions in their teams in the face of VUCA. Coming together in a learning program can help the managers make further sense of what they are experiencing in comparison to their expectations, and how to improve their management and/or leadership capabilities. Reflection and analytical thinking skills can aid in the development of sense-making abilities, particularly when managers do not have all the information. These skills relate to Gosling and Mintzberg's (2003) Analytic and Reflective mindsets as discussed in Chapter 2. Mowles (2015) also discussed the importance of reflection to learn and make sense of what is happening in an organization. These mindsets can help managers learn more effectively in rapidly growing and dynamic environments. Sensemaking through dialogue and action learning experiments were components of the leadership programs at Company B and was being built into Company A's program.

**Organization structure.** As departments grew, became more specialized, and management levels expanded, it became evident that managers needed and wanted more role and responsibility clarity at Company A. These structural changes led to managers wanting more consistent performance metrics and/or to better understand definitions of success as cited in the findings. Multiple managers noted they could not be prepared for every single scenario with their teams, but more guidance could better assist with addressing accountability and understanding what it takes to advance in the organization. Another major outcome of the exponential growth is that people were promoted into a managing role often before they are ready. All 17 interviewees at both companies noted this.

At Company B, the predominant structural impact on managers' need for guidance and development came from restructuring and layoffs with the acquisitions as

discussed in Chapter 4. This tilted the level of order towards more instability, perhaps causing a greater sense of chaos and uncertainty at Company B. The acquisitions also caused the attractor patterns (in the form of cultural values and practices) to be disrupted as cultural norms became threatened. The leadership program attempted to correct this disequilibrium by addressing cultural assumptions managers from across the companies may have been making. This aligns with Luoma's (2006) assertion of manager development as a dynamic system within organizational systems, causing human interactions and environmental contexts to be relevant when designing manager development initiatives.

***Relationships and networking.*** Given the increasing challenges of cross-functional communication, awareness, and collaboration in growing organizations, development programs have the potential to help build networks that could increase both formal and informal lines of communication across departments. Further, such programs provide the opportunity to increase a sense of inclusion and feeling valued in the organization by investing in a company's employees as mentioned in Chapter 4.

Chapter 2 discussed how learning today is more participant-focused and is more of a social experience. People learn from and with others, such as with peers or superiors (Becker & Bish, 2017; Hill, 2004). The findings showed that managers at both companies referenced the importance and/or greater impact learning from and with others had on their development experience - whether that was through a manager, mentor, or from peers.

Antonacopoulou and Chiva (2007) addressed learning from a complexity theory lens citing learning as a complex social process. They emphasized the interactions



amongst learners, as well as the influences from complex political and cultural organizational influences. Culture influenced development implementation at both companies. Managers at Company B cited cultural and political influences following the acquisitions. The L&D/OD team at Company B specifically aligned their development program to address these cultural and political challenges. This may suggest for other growing companies that when designing development programs, special attention could be paid to employee interactions and building relationship impacts from cultural and/or political dynamics.

### **Limitations**

This study examined only two companies and interviewed 17 individuals, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. Further, interviews were the sole method of data collection which Creswell (2014) indicates will provide indirect information filtered through the interviewees' perspectives and the researcher's presence may bias interviewees' responses. Additionally, I did not conduct reliability testing by intercoder agreement (Creswell 2014). The primary form of reliability used was triangulation of the managers' perspectives compared to those of the L&D staff members interviewed.

### **Future Research**

Further research should be considered in the area of this study given the limited research in learning and development in specifically younger, growing organizations. For example, a greater sample size of managers could be surveyed, as well as their direct reports to triangulate the self-reported and perceived development needs of managers. Additionally, pre- and post-assessments could be given to managers taking development programs. Given younger companies often promote new managers into the role without

formal support, a study could be conducted on whether early development initiatives with new managers in young organizations contributes to increased success and performance on a variety of dimensions.

