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# Living on Both Sides of the Fence: A Phenomenological Study of Human Resource Development Professionals as Downsizing Survivors and Strategic Human Resource Development Facilitators

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

LIVING ON BOTH SIDES OF THE FENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF  
HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS AS DOWNSIZING  
SURVIVORS AND STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT  
FACILITATORS

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

ADULT EDUCATION AND HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

by

Claire Kostopulos Nackoney

2012

To: Dean Delia C. Garcia  
College of Education

This dissertation, written by Claire Kostopulos Nackoney and titled Living on Both Sides of the Fence: A Phenomenological Study of Human Resource Development Professionals as Downsizing Survivors and Strategic Human Resource Development Facilitators, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

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Marc Weinstein

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Tonette S. Rocco, Major Professor

Date of Defense: November 7, 2012

The dissertation of Claire Kostopulos Nackoney is approved.

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Dean Delia C. Garcia  
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Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi  
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2012

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Glenn Nackoney, who experienced the highs and lows of this very long journey with me, one that challenged both of us in so many ways. Thank you for having faith in my ability to finish this journey that started in 2003. I know it hasn't been easy and that we cannot recapture the time sacrificed so I could pursue and achieve this goal. Know that I love you more than words can say and am so looking forward to making up for lost time and doing all those things that we still want to do together as we start a new chapter in our lives.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my deceased parents. A. Harry and Helene Kostopulos, who I know are proudly smiling down on me from heaven. Mom and Dad, you have been physically gone for more than half my life but have been with me in spirit every day of my life. Thanks for encouraging me to always aim high. Not a day goes by that I do not think of you. I wish you could have been here physically to enjoy this moment with me. I will always love you.

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Most importantly, thank you to my participants who illuminated this phenomenon through their vivid recollections of the experience of being an agent-survivor in the context of downsizing. Perhaps organizations will learn from your experiences about how to facilitate downsizing justly and humanely.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

LIVING ON BOTH SIDES OF THE FENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF  
HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS AS DOWNSIZING  
SURVIVORS AND STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT  
FACILITATORS

by

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Florida International University, 2012

Miami, Florida

Professor Tonette S. Rocco, Major Professor

This phenomenological study explored how HR professionals who identified themselves as facilitators of strategic HRD (SHRD) perceived the experience of being an organizational agent-downsizing survivor. Criterion and snowball sampling were used to recruit 15 participants for this study. A semi-structured interview guide was used to interview participants. Creswell's (2007) simplified version of Moustakas's (1994) Modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data was used to analyze the data. Four main themes and corresponding sub-themes emerged from an inductive data analysis. The four main themes were a) the emotionality of downsizing, b) feeling responsible, c) choice and control, and d) possibilities for growth.

Participants perceived downsizing as an emotional organizational change event that required them to manage their own emotions while helping others do the same. They performed their roles within an organizational atmosphere that was perceived as chaotic

and filled with apprehension, shock, and a sense of ongoing loss, sadness and grieving. They sometimes experienced guilt and doubt and felt deceptive for having to keep secrets from others when planning for downsizing. Participants felt a strong sense of responsibility to protect employees emotionally, balance employee and organizational interests, and try to ensure the best outcomes for both. Often being there for others meant that they put on their games faces and took care of themselves last. Participants spoke of the importance of choosing one's attitude, being proactive rather than reactive, and finding ways to regain control in the midst of organizational crisis. They also perceived that although downsizing was emotionally difficult to go through that it provided possibilities for self, employee, and organizational growth.



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## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ASTD	American Society for Training and Development
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
EVP	Executive Vice President
HR	Human Resources
HRD	Human Resource Development
ISPI	International Society for Performance Improvement
OC	Organizational Change
OD	Organizational Development
ODN	Organizational Development Network
OL	Organizational Learning
OP	Organizational Performance
P & L	Profit and Loss
POS	Perceived Organizational Support
RBV	Resource-Based View
RIF	Reduction-in-Force
SCA	Sustainable Competitive Advantage
SHRD	Strategic Human Resource Development
SVP	Senior Vice President
VP	Vice President

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how human resource development (HRD) professionals perceived the experience of surviving downsizing and facilitating strategic human resource development (SHRD) before, during, and/or after downsizing. The chapter begins with the background to the study followed by the problem statement, purpose statement, research questions, conceptual framework, significance of the study, delimitations, definition of terms, and list of acronyms used in the study. Some content from this chapter was previously published in the 2006 conference proceedings of the Academy of Human Resource Development. See Nackoney (2006) in References.

#### **Background to the Study**

Downsizing, rightsizing, reductions-in-force, layoffs--although subtle distinctions may exist among these terms, they are all associated with the same thing--employees' losing their jobs. Each year, millions of employees in the United States lose their jobs involuntarily (Guthrie & Datta, 2008). Over the past 20 years, downsizing, "the planned elimination of positions or jobs" (Cascio, 1993, p. 95), has become a commonplace business practice both domestically and globally to boost profits, curb operational expenses, and help organizations survive (Budros, 2002; Gandolfi, 2008a; Guthrie & Data, 2008; Mirabal & DeYoung, 2005; White & Behr, 2007). During economic downturns, downsizing is used to boost lagging revenues and profits. In economic upturns, it is used to enhance revenues and profits (Cameron, 1994; Palliam & Shalhoub, 2002; Shook, 2009).

Downsizing typically occurs after implementation of other strategic business practices such as organizational restructuring, reengineering, mergers, acquisitions, divestitures, and outsourcing. Organizational restructuring is the internal streamlining and reorganizing of departments, divisions, and business units due to changes in business strategy (Tracey, 2004). Reengineering is the process of radically changing a business process to improve efficiency (Tracey, 2004), such as changing a people-driven process to an automated process. A merger results when one company acquires another (Tracey, 2004), while a divestiture results when a company terminates a business relationship (Tracey, 2004), for instance, selling off pieces of the business. Following a merger, the acquiring company might reduce head count by eliminating or streamlining similar functions. Outsourcing is the practice of contracting out parts of the business (Tracey, 2004); an example would be when an organization contracts out its training function. When business services are relocated overseas, the practice is referred to as off-shoring (Tracey, 2004).

Although these strategic practices may have an immediate positive effect on the bottom line, downsizing's long-term financial results have been less than outstanding (Cascio, 1993; Mishra, Spreitzer, & Mishra, 1998; Orpen, 1997; Palliam & Shalhoub, 2002). Palliam and Shalhoub (2002) conducted an empirical study whose sample consisted of 185 large publicly-held U.S.-based corporations that had publicly announced intentions to downsize between 1990 and 1992 and subsequently conducted the layoffs. The purpose of that study was to test the rationale of using downsizing as a cost reduction strategy to improve long-term profitability. The authors created a downsizing index for each company and calculated correlations between the company's downsizing index and

its return on investment between 1992 and 2001. Results indicated that in the long-term, using downsizing as a cost reduction strategy did not result in long-run productivity gains nor did it significantly boost shareholder value.

When eliminating jobs becomes a strategic tool to regulate the bottom line, human lives can be affected adversely for those remaining (i.e., the survivors) and for those leaving (i.e., the victims). Downsizing can result in decreased worker performance, productivity, or commitment over the long-term (Cascio, 1993; Mirabal & DeYoung, 2005). This decline has been attributed to downsizing's emotional and psychological effects on the survivors. These effects are referred to as survivor sickness or survivor syndrome (Appelbaum & Donia, 2000, 2001; Appelbaum, Delage, Labib, & Gault, 1997; Mirabal & DeYoung, 2005; Noer, 1993).

Like a hurricane leaving a path of destruction, downsizing has created a group of shell-shocked employees working in a constant state of heightened alert, wondering when it will be their turn to be let go. Survivors experience a range of emotions including fear, frustration (Mirabal & DeYoung, 2005), depression, fatigue, anxiety (Appelbaum et al., 1997; Noer, 1993), mistrust (Ambrose, 1997; Appelbaum et al., 1997; Mirabal & DeYoung, 2005; Noer, 1993), anger (Ambrose, 1997; Mirabal & DeYoung, 2005), guilt (Ambrose, 1997; Noer, 1993), skepticism, hopelessness, disillusionment, vulnerability, and grief (Ambrose, 1997). Additionally, they may be less motivated, engage in reduced risk-taking, be left with a sense of unfairness, and perceive that the organization has betrayed them (Appelbaum, et al., 1997; Noer, 1993). Yet, organizations typically expect survivors to stoically accept the job loss that has befallen friends and valued colleagues as an impersonal, strategic business decision. Survivors must work smarter, harder, and

take on the workload of those let go (Allen, Freeman, Russell, Reizenstein, & Rentz, 2001). They must also acquire new skills and competencies to compensate for lost organizational knowledge and expertise (Griggs & Hyland, 2003).

### **Problem Statement**

Studies have been done on the emotional and psychological consequences of downsizing on victims and survivors (Appelbaum & Donia, 2000, 2001; Appelbaum et al., 1997; Devine, Reay, Stainton, & Collins-Nakai, 2003; Mirabal & DeYoung, 2005; Noer, 1993). Additionally, studies have been done on managers', supervisors', and HR professionals' experiences as change recipients and as change agents charged with delivering termination notices to downsizing's victims (Clair & Dufresne, 2004; Clair, DuFresne, Jackson, & Ladge, 2006; Gandolfi, 2008b; Grunberg, Moore, & Greenberg, 2006; Molinsky & Margolis, 2006; Parker & McKinley, 2008). However, in reviewing the literature, I was unable to find studies that focused specifically on HRD professionals' experiences as downsizing survivors and as change agents charged with facilitating SHRD—organizational learning, organizational performance, and organizational change (Gilley & Gilley, 2003; Gilley & Maycunich, 2000)—before, during, and/or after downsizing.

When organizations decide to downsize, HRD professionals may be among the first to learn of the decision. As part of an organization's HR function, HRD professionals represent a layer between senior and executive management and front line managers and supervisors. Managers, supervisors, and front-line employees often turn to their HR functions in times of organizational stress for support and direction. During change events like downsizing, however, HRD professionals may find themselves cast



into the dual role of change recipient (i.e., survivors) and change agent (i.e., SHRD facilitators). Being in an HR-related function does not immunize HRD professionals from organizational cuts. To the contrary, during times of financial setbacks, training budgets are often among the first to be cut (Wright, Dunford, & Snell, 2001).

HRD professionals as change agents and change recipients must work through their own downsizing survivor syndrome while helping others do the same. Organizations expect them to help facilitate recovery processes so that the organization can move forward with minimal negative impact to the business. Yet HRD professionals often do not have anyone to turn to help them cope with their own reactions to change and loss.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how human resource development (HRD) professionals perceived the experience of surviving downsizing and facilitating strategic human resource development (SHRD) before, during, and/or after downsizing.

### **Research Questions**

The main research question is as follows: How do HRD professionals perceive the experience of surviving downsizing and facilitating SHRD before, during, and/or after downsizing? Secondary questions include the following:

1. How do HRD professionals' perceptions of their survivor experiences influence their abilities to facilitate SHRD before, during, and/or after downsizing?

2. How do HRD professionals' perceptions of the social exchange relationship between employer and employee influence their own survivor experiences?
3. How do HRD professionals' perceptions of the social exchange relationship between employer and employee influence how they facilitate SHRD before, during, and/or after downsizing?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Merriam and Simpson (2000) observed that “research is not conducted in a vacuum; it is attached or anchored to a particular orientation or perspective” (p. 25) that is “derived from the concepts, terms, definitions, models and theories of a particular literature base and disciplinary orientation” (Merriam, 1998, p. 46). The conceptual framework for this study was derived from concepts and theories from the literature related to surviving downsizing and the literature related to strategic HRD. This section introduces the following concepts and theories that are explored further in Chapter 2: (a) the concept of strategic HRD, (b) the concept of the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm, (c) social exchange theory, and (d) psychological contract theory.

### **Strategic HRD**

In this study, Gilley and Maycunich's (2000) model of SHRD provides an organizing framework for examining strategic HRD practice. SHRD is “the process of facilitating organizational learning, performance, and change through organized interventions and initiatives and management actions... [to enhance] an organization's performance capacity, capability, competitive readiness, and renewal” (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000, p. 6). Traditional HRD focuses on designing and facilitating HRD initiatives to improve individual employee skills, knowledge, and behaviors. SHRD,

however, focuses on designing and facilitating HRD initiatives to help the organization execute business strategy, achieve desired business results, and be change ready and resilient (Gilley & Gilley, 2003; Gilley & Maycunich, 2000).

### **The Resource-Based View of the Firm**

A concept foundational to SHRD is that people, as human resources, can be a key source of sustainable competitive advantage. An organization has a competitive advantage when it offers a valued product or service to its customers that current or potential competitors are not offering (Barney, 1991). A sustainable competitive advantage (SCA), however, is what gives one company a superior position in the long-term over another (Barney, 1991; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Hatch & Dyer, 2004; Hoffman, 2000; Martin-de-Castro, Navas-Lopez, Lopez-Saez, & Alama-Salazar, 2006).

According to the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm, companies can create and sustain a competitive advantage by strategically leveraging unique bundles of tangible and intangible resources (Barney, 1991; Carmeli, 2004; Hatch & Dyer, 2004; Kaplan & Norton, 2001). People are sources of human, social, and positive psychological capital (Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004) resources that can be developed, combined, and leveraged with other organizational capabilities to help an organization achieve business results and remain competitive (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2002; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Luthans et al. (2004) described human capital as what others know, social capital as who they know, and positive psychological capital as who people are, that is, their ability to be hopeful, optimistic, confident, and resilient.

Not all resources, however, are strategically valuable and contribute to an organization's sustainable competitive advantage. To be strategically valuable, a

resource must pass four tests. The resource must be (a) valuable, (b) rare, (c) inimitable, and (d) not easily replaced (Barney, 1991). Valuable resources help the organization reduce or eliminate external threats and exploit external opportunities (Barney, 1991). Rare resources are those not owned by many competitors (Barney, 1991). Inimitable resources are those that competitors cannot easily copy (Barney, 1991). Non-substitutable resources are those that a competitor cannot easily replace with resources of equal or greater value (Barney, 1991).

### **Social Exchange Theory**

SHRD is facilitated within the context of the day-to-day work environment. Business results are achieved through daily social interactions or exchanges that occur with people inside and outside of the organization. Inside the organization, employees interact with peers, managers, supervisors, leaders, and the organization. Outside the organization, employees interact with clients and other stakeholders, those who have a vested interest in the organization.

Social exchange theory suggests that we purposely choose what we put into a relationship based on our perceptions of what we receive in return (Lulofs & Cahn, 2000). Every social exchange involves the giving and taking of resources (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001). In the context of exchange relationships at work, a resource is “anything transacted in an interpersonal situation” (Gergen, Greenberg, & Willis, 1980, p. 78). Employees provide organizations with their skills, knowledge, talents, ideas, experience, dedication, and commitment. Organizations, in turn, provide employees with salaries, benefits, reward, recognition, development, career advancement, and a safe and respectful work environment.

## **Psychological Contract Theory**

Social exchange theory is foundational to the psychological contract (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Blau, 2005; Cardona, Lawrence, & Bentler, 2004; Conway & Briner, 2005; Cullinane & Dundon, 2006; Guerrero & Herrbach, 2008; Lucas & Kline, 2008). Psychological contract theory provides a framework for further understanding the nature of the employee-employer exchange relationship (Conway & Coyle-Shapiro, 2006). The psychological contract is an implicit (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006) promissory (Cardona et al., 2004; Roehling, 1997; Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007) contract between employee and employer. It articulates employee perceptions of the mutual transactional and relational obligations within the employment relationship (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Atkinson, 2007; DelCampo, 2007; Lucas & Kline, 2008; Rousseau, 1990, 1995; Rousseau & Wade-Benzoni, 1994). Transactional obligations include “high pay and career advancement in exchange for hard work” (Rousseau, 1990, p. 389). Relational obligations include the exchange of “job security for loyalty and a minimum length of stay” (p. 389).

### **Significance of the Study**

Work engages us intellectually, emotionally, physically, and spiritually (Chalofsky, 2003; Covey, 2004). People often equate their self-concept and self-worth with their jobs and careers (Ardichvili & Kuchinke, 2009; Curry, 2003; Lazarus, 2009). We live to work. Therefore, taking away someone’s livelihood is like taking away a big portion of his or her life. In his review of the movie *Up in the Air* whose storyline focuses on downsizing, New York, NY Times Op-Ed Columnist Frank Rich (2009) commented on the real life interviews that director Jason Reitman had conducted with

laid off workers while filming. Victims were asked what they said or would have liked to have said to Human Resources when they were let go. One victim replied, “On the stress level, I’ve heard that losing your job is like a death in the family...but personally, I feel more like the people I worked with were my family, and I died” (¶8). Rich ended the article by commenting on layoffs that were happening at the New York, NY Times and observing that, “Even for the survivors, it feels a little like serial deaths in the family” (¶16).

Downsizing reminds us that the notion of lifetime employment no longer exists (Deal & Kennedy, 2000). As employees, we work at the pleasure of our employers who expect us to share our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits when executing our jobs. In today’s turbulent business environment, however, employers can offer little more than a tenuous employment relationship and a weekly paycheck. Organizations, however, recognize that they need employees who come to work for more than just the transactional, tangible benefits they will receive. Companies need employees who are emotionally present, committed, and engaged (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006).

Downsizing has led to the demise of a coveted resource in the social exchange between employer and employee, namely, the implied promise of job security in exchange for hard work and dedication (Noer, 1993). It has severed the long-term bond between employer and employee, sending the unspoken message that employees are disposable resources (Macky, 2006; Susskind, Miller, & Johnson, 1998; Uchitelle, 2006). This perceived violation of the psychological contract has caused many employees to feel betrayed (Morrison & Robinson, 1997) and to question the extent of their commitment towards their employers (Noer, 1993). If the employer can no longer fulfill a key

relational obligation of the contract, then why should the employee remain loyal and committed to the organization?

Downsizing has eroded employee trust and confidence in the organization and has caused employees to become overtly and covertly angry and resentful (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Noer, 1993). This has contributed to decreased employee commitment and productivity (Deal & Kennedy, 2000; Noer, 1993; Weakland, 2001). Ultimately, organizational change, organizational learning, and organizational performance can suffer.

De Geus (1988) observed that perhaps the only sustainable competitive advantage an organization may have is being able to learn faster than the competition. Learning, however, only creates a competitive advantage when it helps the organization execute business strategy and achieve goals and objectives (Appelbaum & Gallagher, 2000). Downsizing robs the organization of rich sources of knowledge while potentially paralyzing the remaining workforce. Victims of downsizing might enter new employment relationships with lowered trust and more cynical and guarded attitudes (Pugh, Skarlicki, & Passell, 2003). Furthermore, before survivors can be productive contributors to organizational learning, they must cope with the emotional aftermath of downsizing and successfully work through change and transition.

This study will extend research already conducted on downsizing/layoff agents—those who function as both change recipients and change agents before, during, and/or after downsizing events. Previous studies have focused on the challenges downsizing agents have experienced when letting people go and not on the challenges associated with their helping the organization move forward. Additionally, this study will add to the

knowledge base by providing a phenomenological perspective on HRD professionals whose experiences as survivors and SHRD facilitators before, during, and/or after downsizing events have not been specifically studied. Understanding HRD professionals' experiences can contribute to HRD practice by providing insights to organizations on the personal and professional challenges associated with the roles these professionals take on related to downsizing events. This in turn may help organizations determine how to better prepare, equip, and support their HRD professionals during times of organizational stress so that they, in turn, can more effectively facilitate SHRD before, during, and/or after downsizing.

### **Delimitations**

The scope of this study was limited to those HR professionals who indicated that they facilitated some aspect of SHRD—organizational change, organizational learning, and/or organizational performance. These individuals interact with employees differently than those who work exclusively in HRM functions like employee compensation and benefits and employee relations. Surviving downsizing and helping the organization recover as an HR professional employed in these areas might be experienced differently from the way that HR professionals who facilitate organizational change, learning, and performance might experience the phenomenon. Including HR professionals from these other HRM-related areas, however, may have produced an additional essence or essences to this experience.



## **Definition of Terms**

### **Competitive Advantage**

A company has a competitive advantage when it offers a valued product or service to its customers that current or potential competitors are not offering (Barney, 1991).

### **Distributive Justice**

Distributive justice refers to an employee's perceptions of the fairness of the outcomes related to decisions and actions (Calderone, 2004; Hopkins & Weathington, 2006; Lavelle, Rupp, & Brockner, 2007).

### **Downsizing**

Downsizing refers to "the planned elimination of positions or jobs" (Cascio, 1993, p. 95) for causes other than performance (Noer, 1993). In this study, the term downsizing is used interchangeably with layoffs and reductions-in-force.

### **Intangible Resource**

Intangible resources are resources that are mostly invisible, difficult to quantify, not easy to duplicate, and that tend to appreciate over time with purposeful use (Becker, Huselid, & Ulrich, 2001; Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003).

### **Interactional Justice**

Interactional justice refers to an employee's perceptions of how people were treated when carrying out decisions and actions (Calderone, 2004; Lavelle et al., 2007; Nirmala & Akhilesh, 2006).

## **Layoff**

Although often used interchangeably with terms like downsizing and reductions-in-force, a layoff refers to the elimination of jobs due to a temporary lack of work (Tracey, 2004); employees who are laid off are often called back to work at a later date when business circumstances change.

## **Organizational Change**

Organizational change is change that “occurs within the system as a whole” (Miller, 2003, p. 52). It is one of the three practice domains of SHRD (Gilley & Gilley, 2003).

## **Organizational Learning**

This term refers to learning “embedded in organizational-level systems, practices and procedures, informational technology, routines, the organizational culture, and other sources of institutional memory” (Yorks, 2005, p. 125).

## **Organizational Performance**

Organizational performance is a measure of how effectively an organization meets the needs and expectations of its stakeholders (Sluyter, 1997). More common measures of organizational performance are those tied to financial outcomes, customer outcomes, internal outcomes, and learning and growth outcomes (Kaplan & Norton, 2001).

## **Perceived Organizational Support**

POS refers to employees’ perceptions of the extent to which the organization values their contributions, cares about their well being, and helps them fulfill their socioemotional needs for affiliation, approval, and esteem (Eisenberger, Huntington,

Hutchinson, & Sowa, 1986; Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

### **Procedural Justice**

Procedural justice refers to an employee's perceptions of the fairness of policies and procedures used to determine and implement decisions and actions (Calderone, 2004; Lavelle et al., 2007; Nirmala & Akhilesh, 2006).

### **Psychological Contract**

The psychological contract is an implicit contract that is comprised of employee perceptions of the mutual transactional and relational obligations in the employment relationship (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Atkinson, 2007; DelCampo, 2007; Lucas & Kline, 2008; Rousseau 1990, 1995; Rousseau & Wade-Benzoni, 1994).

### **Psychological Contract Breach**

A perception of contract breach occurs when an employee has a rational cognition that the employer has not fulfilled one or more psychological contract obligations (Bal, De Lange, Jansen, & Van Der Velde, 2008; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Robinson & Morrison, 2000).

### **Psychological Contract Violation**

A perception of contract violation occurs when an employee experiences a strong emotional or affective reaction to a perceived contract breach causing the employee to experience anger or betrayal (Bal et al., 2008; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Robinson & Morrison, 2000).

### **Reduction-in-Force**

This term refers to involuntary job loss resulting from a company's perceived need to reduce the workforce; a reduction-in-force (RIF) often follows some type of major organizational change or may occur due to economic pressures or lack of work (Tracey, 2004). This term is often used interchangeably with layoffs or downsizing.

### **Relational Obligation**

This term is associated with psychological contract theory and social exchange theory. In an employment relationship, relational obligations include socio-emotional elements transacted in the relationship. For example, an employee pledges his or her commitment in exchange for fair treatment and job security.

### **Resource**

A resource is "anything transacted in an interpersonal situation" (Gergen et al., 1980, p. 78). Resources can be tangible or intangible. They are "special assets, skills, and capabilities (Collis & Montgomery, 1998, p. 72) companies have and use to create and deliver products and services (Sanchez, 2004).

### **Social Exchange**

This term refers to interactions between people that result in an exchange of tangible and/or intangible resources. Social exchange involves transactional and relational obligations (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003). At work, for example, employees may offer their labor, commitment, and dedication in exchange for a pay check, health insurance benefits, and fair treatment.

## **Strategic Human Resource Development**

Strategic human resource development (SHRD) is “the process of facilitating organizational learning, performance, and change through organized interventions and initiatives and management actions... [to enhance] an organization’s performance capacity, capability, competitive readiness, and renewal” (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000, p. 6).

## **Survivor**

A survivor is an employee who remains with the organization following downsizing (Noer, 1993).

## **Survivor Sickness/Syndrome**

This term is used to describe “a set of attitudes, feelings, and perceptions that occur in employees who remain in organizational systems following involuntary employee reductions...people with survivor sickness have often been described as having a reduced desire to take risks, a lowered commitment to the job, and a lack of spontaneity” (Noer, 1993, p. 13).

## **Sustainable Competitive Advantage**

A sustainable competitive advantage (SCA) is what gives one company a superior position in the long-term over another (Barney, 1991; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Hatch & Dyer, 2004; Hoffman, 2000; Martin-de-Castro, et al., 2006).

## **Tangible Resources**

Tangible resources are visible, financially quantifiable, easily duplicated, and depreciate with use over time (Becker et al., 2001; Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003).

### **Transactional Obligation**

This term is associated with psychological contract theory and social exchange theory and is also referred to as a transactional exchange. In an employment relationship, transactional obligations are those associated with money; for example, an employee provides labor in exchange for a pay check or career advancement opportunities.

### **Value Proposition**

The value proposition describes to current and prospective customers why they should do business with one company over another (Ulrich et al., 2008). It “describes the context in which intangible assets... become transformed into tangible outcomes such as customer retention, revenues from new products and services, and, ultimately, profits” (Kaplan & Norton, 2001, p. 11).

### **Victim**

A victim is an employee who is let go during a downsizing event (Noer, 1993).

### **Summary**

This chapter provided the background of the study, the problem statement, the purpose statement, and the research questions. The conceptual framework, significance of the study, delimitations, definition of terms, and acronyms used in the study were also discussed. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature that supports this study. Chapter 3 introduces and describes the phenomenological research method and procedures used to conduct the study. Chapters 4 and 5 present the study’s data and findings. Chapter 6 summarizes the study by answering the research questions and presenting recommendations for organizations, HRD practice, and research.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In the 1980s and early 1990s, downsizing was primarily used by organizations experiencing financial hardship; however since the mid 1990s, globally, downsizing has become a strategy of choice (Gandolfi, 2008a; Mirabel & DeYoung, 2005) to increase efficiency, productivity, and profits (Gandolfi, 2008a). Downsizing, however, can have serious negative repercussions on the workforce and on the organization's ability to learn, grow, be productive, and be profitable. While most organizations make a good rational case for the business need to implement a major organizational change like downsizing, what is often lacking is empathy towards the human response to change and transition (Bovey & Hede, 2001a; Marshak, 2006). People as an organization's greatest asset need to recover as quickly as possible from traumas resulting from organizational change initiatives like downsizing so that the organization can recover as quickly as possible with minimal adverse impact on performance. To strategically develop and leverage the competitive advantage of people, organizations have begun to turn to their HRD functions to facilitate the process.

In this chapter, relevant conceptual and empirical literature related to the business and human sides of downsizing is discussed along with literature related to strategic HRD (SHRD) and the competitive advantage of human resources. The chapter is divided into four main sections: (a) the business side of downsizing, (b) the human side of downsizing, (c) strategic HRD, and (d) downsizing's impact on SHRD.

## **The Business Side of Downsizing**

This section begins with a discussion of downsizing's effect on financial performance. Next, a discussion of downsizing perspectives provides insights into what might prompt an organization to downsize. The section concludes with a discussion of approaches to downsizing and on how they might be used in response to organizational change.

### **Downsizing's Financial Impact**

Downsizing has been described as “the cocaine of boardroom” (Bruning, 1996, ¶6). Between January 2009 and December 2009, over 28,000 mass layoff events took place resulting in job loss to over 2 million U.S. workers (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Economic News Release, January 2010). A mass layoff event is “a situation in which 50 or more persons have filed initial claims for unemployment insurance benefits against an establishment during a consecutive 5-week period” (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Glossary). Mass layoff statistics, however, do not provide a complete picture of the extent of job loss that occurs through downsizing because they exclude those involuntarily let go from organizations that have downsized but that do not meet the federal government's definition of a mass layoff.

Given today's competitive and volatile global market and the current economic recession, some downsizing may be justified and even inevitable. What remains puzzling, however, is why so many organizations routinely engage in this practice despite evidence that downsizing has failed to produce desired long-term financial results (De Meuse, Bergmann, Vanderheiden, & Roraff, 2004; Gandolfi, 2008a; Griggs & Hyland, 2003; Guthrie & Datta, 2008; Morris, Cascio, & Young, 1999; Palliam & Shalhoub,



2002). To the contrary, some studies have indicated that organizations that have maintained stable workforces and those that have upsized during times of economic crisis have in the long-term outperformed organizations that have downsized (Gandolfi, 2008a; Morris et al., 1999).

Cascio (1998) examined financial performance of 311 companies listed in Standard and Poor's 500 that had downsized between 1981 and 1990. Five financial performance index averages were tracked for 3 years pre-downsizing and for 3 years post-downsizing. His study revealed that downsizing neither hurt financial performance nor did it improve it. De Meuse, Vanderheiden, and Bergmann (1994) tracked financial performance of 52 Fortune 100 companies between 1987 and 1991. Thirty-five of the companies did not experience layoffs, while 17 did. Five financial performance indices were tracked for each company 2 years before the announced layoffs, the year of the layoffs (i.e., 1989), and 2 years following the layoffs. Their study revealed that there were no differences in financial performance for either group of companies before the layoff announcements; financial differences, however, did occur during the year that announcements were made and for 2 years following those announcements. The companies that did not have layoffs had higher mean profit margins than those that did. Those that had laid off employees had lower profit margins from 1989 through 1991.

De Meuse et al. (2004) conducted another longitudinal study to look at financial performance of Fortune 100 companies between 1987 and 1998, the decade of the 1990s being one in which frequent downsizings occurred in corporate America. Companies examined in the second study included 92 that were on the Fortune 100 list in 1989. Fourteen of those companies had not experienced layoffs; 78 had made layoff

announcements. During that study's timeframe, 17 of the companies that had announced layoffs downsized once, 12 downsized twice, and the rest downsized three or more times. Their study revealed that firms that downsized initially had experienced diminished financial performance; however, performance began to improve following a healing period.

### **Downsizing Perspectives**

Although studies examining the financial results of companies that have downsized have not proven conclusively that downsizing has a long-term favorable effect on an organization's financial performance, downsizing is still a common organizational practice. Three perspectives may help explain why organizations might engage in this practice: (a) the institutional perspective, (b) the ideological perspective, and (c) the strategic perspective.

**Institutional perspective.** Institutional theory views organizational change as the result of coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures thrust on an organization from its external environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) referred to these forces as institutional isomorphism, an organization's need to compete for political and institutional legitimacy and market position (Mizruchi & Fein, 1999). Coercive pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Mizruchi & Fein, 1999), also known as constraining forces (McKinley, Sanchez, & Schick, 1995), are social or political pressures to conform that are imposed on organizations through their external environments. Healthy or stable organizations, for example, might feel pressured to adopt "lean and mean" or "faster, better, cheaper" mentalities that society has promoted as legitimate.

Mimetic pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Mizruchi & Fein, 1999), also known as cloning forces (McKinley et al., 1995), are those that pressure organizations to standardize practices or to copy or model what others in the industry are doing to reduce uncertainty. Seeing an industry leader engage in downsizing might prompt an organization to follow suit because it seems to be the legitimate or acceptable thing to do. Normative pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Mizruchi & Fein, 1999), also known as learning forces (McKinley et al., 1995), are those resulting from educational institutions and professional networks that socialize members into adopting similar worldviews. Leaders might learn through college and university courses and through professional association workshops that downsizing is an effective practice to control costs.

**Ideological perspective.** The ideological perspective suggests that an organization's decision to downsize as well as employee reactions to downsizing might be shaped by predominant business ideologies (Edwards, Rust, McKinley & Moon, 2003; Rust, McKinley, Moon-Kyungpook, & Edwards, 2005; Sronce & McKinley, 2006). Four possible business ideologies exist: (a) the ideology of market competition, (b) the ideology of shareholder wealth/interest, (c) the ideology of employee self-reliance, and (d) the ideology of employee worth (Rust et al., 2005; Sronce & McKinley, 2006).

The ideology of market competition suggests that organizations must do whatever it takes to remain competitive within the market (Rust et al., 2005; Sronce & McKinley, 2006). The ideology of shareholder wealth/interest suggests that organizations must put shareholder interests above all else (Rust et al., 2005; Sronce & McKinley, 2006). The ideology of employee self-reliance suggests that employees should take control of their own destinies and be as independent as possible from their employers (Sronce &

McKinley, 2006); in other words, employees are responsible to self-develop and do whatever is needed to remain competitive and employable in chosen fields and occupations. The ideology of employee worth suggests that people are an organization's most important asset. Without people, the organization's day-to-day work would be impossible to execute (Rust et al., 2005; Sronce & McKinley, 2006). Therefore, downsizing decisions should consider employee needs as well as organizational needs.

**Strategic perspective.** The strategic perspective views downsizing as a strategy that should be built into an organization's strategic planning process (Appelbaum, Everard, & Hung, 1999; Band & Tustin, 1995) to position the organization for long-term success. With strategic downsizing, organizations intentionally plan for and implement downsizing to proactively ensure that the organization is internally designed to meet changing requirements imposed by the external environment. Planning for downsizing includes assessing current organizational structure, determining desired organizational structure, deciding to downsize, and then planning for, implementing, and evaluating the downsizing initiative (Band & Tustin, 1995).

### **Approaches to Downsizing**

Downsizing is an intentional action (Freeman, 1999; Freeman & Cameron, 1993) that can be implemented reactively to bring an organizational out of decline or proactively to enhance organizational performance (Cameron, 1994). It is typically implemented to improve organizational efficiency (i.e., cut costs), effectiveness (i.e., performance), or both (Freeman & Cameron, 1993). Work processes at either the individual or organizational level are affected, and usually some of the workforce experiences job loss (Freeman & Cameron, 1993). An organization, however, might

implement others actions that do not require workforce reductions (Freeman, 1999; Freeman & Cameron, 1993).

Freeman and Cameron (1993) described two downsizing approaches based on Tushman and Romanelli's (1985; as cited in Freeman & Cameron, 1993) model of continuous or convergent change and discontinuous or reorienting change. Convergence downsizing is used when an organization wants to do the same things better or more efficiently. The goal is to refine the organization's current strategic orientation (i.e., vision, strategy, structure, and/or processes) through incremental changes at the individual or task level rather than at the organizational level. Reorientation downsizing, however, is used when an organization wants or needs to do new things. This approach involves making radical changes to realign the organization's internal environment with its external environment. Reorientation downsizing results in a change in the organization's strategic orientation.

Farrell and Mavondo (2004) conducted a study with the top 2000 manufacturers in Australia that looked at how an organization's downsizing strategy affected the organization's learning orientation (i.e., commitment to learn, open mindedness, and shared vision). Data were examined using structural equation modeling. Their study revealed that a convergent downsizing strategy (i.e., reducing headcount through downsizing) had a negative effect on an organization's learning orientation. A reorientation downsizing strategy (i.e., reducing costs through means other than headcount reduction), however, had a positive effect on an organization's learning orientation. Convergent downsizing was more likely to result in an organization's

engaging in adaptive or single loop learning, while reorientation strategy was more likely to result in double loop or generative learning.

When implementing downsizing, an organization can use three strategies individually or combined: (a) workforce reduction, (b) work redesign, and (c) systemic change strategies (Appelbaum et al., 1999; Cameron, 1994; Cameron, Freeman, & Mishra, 1991; Gandolfi, 2005). Workforce reduction strategies are considered short-term strategies where costs are cut by headcount reduction. These cuts might be implemented through layoffs, natural attrition, early retirement packages, buy out packages, or transfers. Work redesign strategies are considered mid-term strategies and might include redesigning tasks; merging or eliminating divisions, products, or services; or reducing work hours. Systemic change strategies are considered long-term strategies. They might include changing the organization's culture or changing employees' values or attitudes. Downsizing becomes viewed as a part of organizational life with everyone continuously seeking ways to simplify relationships, production, and processes so that the organization can be both efficient and effective.

Downsizing can drive redesign or redesign can drive downsizing (Freeman, 1999). When downsizing drives redesign, the organization first downsizes to become more operationally efficient and then redesigns processes at the task or individual level to compensate for lost employees. When redesign drives downsizing, however, the organization first identifies the need to change the way work is done or the way the organization is structured and then implements those changes. Redesign might involve reengineering a business process, merging two businesses, outsourcing a function, selling off a portion of the business, or closing an affiliate. If, for example, two businesses are

merged, the organization might seek to reduce redundant functions. This could result in job loss to some; however, the organization might also try to minimize workforce reductions by transferring or redeploying affected employees to other units or divisions.

Farrell and Mavondo (2005) conducted another study with the top 2000 manufacturing organizations in Australia that looked at the effect of downsizing redesign strategies on business performance. Data were analyzed using structural equation modeling. That study's results suggested that when downsizing drives redesign, business performance is likely to suffer; however, when redesign drives downsizing, the effect on business performance is more likely to be positive.

### **The Human Side of Downsizing**

Downsizing can have a detrimental effect on employee perceptions of their social exchange relationships and their psychological contracts. This section begins with a discussion of social exchange relationships and the psychological contract including conditions that might lead to a perception of breach or violation and potential consequences of and moderators of perceptions of breach or violation. Next, downsizing's impact on victims and survivors is discussed along with an overview of the concept of survivor syndrome. The section concludes by examining the dual role of HRD professionals as change agents and change recipients.

### **Social Exchange Relationships**

Work consists of exchange relationships whereby employees exchange tangible and intangible resources with others both within and outside of the organization. From a social exchange perspective, employees give their loyalty and effort in exchange for economic and socio-emotional incentives (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Coyle-Shapiro,

2002). Economic exchanges are explicit and monetizable, while social exchanges are implicit and non-monetizable (Blau, 2005). An underlying premise of social exchange relationships is that each party in the exchange seeks to minimize costs and maximize benefits (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Blau, 2005; Homans, 1974).

Trust, fairness, and reciprocity are foundational to effective social exchange relationships (Blau, 2005). Those engaged in social exchange relationships trust that when one person performs actions that benefit another, the recipient will reciprocate in a fair and valued manner at some future, unspecified time (Blau, 2005; Gouldner, 1960; Lynch, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 1999). When others fail to reciprocate or reciprocate in ways perceived as unfair or unvalued, employees might attempt to even the score by investing less time and effort into those relationships or even ending them if feasible.

Bernerth and Walker (2009) investigated how employees' propensity to trust their supervisors and how managers' propensity to trust their employees affected employees' perceptions of the quality of the social exchange relationship. Using hierarchical linear regression, the direct and interactional effects of propensity to trust were tested. Results indicated that the perceived quality of the social exchange relationship from the point of view of employees was not directly affected by managers' propensity to trust them. It was, however, directly affected by employees' propensity to trust their managers. The authors also found a direct positive interaction between managers' and employees' propensity to trust; in other words, the quality of the social exchange relationship was considered highest when both managers' propensity to trust employees and employees' propensity to trust managers were high.



Shore, Bommer, Rao, and Seo (2009) conducted a survey study with 453 employees of a Korean electronics company. Their study examined the relationships between social exchange and affective commitment, social exchange and altruism towards supervisor, social exchange and trust in employer, and social exchange and employee turnover intentions. Shore et al. (2009) also examined the relationships between economic exchange and affective commitment and economic exchange and turnover intentions.

The results showed that social exchange was related to more positive behavioral outcomes than economic exchange. More specifically, a significant positive relationship was found between social exchange and the three criterion variables of affective commitment, altruism, and employer trust, and a significant negative relationship was found between social exchange and turnover intentions. Employees who had stronger social exchanges were more emotionally attached to the organization, more trusting of the employer, more altruistic towards their supervisors, and less inclined to leave the organization.

The authors also examined the moderating effect of reciprocation wariness on these relationships. Reciprocation wariness was defined as “a generalized cautiousness in reciprocating aid stemming from a fear of exploitation in relationships, including relationships with the organization (Lynch et al., 1999)” (as cited in Shore et al., 2009, p. 705). Reciprocation wariness moderated these relationships in that those employees who were highly wary demonstrated lower levels of affective commitment, altruism, and employer trust than those who were low wary, and they demonstrated higher levels of turnover intentions.

A significant negative relationship was found between economic exchange and affective commitment and economic exchange and turnover intentions. Employees who had stronger economic exchanges demonstrated lower affective commitment and higher turnover intentions. Reciprocation wariness did not moderate the relationship between economic exchange and affective commitment; however, it did moderate the relationship between economic exchange and turnover intentions. This relationship was more positive for highly wary individuals.

### **The Psychological Contract**

Social exchange theory is foundational to the psychological contract (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Blau, 2005; Cardona et al., 2004; Conway & Briner, 2005; Cullinane & Dundon, 2006; Guerrero & Herrbach, 2008; Lucas & Kline, 2008). This unwritten contract articulates employee perceptions of the mutual transactional and relational obligations within the employment exchange relationship. The psychological contract begins to form even before a person starts working for an organization (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Rousseau, 1995) and continues to be shaped by an employee's day-to-day interactions with peers, managers, and the organization (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Conway & Briner, 2005).

During the recruitment process, HR professionals and managers begin to shape prospective employees' perceptions of the terms and conditions of the psychological contract by talking about the organization's culture and benefits to be derived from the employment relationship. Once the employee starts working, various socialization processes continue to shape the contract. Socialization processes indoctrinate employees into the organization's culture, familiarizing them with beliefs and assumptions that

govern organizational life (Robinson & Morrison, 2000). New employee orientation programs, for example, provide a venue through which employees begin to learn about the organization's policies, procedures, and values that define expected norms of behavior to fit into the culture.

What makes the psychological contract difficult to manage is that it is subjective (DelCampo, 2007; King, 2000; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Rousseau & Wade-Benzoni, 1994), dynamic (DelCampo, 2007; Lester, Kickul, & Bergmann, 2007; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994), and idiosyncratic (Bellou, 2007; DelCampo, 2007). No two employees will share the same psychological contract. Furthermore, the psychological contract will change as the organization changes and as working relationships change over time.

**Psychological contract breach or violation.** As employees interact with peers, managers, and the organization, they learn if actual organizational practices are aligned with espoused organizational practices. If an employee perceives that the organization has failed to fulfill transactional or relational psychological contract obligations, a perception of breach or violation might result. Perceived breach involves the rational cognition that the employer has not fulfilled one or more contract obligations, while violation involves a strong emotional or affective reaction to perceived breach that can result in feelings of anger and betrayal (Bal et al., 2008; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Robinson & Morrison, 2000). A psychological contract can be breached without being violated; however, violation cannot occur without perceived breach (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Additionally, because the psychological contract is subjective and

idiosyncratic, what one employee views as a breach or violation may not be viewed as such by another.

**Conditions leading to perceptions of breach or violation.** Employees might perceive that a breach or violation of the contract has occurred if it appears that the employer reneged on contract obligations (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Johnson & O’Leary-Kelly, 2003; Turnley, Bolino, Lester, & Bloodgood, 2003), if incongruence exists between employer and employee perceptions of contract obligations (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Lester, Turnley, Bloodgood, & Bolino, 2002; Turnley et al., 2003), or if an unexpected disruption occurs in the employment relationship (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Lester et al., 2002; Turnley et al., 2003). A perception of renegeing can result if it appears that the employer has willfully failed to fulfill an obligation that it is capable of fulfilling. An employee might perceive that a disruption in the relationship has occurred when an organization goes through a merger or acquisition, resulting in implicit and explicit terms and conditions of employment undergoing changes. This might prevent the organization from fulfilling perceived obligations of the original contract that under normal circumstances it would have fulfilled.

**Potential consequences of breach or violation.** Employee perceptions that the employer has breached or violated the psychological contract can have numerous negative repercussions. Studies have revealed that perceptions of breach or violation can lead to reduced trust (see Atkinson, 2007; Bal et al., 2008; Kickul, Gundry, & Posig, 2005; Muthusamy & White, 2005; Vickers & Parris, 2007, commitment (see Bal et al., 2008; Clay-Warner, Hegtvedt, & Roman, 2005; Lee & Peccei, 2007; Muthusamy & White, 2005), and organizational citizenship behaviors (see Cardona et al., 2004; Lavelle

et al., 2007; Lester, Meglino, & Korsgaard, 2008; Love & Forret, 2008). Organizational citizenship behaviors are behaviors that employees freely demonstrate outside of their normal job duties without expecting personal reward or benefit (Robinson & Morrison, 1995). These behaviors might benefit other employees, the team, or the organization (Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003). Employees who altruistically volunteer to help fellow employees with tasks without being asked to do so and without expecting recognition for doing so would be demonstrating an organizational citizenship behavior.

Perceptions of contract breach or violation can also lead to reduced job satisfaction (see Gakovic & Tetrick, 2003; Turnley & Feldman, 1999), knowledge sharing (see Hislop, 2003; Muthusamy & White, 2005; Nahapiet, Gratton, & Rocha, 2005; O'Donohue, Sheehan, Hecker, & Holland, 2007; O'Neill & Adya, 2006; Sharkie, 2005), and job performance (see Conway & Coyle-Shapiro, 2006). Furthermore, perceived breach or violation can lead to increased cynicism (see Brandes et al., 2008; Johnson & O'Leary-Kelly, 2003) and intentions to leave the organization (see Erickson & Roloff, 2007; Spreitzer & Mishra, 2002; Turnley & Feldman, 1999).

**Moderators of breach or violation.** Many factors, however, can moderate perceptions of contract breach or violation. These factors include employee business ideologies (see Edwards et al., 2003; Rust & McKinley, 2005; Rust et al., 2005), organizational justice perceptions (see Brennan & Skarlicki, 2004; Clay-Warner et al., 2005; Kickul et al., 2005; Kickul, Newman, Parker, & Finkl, 2001; Lavelle et al., 2007; Tekleab, Takeuchi, & Taylor, 2005), and perceived quality of the social exchange relationship between employee and manager (see Erdogan & Enders, 2007; Tse, Dasborough, & Ashkanasy, 2008), employee and peers (see Love & Forret, 2008;

Murphy, Wayne, Liden, & Erdogan, 2003, Tse et al., 2008), and employees and the organization (see Aselage & Eisenberg, 2003; Erdogan & Enders, 2007; Lee & Peccei, 2007; Muse & Stamper, 2007).