## **Conclusion**

Given the significant shifts taking place intra- and interpersonally for managers, as well as externally through the complex environments within and outside the organizations, there could be many benefits to bringing in an L&D initiative early to a growing organization. A major challenge in younger companies is the speed at which things change and the amount of work there is to be done. There may be a perception that there is no time to stop and do a development program. Taking time to learn may seem impossible or a luxury (Bersin & Zao-Sanders, 2018). Motivation to learn and encouragement to do so from senior leadership is important to have impact and buy-in. As Mintzberg (2004) points out, a goal of development should be to “Use work, [not] make work.” (p. 28). Thus, knowing how to reflect and process situations more quickly in real-time could aid managers in improving their teams’ performance and being able to cope with VUCA.

Based on the findings from these interviews, there are certain considerations for development initiatives and programs that could lead to greater effectiveness in younger, growing companies. At both companies, managers cited the impact of being part of a cohort to engage in conversation, coaching, and learning from others. To capture the benefit of building relationships and networks through L&D programs, the learning design can directly incorporate these social aspects through group and peer learning. Having group discussions to learn about best practices, analyze scenarios, using peers as

mentors, and/or having coaching exercises were all mentioned as effective techniques for learning. Further, as cited at both companies, access to (and mentorship from) a direct supervisor serves as a valuable key source of learning. Tying in the development program learnings to regular 1:1 meetings and/or performance reviews, or involving managers in the participants' reflection work could help align the learning more directly to business objectives and increase the impact of learning. Experiential and interactive learning can augment and support the informal learning and on-the-job learning that takes place organically.

As interviewees cited, there is no substitution for direct experience and that takes time. Further, managers cannot be prepared for every scenario that comes at them. Early development initiatives thus have the opportunity to speed up on-the-job learning by helping managers learn faster and more effectively. This is particularly salient given that managerial learning, roles, and responsibilities are continuously evolving - especially in these younger organizations. As Becker and Bish (2017) suggest, informal and formal learning opportunities should take place in parallel. Development and learning initiatives at younger organizations should be experiential, applied, interactive, and include learning with others whether through peers, mentoring, and/or some form of coaching. They could include sensemaking exercises in reflection, dialogue, and metacognition. Lastly, by having a better understanding of Self, interpersonal dynamics, and human nature, managers can better cope with VUCA and help their teams to do so as well.

### **Recommendations to OD and L&D Practitioners**

In terms of considering the timing of and approach implementing development initiative, it would appear that Galbraith's (2003) Star Model offers a useful framework

to consider. When there are significant changes or shifts in prominent areas of the organization, the researcher would suggest that some form of internally-led, customized development could be needed or useful. Learning and Development initiatives cannot be implemented in isolation; they are an important branch of Organization Development if viewed as more than simply “training” and skill building. When built intentionally, the programs should be tied to the strategic capabilities needed in the organization to be prepared for continued growth. Given the unpredictability and complex dynamics in rapidly growing companies, manager development initiatives have the potential to help organizations proactively prepare their managers to cope with the challenges and opportunities of these environments.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

## Questions for Managers

### Introduction

*Thank you for participating in this study. As I mentioned in my email, I am an MSOD student at Pepperdine School of Business. My research is on how managers cope with challenges and demands of a quickly growing, complex environment and how learning interventions are used to address these needs. I would like to audio record this interview so I can fully capture your experiences. If you prefer I do not, please let me know. No recordings or direct responses will be given back to your organization. I'll only be sharing an executive summary of aggregate responses. While I don't intend these questions to cause any discomfort, if you prefer not to answer something, that is ok and let me know. Let's get started with some quick baseline questions.*

### Baseline - these questions to be asked at the start of the interview

1. How long have you been at your company?
2. Is this your first managerial role? If not, how long have you been a manager?
3. How long have you been in this particular role?
4. What age range do you fit into?
  1. 21-25
  2. 26-30
  3. 31-35
  4. 36-40
  5. 41-45
  6. 46-50
  7. Over 50

### Growth and Change

*Change may be on a smaller scale (e.g. a process change or high employee turnover) or a larger scale (e.g. re-structuring the org or a product pivot).*

1. Briefly talk about growth and change in your organization
2. From a managerial perspective, what do you consider to be the biggest challenge or demand in your organization that you attribute to scaling/growing quickly?
  - a. How does this impact how you manage and/or support your team?
3. Do you help your team members practice being flexible to cope with growth in the organization? If so, how? Provide a specific example.