In an investigation of the relationship between business ideologies and perceived psychological contract breach, Rust et al. (2005) found that employees who embraced the ideologies of market competition, shareholder wealth/interest, or employee self-reliance were less likely perceive that their psychological contracts had been breached as a result of downsizing. To the contrary, downsizing was more likely to be perceived as a legitimate practice to improve or maintain an organization's standing with shareholders, financial analysts, or the market, On the other hand, employees with a strong belief in the ideology of employee worth were more likely to perceive that their psychological contracts had been breached or violated because of downsizing (Rust et al., 2005).

Perceptions of procedural, distributive, and interactional justice can also contribute to and moderate employee perceptions of contract breach or violation. Interactional and procedural justice are related to relational or socioemotional aspects of the exchange relationship and the psychological contract, while distributive justice is related to transactional aspects of the exchange relationship and psychological contract (DelCampo, 2007). Procedural justice refers to the fairness of policies and procedures used to determine and implement decisions and actions (Calderone, 2004; Lavelle et al., 2007; Nirmala & Akhilesh, 2006). When downsizing occurs, employees might evaluate procedural justice by considering how the organization decided to downsize, how the organization determined who would leave and who would stay, and how much advance

notice was given about the specifics of the downsizing event (Brockner et al., 1994; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998).

Distributive justice refers to employees' perceptions of the fairness of the outcomes related to an organization's decisions and actions (Calderone, 2004; Hopkins & Weathington, 2006; Lavelle et al., 2007). When downsizing occurs, survivors might form perceptions of distributive justice by assessing the adequacy of severance packages or outplacement assistance provided to victims. Additionally, they might assess the degree to which the burden for downsizing was shared throughout the organization (Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998). Interactional justice refers to employees' perceptions of how people were treated when the organization carried out decisions and actions (Calderone, 2004; Lavelle et al., 2007; Nirmala & Akhilesh, 2006). Employees might form perceptions of interactional justice during downsizing based on the extent to which they perceived that the organization treated people with dignity and respect. They may also consider how the need for downsizing was communicated and if reasons given were plausible (Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998).

### **Downsizing's Victims and Survivors**

Downsizing is an organizational trauma that profoundly affects employees, families, and even communities (Ambrose, 1997; Noer, 1993; Susskind et al., 1998; Uchitelle, 2007). Downsizing's victims often experience shame (Butts, 1997; Vickers & Parris, 2007), isolation (Butts, 1997), and alienation (Vickers & Parris, 2007). Furthermore, both victims and survivors sometimes experience loss of self-esteem (Wiesenfeld, Brockner, & Thibault, 2000) and identity (Curry, 2003; Jones et al., 2008; Price, Friedland, & Vinokur, 1998; Wilson, Larson, & Stone, 1993).

Devine et al. (2003) suggested that perhaps it is better to be a victim than a survivor. They conducted a survey study to test a model of downsizing that examined how downsizing stress and perceived control over one's work situation affected victim and survivor responses to downsizing. Their study involved Canadian healthcare professionals who worked for an organization within a province that had displaced 14,753 workers during three downsizing events over a 3-year timeframe in the 1990s. Results indicated that downsizing victims who secured new employment reported lower levels of absence and illicit drug use and higher levels of job satisfaction, physical health, and quality of life than downsizing survivors. Survivors' on-going worry about job insecurity resulted in their feeling a loss of control over their employment situations. This, in turn, resulted in higher levels of stress, lowered job satisfaction, lowered quality of life, diminished health, and increased use of illicit drugs.

### **Survivor Syndrome**

Some have likened the symptoms of those surviving downsizing to the symptoms of those who survived the Holocaust (Appelbaum & Donia, 2000; Noer, 1993; Stein, 1997) or the Hiroshima bombing (Noer, 1993). Stein (1997) used the metaphor of being on Schindler's List to describe those fortunate enough to survive downsizing. Lifton (1967/1991) coined the expression *survivor syndrome* to describe the physical, mental, and emotional symptoms that Holocaust and Hiroshima survivors displayed during and after these events. Lifton's (1967/1991) psychological analysis of the emotional reactions of survivors revealed a number of themes. Survivors displayed distancing, psychic mutation, psychic numbing, death guilt, and death imprinting behaviors during and after the event. These reactions served as coping mechanisms to protect them from



further emotional pain and suffering as they attempted to make sense from senseless actions and carry on with their lives.

Distancing involved the survivors' putting physical or emotional space between themselves and the source of their emotional pain (Lifton, 1967/1991). Psychic mutation referred to a change that occurred within the psyche of the survivors that allowed them to suffer and participate in atrocities that they normally would have found repulsive (Lifton, 1967/1991). Psychic numbing often followed psychic mutation, resulting in survivors' having a diminished capacity for expressing emotion. Survivors appeared emotionally flat or dull as they went through their day-to-day activities (Lifton, 1967/1991).

Death guilt referred to the guilt that survivors often felt over having survived the death camps or the bombings when friends and loved ones had not (Lifton, 1967/1991). On the one hand, they were relieved to have been spared; on the other hand, they were left wondering why they were so lucky. Death imprinting was the process whereby survivors became imprinted with the memory of the deaths of family, friends, and strangers (Lifton, 1967/1991). This memory could then be retriggered through symbolic reactivation (Lifton, 1967/1991) many years later through visits to or even images of the trauma sites as well as by images of traumatic events totally unrelated to the ones they had experienced. An example of this would be someone who flinches every time he or she hears loud fireworks or thunder and lightning because these sounds trigger memories of the sound of exploding bombs.

Noer (1993) suggested that Lifton's themes could be applied to surviving downsizing. For example, Noer (1993) observed that downsizing survivors might display psychic mutation by approaching day-to-day work business as usual or appearing

fatigued, sad, depressed, or anxious. The death imprint of colleagues suddenly let go could resurface if the organization went through another round of downsizing or even if surviving employees previously had gone through downsizing at a different organization. Death imprinting could occur even in the absence of an actual threat to one's job. Newspaper stories about downsizing or TV news commentaries about downsizing could symbolically reactivate or retrigger the death imprint of the original event, leaving surviving employees feeling listless, anxious, and vulnerable. Downsizing survivors also could experience death guilt, feeling both relieved yet guilty that they had survived the job cuts when friends and colleagues had not.

### **HR Professionals as Survivors and Downsizing Agents**

St. George (1998) described HR professionals as “the corporate lifeline that pulls employees from troubled waters” (p. 51). During times of organizational crisis, HR professionals are often thrust head first into toxic handler roles bearing the brunt of others' emotional pain and anxiety and trying to transform that pain into individual and organization healing (Frost, 2004). Toxic handlers “are not only caregivers who help heal people who hurt, they are also leaders who work with pain in ways that are designed to sustain or enhance performance in the workplace” (p. 115).

When downsizing occurs, managers and HR professionals must deal with the challenges that come with being both a survivor and a change agent. Not only must they manage the rational aspects of downsizing and change, they must also cope with their own emotional survivor reactions as well as those of the remaining workforce. This role has been referred to as the downsizing agent (Clair & DuFresne 2004; Clair et al., 2006; Grunberg et al., 2006) or layoff agent (Sronce & McKinley, 2006) role. Downsizing

agents include anyone involved with planning or implementing a downsizing event or helping the organization recover following the event (Clair & DuFresne, 2004; Gandolfi, 2008b). Those serving in this role usually do not do so voluntarily. Because of their organizational positions, they are expected to fulfill this role.

Being a downsizing agent places managers and HR professionals in positions of having to juggle the organization's and the workforce's well being (Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1997; Sronce & McKinley, 2006). Other employees may view this involvement negatively causing downsizing agents to feel stigmatized within the organization (Clair & DuFresne, 2004; Clair et al., 2006). Other survivors might go so far as to blame downsizing agents for the emotional trauma they are experiencing, viewing them as grim reapers (Clair & DuFresne, 2004; Clair et al., 2006), angels of death (Sahdev & Vinnecombe, 1998), industrial surgeons (Foote & Robinson, 1999), terminators (Clair et al., 2006), and executioners (Grunberg et al., 2006; Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1996).

In a qualitative study involving downsizing agents who worked for a U.S.-based financial organization, Clair & Dufresne (2004) explored how downsizing agents experienced and reacted to their roles. The downsizing agents included 40 employees from various functional areas and from different positional levels (e.g., executives, senior managers, directors, managers, managers, HR professionals, individual contributors). Thirty percent had experienced downsizing before or had been downsizing agents.

Clair and Dufresne's study revealed that being a downsizing agent was an emotionally taxing experience, especially for who were closest to the emotional epicenter of the event and for those who had close personal ties to employees being let go. Those closest to the emotional epicenter shared that having to make tough, uncertain decisions,

deal with employees' toxic emotions, and withhold information from others was emotionally taxing. Furthermore, many felt stigmatized because of their involvement in the event.

To cope, many downsizing agents engaged in emotional and physical distancing and in cognitive reframing techniques. Emotional distancing involved downsizing agents' psychologically cutting themselves off from others' negative emotions or depersonalizing the situation, for example, seeing people as names on a list and not as people. Physical distancing involved avoiding contact with other employees and sanitizing the downsizing process. This included keeping conversations with victims to a minimum and delivering termination notices sterilely using a scripted message. Cognitive reframing involved attempting to neutralize the negative situation and reframe it in more positive or neutral light. One way of doing this was to rationalize the business need for downsizing, viewing it as a difficult yet inevitable part of corporate life.

Clair et al. (2006) continued the research that Clair and Dufresne (2004) had started on downsizing agents. Their qualitative study confirmed what was found in the first study and also identified a number of factors that can place downsizing agents more at risk for suffering negative effects as they execute their role responsibilities. Some of the downsizing agents expressed ambivalence about whether or not their organizations needed to downsize. Others were not confident that the right people had been selected to be let go. Some downsizing agents felt that participating in downsizing events created a sense of divided loyalties for them as they struggled to do what the organization expected them to do in the role and to do what, in their opinion, was right for the employees. Organizations typically require downsizing agents to maintain confidentiality about the

decision to downsize as well as about other processes and decisions related to the event until the organization is ready to make a general announcement. For some of the downsizing agents, this led to their feeling dishonest and unable to live up to their personal values as well as to the norms of their chosen professions.

Some agents reported feeling stigmatized by others as employees blamed them for what was happening. Some stated that employees and colleagues went so far as to ignore or avoid them. Agents who had longer organizational tenure and had established close personal ties with fellow employees also experienced more stress than those with shorter tenure who had not. Some downsizing agents feared that terminated employees might find a way to retaliate. In some cases, they had received explicit threats; in others, it was just an unsubstantiated fear. Finally, emotional numbing from chronic exposure to downsizing events can put downsizing agents at risk. While it may be an effective coping mechanism, emotional numbing in the long-term can actually lead to emotional trauma, burnout, and stress.

Gandolfi (2008b) conducted an exploratory case study involving 20 employees from Australia's largest bank to verify, test, and extend Clair and Dufresne's research and conceptual framework related to downsizing executioners' experiences and reactions to their downsizing tasks. Similar to Clair and Dufresne's study, the 20 participants included people from various hierarchical levels and functional areas within the bank. The key criterion for participating was that participants needed to have been employed at the bank before, during, and after the downsizing event and to have served in an executioner role. Gandolfi's study supported Clair and Dufresne's results.

Molinsky and Margolis (2006) interviewed managers and HR professionals who had delivered layoff messages to employees at a Fortune 500 company that had undergone restructuring. The purpose of their study was to better understand the challenges managers and HR professionals faced when delivering the layoff news to those being let go. The company had done many things right: providing generous severance packages and outplacement assistance to those affected. Additionally, the company had provided procedural training to the downsizing agents including a script they could use to consistently deliver the message to the victims. The one thing the company had failed to adequately consider was how the downsizing agents' own emotions might affect the process.

The managers and HR professionals experienced anxiety, shame, sadness, sympathy, and even guilt. They attributed their reactions to their limited experiences in dealing with stressful workplace situations and to the personal relationships they had shared with many of the victims. To cope, they either openly expressed or suppressed their emotions. Indulging in their emotions led to their participating in five types of dysfunctional conversations with layoff victims: bargaining (i.e., negotiating and offering special accommodations that should not have been offered), cushioning (i.e., trying to soften the blow), unloading (i.e., becoming emotional themselves during the layoff meeting), arguing (i.e., fighting back), and mechanizing (i.e., delivering the message rigidly or too quickly). Bargaining, cushioning, unloading, and mechanizing were triggered by the manager's or HR professional's own emotions of anxiety, sympathy, or guilt, while the arguing was triggered by his or her own anger or frustration. Regardless

of conversation type, the outcome was counterproductive resulting in insensitive message delivery, inconsistent employee treatment, or non-delivery of the layoff message.

During layoff conversations, the downsizing agents used coping strategies such as (a) justifying organizational decisions, (b) quarantining their emotions, (c) releasing their emotions, or (d) diverting attention to other tasks. Justifying the company's downsizing decision helped them cope with guilt feelings. Quarantining emotions helped them stay focused on delivering the message. Releasing pent up emotions with colleagues in between meetings with victims helped them recover and prepare for subsequent meetings. Diverting attention away from their own emotions to other activities (e.g., focusing on the scripted downsizing conversation or thinking about things they needed to do with their families) was another coping mechanism used.

The authors concluded that while managers and HR professionals are those who employees turn to during times of distress to help lead the way forward, organizations do not adequately prepare or support them for the emotional aspects of dealing with organizational change and for helping others while also helping themselves. In the case of that study's organization, managers and HR professionals had opportunities to practice delivering the message through role-play situations; however, the practice setting did not adequately prepare them for the reality they encountered.

All of the studies discussed in this section provided insights about the reactions and experiences of downsizing agents; however, these studies focused on the agents' roles in planning for and executing terminations and not on their roles in facilitating change and recovery with survivors during and after downsizing. Additionally, while

HR/HRD professionals were among those interviewed, these studies did not focus specifically on the HRD professionals' experiences as survivors and SHRD facilitators.

Something that can positively or negatively influence how downsizing agents react to downsizing is their ideological beliefs. Sronce and McKinley (2006) used multiple regression analysis to test four hypotheses related to effects of layoff agency on four downsizing perceptions: the degree to which downsizing was perceived as (a) financially effective, (b) inevitable, (c) liberating for laid-off employees, and (d) a breach of the implied psychological contract. These hypotheses were tested, controlling for four variables: the respondent's previous layoff victim status, age, educational level, and ideological beliefs about business. The respondents included people with layoff agent experience as well as those without prior layoff agent experience (i.e., non-layoff agents).

Their study revealed that layoff agents perceived downsizing as more inevitable and were less inclined to perceive downsizing as a breach of the psychological contract than non-layoff agents. However, neither layoff agents nor non-layoff agents differed significantly in their perceptions of the degree to which downsizing was financially effective or to which those laid off found downsizing liberating. Furthermore, their study found that those employees who strongly believed in the ideologies of market competition, shareholder wealth, and employee self-reliance perceived downsizing as more financially effective and as less of a breach of the psychological contract than those who did not. Additionally, those who strongly believed in the ideologies of shareholder wealth and employee self-reliance also perceived downsizing as more liberating to those laid off. Strong believers in the ideology of employee worth, however, perceived downsizing as less inevitable and more of a breach of the psychological contract.



## **Strategic Human Resource Development**

This section begins with an examination of the concept of sustainable competitive advantage and how it may be attained through the identification, development, and leveraging of bundles of strategically valuable tangible and intangible resources. The concept of the resource-based view of the firm is discussed. This is followed by an overview of what it means to be strategic in HR and how HRD has evolved from being a traditional transactional function to one that can help the organization achieve strategic business results. The concept of strategic maturity in HRD is explored. Gilley and Maycunich's (2000) strategic HRD model conceptualizing HRD practice as the three overlapping practice domains of organizational performance, organizational learning, and organizational change is then discussed. Included in this discussion is an overview of concepts related to organizational performance, organizational learning, and organizational change.

### **Creating a Sustainable Competitive Advantage**

Globalization and technology have changed how companies compete (Garavan, Costine, & Heraty, 1995; Hitt, Keats, & DeMarie, 1998; Marquardt & Reynolds, 1994). Globalization, "the increasing connectedness and integration of markets, organizational work processes, and communication links that transcend national states" (Yorks, 2005, p. 294), has opened markets to companies that previously could not compete. Technology has allowed companies to expand operations beyond domestic borders and create more globally diverse workforces. Technology has also made it easier for competitors to duplicate each other's products and services and offer them to a broader customer base. Furthermore, customers have become more demanding, expecting faster, better, and less

expensive products and services, while also expecting the next innovation to become available soon after a product hits the market.

A company has a competitive advantage when it offers a valued product or service to its customers that current or potential competitors are not simultaneously offering (Barney, 1991). Porter (1998) identified three generic strategies that can be used singly or combined to create a competitive advantage: (a) the cost leadership, (b) differentiation, and (c) focus strategies. These three generic strategies approach competitive advantage from an external competitive environment perspective. The cost leadership strategy views competitive advantage as being derived from a company's ability to position itself as the low cost producer throughout the industry. The differentiation strategy views competitive advantage as being derived from a company's ability to create a product that is viewed throughout the industry as unique. The focus strategy views competitive advantage as being derived from a company's ability to focus on the needs of a particular buyer group, market, or product line.

While these three generic approaches to strategy can contribute to a company's competitive advantage, as markets have become more turbulent and competitive, companies have had to identify more unique and sustainable sources of competitive advantage. A sustainable competitive advantage (SCA) is what gives one company a superior position in the long-term over another (Barney, 1991; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Hatch & Dyer, 2004; Hoffman, 2000; Martin-de-Castro, et al., 2006). According to the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm, companies can create and sustain a competitive advantage by strategically leveraging unique bundles of tangible and intangible resources (Barney, 1991; Carmeli, 2004; Hatch & Dyer, 2004; Kaplan &

Norton, 2001). Resources are “special assets, skills, and capabilities” (Collis & Montgomery 1998, p. 72) companies have and use to create and deliver products and services (Sanchez, 2004). While Porter’s approach to competitive advantage focuses on the external competitive environment, the RBV of the firm combines the external competitive environment with the organization’s internal capabilities and competencies (Barney, 1991; Hax, 2009).

### **Leveraging Strategically Valuable Resources**

Tangible resources, a company’s “bricks and mortar” (Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003, p. 3), are visible, financially quantifiable, easily duplicated, and tend to depreciate over time (Becker et al., 2001; Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003). Buildings, equipment, and supplies (Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003) are examples of tangible resources. Intangible resources, however, are mostly invisible, difficult to quantify, not easily duplicated, and tend to appreciate over time with purposeful use (Becker et al., 2001; Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003). This includes a company’s culture (Hall, 1993), reputation (Hall, 1993), trade secrets (Hall, 1993), patents and licenses (Hall, 1993), business processes (Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003), managerial expertise (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997), ability to learn (Hatch & Dyer, 2004), organizational capabilities (Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson, Sandholtz, & Younger, 2008), and employee competencies (Ulrich et al., 2008).

Organizational capabilities are “intangible, hard-to-copy assets” (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2004, p. 5) that “represent the ways that people and resources are brought together to accomplish work” (p. 4). They are the “collective abilities of an organization... demonstrated in various ways by the organization’s members, though not dependent on any one individual” (Ulrich et al., 2008, p. 22). These capabilities or core

competencies (Hitt et al., 1998) “form the identity and personality of the organization by defining what it is good at and in the end, what it is” (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2004, p. 4). An organization’s ability to attract and retain top talent, learn and innovate, quickly bring a product or service to market, and create a shared mindset or brand identity are examples of organizational capabilities (Ulrich et al., 2008). Individual competencies (Ulrich et al., 2008), also referred to as individual capabilities (Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003), are “the knowledge, skills, and behaviors demonstrated by individuals in the course of getting their work done” (Ulrich et al., 2008, p. 22). These individual competencies are also referred to as human, social, positive psychological, and customer capital.

Human capital refers to employees’ training (Barney, 1991), judgments (Barney, 1991), intelligence (Barney, 1991), and ideas (Barney, 1991). Social capital includes resources “embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit” (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998, p. 243). Positive psychological capital refers to employees’ capacity to be hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and self-confident. These traits help them cope with and surmount ambiguity and organizational challenges (Luthans et al., 2004). Customer capital is similar to social capital but represents the breadth, depth, durability, and profitability of customer relationships (Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003).

A company’s sustainable competitive advantage (SCA) is ultimately derived from its ability to provide a unique value proposition. The value proposition describes to current and prospective customers why they should do business with one company over another (Ulrich et al., 2008). It “describes the context in which intangible assets...

become transformed into tangible outcomes such as customer retention, revenues from new products and services, and, ultimately, profits” (Kaplan & Norton, 2001, p. 11).

While unique bundles of tangible and intangible resources can help a company create and sustain a competitive advantage, to be strategically valuable, a resource must pass four tests. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the resource must be (a) valuable, (b) rare, (c) inimitable, and (d) non-substitutable (Boxall, 1998; Carmeli, 2004; Hatch & Dyer, 2004; Kristandl & Bontis, 2007; Barney, 1991). Valuable resources help the organization reduce or eliminate external threats and exploit external opportunities (Barney, 1991; Harrison & Kessels, 2004). Rare resources are those not owned by many competitors (Barney, 1991). Inimitable resources are those that competitors cannot easily copy (Barney, 1991). Non-substitutable resources are those that a competitor cannot easily replace with resources of equal or greater value (Barney, 1991).

Ulrich and Smallwood (2004) identified 11 organizational capabilities that are typically considered the building blocks for creating and sustaining a competitive advantage. They include the following: talent, speed, shared mind-set and coherent brand identity, accountability, collaboration, learning, leadership, customer connectivity, strategic unity, innovation, and efficiency. These capabilities are “the outcome of investments in staffing, training, compensation, communication, and other human resources areas” (p. 4). Ulrich and Smallwood (2004) have found that an organization’s competitive advantage is typically derived by excelling in up to 3 of the 11 capabilities; however, while excelling in all 11 is not required, organizations who do not at least maintain industry parity in those they do not excel may find themselves at a competitive disadvantage (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2004).

## **Being Strategic in Human Resources**

Some have estimated that intangible assets account for up to 85% of a company's sustainable competitive advantage (Becker et al., 2001). As a result, companies have begun to turn to their human resources (HR) departments to develop and harvest the strategic capabilities that can be derived through people. HR professionals have been charged to approach HR practices strategically and help the organization link people, strategy, and performance (Becker et al., 2001; Peterson, 2008). This has resulted in a blurring of the lines among HRM, HRD, and organizational development (OD) (Yorks, 2005). In strategically-oriented organizations, everything that HRM, HRD, and OD professionals do must be focused on one overarching goal--helping the organization grow, change, and remain competitive through effective workforce recruitment, deployment, retention, and development.

Yorks (2005) distinguished between strategically-focused HRM, HRD, and OD by defining each area's guiding principle. HRM's guiding principle is to recruit the right people and place them in the right jobs so that the organization can perform optimally and achieve strategic goals and objectives. HRD's guiding principle is to ensure that employees are continuously developed and that formal and informal learning systems are in place so that the organization can perform optimally and achieve strategic goals and objectives. OD's guiding principle is to ensure that the organizational processes and systems are aligned so that the organization can grow, develop, and perform optimally and achieve strategic goals and objectives.