### Uncertainty

*Uncertainty in this context means the degree of predictability or ability to understand what is happening.*

1. How do you handle uncertainty in your organization? (provide an example)

- a. How did you learn how to do this as a manager? And/or is there more you want to learn in handling uncertain situations?

### **Ambiguity**

*In this context, ambiguity means a lack of clarity about how to interpret something. It may mean something is incomplete or contradictory. Similar to uncertainty, you might not have all the information you need to make a decision.*

1. Describe the level of ambiguity in this organization (low, medium, or high and how so?).

Provide an example.

2. As a manager, how do you handle ambiguous situations or decisions for yourself and your team?

### **Learning**

1. What, if any, type of training/education/development have you received at your current organization and on what topics (*can provide the following examples, also answer for previous organizations*)

- a. Classroom-based short courses
- b. Cohort-based program
- c. E-learning
- d. 1:1 Coaching
- e. Group coaching with a professional coach
- f. 360 review process
- g. Self-rated assessments
- h. Mentoring
- i. Peer mentoring groups
- j. Manual or Handbook
- k. Other
- l. None of the above

2. What was useful, if at all, about any of the development opportunities in which you have participated (if applicable)?

3. To what extent do you feel you have received enough training to function successfully as a manager? (*A great extent, a certain extent, neutral, minimally, not at all; whether at this organization or a previous one*)

4. If you were/are part of a more formalized development program within your current organization, did it come at the right time that was useful for you (e.g. helped you get a promotion, helped you feel prepared to make the transition from

individual contributor to manager, etc.)? If not, when would it have been better and why?

5. If you participated in a development opportunity outside of your organization, please explain.
6. What, if at all, has prevented you from seeking out or participating in development opportunities?
7. What skills, behaviors, and/or competencies do you still want to learn and/or would help you as a manager in your current organization? Why & example.
8. Please share anything this interview did not ask.

### Questions for HR/L&D staff

*I am an MSOD student at Pepperdine School of Business. My research is on how managers cope with challenges and demands of a quickly growing, complex environment and how learning interventions are used to address these needs. I would like to audio record this interview so I can fully capture your experiences. If you prefer I do not, please let me know. No recordings or direct responses will be given back to your organization. I'll only be sharing an executive summary of aggregate responses. While I don't intend these questions to cause any discomfort, if you prefer not to answer something, that is ok and let me know. Let's get started with some quick baseline questions.*

1. Describe the state of change and growth at your organization.
  - a. (For the CPO at Company A) What other People aspects at the organization are relevant to a growing organization that have been important to address? Does this impact the timing of manager development?
2. What would you say are the greatest managerial challenges related to the company growing?
3. How does your organization currently help its managers learn to cope with change, uncertainty and/or ambiguity and support their teams through these challenges?
4. What forms of development initiatives do you currently have for your front-line to mid-level managers (choose all that apply)
  - a. Classroom learning
  - b. Cohort-based program
  - c. 1:1 Coaching
  - d. Group coaching with a professional coach
  - e. 360 feedback assessment

- f. Self-rated assessment
  - g. Online learning
  - h. Mentoring
  - i. Peer mentoring and/or coaching
  - j. Other
5. Is there a difference for brand new managers?
  6. When and why did you begin building out a development strategy for your front-line and mid-level managers? What were you trying to solve for?
    - a. If you haven't yet started, why not?
  7. Looking back, are these efforts/initiatives starting at the right time? Why or why not?
  8. If applicable, what initiatives/support for managers have been most successful and why?
  9. What, if at all, do you wish you could be doing in terms of development opportunities for your front-line and mid-level managers right now that you aren't?
    - a. What have been the obstacles to doing this?
  10. Please share anything relevant that was not asked in this interview.