The strategic approach to HR practice has added an element of complexity as HR professionals have begun transition from administrative to strategic roles. In a 20-year

longitudinal study involving five waves of data collection and over 40,000 HR professionals, including those in learning and development roles, Ulrich et al. (2008) identified six role competencies essential to the strategic HR professional's effectiveness. Strategic HR professionals must be (a) credible activists, (b) operational executors, (c) business allies, (d) talent managers/organizational designers, (e) culture and change stewards, and (f) strategic architects.

To become credible activists, HR professionals must build trustful relationships, demonstrate personal integrity, take risks, provide candid observations, and challenge assumptions that may be interfering with business success (Ulrich et al., 2008). The operational executor role reflects HR's more traditional role of administering HR practices (Ulrich et al., 2008). To be viewed as effective business allies, HR professionals must become business savvy and demonstrate an understanding of the organization's internal and external business environments. Additionally, they must develop a broad understanding of key functional areas supporting the business (e.g., finance, information technology, marketing, etc; Ulrich et al., 2008). Having this knowledge helps HR professionals become more effective talent managers/organizational designers and take a more proactive role in identifying and developing individual and organizational capabilities needed for present and future business success. This role also involves ensuring that the organization is properly designed (i.e., structure, policies, processes) to fully leverage these capabilities (Ulrich et al., 2008).

As culture/change stewards, HR professionals play a key role in shaping and communicating the organization's culture (Ulrich et al., 2008). The organization's culture includes its brand and identity as well as behaviors employees are expected to

demonstrate as members of the organizational community. HR professionals also must be actively involved in facilitating change initiatives, helping both individual employees and the organization manage change and be resilient. To be effective strategic architects, HR professionals must actively participate in the organization's strategic planning process, helping to shape, formulate, and execute business strategy. This also requires them to engage in forecasting and identifying industry trends so they can help the organization understand the human capabilities needed to remain competitive (Ulrich et al., 2008).

Similar to Ulrich et al.'s (2008) role competencies for strategic HR Professionals, Gilley & Maycunich (2000) distinguished between traditional and strategic roles of HRD professionals. Traditional roles include those that are transactional or activity-driven. For example, the roles of trainer, instructional designer, and needs analysts are traditional HRD roles (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000; Gilley & Gilley, 2003). Strategic roles include those that are transformational and results-driven. For example, relationship builders, strategists, organizational architects, performance engineers, political navigators, and change agent are transformational roles (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000; Gilley & Gilley, 2003).

### **Attaining Strategic Maturity in HRD**

In organizations where HRD is positioned strategically, HRD is "blended into the fabric of the organization" (Gilley & Gilley, 2003, p. 35). Learning and development are not HRD's sole responsibility; the responsibility is shared throughout the organization (Garavan 1991, 2007; Gilley & Gilley, 2003; McCracken & Wallace, 2000; Peterson, 2008). Employees are expected to continuously learn and proactively manage their own



development to remain employable (Carbery & Garavan, 2005; Gilley & Maycunich, 2000; Thijssen, Van der Heijden, & Rocco, 2008). Line managers and supervisors facilitate learning, champion employee development, and enable performance through ongoing feedback and coaching (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000). With line managers and supervisors taking more responsibility for day-to-day learning and development, HRD professionals can focus less on transactional roles and more on strategic or transformational roles (Gilley & Gilley, 2003; Gilley & Maycunich, 2000).

McCracken and Wallace (2000), building on Garavan's (1991) SHRD conceptualization, distinguished between (a) not very strategically mature, (b) quite strategically mature, and (c) very strategically mature HRD functions.

**Not very strategically mature.** Not very strategically mature HRD functions are those where learning and development initiatives are poorly integrated with the organization's mission and goals. HRD plays more of a reactive role with respect to business strategy, perhaps helping to implement strategy but not being actively involved in shaping strategy. HRD professionals administer and deliver training programs with minimal attention paid to whether or not those programs help the organization achieve desired business results. Training evaluations assess employee reactions to training or knowledge acquired through training. Little top management support for HRD exists and management commitment to or involvement in HRD initiatives is minimal. HRD plays a minimal role in shaping organizational culture. Little environmental scanning is done to shape the direction of HRD initiatives, and no learning culture is present.

**Quite strategically mature.** Quite strategically mature HRD functions are those with characteristics somewhere between not very strategically mature and very strategically mature organizations. HRD is somewhat integrated with the organization's mission and goals; however, HRD's role is still mainly reactive, supporting strategy implementation rather than shaping it. Top management supports HRD initiatives but does not lead them. Line managers support and are involved with HRD but are not strategic partners with HRD professionals. HRD professionals assume learning and change consultant roles. HRD shapes and is shaped by organizational culture, and more emphasis is placed on HRD evaluation.

**Very strategically mature.** Very strategically mature HRD functions are those that play a strong, proactive role in shaping organizational strategy, mission, and goals, while also supporting strategy implementation. HRD's focus is on developing and facilitating strategic change initiatives. A strong learning culture exists. Top management actively leads HRD initiatives. HRD professionals work as strategic partners with leaders, managers, and other HR professionals. They also play a strong role in influencing corporate culture, with culture helping to determine how HRD initiatives should be delivered and evaluated. HRD evaluation focuses on assessing the extent to which HRD initiatives contribute to the bottom line. Senior management plays a key role in conducting environmental scanning to identify internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats. HRD implications are assessed before organizational initiatives and changes are made.

## **Conceptualizing Strategic HRD (SHRD) Practice**

Gilley and Maycunich (2000) suggested that SHRD be viewed as three interdependent practice domains: (a) organizational performance, (b) organizational learning, and (c) organizational change.

**Organizational performance.** Organizational performance is a measure of how effectively an organization meets the needs and expectations of its stakeholders (Sluyter, 1997). More common measures of organizational performance are those tied to financial outcomes, customer outcomes, internal outcomes, and learning and growth outcomes. These four outcomes comprise the Balanced Scorecard approach to strategic planning and business performance (Kaplan & Norton, 2001). Financial outcomes include measures like profitability and return on investment (Hunger & Wheelen, 2003), return on equity, cost reduction, and cash flow (Kaplan & Norton, 2001). Customer outcomes include customer satisfaction, customer retention, and market share (Kaplan & Norton, 2001). Internal outcomes include costs, quality, and cycle time (Kaplan & Norton, 2001). Cycle time refers to the time it takes to complete a process from start to finish (Holton, 2003). Learning and growth outcomes include employee retention, employee satisfaction, and employee competencies (Kaplan & Norton, 2001). Additional performance measures include growth, research and development, employee welfare, and corporate social responsibility (Daft, 2003).

From an organizational performance perspective, HRD is strategic when it helps the organization identify and close performance gaps (Gilley & Gilley, 2003). As performance engineers, HRD professionals assess actual and desired organizational performance. Following this assessment, they can then recommend, design, and

implement both learning- and non-learning-related interventions to close those gaps (Gilley & Gilley, 2003).

**Organizational change.** Organizational change is essential to organizational survival (Neves & Caetano, 2006; Weber & Weber, 2001). Organizational change is change that “occurs within the system as a whole” (Miller, 2003, p. 52). Organizations must continually change to remain competitive in an increasingly unstable and ambiguous business environment. Being able to weather change and bounce back from adversity is critical to both individual and organizational survival. When people and organizations are unable to change, they are also unlikely to perform and to learn.

From an organizational change perspective, HRD is strategic when it helps the organization cope with both tactical and personal challenges that often result from change. As change agents or change consultants, HRD professionals help employees and the organization manage continuous and discontinuous change so that they can bounce back quickly with minimal negative impact on performance (Gilley & Gilley, 2003). Continuous change (Meyer, Brooks, & Goes, 1990; Norbutus, 2007; Tushman & O’Reilly, 1996; Weick & Quinn, 1999), also known as first-order (Gilley & Gilley, 2003; Meyer et al., 1990), incremental (Tushman & O’Reilly, 1996; Weick & Quinn, 1999), and evolutionary change (Norbutus, 2007; Tushman & O’Reilly, 1996; Weick & Quinn, 1999) occurs in stable environments (Meyer et al., 1990; Tushman & O’Reilly, 1996). An example of continuous change is when an organization streamlines a work process without changing its overall structure or strategic orientation.

Discontinuous change (Meyer et al., 1990; Norbutus, 2007; Tushman & O’Reilly, 1996; Weick & Quinn, 1999), also known as second-order (Gilley & Gilley, 2003; Meyer

et al., 1990), radical (Norbutus, 2007), episodic (Norbutus, 2007; Weick & Quinn, 1999), transformational (Gilley & Gilley, 2003), and revolutionary (Meyer et al., 1990; Norbutus, 2007; Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996; Weick & Quinn, 1999) change, occurs in unstable environments (Meyer et al., 1990; Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996). The organization undergoes periods of stability or equilibrium punctuated by disruptive change events (Garavan et al., 2005; Romanelli & Tushman, 1994; Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996). An example of discontinuous change is a merger and acquisition where the acquiring company makes sweeping changes to the acquired company's culture, structure, or product lines. This change is then followed by another period of relative stability punctuated by yet another disruption, for example, a divisional merger, product line discontinuation, or affiliate closure.

**Organizational learning.** In today's competitive business environment where change and ambiguity are constant, past and present successes do not ensure future success. Organizational learning is, therefore, essential for long-term survival (Friedman, Lipshitz, & Popper, 2005) and strategic renewal (Crossan & Berdrow, 2003; Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999). Organizational learning is learning "embedded in organizational-level systems, practices and procedures, informational technology, routines, the organizational culture, and other sources of institutional memory" (Yorks, 2005, p. 125). It is "a reflective process, played out by members at all levels of the organization that involves the collection of information from both the external and internal environments" (Fisher & White, 2000, p. 245).

Organizations as social entities are comprised of employees working together to create a collective consciousness, with learning occurring through interpersonal

connections between and among employees (Fisher & White, 2000). Learning occurs on four levels: (a) intrasubjective, (b) intersubjective, (c) generic, and (d) extrasubjective (Fisher & White, 2000; Griggs & Hyland, 2003). At the intrasubjective or individual level (Crossan et al., 1999), employees engage in individual sense-making (Crossan et al., 1999; Fisher & White, 2000; Griggs & Hyland, 2003) through processes of intuiting and interpreting (Crossan et al., 1999). At the intersubjective or group level (Crossan et al., 1999) shared sense-making and collective learning occur (Crossan et al., 1999; Fisher & White, 2000; Griggs & Hyland, 2003) through the process of integrating (Crossan et al., 1999). The generic level is where knowledge is stored and preserved. At the extrasubjective or organizational level (Crossan et al., 1999), learning and meaning become embedded into the organizational culture (Fisher & White, 2000; Griggs & Hyland, 2003) through the process of institutionalizing (Crossan et al., 1999).

As employees interact with each other, learning occurs through the dynamic exchange of tacit and explicit knowledge (Nonaka, 1994). Tacit knowledge is personal knowledge carried within that is often difficult to articulate to others (Nonaka, 1994). For example, being able to do something without giving it much thought (e.g., speaking a language, driving a car, using a computer keyboard) involve tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge, on the other hand, is knowledge that is easily shared, documented, codified, and stored (Nonaka, 1994). Knowledge contained in procedural manuals and knowledge stored in computer databases are examples of explicit knowledge.

Tacit and explicit knowledge interact through four processes--socialization, combination, externalization, and internalization (Nonaka, 1994) resulting in the continuous creation of knowledge creation, known as the knowledge spiral (Nonaka &

Takeuchi, 1995). Through socialization, tacit knowledge is shared and new tacit knowledge is created (Nonaka, 1994). An example of socialization is when employees work on a project, share experiences and expertise, and produce outcomes superior to anything each person could have achieved working alone. Through combination, explicit knowledge is shared and reconfigured into new explicit knowledge (Nonaka, 1994). An example of combination is when an organization produces its annual report by gathering information from various business segments and combining that information into a single document.

Through externalization, tacit knowledge is shared and converted into explicit knowledge (Nonaka, 1994). When one person describes a complex process to someone else who then creates documentation that helps others learn the process, externalization has occurred. Through internalization, explicit knowledge is converted into tacit knowledge (Nonaka, 1994). When new employees read procedural documentation and then are able to perform a task or process without referring to the documentation, internalization has occurred.

Knowledge sharing can result in two types of organizational learning—single loop and double loop (Argyris, 1980). Single loop learning is also referred to as adaptive learning (Harrison & Kessels, 2004; Marquardt & Reynolds, 1994; Senge, 1990), thermostat learning (Argyris, 1980), and survival learning (Hitt, 1995; Senge, 1990) because it helps the organization survive and adapt in the short-term. The focus is on sharing knowledge to incrementally detect and correct errors in existing processes and routines, without changing existing patterns or mindsets for problem solving (Argyris, 1980).

Double loop learning occurs when employees exchange knowledge and engage in critical reflection (Harrison & Kessels, 2003). Critical reflection is a process where individuals critically reflect on existing strategies and challenge deeply-rooted assumptions and norms related to those strategies, and then are willing to let go of the old to create something new (Argyris, 1980; Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006; Lipshitz, Freidman, & Popper, 2006; Marquardt & Reynolds, 1994; Van Woerkom, 2004; Yorks, 2005). Double-loop learning helps the organization overcome defensive routines (Argyris, 1992) and survive in the long-term (Argyris, 1980) so it can engage in self-renewal and innovation (Harrison & Kessels, 2004). Defensive routines are “policies or actions that prevent organizational players from experiencing embarrassment or threat while preventing the organization from uncovering the causes of the embarrassment or threat in order to reduce or get rid of them” (Argyris, 1992, Understanding Organizational Defensive Routines, ¶1). When defensive routines are present, employees might view certain topics as taboo and undiscussable, making it difficult for them to engage in critical reflection and double-loop learning.

Organizational learning requires organizations to balance exploration and exploitation processes (Crossan et al., 1999; March, 1991). Through exploration processes, organizations use new knowledge to take risks, experiment, innovate (March, 1991), rethink, redeploy, and search for new options (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). Through exploitation processes, organizations use existing knowledge to refine processes and find ways to be more efficient (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006; March, 1991). HRD is exploitation-focused when it helps the organization develop internal competencies in the short-term and function more efficiently by refining existing practices. HRD is exploration-focused



when it helps the organization identify competencies needed for future performance and develop long-term adaptive capacity through initiatives that promote tacit learning, knowledge management, experimentation and risk-taking, and change (Garavan, 2007).

While organizational learning cannot occur without individual learning and knowledge sharing, individual learning and knowledge sharing do not guarantee that organizational learning will take place (Senge, 1990). Lipshitz, Popper, and Friedman (2002) depicted productive organizational learning as consisting of five interdependent facets: (a) structural, (b) cultural, (c) psychological, (d) policy, and (e) contextual.

***Structural and cultural facets.*** The structural facet focuses on whether or not organizational learning mechanisms are in place to allow employees to collect, process, share, use, and disseminate knowledge. The cultural facet focuses on normative behaviors within the organizational culture that facilitate productive organizational learning (Lipshitz et al., 2002, 2006). Organizational learning is more likely to occur in transparent cultures that promote integrity, issue orientation, inquiry, and accountability (Lipshitz et al., 2002, 2006). In transparent cultures, employees are willing to share thoughts, feelings, and actions with others. When integrity exists, employees are open to giving and receiving feedback and considering contrary evidence. Issue orientation refers to employees' abilities to stay focused on the issues and consider all information obtained regardless of the information source's organizational stature. In a culture of inquiry, employees approach problems with curiosity and open-mindedness and persist in exploring issues until they are successfully resolved. In a culture where accountability is valued, employees demonstrate self-responsibility for learning and for applying lessons learned (Lipshitz et al., 2002, 2006).

***Psychological facet.*** The psychological facet focuses on the degree of psychological safety that exists within the organization as well as the degree to which employees are organizationally committed (Lipshitz et al., 2002, 2006). In psychologically safe environments, employees feel that it is safe to speak up and take risks without fear of negative repercussions (Carmeli, Brueller, & Dutton, 2009; Edmondson, 1999, 2002; Lipshitz et al., 2002, 2006). When employees feel psychologically safe, they are less likely to perceive that they will be judged incompetent when asking for help and more likely to actively seek feedback from others, speak up when mistakes occur, and test their own and others' assumptions (Carmeli et al., 2009; Edmondson, 1999, 2002; Lipshitz et al., 2002, 2006). Psychological safety, in turn, facilitates transparency, inquiry, and accountability. Organizationally committed employees have personal goals and values aligned with the organization's goals and values, facilitating knowledge sharing (Lipshitz et al., 2002, 2006).

***Policy facet.*** The policy facet focuses on how formal and informal organizational policies promote or hinder organizational learning (Lipshitz et al., 2002, 2006). Productive organizational learning is more likely to take place in organizations committed to employee development and where organizational policies encourage and support experimentation and knowledge sharing. The organizational culture must also be one where it is safe for employees to make errors "in the service of learning" (Lipshitz et al., 2002, p. 89). Additionally, the organization must develop and implement policies that demonstrate fairness, mutuality, and a commitment to the workforce.

***Contextual facet.*** The contextual facet focuses on direct and indirect features within the organizational or task environment that may or may not be under

management's control that can promote or inhibit productive organizational learning (Lipshitz et al., 2002, 2006). Included are error criticality, environmental uncertainty, task structure, proximity to core mission, and leadership commitment and support (Lipshitz et al., 2002, 2006). Error criticality refers to the severity of the costs associated with making errors. Environmental uncertainty refers to the rate of change and intensity of competition an organization faces. Task structure refers to how task organization facilitates or hinders cooperation and knowledge sharing among colleagues. Proximity to core mission refers to the degree to which tasks performed are connected to the organization's core mission. Leadership commitment and support refer to the extent to which the organization's leaders provide an infrastructure that supports knowledge sharing and the extent to which they monitor and recognize knowledge sharing (Lipshitz et al., 2002, 2006).

From an organizational learning perspective, HRD is strategic when it helps the organization continuously learn. HRD professionals who approach practice from this domain view their primary purpose as creating a learning culture (Gilley & Gilley, 2003; Gilley & Maycunich, 2000) by designing, implementing, and facilitating formal and informal organizational learning mechanisms (Lipshitz et al., 2002) and initiatives to help the organization solve performance-related problems (Gilley & Gilley, 2003). Examples of organizational learning mechanisms include performance reviews, communities of practice, project debriefs, and coaching networks (Lipshitz et al., 2002, 2006).

### **Downsizing's Impact on Strategic HRD**

This section begins with a discussion of how downsizing seems to negate the resource-based view of the firm. Next, downsizing's impact on organization change is

discussed. The section concludes with a discussion about downsizing's impact on organizational learning and performance.

### **Downsizing and the Resource-Based View of the Firm**

Whether justified or not, downsizing poses a paradox to the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm and the strategic view of people as rich sources of human, social, and positive psychological capital needed to create and sustain a competitive advantage. Downsizing signals that people are valued as instrumental means to organizational ends (Lamsa, 1999). No matter how experienced, knowledgeable, educated, talented, and committed to the organization that employees are, no matter how long their tenure, everyone is disposable (Appelbaum & Donia, 2000; Macky, 2006; Susskind et al., 1998; Uchitelle, 2006). Viewing people from an instrumental stance can damage social exchange relationships and hinder an organization's ability to change, learn, and perform.

### **Downsizing and Organizational Change**

The success or failure of organizational change efforts depends on how effectively organizations manage macro- and micro-level issues related to change (Walker, Armenakis, & Bernerth, 2007). Macro-level issues include content, context, and process-related issues. Content-related issues focus on the type of change being implemented: continuous or discontinuous change; context-related issues refer to preexisting forces in the organization's internal and external environments that can affect change implementation. Process-related issues refer to how the change will be introduced and implemented within the organizational community. Micro-level issues are those that have to do with people—individual differences such as personalities and

attitudes of change agents and change recipients and how they might facilitate or hinder the change effort.

Organizational change can be traumatic (Stuart, 1996) and disruptive (Susskind, 2007). Downsizing can disrupt stable routines contributing to reliable performance (Neves & Caetano, 2006) and leave surviving employees feeling vulnerable and unsafe (Stuart, 1996). Change requires employees to move out of their comfort zones (Armenakis, Bernerth, Pitts, & Walker, 2007; Engle & Arkowitz, 2008). This can create a sense of uncertainty (Diamond, 2008; Folger & Skarlicki, 1999; Self & Schraeder, 2009; Stuart, 2006), unpredictability, and uncontrollability (Engle & Arkowitz, 2008) resulting in decreased morale, risk-taking, sense of direction, commitment, and self-esteem along with increased anxiety, disorientation, stress, and insecurity (Stuart, 2006).

When change occurs, employees assess the change cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally (Armenakis et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2008; Oreg, 2006; Piderit, 2000). Cognitively, employees assess what they think about the change based on information available. Affectively, they assess how they feel about the change. Behaviorally, they decide what they intend to do about the change; in other words, will they support or resist it?

Major organizational change can provoke a reaction resulting in employees' using unconscious defense mechanisms to protect themselves from perceived harm (Bovey & Hede, 2001a, 2001b). Employee resistance is one of the key reasons why organizational change initiatives typically fail (Avey, Wernsing, & Luthans 2008; Bovey & Hede, 2001a, 2001b; Self & Schraeder, 2009). Resistance, however, is a natural defense mechanism stemming from fear of the unknown (Bovey & Hede, 2001a, 2001b) and

from people feeling threatened (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999; Kelman, 2006; Marshak, 2006) and perceiving that the change will create negative outcomes (Oreg, 2006) such as personal hardship or loss (Bovey & Hede, 2001a, 2001b; Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Folger & Skarlicki 1999). For instance, during a corporate reorganization, an employee may be required to take a demotion to remain employed. In addition to a loss in status, the person may also be required to take a pay cut. Even though the employee understands the rational need for the change, these losses might spark resistant behaviors.

Personal, organizational, and change-specific factors can contribute to employee resistance (Self & Schraeder, 2009). Personal factors include an individual's disposition, current life issues being dealt with, and concerns related to his or her personal external environment. Organizational factors include an organization's change history, employees' mistrust in the credibility of the organization or the change agent, and their mistrust of management. Change-related factors include perceptions that the change is not right or needed or that the change process is flawed, along with concerns employees may have about the interpersonal impact of the change.

Support and resistance can be displayed actively or passively and overtly or covertly (Bovey & Hede, 2001a). Active and overt supportive behaviors include initiating and embracing change, while active and overt resistant behaviors include opposing the change, arguing about it, and obstructing implementation. Active and covert supportive behaviors include supporting and being cooperative; active and covert resistant behaviors include stalling, dismantling, and undermining the change. Passive and overt supportive behaviors include agreeing to the change and accepting it, while passive and overt resistant behaviors include observing, refraining, and waiting. Passive

and covert supportive behaviors include giving in and complying with the change; passive and covert resistant behaviors include ignoring the change, withdrawing from it, and avoiding it (Bovey & Hede, 2001a). Other resistant behaviors include spreading rumors, using facts selectively, withholding information or support, sabotaging, or criticizing (Self & Schraeder, 2009).

Some have suggested that the term ambivalence be used in place of resistance (Engle & Arkowitz, 2008; Piderit, 2000). Unlike resistance, which involves opposing the change, employees who display ambivalence wrestle with intrapersonal and interpersonal factors that move them simultaneously towards and away from the change (Engle & Arkowitz, 2008; Piderit, 2000). For example, downsizing survivors might be relieved to have jobs, curious about the new organizational structure, hopeful that taking on new responsibilities will increase their value to the organization, and determined to help the organization succeed. Concurrently, they may be disheartened to have lost valued colleagues, worried about how they will get along with the new management team, and anxious about having to manage new responsibilities and increased workloads.

Organizational change has both overt and covert dimensions (Marshak, 2006). The overt dimension of change is what is transparent and placed on the table, in other words, the rationale or the business need for the change. The covert dimensions are those that are often hidden from view that can hinder change implementation. Covert dimensions include politics, inspirations, mindsets, and psychodynamics. Politics refers to individual and group needs, interests, and agendas that either push for change or suppress change. Inspirations include values-based and visionary aspirations that speak to the heart and that reflect the desired future state of the organization. Emotions include

both positive and negative feelings that the change might evoke or provoke. Mindsets include guiding beliefs and assumptions that can facilitate or limit possibilities for change. They provide a framework or lens through which individuals make sense of and interpret the world around them. Psychodynamics include anxiety-based and unconscious defenses that might surface when employees feel threatened by change.

Organizations often fail to inspire, enlist, and speak to the heart when making the case for change (Marshak, 2006). Considerable time and effort are often invested into making the business case for the change, with little time and effort invested in managing the human aspects of change (Bovey & Hede, 2001b; Marshak, 2006). Furthermore, emotional expression in organizations is often considered taboo and is, therefore, suppressed (Marshak, 2006). Subsequently, when employees do not quickly embrace change, they are labeled as resistant or difficult.

Bridges (2003) observed that it is not the change that creates a problem but the transition that follows. Change represents an external event; for instance, a company decides to close an affiliate, eliminate a product line, merge two divisions, or automate a process. Transition, however, involves an individual, internal psychological process that each person must go through to process and adjust to the change.

Transition provides the impetus for both individual and organizational renewal and consists of three phases: (a) endings, (b) the neutral zone, and (c) the new beginning (Bridges, 2003). Endings involve acknowledging and grieving for what was valued and lost because of the change. Once employees have made it through the ending phase, they can then enter the neutral zone. The neutral zone provides a safe space for employees to begin the emotional healing process and the psychological adjustment required to



internalize the change. Survivors in downsized organizations, for example, will begin to explore what the post-downsized work environment will look like and what their new roles will be. They can begin realigning and reorienting themselves to changed processes and the new environment. While in the neutral zone, employees might also experience a gamut of emotions; they might feel anxious, confused, and overwhelmed, as well as hopeful, curious, and creative.

Eventually, employees will be ready to leave the neutral zone and move into the final transition phase, the new beginning. Starting anew requires that employees let go of those parts of the past work environment that will no longer serve them well in the changed work environment. As employees emerge from the neutral zone to embrace the new beginning, they will do so with a new identity and renewed sense of purpose, and should be more equipped to tackle the challenges at hand and help the organization move forward.

What complicates transition is that no two employees will experience it in the same way or at the same pace (Bridges, 2003). In the case of downsizing, managers or HR professionals who were involved in planning the downsizing event might be weeks or months ahead of others in the transition process. Similarly, an employee who previously survived downsizing might move faster through the phases knowing what to expect than someone surviving downsizing for the first time. On the other hand, someone who previously went through a traumatic experience with downsizing might struggle with transition, the current situation resurfacing bad memories of the previous downsizing event.

## **Downsizing and Organizational Learning and Performance**

Knowledge can be a strategic resource (Sharkie, 2005) and a source of power to those who own it (Swift, 2007). When key employees leave organizations, voluntarily or involuntarily, their tacit knowledge (Fisher & White, 2000; Smith, 2001) and pieces of organizational memory (Fisher & White, 2000) are lost. Knowledge sharing is a form of social exchange (Swift, 2007) that is more apt to occur when a degree of trust and psychological safety exists within the work climate (Edmondson 1999, 2002; Sharkie, 2005). When organizations downsize, however, trust is among the first things to suffer (Deal & Kennedy, 2000). When trust is low or absent, employees may be more predisposed to keep important knowledge to themselves (Sharkie, 2005), especially if they perceive that sharing knowledge might threaten their own job security (Bollinger & Smith, 2001).

Downsizing “attacks the social fabric of the firm” (Shah, 2000, p. 111), altering formal and informal social network relationships through which knowledge is exchanged and organizational learning occurs (Shah, 2000). Downsizing disrupts interpersonal relationships, work patterns, communication flows (Shah, 2000), and learning at the intersubjective level where collective learning takes place (Griggs & Hyland, 2003). It creates structural holes in survivors’ social networks (Susskind, 2007; Susskind et al., 1998). Structural holes result when employees lose contact with key people who provided them with information needed to effectively perform their jobs (Susskind, 2007). Employees may belong to more than one social network within an organization; therefore, the loss of even one key employee can disrupt communication flows and knowledge sharing within many social networks (Fisher & White, 2000). Structural

holes will remain until the social network is reconfigured and surviving employees find adequate substitutes for lost network contacts (Shah, 2000; Susskind, 2007).

Network disruption not only can affect learning and performance but can also affect employee receptivity to change (Fisher & White, 2000; Griggs & Hyland, 2003; Shah, 2000; Susskind, 2007; Susskind et al., 1998). As structural holes grow, surviving employees may grow more detached from the organization and be less receptive to change (Susskind et al., 1998); similarly, those experiencing closure in structural holes, may be more receptive to change (Susskind et al., 2008); therefore, it is important for managers and HR professionals to find ways to close structural holes resulting from downsizing as quickly as possible.

Organizational learning is more likely to occur when employees are engaged in high quality work relationships (Carmeli et al., 2009) and feel psychologically safe (Carmeli et al., 2009; Edmondson, 1999, 2002). In high quality work relationships, employees experience high personal regard towards one another and a sense of mutuality (Carmeli et al., 2009). Additionally, these relationships have emotional carrying capacity, tensility, and connectivity (Carmeli et al., 2009).

Employees who have high personal regard for each other feel known, respected, and appreciated. Mutuality encourages each party to fully participate in the relationship and engage in self-disclosure. Relationships with emotional carrying capacity allow employees to comfortably exhibit a wide range of positive and negative emotions with others without fear or embarrassment. Tensile relationships are those that are resilient in the presence of tension and conflict. Connectivity allows employees to be open to new ideas, influences, and approaches.

Carmeli et al. (2009) conducted a study to determine if high quality work relationships facilitated psychological safety and expanded an organization's learning capacity. Participants included part-time undergraduate and graduate students who were employed full-time across a variety of industries. Participants completed surveys at two time intervals. The first survey focused on high quality work relationships. The second survey, administered 3 weeks later, focused on learning behaviors and psychological safety. Results indicated that experiences of high quality work relationships (i.e., mutuality and positive regard) were directly associated with learning behaviors and were indirectly associated with learning behaviors through psychological safety. Additionally, psychological safety partially mediated the effect of high quality work relationships on learning behaviors and fully mediated the capacity of high quality work relationships (i.e., tensility, connectivity, and emotional carrying capacity) and learning behaviors.

Both organizational change and learning may require individuals and organizations to unlearn old routines, processes, beliefs, and values, before they can learn anew (Akgun, Byrne, Lynn, & Keskin, 2007; Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Organizational learning and unlearning help an organization deal with environmental turbulence (Carmeli et al., 2009), that is, environmental change and unpredictability (Akgun et al., 2007). Organizational unlearning is a prerequisite for double loop organizational learning (Farrell & Mavondo, 2004). It provides the impetus for a "change in collective cognition and routines that coordinate organizational change processes" (Akgun et al., 2007, p. 800).

Unlearning is often more difficult, however, in organizations undergoing radical change than in organizations undergoing incremental change. The latter typically

requires employees to incrementally adjust existing routines and beliefs while the former typically requires employees to radically alter or even replace existing routines or beliefs (Akgun et al., 2007; Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Furthermore, individual unlearning must take place before organizational unlearning can occur (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). However, if employees are emotionally vested in old ways of thinking, believing, and doing, they may resist adopting new ways of thinking, believing, and doing even if their survival and the organization's survival depend on it (Akgun et al., 2007).

### **Summary**

In this chapter, conceptual and empirical literature related to the business and human sides of downsizing were discussed along with relevant literature related to strategic HRD (SHRD) and the competitive advantage of human resources. In Chapter 3, my interest in this study is shared, and the phenomenological research method and procedures used to conduct the study are discussed. Chapters 4 and 5 present the study's data and findings. Chapter 6 summarizes the study and presents a discussion of the findings, answers the research questions, and provides recommendations, for organizations, HRD practice, and research.

## CHAPTER III

### METHOD

This chapter begins with the problem statement, purpose of the study, and research questions presented in Chapter 1. The phenomenological method used for this study is then discussed, followed by a brief description of my interest in this study. The procedures that were used to select and recruit participants and to collect, manage, analyze, and synthesize the data are then discussed. Methods that were used to protect participants, integrity measures to establish the trustworthiness of the study's process and product, and possible limitations to this study are also discussed.

#### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how human resource development (HRD) professionals described the experience of surviving downsizing and facilitating strategic human resource development (SHRD) before, during, and/or after downsizing.

#### **Research Questions**

The main research question was as follows: How do HRD professionals perceive the experience of surviving downsizing and facilitating SHRD before, during, and/or after downsizing? Secondary questions include the following:

1. How do HRD professionals' perceptions of their survivor experiences influence their abilities to facilitate SHRD before, during, and/or after downsizing?
2. How do HRD professionals' perceptions of the social exchange relationship between employer and employee influence their own survivor experiences?

3. How do HRD professionals' perceptions of the social exchange relationship between employer and employee influence how they facilitate SHRD before, during, and/or after downsizing?

### **The Phenomenological Method**

“Phenomenological reflection is not introspective but retrospective” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 10). In other words, participants engage in the process of reflecting on and recollecting something that has already happened (Patton, 2002; Van Manen, 1990). The aim of phenomenology is to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of everyday experience (Patton, 2002) and to capture the commonalities or essences of individual experiences related to a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002).

Phenomenology seeks to describe and not to explain (Lester, 1999). The research question in a phenomenological study “does not seek to predict or to determine causal relationships” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105). The question “is illuminated through careful, comprehensive descriptions, [and] vivid and accurate renderings of the experience rather than measurements, ratings, or scores” (p. 105). Phenomenological studies explore the question, “What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). This study is phenomenological because it explores HRD professionals' experiences in the dual role of surviving downsizing and facilitating SHRD before, during, and/or after the downsizing event. This study was undertaken to capture the essence of this experience—what participants experienced in relation to the phenomenon, how they experienced it, and then to integrate each participant's experience with the phenomenon into a composite description representing the group as a whole.

In phenomenology, the researcher's own lived experience, assumptions, and biases related to the phenomenon are viewed as potential sources of data contamination (Patton, 2002). Researchers, therefore, are expected to engage in epoché, making personal biases, assumptions, and preconceptions known at the onset of the study and then bracketing or setting them aside for the study's duration (Moustakas, 1994). The goal is to reduce subjectivity and assume a "value neutral" (Berg, 2004, p. 105) position to better hear and interpret data gathered through the interviews.

### **My Interest in This Study**

My interest in exploring the experience of being a downsizing survivor and a SHRD facilitator arose from my own experience with this phenomenon. In the fall of 2003, my employer suddenly announced a reduction-in-force (RIF). The RIF resulted in involuntary job loss for about 15% of the workforce at the two main campuses of the company. The experience was traumatic for both victims and survivors. Although company affiliates had experienced reductions before and had even closed in previous years, this was the first time downsizing had hit home. When traumatic events strike at a distance, detachment is easy because it is happening to people "out there"; however, when traumatic events arrive at your front door, they are more difficult to brush off as merely ordinary events of business life.

As HRD professionals, my colleagues and I were thrust into three roles: survivors, caregivers, and change agents. These roles carried with them emotional struggles that we were ill-prepared to cope with. I felt listless, anxious, and depressed most of the time. I remember times when my colleagues and I asked questions like who cares for us, the caregivers? Who helps us cope with our own emotions before, during, and after



downsizing so that we can help others and the company move forward? Should we be expected to assume this role with little or no preparation? We really had no one to turn to except for each other and our manager who was on hand to listen and guide us through the process.

As survivors, we had to deal with our own sense of shock and despair over the reductions. As caregivers, we were charged with providing practical and emotional support to those leaving and those remaining. We developed and conducted resume and job search workshops for those who lost their jobs. As change agents, we were charged with helping the organization move forward. We conducted straight talk sessions and facilitated change management workshops. The straight talk sessions provided a forum for survivors to emotionally vent and share with us concerns they had about post-downsizing recovery as it related to their ability to do their day-to-day work. We created a thematic list of their concerns and shared them with the executive vice president of human resources.

While I believe that my organization did many things right throughout the process, I recall the experience as being emotionally draining and as one in which I lost my naiveté about the employee-employer relationship. I was raised to believe that if you worked hard, gave 100% of yourself and then some to your employer, and if you were committed to your employer, your reward would be long-term employment. What the experience revealed to me, however, is that organizations do whatever they feel they must do to survive. Tenure and commitment often do not enter into the equation.

I still derive enormous satisfaction from the work I do and give 100% plus of myself to my employer. However, I also am more guarded with respect to my ability to

trust and have more of a sense of emotional detachment. Sometimes, I feel like I am working on borrowed time; given enough time, eventually it will be my turn to be pink slipped whether I am ready or not. If I remain somewhat detached emotionally, should a time come when I am let go, perhaps it will not be as difficult to leave.

### **Procedures**

The procedures used to conduct this phenomenological study along with the rationale for using those procedures are described in this section. First, I will describe participant selection, sampling, and recruitment methods. Then I will describe the methods that I used to collect, manage, analyze, and synthesize data. The section will conclude with a description of how protection of participants was addressed and the integrity measures that were used to evaluate the trustworthiness of the data.

#### **Participant Selection**

Participants in this study included 15 HR professionals who identified themselves being in positions where they facilitated organizational change, organizational learning, and/or organization performance during the time that their organizations downsized, initially survived the event, and were involved in one or more phases of the event, that is, before, during, and/or after downsizing. They were selected using criterion and snowball sampling and were recruited through numerous channels.

**Criterion sampling.** Criterion sampling is the process of selecting individuals to participate in a study who meet specified criteria (Creswell, 2003; Patton 2002). This is an appropriate sampling method for this study as it was important to find participants who were intimately familiar with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). First, I sent participants information about the study and the criteria for participating (see Appendix

A). Those individuals who expressed an interest in participating in the study were asked to respond to an email address exclusively dedicated to this study. I then sent them a screening questionnaire (see Appendix B) via email.

The screening questionnaire consisted of demographic questions to elicit up-front information about prospective participants such as the person's job title, the industry in which he/she was employed, and the approximate number of jobs that were eliminated during downsizing. Individuals were to identify which aspects of SHRD that they were involved with in their respective roles, that is, organizational learning, organizational change, and/or organizational performance. I also asked them to identify the phases of the downsizing event that they participated in (i.e., before, during, and/or after) and the reason(s) that the organization downsized. I then reviewed the completed questionnaires, and contacted by email those individuals who best met established criteria to arrange an interview. The goal was to select people from a variety of industries who experienced downsizing while employed in an HR-related role, survived it, and were involved in helping their organizations move forward.

**Snowball sampling.** Snowball sampling involved having the study's participants recommend others for me to contact as prospective participants whom they believed met the criteria (Berg, 2004; Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002) to participate in this study. During active recruitment of prospective participants, I asked participants to recommend others who might be interested in participating in this study. Those contacted from snowball sampling went through the same screening process as other participants.

## **Participant Recruitment**

Prospective participants were recruited through various channels: (a) professional associations that HRD professionals typically belong to, (b) master's and doctoral students and candidates in Florida International University's (FIU) Adult Education and HRD (AE/HRD) program and in the doctoral dissertation group (c) professional colleagues, (d) Linked In, a social media site, and (e) the study's participants, (e) a friend affiliated with the field of HRD.

**Professional associations.** To recruit prospective participants for this study through professional associations, I contacted the presidents of the Miami and Fort Lauderdale sub-chapters of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) and asked them if I could speak at subchapter meetings and pass out information related to my study. Although I spoke several times at these meetings and several people expressed an interest in participating, I was only able to recruit one participant through this channel. A member of the Fort Lauderdale subchapter introduced me to this participant.

**Master's and doctoral students and candidates.** I asked master's and doctoral students/candidates at Florida International University enrolled in the Adult Education and Human Resource Development program and who belonged to the dissertation group that my chair, Dr. Tonette Rocco, facilitates to provide names of people whom I might contact who might qualify to participate in this study. Additionally, a call for participants was advertised through the Adult Education and HRD List Serve. This channel did not generate leads or participants.

**Professional colleagues.** The organization for which I work has many affiliates throughout the United States, each with its own HR department. I asked professional colleagues to direct me to people they knew outside of the organization who might qualify to participate in this study. Additionally, colleagues themselves expressed an interest in participating. I also contacted former colleagues to see if they could help me recruit participants. I recruited seven participants through this channel.

**LinkedIn.** A member of the Miami subchapter of ASTD suggested that I use the social media site, LinkedIn, to recruit participants. I posted a call for participants with numerous LinkedIn groups related to learning and development, organizational development, organizational change, organizational learning, and organizational performance. The groups I posted with also included chapters and subchapters of the International Society of Performance Improvement (ISPI), ASTD, and the South Florida Organizational Development Network (ODN). I recruited five participants through this channel.

**The study's participants.** As mentioned previously (see snowball sampling), as I interviewed participants, I asked them to identify others in the field who might also qualify to participate in this study. I recruited one participant through this channel.

**A friend affiliated with the field of HRD.** A friend/former Adult Education and HRD professor at another local university referred me to an adjunct professor in the program who worked for an organization that had recently undergone downsizing. This person qualified for and agreed to participate in the study.

## **Sample Size**

In naturalistic research such as phenomenology, the sample is not randomly selected nor is the goal to generalize findings from a sample to a population. Rather, the goal is to select a purposeful sample and find individuals who have intimately experienced and can fully elucidate a phenomenon (Patton, 2002). “Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources” (p. 244). Creswell (2007) suggested that up to 10 people be interviewed for phenomenological studies; Polkinghorne (1989) suggested 5 to 25 participants, and Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) suggested that between 6 to 12 may be adequate.

Starks and Trinidad (2007) observed that because phenomenology focuses on “common features of the lived experience...data from only a few individuals...who can provide a detailed account of their experience—might suffice to uncover its core elements...[with] typical sample size...from 1 to 10 persons” (p. 1375). Patton (2002) recommended that “qualitative sampling designs specify minimum samples based on expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon” (p. 246). For this study, I, therefore, selected 15 participants. This is within the range recommended by those who have written about sampling in phenomenological studies.

## **Participant Demographics**

Table 1 presents participant demographics. It includes their pseudonyms for this study, their age grouping, the number of years they had been working in HRD at the time of the interview, their position level within the downsized organization, the domains of SHRD they identified as being part of the roles, and the phases of downsizing that they

were involved with. In the table, organizational change is referred to as OC, organizational learning as OL, and organizational performance as OP. This demographic information came from two sources—the screening questionnaire that each participant completed and from the interviews where information was confirmed and elaborated upon.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Age Group	Years in HRD at Time of Interview	Position within Downsized Organization	SHRD Domains: OC, OL, or OP	Phases of Downsizing Involved In
Ashley	50+	27	Professional	OC, OL, OP	Before, During
Barbara	30-49	14	Manager	OC, OP	Before, During, After
Brad	50+	20	Professional	OC, OL, OP	Before, During, After
Carol	30-49	13	Professional	OC, OL	After
Carolyn	50+	25	Senior Manager	OC, OL, OP	Before, During, After
David	30-49	8	Manager	OC, OL, OP	Before, During, After
Jack	50+	17	Manager	OC, OL, OP	Before, During, After
Kat	30-49	15+	Professional	OC, OL, OP	Before, During, After

(continued)

Table 1

*Participant Demographics (continued)*

Pseudonym	Age Group	Years in HRD at Time of Interview	Position within Downsized Organization	SHRD Domains: OC, OL, or OP	Phases of Downsizing Involved In
Laura	30-49	18	Manager	OC, OL, OP	Before, During, After
Lucy	50+	11	Director	OC, OL, OP	Before, During, After
Matthew	30-39	23	Senior Manager	OC, OP	Before, During, After
Pat	30-49	20+	Director	OC, OL, OP	Before, During, After
Sophia	50+	22	Manager	OC, OL, OP	Before, During, After
Stacey	50+	25+	Director	OC, OL	Before, During, After
Tony	50+	30	Manager	OC, OL, OP	Before, During, After

Participants fell into two of three age groupings listed in the screening questionnaire (i.e., 30-49 years old and 50+ years old), and positions held ranged from professional to senior level. All but two participants were involved in all three phases of the downsizing events in their respective organizations. Among the participants, average tenure in the field of HRD was 19.2 years.

Table 2 also contains demographic information. Included in this table are the industries of the downsized organizations and the rationales given for downsizing. This information also came from the screening questionnaires and was confirmed during the interviews.



Table 2

*Industry Demographics and Rationales Given for Downsizing*

Pseudonym	Industry of Downsized Organization	Rationale(s) Given for Downsizing
Ashley	Financial Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal restructuring not resulting from a merger and acquisition</li> </ul>
Barbara	Insurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic downturn</li> </ul>
Brad	Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal restructuring not resulting from a merger and acquisition</li> <li>• Economic downturn</li> </ul>
Carol	Banking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Severe financial loss and resulting in elimination of jobs to improve financial condition</li> <li>• Economic downturn</li> </ul>
Carolyn	Construction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal restructuring not resulting from a merger and acquisition</li> <li>• Reengineering of a key business process</li> <li>• Economic downturn</li> </ul>
David	Healthcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Merger and acquisition resulting in elimination of redundant positions</li> </ul>
Jack	Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal restructuring not resulting from a merger and acquisition</li> <li>• Reengineering of a key business process</li> <li>• Economic downturn</li> </ul>

(continued)

Table 2

*Industry Demographics and Rationales Given for Downsizing (continued)*

Pseudonym	Industry of Downsized Organization	Rationale(s) for Downsizing
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Kat	Retail-Auto	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal restructuring not resulting from a merger and acquisition</li> <li>• Reengineering of a key business process</li> <li>• Severe financial loss and resulting in elimination of jobs to improve financial condition</li> <li>• Economic downturn</li> </ul>
Laura	Retail-Catalog Sales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selling of a piece of the business</li> </ul>
Lucy	Healthcare-Hospital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Company needed to “right-size” to meet net operating income expectations of parent company</li> </ul>
Matthew	eCommerce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moved part of business offshore</li> <li>• Outsourced a key function</li> <li>• Severe financial loss and resulting in elimination of jobs to improve financial condition</li> <li>• Economic downturn</li> </ul>
Pat	Internet Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal restructuring not resulting from a merger and acquisition</li> <li>• Moving part of the business offshore</li> <li>• Discontinuing a service or product line</li> </ul>
Sophia	Telecommunication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal restructuring not resulting from a merger and acquisition</li> <li>• Reengineering of a key business process</li> <li>• Severe financial loss and resulting in elimination of jobs to improve financial condition</li> <li>• Economic downturn</li> </ul>

(continued)

Table 2

*Industry Demographics and Rationales Given for Downsizing* (continued)

Pseudonym	Industry of Downsized Organization	Rationale(s) for Downsizing
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Stacey	Retail-Wholesale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Merger and acquisition resulting in elimination of redundant positions</li> <li>• Internal restructuring not resulting from a merger and acquisition</li> <li>• Selling a piece of the business</li> <li>• Moved part of business offshore</li> <li>• Economic downturn</li> </ul>
Tony	Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Merger and acquisition resulting in elimination of redundant positions</li> <li>• Severe financial loss and resulting in elimination of jobs to improve financial condition</li> <li>• Internal restructuring not resulting from a merger and acquisition</li> <li>• Reengineering of a key business process</li> <li>• Selling piece of the business</li> <li>• Outsourced a key function to a domestic provider</li> <li>• Moved part of business offshore</li> </ul>

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Two participants (Brad and Jack) worked for the same organization but in different areas of the organization with one working in the U.S. and the other working overseas. All organizations were in the private sector.

### **Data Collection**

Three forms of data collection were used: (a) the screening questionnaires, (b) interviews, and (c) a reflective journal.

**Screening questionnaire.** The screening questionnaire (see Appendix A) provided demographic information on participants and the downsized organizations. Additionally, it provided information about the SHRD domains that participants identified were within their roles, the phases of downsizing they participated in, and what they did in their downsizing roles.

**Interviews.** In-depth interviews are a key means to obtain data in phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2007). Rubin and Rubin (1995) described

qualitative interviewing as “a great adventure; every step of an interview brings new information and opens windows into the experiences of the people you meet” (p. 1). In this study, my goal was to capture participants’ experiences as downsizing survivors and SHRD facilitators by getting them to vividly recollect their downsizing experiences before, during, and after the event. I wanted to learn how their experiences affected them personally and professionally as survivors and SHRD facilitators.

Qualified participants who agreed to participate in this study were contacted by email and phone to arrange a date, time, and private meeting place for the interview. Nine participants were interviewed in person and six participants were interviewed by phone. The interviews lasted between 60 to 120 minutes and were digitally recorded and then transcribed using an independent transcriber.

A semi-structured interview guide was used that consisted of open-ended questions related to the experience of surviving downsizing and facilitating SHRD (see Appendix C). Open-ended questions are those that encourage the participant to provide detailed information rather than merely a brief response (Patton, 2002). Members of the doctoral dissertation group facilitated by my chair, as well as my dissertation committee and the Office of Graduate studies reviewed the questions in the interview guide and provided feedback resulting in interview guide revisions. Additionally, a former business colleague, now an academic, who had experienced the same downsizing event that prompted my interest in this study, agreed to pilot the interview guide. To pilot the interview guide, I interviewed her as if she were a participant in the study to check for question clarity and to better ensure that the questions would elicit the type of rich, nuanced information that was needed to answer the research questions. Furthermore, as

part of the epoché process of the phenomenological method I used, I also answered the questions myself and created a complete transcript of my own experience with this phenomenon.

While the semi-structured format allowed me to explore specific topics related to the downsizing experience, I remained open and flexible and took whatever path needed to be taken to fully explore, capture, and understand each person's experiences. To facilitate disclosure and dialogue, I used two types of questions: (a) main questions and (b) probing questions (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Main questions/statements encouraged participants to reflect on and speak at length (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) about their experiences as HRD professionals surviving downsizing and facilitating SHRD. For instance, "If you were to describe your survivor experience to an outsider, what metaphors, analogies, images, or pictures come to mind?" Probing questions were used to follow up on information already shared and to add clarity and depth to participants' answers to the main questions (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). For example, "So in terms of having that postpartum depression following the downsizing, how if any, did you find it impacting your productivity or your interactions with others in the organization in your role?"

**Reflective journal.** During the interviews, I kept a written record of my own observations of the participants' verbal and nonverbal behaviors while talking about downsizing. I also noted my own insights, thoughts, and feelings that surfaced during the interviews. After each recorded interview and while re-listening to the audio files, I transcribed my observational notes and added my own reflections on points that participants made during the interviews. "This period after an interview...is a critical

time of reflection and elaboration. It is a time of quality control to guarantee that the data obtained will be useful, reliable, and authentic” (Patton, 2002, p. 384). Some of my notes were kept in an MS Word file; other notes were added as comments appearing throughout the transcripts themselves. These observational notes helped me develop probing questions during the interviews. They were also useful during phenomenological reduction (i.e., the process of making meaning from the data) and synthesis phases of the study by helping me provide vivid descriptions of the participants’ experiences. For instance, during one interview, a participant began to cry. I added this as a bracketed note in the transcript and reflected further on how emotional a recollection of downsizing can be even months after the event occurred.

### **Data Management**

After the interviews were conducted, a transcriptionist transcribed the audio files verbatim. I then checked each transcript for accuracy by listening to the audio files while reading the transcripts.

All data were managed according to the FIU IRB Data Management/Security Guidelines. File-protected computer folders were created for each participant. All screening questionnaires, interview transcripts, journal entries, personal documents, and email correspondence were stored in respective folders. All computer files were password -protected and backed up on other drives. All documentation produced in this study, interview audio files, and backups will be maintained for 3 years in a locked file cabinet in my home office to which only I have access.

### **Data Analysis and Synthesis**

Creswell's (2007) simplified version of Moustakas's (1994) Modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data was used to analyze and synthesize the data. The steps include:

1. Providing a full description of the researcher's experience with the phenomenon (i.e., bracketing the experience, also referred to as epoché).
2. Providing full descriptions of each participant's personal experience with the phenomenon.
3. Developing a list of significant statements from interview transcripts (i.e., horizontalizing the data); treating each statement as having equal value; developing a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements.
4. Grouping significant statements into meaning units or themes.
5. Creating a textural description of participants' experiences; that is, describing what they experienced, including verbatim quotes as examples.
6. Creating a structural description of participants' experiences; that is, describing how participants experienced the phenomenon including the setting and context in which they experienced the phenomenon, including verbatim quotes as examples..
7. Creating a blended, composite textural/structural description of the phenomenon that captures the essence or essences of the collective experience.

In this study, Steps 5 and 6 were combined. The verbatim quotes related to the textural and structural aspects of participants' experiences are included under the themes and subthemes that emerged through the data analysis process.

### **Inductive Analysis**

Preliminary coding was done through the qualitative research software program Atlas ti. This process involved loading the transcript documents into Atlas ti as rich text files, reading through each transcript, and assigning labels or codes to significant statements based on the statement's content. For example, if a participant mentioned that employees were shocked when downsizing was announced, the code name shock would be assigned to the statement. That code name would then be assigned to all statements across all transcripts that referenced the word shock. All shock statements were then further divided into whether shock was an employee emotion or a participant emotion. This coding process resulted in close to 700 codes initially being assigned to statements. The goal then became to collapse these codes into groupings that would then help to identify themes and subthemes. As I read the transcripts using Atlas ti, I also used the comments feature as a reflective journal to reflect on the statements and capture my thoughts.

After completing the initial coding and before identifying themes, in an effort to further manage my data, I pulled some key words from interview questions and began to further categorize coded statements. For example, some of the interview questions asked participants to paint a picture of what it was like to be a survivor and change agent using analogies or metaphors if they could think of them. One participant commented that she felt like Wonder Woman as she deflected and juggled her own emotions and others' emotions. This was coded as SHRD/Surv Metaphor: Wonder Woman Super Hero.

When I met with my chair and the dissertation group in March 2011 to review my coding process, my chair expressed concern that by using interview question keywords as organizers, I was moving into a deductive data analysis, which was not something called



for in my method. Dr. Rocco recommended that I step away from the data for a few months and then re-analyze and re-code the transcripts using an inductive approach.

I set the data aside until November 2011 and chose to not re-code the transcripts through Atlas ti but to use a manual process through MS Word. First, I made copies of all of the original MS Word transcript files. I went through each transcript and blacked out the interview questions so that all that remained was the participants' answers forming running narratives rather than question and answer transcript documents. This was done to keep my focus on the participants' experiences and perceptions and not on the research questions.

As I read each participant's narrative, I took notes using the MS Word comments feature, and after I fully read each transcript, I spent quiet time reflecting on what was shared and capturing in a table things had left an impression on me. I did this for each participant and then compared my impressions across participants and arrived at preliminary themes and subthemes. I also referred to the comments files I had created in Atlas ti. My chair and I then met to discuss my themes and subthemes and the process used to arrive at them, and I was given the green light to proceed with writing up my findings.

### **Protection of Participants**

After agreeing to participate in the study, each participant was asked to sign an Informed Consent letter explaining the purpose of the study, expectations, how data would be reported, and how the dissertation and related publications might be used in the future (see Appendix D). This letter also advised participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Participants were advised to select locations where they could speak freely and confidentially and without extraneous noise and interruption. Organizational names were not used in the study. Whenever a participant mentioned the organization by name, the designation [the company] or something similar was used in place of the organization's name. Pseudonyms selected by the participants were used instead of their actual names.

### **Integrity Measures**

In qualitative research, the integrity of the study is a measure of its trustworthiness. Trustworthiness refers to the researcher's ability to "persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of the inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). Three criteria were used to establish the trustworthiness of the study's process and product: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, and (c) dependability.

**Credibility strategies.** Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings are believable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Four strategies were used to enhance the study's credibility: (a) conducting member checks, (b) conducting peer reviews, (c) engaging in epoché, and (d) maintaining a reflective journal.

**Conducting member checks.** Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintained that member checking "is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). Member checking involves sharing "data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions...[with] participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account" (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). Participants were asked to review their respective interview transcripts and check them for accuracy. Changes were made as needed based on this review process.

Participants were sent Chapters 4 and 5 that included quotes used from their transcripts related to the themes and subthemes. I also invited them to read the composite textural-structural description of the phenomenon presented in Chapter 6. None of the participants who read the findings and composite textural-structural description objected to the content or my interpretation of the data. Several affirmed that the findings and the discussion resonated with them and my interpretation of their quotes was accurate. One participant (Brad) commented, “Wow! Very impressive.”

***Conducting peer reviews.*** Peer review is the process of having one’s peers review methods used, meanings derived, and interpretations made (Creswell, 2007). In this study, peer review occurred multiple times. First, the interview guide was sent to the dissertation group and to my dissertation committee for feedback. Based on their feedback, the interview guide was revised. The dissertation group consisted of other doctoral candidates and students and was facilitated by my chair, Dr. Tonette Rocco. Second, following preliminary coding of data, the process I used was reviewed with my chair and peers at a dissertation group meeting. This process resulted in my re-doing my data analysis (see Inductive Analysis section). Following my identification of themes and subthemes, my chair and I reviewed the process used to arrive at them, and I also met with a peer who reviewed the process and a selection of verbatim quotes that spoke to each theme and subtheme. The dissertation peer group and individual peers reviewed my findings chapters and discussion chapter. Several changes were made based on their feedback.

***Engaging in epoché.*** Epoché is a process in which the researcher clarifies his or her own experience with the phenomenon and then brackets or sets aside his or her biases

and preconceptions of the experience (Moustakas, 1994) to approach the phenomenon with a fresh perspective (Creswell, 2007). This was done before interviewing participants. I described my interest in the study earlier in this chapter. Furthermore, as part of the phenomenological method I am using, I created a full transcript of my own experience with the phenomenon by answering the same interview questions that were posed to participants. This was done before I began the participant interviews.

***Maintaining a reflective journal.*** As discussed under Data Collection, throughout the study, I maintained a reflective journal to record my own observations of participants' verbal and nonverbal behaviors while talking about downsizing. I also noted my own insights, thoughts, and feelings that surfaced during the interviews.

**Transferability strategy.** Transferability is the extent to which another person can conclude that the findings might apply to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This is the qualitative equivalent of generalizability. While qualitative researchers cannot generalize from a sample to a population, they can strive for reader generalizability, in other words, the extent to which readers can apply the findings to their own contexts. In this study, transferability was enhanced by providing rich, thick description (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002) that enhances the researcher's ability to "transport readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences" (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). Thick description was provided through the structural and textural descriptions of participants' experiences with the phenomenon. Additionally, a colleague of mine read the two findings chapters, Chapters 4 and 5, and was able to apply the findings to a voluntary separation that was underway within the organization.

**Dependability strategy.** Dependability refers to the extent to which the results make sense (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002). In other words, “the results are consistent with the data collected” (Merriam, 2002, p. 27). Throughout this study, I created an audit trail by providing detailed descriptions of processes used to collect data, derive themes, and make decisions. Dependability was verified through the peer review process described previously. Originally, confirmability, the extent to which others can confirm or authenticate the study’s results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002), was to be verified through an external auditor when the study was complete. However, my chair decided this was unnecessary since more than adequate integrity measures had already been used throughout the study.

### **Limitations**

This study focused on participants' perceptions of a phenomenon. Perceptions are by nature subjective. Although participants appeared to be transparent when sharing their perceptions, some may have been guarded when discussing different aspects of their experiences.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the procedures I used to conduct this phenomenological study. Included were the methods that were used to recruit participants and sampling methods that were used to select participants, namely, criterion and snowball sampling. Participants were interviewed in person and by phone using semi-structured interviews. Data were collected, analyzed, and synthesized using a slightly modified version of Creswell's (2007) simplified version of Moustakas's (1994) Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data. A description of how participants were protected and the integrity measures used to establish the trustworthiness of the data were discussed. In Chapter 4, I will present two of the four themes that emerged through an inductive data analysis. These themes will be illuminated using verbatim quotes from participants' interviews.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS: PART 1

In this chapter, the findings of the phenomenological study on the perceptions of HRD professionals as downsizing survivors and facilitators of strategic HRD (i.e., organizational change, organizational learning, and organizational performance) in the context of downsizing are presented. The findings in this chapter emerged from an inductive data analysis. Four key themes emerged through the data analysis: (a) the emotionality of downsizing, (b) feeling responsible, (c) choice and control, and (d) possibilities for growth.

The findings are divided between two chapters. This chapter covers the first two themes—the emotionality of downsizing and feeling responsible, which deal with more of the matters of the heart related to the agent-survivor role. Chapter 5 covers the latter two themes—choice and control and possibilities for growth. These two themes are related to more pragmatic aspects of the experience or matters of the mind. Verbatim quotes from participants' interview transcripts are included to illustrate themes and subthemes and illuminate the textural aspects of the phenomenon, that is, what was experienced and the structural aspects of the phenomenon, that is, how the phenomenon was experienced—the contextual elements. When quotations from the interview transcripts are used to support findings, participants' pseudonyms and line numbers from the transcripts are provided (e.g., Pat, Lines 272-279). Ellipses appear when words have been omitted from a quote or only pieces of the quote specifically related to the theme or subtheme are used.

## **The Emotionality of Downsizing**

In the context of this study, emotionality refers to the emotional nature of the downsizing event and the emotions participants personally experienced and encountered among the workforce as they planned, implemented, and recovered from downsizing. Participants experienced both positive and negative emotions related to the downsizing event while also helping others manage their emotions. Subthemes include the following: (a) feeling dishonest, (b) experiencing survivor guilt (c) experiencing doubt, (d) experiencing loss, (e) experiencing apprehension, (f) experiencing chaos, and (g) experiencing shock.

### **Feeling Dishonest**

Being involved in downsizing events provides those engaged in planning and implementation with insider information. HR professionals in those roles are often expected to maintain confidentiality until the organization is ready to share what will happen with the greater organizational community. Some participants worked for organizations that controlled information flow but also shared as much information as they could with employees. Others worked in organizations where downsizing information was tightly controlled and was not shared with employees until announcement day, which, in some instances, was also the last work day for impacted employees. Some participants knew before other employees that downsizing was imminent and were involved in developing processes that would be used in implementing the downsizing; others learned about the downsizing event after decisions had already been made and were asked to help with implementation.



Having information that others did not have sometimes felt like a double-edged sword. Being aware of the organization's intentions and being involved in planning and implementation processes reduced some of the uncertainty that others who were unaware experienced. However, being aware of organizational intentions and having knowledge before others also created discomfort for some participants. Pat spoke of being uncomfortable; Barbara felt guilty; Barbara, David, and Pat felt sneaky or underhanded; Matthew and Tony felt dishonest; Tony also mentioned feeling unfair.

Pat shared that it was uncomfortable for her to plan in secret, especially when rumors started to circulate. Employees nicknamed the fifth floor where Pat and her team worked behind the scenes creating severance packages as "Slaughterhouse 5" (Line 194).

Pat shared:

It was kind of uncomfortable because you're going down to the fifth floor and trying to act like nothing's going on and then going back up to 7 [floor] to your regular office. . .everybody really knew what was going on, and yet no one could talk about it" (Lines 198-201).

Barbara felt guilty that she knew who would be severed and why and was unable to share this information with colleagues who were to be severed.

There's the guilt of [colleagues' asking] "Why was it me? Why did I get picked?" And so for me personally, I did have some of that knowledge. I did know why some of these people [were picked], especially my close friends, and actually having to work behind the scenes to get this prepared and still having lunch with them several times a week while this is going on...it was tough. (Lines 272-275, 279)

Barbara also made a comment that suggested she felt a little underhanded or sneaky. "So there is a sense of knowing that I'm providing information to people that are going to make decisions about your future that you have no way of defending yourself against" (Lines 305-307).

David reflected on the pros and cons of planning in secret. A pro was not worrying employees about something that had not yet been implemented. A con was planning something that was going to negatively impact employees' lives in a big way.

The positive side of it is that we were trying to make sure that we were tucked away. . .where we could have these conversations in a safe place that no one was going to hear or no one was going to needlessly get pre-warned. . .The other side of the coin is sometimes you kind of felt like you were being underhanded and sneaky because people are out there like working their best not knowing what's coming down the pike, and you're behind closed doors. And it's almost like you're back there planning this big bad thing that's going to happen. (Lines 460-467)

Pat, like David, experienced discomfort related to working behind closed doors. She likened her role to being "...a little bit like a covert SWAT team or something . . . just trying to do everything behind the scenes and not able to talk to other employees about what's going on" (Lines 750, 754-755).

Matthew prided himself on being upfront and transparent. For Matthew, keeping secrets, especially when employees suspected something was going to happen and being unable to respond to their questions was personally challenging for him and went against the grain of how he saw himself.

I would say the biggest personal challenge was sometimes the lack of transparency or the confidentiality that had to be maintained. . .when employees are saying to you, 'Look we see that you stopped posting jobs. We see that the HR team is meeting behind closed doors. We know that this specific conference room is being used, which has been used in the past during downsizings. . .the employees would see the signs and actually confront you. That was just challenging personally because. . .[my] normal style would be to be much more up front and transparent. But of course, in this situation because of the size of the impact and other things, you couldn't be. (Lines 239-246)

Tony, like Matthew, felt dishonest for not sharing with others what was going to happen. He described it as “gut-wrenching” (Line 539) especially with his own staff who questioned why he would disappear for long periods of time.

I was always a manager of being very open and very honest...I would within reason tell my people what’s going on . . . That was gut-wrenching for me knowing that I knew what was coming down and couldn’t say anything . . . I would disappear sometimes for long periods of time [in] planning meetings and such, and people wanted to know where I was. And I kind of just had to dance around it. . .this was almost like I knew too much or I knew so much that it was a little difficult on me not being able to share that. Yeah, it was almost as if I was not being fair and open to my employees, and I had to really watch what I was saying. It was tough. (Lines 516-521, 524-525, 529-530)

For both Barbara and Tony, keeping secrets carried consequences. Both encountered resentment from their own direct reports once their organizations announced and began to implement downsizing. Barbara recalled her direct reports’ reactions when they learned of her involvement in the event.

I had two individuals that reported in to me that I couldn’t share this with. I mean it was kept that close to the veil because it had to happen so quickly, and they were asking me, ‘Why are you having all these closed door meetings? Why are you pulling all this data?’ and having to keep it from them. So there was some resentment after the fact from them. (Lines 288-292)

Tony had become aware months before the actual downsizing event that the organization planned to offshore a division to save money. He had been asked to sign a document similar to a non-disclosure agreement that prevented him from speaking to others about the organization’s intentions.

I had to sign a . . .non-disclosure kind of thing. I had to sign that because I was not only in OD, I was managing the Training & Development function. . .they wanted to see what we had in terms of [training programs] so that if we were to outsource it, what kind of materials would the vendor use to train people. And so they brought me in very early, and so I knew this well in advance that it was coming down. (Lines 137-138, 142-146)

Tony described the resentment as a pull back that he experienced with his employees when they found out what was happening within the organization and how he had answered them dishonestly when they asked him where he was going and what he was doing. He appealed to their sense of reason and understanding that he had no choice but to be secretive because of the non-disclosure agreement he had signed.

I almost sensed a kind of a pull back like, ‘Wow, you were not open with us’ . . . When I did make the announcement because things were slipping out on the organization, I had to be very clear with them that I signed a non-disclosure agreement, and I could not reveal anything. . . I apologized for when I would disappear for an hour or fly out to a particular city and say, ‘‘Well, I’m just going out there to meet with them’’ and was a little bit vague. They suspected something, but they didn’t know what. (Lines 539-544)

Being expected to plan for downsizing in secret created discomfort for some participants and created feelings of guilt, being dishonest, being underhanded, and being unfair. During downsizing implementation, some participants perceived that being secretive resulted in some colleagues and direct reports being resentful.

### **Experiencing Guilt**

Downsizing as an organizational trauma or crisis impacts the entire workforce resulting in those who stay and those who leave. Those who stay with an organization following a downsizing event often experience what has been referenced in the literature as survivor guilt (Appelbaum & Donia, 2000; Noer, 1993). Survivor guilt is part of a syndrome of emotions that downsizing survivors often experience. It has been likened to the guilt that people often have experienced surviving a tragic accident or a horrific event like the Holocaust (Appelbaum & Donia, 2000; Noer, 1993; Stein, 1997). Survivors are often left with ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, they may feel lucky to have survived; on the other hand, they may wonder why they were so lucky or why they

deserved to stay more than others. Other emotions that accompanied some participants' survivor guilt were fear and anger.

Ashley, Kat, Sophia, and Tony experienced survivor guilt that stemmed from their not feeling any more capable or deserving to stay than those who were downsized.

Ashley's survivor guilt was accompanied by fear that eventually it would be her turn to go. "You go through the guilt. You wonder why did other people get it – it's a big thing, and then the next thing is the fear; you flip into 'When will it be me? What's next?' (Lines 547-548).

Kat was relieved that she still had a job but upset that "the smart cookies" (Lines 380-381), the "extraordinary" (Line 381) ones, were let go. When she tried to find out why she had survived and the smart cookies didn't, she was told to drop the issue.

When I found out who the impacted were, I was really upset. . .we were a group of five for the region that I was involved in, and the two that were impacted, I used to call them the smart cookies because they were extraordinary. . .and I did ask, and I got the stamped response that everybody got, 'economic impact,' and I pushed a little bit and I was told to let it go. (Lines 378-381, 385-386)

Sophia reflected on how in the past, she had been the one to lose her job while others had survived. Now the roles were reversed. She shared how even though she may not have articulated the feeling of guilt that it was still there in the in the background.

I was a person who lost their job, and now I'm a person who survived, and seeing all these people leave is painful because you know what they're going to go through, you know what they're going through at that moment, you've been there, and it's painful because there is that sense of guilt. I don't know that anybody truly acknowledges it; I can't tell you that I acknowledged it to say, "Oh my God, I feel guilty"; not to that extent, but there's something back there when you see people losing [their jobs]. . .You can't help but feel really bad for them and almost have that sense of guilt that they're leaving, and I'm still here. . .When you know people well enough, and you know what they're capable of, you almost feel like they're as good as I am; they do their job as well as I do; then why did this person get picked and why not me?" (Lines 231-236, 242-243, 248-250)

Tony also experienced survivor guilt that partly stemmed from his struggle related to worthiness. However, his guilt went a step beyond the typical “why not me?” He also felt somewhat responsible for people losing their jobs.

There was a little bit of a sense of guilt. It was almost like you’re involved in a plane crash, and you survived, and you kept asking, “Wow, that could’ve been me just as easy as them!” There was a little bit of guilt feeling like “Why not me? What did they do to deserve this? I don’t deserve staying here anymore than they deserve leaving.” [It was]. . .almost like losing family members because I didn’t know the ground level employees; I knew a lot of the supervisory people. . . [who] were from other parts of the organization that moved into there. . .and there was a huge amount of guilt and remorse because those people that went into that division years ago would still be here if they wouldn’t have gone into there. So there was a great deal of feeling of people don’t deserve this. (Lines 411-419)

David’s guilt was different from Ashley’s, Kat’s, Sophia’s, and Tony’s guilt. His guilt stemmed his knowing that because he had an instrumental role in relocating the business to the West coast, he had more time as a survivor to make his own professional and personal decisions than those who were impacted as a result of the move.

The most difficult part for me was knowing that you were going to be there longer than some of the other ones. . .you knew you had a little more time to figure out what you were going to do next, whereas some of them had shorter horizons . . .you knew that they were being affected faster, and then since you knew them, it bothered me knowing that I was safe, but they had kids. . .and they were going to be really pressed to find a job. (Lines 287-292)

Surviving downsizing resulted in some participants experiencing guilt that stemmed from their feeling that others equally deserving to stay had been severed. Another participant experienced guilt related to feeling responsible that others had lost their jobs. One participant also experienced guilt for having more time to decide on next steps for himself career-wise by virtue of his role in planning for and implementing downsizing.

## Experiencing Doubt

Doubt is the state of being uncertain, skeptical, or undecided about something (Doubt, 1982). Brad, Carolyn, and Tony expressed doubt in recommendations they had made to senior management related to the downsizing event. Brad had helped design the process by which the 2009 downsizing in his organization would cascade throughout the organization. While he was glad to have been in a position to influence processes, he questioned if the process used was the right one or the best one.

We tried to do it differently in this last round, and to what extent we succeeded was. . . a little ragged. One of the problems was--and I'm not sure what the right answer is--but we decided to have the OD and the HR people go first. So all their jobs were posted, and they all knew what was happening to them before any of the rest of them. The idea was let's get that set, and then we can take care of the rest of the staff. The result of that was most departments--the HR person in charge of the transition was new, didn't know any of the people, didn't know jack, didn't know anything. . . They had no clue as to what they were doing. (Lines 1041-1048)

Carolyn felt good about being able to influence how the organization planned for and executed change initiatives, but worried about the recommendations she made.

Well, I get to influence how we're going to look at change, plan for change and execute efforts/initiatives/programs to maneuver through change, and then evaluate how well did we do? So I'm in a great position. I wouldn't feel so optimistic about it if I was a simple recipient of change. (Lines 694-696)

She spoke of "the discomfort in the gut" (Line 705) that kept her up at night as she questioned recommendations she had made to senior management.

[There's] the discomfort in the gut of, "But what if you're not doing the right thing the right way?" So it's a heavy burden. What if you're wrong, and what if the way that you're influencing senior management decisions and they're supporting you [is wrong]; they trust you; and they're saying, "Tell us how to do it; we want to support you," and they do. But what if it doesn't work? . . . That's a burden and that's what keeps me up at night. . . What if I'm wrong, and what if it doesn't work, and what if it hurts other people? . . . That's a rough burden. (Lines 700-704, 708-709, 713)

Tony, like Carolyn, also second guessed recommendations he made to leaders, and the direction in which he tried to move the organization when he developed the communication strategy. His preoccupation with this became emotionally distracting and consuming.

[It was] very distracting, it consumed a lot of my time, even when I wasn't working on it because you would tend to second guess your decisions, second guess the direction that you were trying to help the organization go because there is so much emotion you had to make sure your emotions stayed separate from the whole business process. It was all consuming because even though lives weren't at stake it was almost that kind of emotional involvement. (Lines 671-675)

Brad, Jack, Lucy, Matthew, and Tony shared that they found themselves doubting if their organizations had made the right decisions. Brad felt that certain decisions would help the organization in the short-term but not in the long-term.

I was part of the process; I'm proud of it. I did the right thing, extremely fair process. Am I happy with the direction of the company? No. I think they are better than [Competitor 1], but I don't think they're ever going to rival [Competitor 2] as a multinational company, and I detest [Competitor 2's] management; I don't think [the company] has it right either. I think [the company] is making some decisions right now that are going to, in the short-term pay off, and in the long-term are going to damage them as a company. So I think they are making some bad choices. But I can't fault the intentions or the values of the people doing it. (Lines 685-692)

Jack did not question if the downsizing was the correct action for his organization to take; however, he did question the scale of the downsizing. "I think from the negative side... the scale of it, the enormity of it; it's like...do we really have to do this? Is it really necessary...all the self-doubt that...that initiates" (Lines 528-530).

Lucy questioned some of the financial targets expected by the parent company and wondered if there might have been a better way to achieve the desired financial results than to cut positions.



Some of the targets that we were given. . . by our parent corporation . . . occasionally, you look at those and you go, “Gosh is this realistic?” So initially, my reaction was, “Is this necessary? Why didn’t we prevent it? Could we not have managed labor better to not get ourselves in a position where we had to do this?” And then I would sometimes be critical of senior leaders. “Well, why do they make so much money? And if we give them a half cut in pay, we could [have not fired] half a dozen people or a dozen people.” You go through all that; you worry about whether we’re doing the right thing and if there’s a better solution. (Lines 571-578)

Matthew reflected on trends he had seen in general that caused organizations to downsize. He felt that if organizations planned better when staffing and focused on the long-term rather than the short-term that perhaps downsizing could be avoided.

Unfortunately what I see happening is. . . organizations will eliminate positions in the third quarter; by the end of the first quarter of the following year, they’ve already hired back in people to do that work or do similar work or they’ve gone outside and gotten a third party to do it. . . my question would be is there really the long-term gain that you think that you’re gaining from it either through efficiencies, productivity, financial savvy, or do we simply shuffle the deck? (Lines 706-711)

I wonder how much of that is also true when it comes to downsizings and reductions? How much of that is really realized in the long-term versus what is the better way to think through an organizational change like that and make it more planful? (Lines 715-718)

Tony spoke of how he found himself second-guessing the organization’s decision to downsize. “There was a lot of second guessing and saying is this really necessary? Is this really the right decision? Couldn’t there have been another way? That type of thing” (Lines 169-171).

Jack experienced self-doubt with respect to his decision to stay with the organization and wondered if he may have missed out on other opportunities by staying.

Well, the period between when the announcement was made and my job was safe was a long time; so it was mixed. It’s. . . like one voice [said]--valued, security, relief. . . okay, I’ve got a job; on the other side, it’s like what opportunities did I miss by not going out, like maybe it was time to go. . . I think it’s that. It’s like

was it time for me to move on or be moved on? That's the most difficult thing of surviving. That's the most difficult thing of surviving. It's not. . .figuring out how the organization works and new relationships and tensions between new groups . . . it's just part of what we do, anyway. So I think the one is. . .did I miss [out] . . .the grass is always greener. (Lines 770-772, 784-787)

Participating in the downsizing event caused some participants to experience doubt related to recommendations they had made to the organization's leaders on how to proceed with downsizing. One participant spoke of self-doubt related to his own decision to stay with the organization. Other participants expressed doubt over the organization's decision to downsize and wondered if there might have been better alternatives.

### **Experiencing Loss**

Loss is defined as the act or instance of losing someone or something (Loss, 1982). Participants in this study spoke both implicitly and explicitly of both tangible and intangible losses. Tangible losses included loss of employees; intangible losses included lost trust, faith, and heart in the organization. Loss was often expressed using feeling words like sadness, crying, depression, and grieving and by using death imagery.

Carol, Jack, Matthew, and Tony implicitly or explicitly spoke of feeling sad or they described situations that implied sadness. These feelings of sadness resulted from seeing colleagues and others that they knew leave the organization. Carol recollected the day that the vice president called her organizational development colleagues into his office to tell them they had been terminated. While the separation meeting was happening, Carol and the training specialists were taken into another office and told what was happening.

The other OD Specialists were called into the Vice President's office to be told, and that same time, the supervisor took me and the girl who was staying into an office and basically said, "Hey, this is what's going down right now. These two

employees are not going to be with us anymore. Here are some boxes. Start building”. . .They were those flat boxes that aren’t built yet, and he said, “Start getting these ready for them because when they come out of the office, you’re going to need to help them pack up and leave”. . .We knew it was coming, but it was still very sad. (Lines 334-340)

Jack experienced sadness saying goodbye to colleagues who were friends of his even though many of them seemed happy. He shared:

Saying goodbye to a lot of different people was very difficult. I said goodbye to a lot of people. . .we were friends – for a long time. . .It was emotional. It was sad, although most of them were pretty damn happy [Jack laughed]. (Lines 837-838, 842,846)

Matthew reflected on the sadness and loss associated with realizing that people you worked with and enjoyed seeing everyday would not be there anymore. “There would have been the sadness or the loss. . .dealing with the loss of people that you enjoyed seeing every day or working with every day that would no longer be in the workplace” (Lines 407-409).

Tony also spoke of the sadness that he experienced seeing people he knew being severed.

Well, there was one side of me that said I was very lucky that I wasn’t impacted, but then at the same time I felt saddened because I knew a lot of the people that were going to be let go. (Lines 158-159)

Carolyn and David shared how they sometimes found themselves crying either alone or with others during the downsizing event. Carolyn recollected what she called the most memorable moment of the downsizing event. As she recalled the moment, she started to cry during the interview.

I’ll tell you. . .the memorable moment. The last reduction in force we did, it was particularly tough because. . .these are top talent people. . .we started maybe with C players; these are A and B players here, and they’re good, top talent, and we’re close to them, and it was particularly difficult for [the HR manager], and I knew

that. And when it was all said and done, she walked out of her office. I met her there. . .I looked at her. . .[Carolyn exhales; it sounds like she's beginning to cry]. (Lines 295-300)

[Carolyn begins crying] And she broke down, and I just hugged her and down the hallway comes the Chief Operating Officer, big guy, 6 foot forever, weighs a ton, and he came. . .and he put his arms around us [Carolyn sobbing], and he joined us. And we just held onto each other. Didn't say a word, and then the moment passed, like it's passing now [Carolyn is still sobbing and takes deep breaths]. We let go, we chuckled, and we separated. We needed that. And that shows we're so human [still sobbing]. . . And it hurts. But we know that when it's time to separate it, we can act as business professionals. But let's not forget it hurts. (Lines 304-306, 314-316, 320-322)

David shared how after speaking with impacted employees, especially those with whom he shared close relationships, he would sometimes go back to his office, shut the door, and cry.

I felt really good that we were doing something for them, but at the same time, I was very close with the individuals and remember. . .having conversations with individuals as a group, and then subsequent, they would come and ask questions. Typically, after I would get done with a conversation, I would have to shut my office door and cry. (Lines 255-258)

Sometimes, however, David would cry in the presence of impacted employees and they would console him. Crying with those who were being severed created a sense of camaraderie with them.

There was a group one [meeting], and then the individual ones were at their option if they wanted to come in and talk more individually then. Some of them did. And we were very close, so some of them would come in and they would cry, and there were some times where they would cry and I'd cry with them, and I'd find them consoling me versus me consoling them. It was really interesting. But they'd say, "No, it's okay. I understand. We've been through this before." And you have that camaraderie with them. (Lines 267-272)

Barbara and Laura spoke of a grieving process that they experienced or observed in others during the downsizing event. For Barbara, grieving began even before people

knew they were being let go and continued from the time they were advised, to their walking out the door.

You have multiple moments of. . .it's almost loss, grief, and loss. As the HR person, you know about it in advance; so you grieve for the person before it even happens. Then you grieve when you're having to deliver the news to these people, and then the third is. . .it's happened, this person is gone and watching them walk out the building. (Lines 807-814)

Laura spoke of a natural grieving process that she observed as she and other employees made sense of the site closure and were able to reach a point of acceptance.

It is almost a natural grieving process where first, you're upset, then you're angry, then you're sad. You kind of go through all those different emotions. And people had different ways that they went through them. But it was almost like a grieving process. (Lines 134-136)

Barbara, Carol, Pat, and Sophia used explicit or implicit death imagery when they spoke about the losses they experienced within their organizations. Barbara spoke the sadness of having to say goodbye to people, yet at the same time she rationalized that for the organization to survive, human sacrifices were needed.

Having to say goodbye to some people that had been part of the company when it began. . .it was tough, absolutely. . .but I realized that. . .the 60 something [people], while they had to lose their jobs, it ensured that the rest of us had jobs . . . So part of it was you sacrifice some for the greater good of the company, and perhaps, if we're doing better they can come back, or we'll be able to employ other people. But right now we knew in order to stay financially afloat this was something we had to do. (Lines 217-219, 230-232).

Barbara also spoke of coming through a storm where there were casualties and then her having to sort through the emotional "debris" (Line 261), the sadness of saying goodbye to some of her own colleagues.

It was the calm after the storm where you're thankful to have come out of the storm unscathed but you've got all this debris, you really still have to sort through all the debris. . .most of us had some casualties of the storm in one way or another . . .[I] was losing some of my own close colleagues. (Lines 259-262).

Carol painted a picture of death and loss by describing the ghost town-like atmosphere following the severing of colleagues and other employees at the corporate office.

It was like a ghost town. You'd walk around and look at all those empty desks or those empty cubes. . .the two folks in our area that were no longer there. . .we took all their stuff down. . .Their cubicles are there, but they're just empty. . .all the papers and any stray anything was taken down and gotten rid of and. . .Oh! The parking lot! . . .We have two parking lots at our facility, and one is behind the building and one is in front of it, and there [were] just so many empty parking spots! You would look around every day like wow! I never have a problem getting a parking spot this close anymore because there's so much less people here than there were before. So that was kind of a weird feeling, too. It was interesting. (Lines 351-353, 357-363)

Pat described the sense of loss in her organization like being at a constant funeral because people left in waves over 4 months.

You got through the first wave, then you sort of had to gear up and go, "Okay, well now, this guy is leaving next month or this whole group of people." So there was this constant kind of funeral going on the first four months after that, just because of. . .the timing of people's last days. (Lines Pat 567-570)

Sophia also used death imagery when talking about the sense of loss in her organization.

It feels like something is dying or like you're losing somebody, almost like you can personify it. . .This one that was most recent, we had the downsizing, the biggest one. . .over 350 people at one site, the site where I'm at, and this was an organization, a business unit that had never suffered any type of downsizing. And now you're saying we're getting rid of this whole business unit? So the initial reaction is that of loss, a lot of sadness, and then it starts changing. It changes into fear; it changes into anger. . .you go through that whole Kubler-Ross model, and you literally see people going . . . in and out of the stages. So it just feels like death. That's the only way that I can explain it. (Lines 213, 217-223)

Barbara and Jack both spoke of delayed loss that they experienced following the downsizing events in their organizations. Barbara reflected on the sense of loss that often

occurs when you realize days or weeks later that the person is no longer present in your life. She used the metaphor of someone coping with losing a loved one to cancer.

One thing I've heard numerous times when someone had time to deal with an illness, so maybe it was a battle with cancer, so the surviving family member came to terms with the fact that this person had a terminal disease, and they were going to lose them. So there's the sadness when they find out; there's a sadness when they pass, but there's this moment of relief where it's like [Barbara exhales], they're out of their misery; they're no longer suffering; it's over. . . And then there's this delayed grieving, you know? So it's very similar [with downsizing] where you have the different stages of the same emotion but just at different times for different reasons. (Lines 824-829, 834-835)

Jack experienced a case of the doldrums, what he described as a post-partum-like depression, when the organization slowed down from the rush of the downsizing event and returned to a semi-stable state.

It was kind of like a doldrums. . . it was like everybody kind of went back into their holes trying to figure out what their job was, how they worked with their new teams. . . I'll call it a postpartum depression type thing [laughing], but it was like, "God, we went through all this, for what?" . . . if you're going to go through all this pain and anguish, do a damn good job of it and push harder and harder on the organization than you ever thought, because you don't want to do it again for a while. (Lines 812-814, 816-820)

In addition to the tangible loss of colleagues and other employees, downsizing also created intangible values-based losses for some employees. Ashley, Carol and Tony experienced this type of loss. Ashley reflected on how the lack of communication with the workforce resulted in employees' losing trust in the organization.

The doubt and the mistrust and the fear and the, "I wonder if it'll be me next? When will be the next one? What else is coming? They didn't tell us about this so how do we know that anything they ever tell us will be something that we can believe and trust in." So the destruction and the erosion of trust. . . was just enormous. (Lines 158-161)

Employees not only mistrusted the leaders and management but they also began to mistrust HR. They did not understand that HR was simply the messenger carrying out

higher level directives. HR was perceived in more of an adversarial role rather than being a champion of people.

From an HR perspective, it seemed like people shut down; where they used to maybe come to Human Resources to talk about something, there was a lot of fear that resulted from this and a lack of trust. (Ashley, Lines 168-170).

Really HR is the messenger. We're told what to do like I was [told] that day. I could not have said, "Oh no, I've been hired to hire. I haven't been hired to fire." It's what I was thinking and what I was feeling as a human being and as an HR professional and as a [recruiter with] a learning and development specialty that I have. I was not happy about having to do it, but I could not "not" do it. I was an HR employee, and I was being asked to assist with a business restructure and I had to do it. (Lines 174-179)

Ashley herself also lost trust in the organization, "Trust is gone, as it was with every other employee. I knew at some point that no matter if anybody said, 'Oh, it'll be okay, it'll be okay, it'll be okay,' that it wouldn't be"(Lines 474-475).

Tony spoke of the mistrust that lingered following downsizing, especially since the organization had not been transparent with employees about its plans to offshore. He experienced lost trust along with other employees. "Even after it was all over with, not only for me but I think the organization in general was [thinking] wait a minute, is there more going on behind the scenes? What's the next shoe to fall?" (Lines 544-546).

Carol spoke of losing heart, pride, and respect for the organization because of the way that the downsizing was managed. She believed that there was a right way and a wrong way to implement downsizing and that the organization had been disrespectful towards the workforce. For Carol, the lack of communication and lack of transparency caused her to perceive that the organization acted sneakily.

Honestly I could not tell you exactly how many people were let go in that second layoff because we were never communicated with. We were never told who was let go . . .or why. . .no, it was all done very – for lack of a better word – sneakily.



No communication. . . You just noticed. I haven't talked to so and so in a while. Oh, they're not here anymore. You could go into the employee directory on the internet and see that they were removed; they weren't there anymore. So it was not done in a way that I thought was reputable. (Lines 213-215, 219-223)

I wholeheartedly lost a lot of respect for the company by the way that they did the downsizing, the lack of communication. I really lost a little heart, you know? I once had so much pride in the institution and that got taken away from me. It was hard to stay and still have that drive when I was losing respect for the organization. (Lines 402-406)

I mean it would be like showing you a picture of the American flag, pride of our nation and patriotism and all of that. I think after the downsizing that flag is like half-mast with holes shot through it, you know? (Lines 541-544)

Tony spoke of experiencing a slight loss of faith in the organization because of its decision to offshore and put profits above people. However, having been through downsizing events before, Tony could separate the business and emotional aspects of the event so that he didn't totally lose faith in the organization.

Let's put it this way. . . it may have caused me a slight bit of loss of faith, a slight bit of you know just downgrading a little bit. . . So I didn't really lose faith in the company, but you know what, I saw a lot of people totally lose faith. (Lines 392, 395-397)

Downsizing resulted in participants' experiencing different types of loss. Loss was experienced by participants themselves and also by others in the organization and occurred throughout the downsizing event. Loss was described in different ways. There was sadness related to knowing and then seeing employees leave the organization. Losing employees was equated to death and dying and the subsequent grieving that occurs when someone you know passes on. Participants spoke of going through depression and sometimes delayed grieving that happened after the organization returned to stability and they then had the chance to fully process their own emotions. Some

employees also spoke of values-based losses, for example, lost, trust, heart, faith, respect, and pride in their organizations.

### **Experiencing Apprehension**

Downsizing can create apprehension among both survivors and victims. Apprehension refers to a feeling of fearful or uneasy anticipation of the future (Apprehension, 1982). In the context of this study, apprehension refers to nervousness, tension, anxiety, worry, and fear that participants observed among employees or that they themselves experienced. For downsizing's victims, apprehension often results from worrying about whether or not they will easily find gainful employment outside the organization. For downsizing's survivors, apprehension often results from uncertainty, in other words, continuing to worry about their own job security.

Twelve participants (Ashley, Barbara, Carol, Carolyn, David, Jack, Laura, Lucy, Pat, Sophia, Stacy, and Tony) spoke of apprehension that began in the weeks before the downsizing events were underway and that continued throughout the events and even beyond. Brad reflected on what it was like to be planning for downsizing when his own department was part of the target and when his continued employment had not been decided even at the second round. His comment implied uneasiness.

My sense of being an OD professional in a company going through downsizing, especially if your department is part of the target. . .you're inside the gates, and you don't know the code [to unlock the gates]. You've been asked to help. So you are 'officially' one of the staff. And you wear a white coat. But you don't know the code and you can't get out. So you're an inmate! (Lines 861-864)

In this second downsizing [2009], I was one of the people that was looked to provide the counseling, the coaching, and the insights. . .And my boss was very clear and said, "Brad, you know, you're one of the inmates, and we don't know whether you're going to stay or go." (Lines 1051-1054)

As a survivor, Ashley herself became preoccupied by the possibility that the organization might continue to downsize and how that might impact her personally.

Who's next? What's next? There's all this ambiguity around these situations. It doesn't feel cut and dry. Okay, we needed to save. . . \$2 million; we got rid of x amount of people and that's it. It's not that clear cut. It's not. There's always a little more that can be saved, a little better projection that can be presented to shareholders, just a little more something. (Lines 567-570)

Some participants described apprehension as worry or fear that more downsizing might follow the initial event. Ashley recalled the continual apprehension among employees who worried about when the next round of reductions would happen.

There were always rumblings. . . the numbers maybe weren't where they should be, or there was a change in upper management. You know, any major shift in the norm within this organization. . . the next sentence was, "Well I guess the next RIF will come". . . and there wasn't [anything] to prove differently because about every year, either in November or April, there was a layoff. (Lines 247-250, 254-255)

Carol, like Ashley, perceived that employees were hypersensitive to any actions that they observed where even ordinary day-to-day activities were viewed suspiciously. Carol spent time trying to allay employees' fears.

I'll give you an example of the kind of fear that I observed. . . there's a team of ladies who come in and clean our building, our headquarters building, and the lady was down on her hands and knees cleaning the plastic baseboards that we have. . . An employee came to me and said "Oh, why are they doing that? Are we going to sell this building?" and I was like, "Oh no! This is just something they do annually. It's just maintenance. . . nothing's going on. We're not going to lose our building or our facility". . . but that's the kind of fear that gets instilled in people when there's no communication, you know? (Lines 152-158)

People [were] just walking on eggshells and every little thing that they would see going on in the organization they would read more into it than there really was so there was a great deal of fear and just morale so low because here we were without a lot of leadership, no communication. (Lines 316-320)

Barbara, like Ashley, recalled lingering fear among the remaining workforce that more downsizing would follow.

There was some fear. . . “What if we don’t recover?” You go through these emotions. . . it’s hard for me because I’m on that other side, but I can imagine when you’re on the receiving end or very close to [it] you’re thinking, “That was a close call. What if we don’t recover [quickly] enough? How long before it’s me?” (Lines 184-187)

David spoke of the apprehension he observed among those losing their jobs especially the single mothers. “So a lot of people were pretty upset, and of course, they were scared because the majority of individuals that were employees that I dealt with were. . . mostly single mothers” (Lines 167-169).

Lucy observed fear among the workforce in the weeks leading to the downsizing announcement. She recollected how incapacitated a colleague had become from worrying about the possibility of job loss. Lucy perceived that her colleague had created a self-fulfilling prophesy that led to her demise.

Well, I think there was quite a bit of fear. People were afraid that they might lose their jobs; they weren’t sure how the decisions would get made. . . the colleague of mine who was let go. . . almost got to a point. . . [of] what I’ll call the self-fulfilling prophecy; she became so afraid that she stopped being effective in her role. . . But it was just my observation that she became somewhat incapacitated and her effectiveness deteriorated quite a bit, and I worried that that put her on the radar scale as far as one of the people who was let go. (Lines 101-104, 108-110)

Lucy also perceived that following the downsizing announcement employees remained fearful and tried to maintain a low profile.

A lot of people thought, “Well, if I put my head down and I just work and I fly under the radar screen and I don’t make any waves then I’ll survive,” and so I guess if you’d see a picture of a bird kind of like trying to fly under the radar. I mean they’re probably still afraid they might get hit by a plane. (Lines 283-286)

Some participants (Carol, Carolyn, Jack, Kat, Laura, Sophia, and Stacey) described the apprehension as uneasiness, nervousness, or anxiety. In Carol's organization, the leaders communicated coldly and in some cases minimally with employees. The impersonal nature of how employees were told and were severed was nerve wracking for those remaining.

We have like Regional Directors. . .so they have certain branches that report to them. I think they had a conference call because that was the only way they could do it, and they told them via the conference call. I don't know if the employees were told through the conference call or just the managers of the branches were told. . .And then the headquarter's staff that were laid off, it was just basically, "Okay, 3:00 PM you're going to pull these people into your office and explain to them what's going on, and you're going to pack up their stuff, and that's it. We're going to escort them outside." And that was it. It was very nerve racking . . .it was tough. (Lines 279-287)

Carolyn believed that her organization carried out the downsizing in a straightforward and respectful way. The organization was transparent and informed employees that it might need to conduct more downsizing. While employees understood the organization's decision to downsize and why it might need to do more downsizing in the months that followed, they were still anxious. "There was anxiety because employees were thinking 'am I next?'" (Line 186).

Jack recollected how employees became very nervous and anxious when the organization announced that global restructuring would be taking place.

It was like. . .anxiety – so [like] being told you have to present a paper in front of the crowd – a classroom – without any preparation, that feeling of anxiety you get when you have to do that. It's like, "Oooh." So it's half nervousness, half all those things that are embedded in that. (Lines 331-334)

Laura recollected that when the organization announced that the site would be closing that employees had become tense and upset even though they anticipated

something might happen because of the organization's financial difficulties. Once anticipation became reality, the worry set in as the reality of imminent job loss set in.

It was like a big, gray cloud, a storm brewing. Because you could feel--you could almost cut the tension in the air because people were mad; they were upset. "What am I going to do?" You could just feel that. . .It was just hanging there; something just hanging there for a couple of days. (Lines 147-149, 153)

Stacey spoke of the tension that took root in her organization under the new CEO who had created a culture of fear, where previously, the culture was one of mutual loyalty.

There was just such a, a tension in that environment that was not there before him. And before him, everybody bled [the company] blue. We did everything we could for the stores to make sure they were great, and we knew we worked for the stores, and that was all so wonderful, and then it all shifted. . .I mean it was just amazing how quickly it happened and then how distinctly different the culture was. And so it was really, I would call it a fear state culture that everybody felt, and then when he sold the company, it turned into anger. (Lines 415-418, 422-425)

In Sophia's organization the downsizing occurred in waves. Although the organization kept employees informed, constant anticipation of even more downsizing created worry. Employees were worried and needed reassurances that the organization was unable to provide. This created morale and productivity issues.

The biggest challenge is engaging the people who are there, especially when people know that there's more downsizing to come; so in my company, every time a wave would go by, usually, there would be some kind of communication, town hall or something that would take place and then people would ask, "Are there going to be more?" And every time the leaders would have to say, "I can't tell you that there won't be." [Employees ask], "So is there a possibility?" [Leaders respond], "Yes, very likely because we continue to look at the business and find ways to blah blah blah," right?" (Lines 722-727)

So the message was always there; they have this looming over their heads. And they can't help but worry about it. So I think the biggest challenge is how do you engage people even during this time of uncertainty, even during this time of ambiguity where nobody knows? And everybody has to worry about themselves;

they have to worry about ‘how am I going to put food on the table, and where’s my next paycheck going to come from?’ (Lines 727-732)

Stacey recollected the atmosphere in her organization when employees learned that the CEO was thinking about selling the company. She spoke of it as being quiet and of employees being panicked and worried. Many employees had only worked for that organization.

Here in [my location], it was really quiet. . . But it was that people were afraid to even imagine. . .they were very worried about what was going to happen. . .And I ended up coaching a lot of people, managers and directors, on thinking [it] through because the panic initially was, “I’ve only worked here. I only know this. I don’t have transferrable skills. What am I going to do?” And they immediately go down that ladder of. . . “I’m going to be a bag person. You know? I’m going to be out on the street. And what am I going to do?” (Lines 328, 332-337)

Kat reflected on the tension within the planning team, describing it as “the calm before the storm” (Line 318) and “everyone was very uneasy but it was very quiet’ (Line 322). After the organization began to terminate employees, whenever Kat would visit a site, employees would become tense because they anticipated she was there for one purpose--to conduct termination meetings. Kat became known as the Hatchet Lady.

[It was] very tense. Everybody still expected the shoe to drop because it happened multiple times. . . the way that the organization was set up, each location was its own legal entity, so that’s how I earned my nickname the Hatchet Lady. (Lines 352-354)

Every time they saw HR walk into the building, they thought something was going to happen. So, because it happened multiple times, we arrive at one location, do the downsizing there, arrive at another location, do a downsizing there, and so on and so forth. So there was never an ease afterwards. I mean, I’m sure at this point they’ve gotten over it, but until I left, it was still that tension that they expected another round. (Lines 358-363)

My original locations really knew me well and knew what I was about and understood that most of my work was helping not harming but the newer locations that I acquired during that transition, when I walked in there I got stares, and it was tough. It was a tough audience. (Lines 367-370)

David, like Kat, shared felt somewhat stigmatized among employees as a result of his involvement in the downsizing event.

I guess the worst part from an HRD perspective is that you tend to become seen as that when you're around "Uh oh, they must be coming to do more layoff type of things," so it kind of like gives another edge to your personality. (Lines 837-841)

Participants carried out their downsizing roles in an organizational atmosphere described as one filled with apprehension. This apprehension existed before, during, and after downsizing. Apprehension stemmed predominantly from lack of communication and from employees struggling with the prospect of immediate or future job loss and the impact that would have on their lives. In some instances, the apprehension stemmed from participants' own roles in the downsizing and their anticipating what would happen when downsizing was underway. Some participants also felt stigmatized by others because of their involvement in the downsizing events.

### **Experiencing Chaos**

Chaos is a condition of disorder or confusion (Chaos, 1982). Seven participants (Carol, Carolyn, David, Kat, Jack, Matthew, and Pat) either implicitly or explicitly spoke about chaos that they experienced following their organizations' announcing that a reduction-in-force was imminent. For some, the chaos resulted from a sense of disorganization and confusion, not knowing what to do next.

While Carol was not involved in planning or implementing downsizing, in her training and development role she wanted to contribute in a meaningful way to the organizational recovery process but did not know how to do so. Many of the leaders had left both voluntarily and involuntarily and assigned projects kept changing causing confusion and frustration for her.



Well, it was very confusing because with the lack of leadership that we had at the time, it was like we would get projects to work on and you know this week we were going to start working on this project but then half the time they would change their minds the next week after that. “No, no, drop that project that’s being back-burnered. . .we’re going to be doing this now.” It was very frustrating because I felt like I was accomplishing nothing. Here I was, the surviving employee, trying to have the right attitude and move forward from it, and they just kept changing the game all the time and that was frustrating. (Lines 503-509)

David spoke of chaos resulting from the planning team’s not being prepared for many of the questions employees asked following the downsizing announcement. There was information that they just did not know at that time.

It was chaotic because people were asking questions that we weren’t prepared to answer; we didn’t know beyond what we knew. So it was kind of chaotic because you could tell the individuals didn’t know what was going on in their personal lives. ‘Where am I going to go from here?’ (Lines 179-183)

Kat described disorganized chaos within her organization using the metaphor that it was “like Rome burning” (Line 230). Employees did not expect the organization to downsize and they were devastated following the announcement.

People [were] running away, screaming, crying. [They] couldn’t understand what was going on. It was chaos. . .because, again, while people understood what was going on, they really didn’t expect it to happen to them. So, when the hammer came down, and you were sitting in a room with that individual, it was just devastation, and a lot of them knew it was going to be very difficult for them to find another job. And you heard stories. I mean people would automatically go, “You don’t understand. I’ve got this personal situation. I can’t lose my job.” I mean we had all types of serious. . .people crying, having to be driven home, having to call our EAP because there were employees threatening to hurt themselves. (Lines 234-241)

Like Kat, Pat and her team experienced disorganized chaos. However, Pat’s sense of chaos stemmed from what she described as constant behind the scenes “wheeling and dealing” (Line 224) that went on while she and her team were rushing to put severance packages together and conduct termination meetings. She perceived that

decisions on whom to sever were haphazard with people making those decisions not consulting with HR or even with front line managers. Another source of chaos was the short time frame between some employees being told they were being severed and having to leave the organization. The organization decided to sever 70% of those impacted within two weeks of making the announcement; in previous downsizings under the former CEO, employees had much more time to absorb the message before having to leave the organization.

It was chaotic for a couple reasons: one, no one was expecting the two weeks' notice, so that just kind of really turned everything into chaos, and secondly, because such a small group of people had been involved in making the decisions. So let's say just the EVPs [executive vice presidents] and some VPs [vice presidents]. But no one. . .down at a front line manager level was ever consulted about, "Okay, if you had to get rid of one of these folks on your team or three of these people on your team, who would you select?" [Pat's voice became more animated, faster, almost frustrated as she recollected what happened]. All the decisions were made . . . at such a high level. . . then there was just lots of negotiating going on afterwards. . .you might've been told that you were getting laid off, and you were handed a packet. Perhaps a week later . . . now wheeling and dealing is going on; now you have your job back, and this person is leaving or people who didn't get laid off were disappointed because they had been counting on a package and getting out because they already knew they weren't going to be great at work anymore, and then they're disappointed. And then they're going to their managers and saying, "Can you get me on the list? Can you get me on the list for November?" (Lines 215-229)

In some instances, even when the organization was fully prepared for the downsizing event, it was still chaotic. Employees not only had questions but were preoccupied and concerned about how downsizing would impact them. Carolyn described it as organized chaos; it was chaotic for employees, but the organization had planned well and was able to answer most questions.

Employees understood. But it was a chaotic time not just because of what the company was going through but their spouses were going through similar experiences and they were comparing notes of how their spouses were either

affected or coming back home after a long day at work and saying, “Our company had a layoff and look at how they handled it.” And so it was chaotic...but there was order as well. . .there was enough structure provided to them , flexible and not rigid structure. . .for them to have a venue to come [to] and to talk to people who could give them whatever answers were available at the time. So I think I’d describe it that way. There was anxiety and uncertainty, but it was organized. We could move on. (Lines 182-190)

Jack’s organization, like Carolyn’s, was fully prepared for the downsizing event.

Jack saw himself during implementation as someone trying to create order from chaos by providing guidance to employees who were confused.

You know the movie Titanic? . . .when all those people are scrambling around, and you had the little band playing, and then you had Leo DiCaprio and all that trying to usher? There are the people on the boat who were trying to save people knowing they, at some point, had to save themselves. That picture just flashed in my head, so that must mean something. . .think it was like the dynamic that was going on around chaos, people looking out for themselves, but unless there’s some order to it, everybody’s going to suffer. (Lines 733-734, 738-741, 745-747)

Matthew’s organization, like Carolyn’s and Jack’s organizations, was fully prepared for the downsizing event. While Matthew did not use the word chaos during the interview, the way he described his role during downsizing implementation suggested that his role was to help the organization manage the chaos that came with so much change and avoid a disaster. He described himself as the air traffic controller whose role was to ensure flawless execution.

[I was] the person at the airport, the air traffic controller. You have a lot of responsibility for different flights landing and taking off at the same time; if you don’t keep a calm mind and keep your eyes on the traffic, then an incident can occur. A disaster can occur, and I would say that is similar to. . .my role at that time in the downsizing. I had to make sure that the flights that were landing and taking off in terms of employment were executed flawlessly. . .because there could be an incident should something not occur correctly. (Lines 377-383)

Whether participants felt fully prepared for the downsizing event or not, the event created organizational chaos resulting from employee questions that were not anticipated

and the confusion that employees experienced as the reality sunk in that their organizations were reducing headcount and they were trying to figure out what this meant for them personally. Chaos also resulted from confusion that participants felt resulting from lack of communication and changing priorities and decisions. Some participants perceived their roles as guiding employees through the chaos.

### **Experiencing Shock**

Along with working within an atmosphere of chaos, some participants also described work settings where employees walked around in a state of shock. Shock is defined as “something that jars the mind or emotions as if with a violent unexpected blow” (Shock, 1982, p. 1196). Depending on how involved participants were in planning for and implementing downsizing, sometimes, they, too, were shocked. Seven participants (Ashley, Barbara, David, Laura, Pat, Stacey, and Tony) perceived varying degrees of shock within the employee community regardless of whether or not employees were aware that the organization was planning to downsize.

For some, the shock employees experienced was the result of the organization’s giving them no advanced notice. As Ashley recalled, “There was no advanced notice . . .no never. . .Security would come and help you pack up your desk and walk you out the door” (Lines 93, 97, 106).

People were either called into Human Resources or Human Resources personnel started to walk through the headquarters there. And there were certain rooms that had been allotted to these meetings, and as soon as the first couple of separation meetings occurred, people knew when they were called into that room or somebody came and got them, what was going to happen to them. And it was just real shocking for people, and there was no advance notice. They came in on that morning and one-by-one, or in actuality, sometimes simultaneous meetings were going on because of the large numbers. That’s why I ended up being involved

and having to actually conduct the meetings; there weren't enough HR people to do it; they had to have a recruiter assist with laying people off. (Lines 141-149)

Ashley recollected how shocked she herself was after learning that the organization was downsizing and that 80 people were impacted at her site. On the morning of the downsizing event, she was unexpectedly pulled into a meeting where she was briefed and immediately asked to help with the termination meetings.

I knew that there were discussions and meetings being held probably about 10 days or so in advance. I did not know the enormity, the impact, the specifics, the people. Even within HR, there was a select group that had all of that information and the other employees in HR were not privy to that. . . so I was as much in shock when I came in that morning. . . “We need you to help with this” as the employees who were laid off were. (Lines 184-189)

Barbara, like Ashley, spoke of the sudden manner in which downsizing was announced to the workforce and how many employees had no advanced notice that they were going to lose their jobs. Barbara shared, “As a whole. . .a data processor. . .had no notice. . .It was literally coming in one day and being told that day” (Lines 131-132, 136).

Barbara also perceived that the downsizing announcement, in general, was shocking for employees who believed they were working as efficiently as possible. She perceived that there was “some shock simply because we're coming from the perspective . . .that we had already been keeping the purse strings pretty tight, so there was a little surprise and shock” (Lines 181-183).

Because of the long tenure that many employees had in David's organization, he perceived that they were shocked and upset when they learned that the organization was relocating to California. David himself, however, was less emotional about the relocation because he had not been with the organization for very long.

I would say most of them were pretty shocked and a little upset because they had been with the company for quite some time. I guess it's important to know that I had only been at the company a year before this took place; so, I didn't have as much invested in the company as the rest of the group did. (Lines 156-159)

In Pat's organization, even though employees were not let go immediately as they were in Kat's, Ashley's, and Barbara's organizations, some employees were still shocked by the short time frame between learning about the downsizing and their being severed. They were also shocked by the extent of the downsizing even though there was general awareness that the CEO had planned to make cuts.

I would say 70% of the people. . . were let go within that 2-week notice of their end date, and so that was very shocking. And then there was another group that was in November and then another one in December, and then they sort of trickled on from there. . . I think in terms of some general idea that the business is maybe not doing well and we need to make some change, I think that was pretty obvious from the time that the CEO arrived, and he made that declaration. . . I don't think anyone had imagined the extent of his actions. (Lines 126-134)

Laura shared that even though employees anticipated that the site might close, it was still shocking for them. Knowing that something might happen and anticipating it was far different from actually experiencing it.

I think that deep down, everyone knew it was coming because our company had filed for bankruptcy, and they were trying to reorganize, and we had been struggling for several years. So I think when it did finally happen, it wasn't a huge surprise. But at the same time, it's still that shock. . . "Oh, my God, it is happening now." (Lines 100-103)

Stacey and Tony both worked for organizations that had been around for many years. Stacey spoke of how extremely successful and profitable her organization had been for most of its lifetime; also up until the time of the downsizing, it had been owned by the same family. She observed that employees at her location were quite shocked

when they learned that the CEO was thinking about selling the company to resolve its financial woes.

I think they were in shock because this was such a successful company and because when the former CEO was putting out this information that we were looking at strategic alternatives, which might include the sale of the company, people were like, “What?” And there was such a shock around it. (Lines 328-331).

Tony, like Stacey, perceived that employees were shocked that the organization would sell part of the business through off-shoring especially since those impacted had been contributing to the organization’s success. It came down to the organization’s deciding to sacrifice people simply to save money.

There was a huge amount of shock, a huge amount of shock, because this had been part of the organization for a long time, and if you look back on it . . . reactions were shock and anger, shock and anger; “How could the company do this? The company has been around for many years?” And people were angry because the company was making a dollars and cents decision, basically, saving money but giving up employees. (Lines 99-103)

David and Stacey metaphorically described the shock they observed among the workforce. The metaphors used described people who were physically present but mentally and emotionally elsewhere. David envisioned people walking about on busy streets moving in many directions.

[It’s like] those busy streets where you see people hustling and bustling all different ways. . . Each person was probably experiencing their own experience, and so they were all heading in different directions in their mind, and you could actually sense that there was this uneasiness; there was an energy there. . . I mean they continued to. . . do their job, but you could just tell that there was something there, that they were here, but they were also someplace [else] . . . they were in two places at once. (Lines 183-187, 192-194)

Stacey, like David, also perceived that employees were physically present but were mentally and emotionally elsewhere. She used the metaphor of “Stepford Wives”

behavior to describe what she observed, “There was just a lot of. . .almost a Stepford Wives [atmosphere] for a time where people were just walking in the hall going, [Stacey speaking in a monotonous tone] ‘Hi, how are you? I’m fine. How are you?’” (Lines 119-121).

I think when you see people who are in shock, like in an accident, they might not even realize they’re hurt yet. They just kind of get out, and it’s like, “What happened?” You know? And they’re not really all together there. . .that’s what I mean by the Stepford Wives, where they became robots, and they were just kind of walking through their day. (Lines 425-429)

Ashley implied that employees were mentally checked out when she described the dip in productivity among survivors following the downsizing announcement. “If there was a productivity measure done that day, it would have probably been at like two out of a hundred. I mean just nobody could function because the shock ripples across the survivors” (Lines 156-158).

An emotion that often accompanied the sense of chaos that spread through the organization following the downsizing announcement was shock. Participants perceived that shock resulted from many things: shock over the organization’s decision to downsize, shock over the short and sometimes non-existent time frames between the downsizing announcement and people being severed, and shock from feeling unprepared to perform in one’s downsizing role. Shock manifested itself as behavior described as people walking around distracted and in a daze, physically present but mentally and emotionally elsewhere.



## **Feeling Responsible**

In this study, feeling responsible refers to participants' sense of obligation to execute their roles as directed yet at the same time to ensure that justice prevailed and that outcomes were as fair as possible for both individuals and the organization.

Subthemes related to feeling responsible included the following: (a) protecting employees, (b) balancing employee and organizational interests, (c) putting on a game face, and (d) taking care of self.

### **Protecting Employees**

Nine participants (Ashley, Carol, Carolyn, David, Kat, Laura, Lucy, Sophia, and Tony) saw themselves in helping, nurturing, mothering, and protective roles wanting to shield employees from emotional harm, ease the pain, and instill hope. Ashley saw herself as a helper and wanted to ease the pain of the survivors.

[I see myself as] really a helper, being able to make it a little bit better for the people left behind because it is very difficult. It's terrible to lose your job; it's also really, really difficult to be there and have to deal with the aftermath. So anything that I could do to help ease that pain; that's the benefit and that's the role. (Lines 645-648)

As someone responsible for training new hires, Carol tried to protect new employees from negativity that they might encounter when they finished training and began working in their new roles. She would try to give them a balanced perspective of what happened and where the company was headed and generate enthusiasm in them that the organization was going through an exciting renewal process.

So now we're back to hiring people again, and one of the things I make sure they understand before they go out into their departments or their branches or what have you...I ask them, "How much do you know about what's gone on in this place in the last 6-9 months? Because I don't want to send you out there, and you might observe negativity or different feelings or different perceptions". . .I'm very

honest with them. . . I go into the fact that we had branch closures, that we had people laid off, that we had benefits taken away from us, and that we're rebuilding the organization . . . that they're joining at a very exciting time because now we actually have leadership, but for them to understand the culture that's surrounding them when they get there. So I want them to be ready for that. (Lines 557-566)

Carol also spoke of how she tried to gauge where employees were emotionally and tried to instill hope in them by focusing them on the positive changes that were ahead under the new leadership. She used the metaphor of the organization trying to get the right people on the bus to move forward.

I always try to get a feel to what they're feeling emotionally on the job, like what other issues they're having that are impacting their ability to learn or to adopt the concepts that we're teaching. And if I identify anything, I try to manage that because I have a unique opportunity during that learning event to gauge that where maybe their managers aren't tapping into that, which actually I'm sure they're not. . . I try to get a feel for where they're at, how they're feeling about the organization, how they're feeling about the customers. . . and try to instill hope. With the information that's accurate, what I know. . . based on what I know from my department. . . [I] try to let them know this is where the organization's going, and I think there's going to be positive changes coming. But we just kind of have to wait a little bit; people are still getting on the bus. . . the bus cannot take off until the right people are on it. And so I try to do that with them. I try to motivate them to just hang in there, look at the good things going on like with the communication and the blog and all that stuff and the culture, watch how it's changing, and just kind of ride that wave and be ready to change with it. (Lines 810-823)

Carolyn spoke about wanting to protect employees emotionally throughout the downsizing event even though she knew that she could not fully do so. She likened her role to Holden Caulfield, the protagonist in the book *Catcher in the Rye*. Carolyn then explained the significance of the phrase "the catcher in the rye" and equated it to the protective role in which she perceived herself to be during the downsizing event.

It was about the kids playing in the field, and they were getting close to the edge of the cliff, and he was the catcher in the rye, and he was going to protect them from falling off the cliff, and that's what he saw his role as. And I feel a little bit

like [the employees are] getting close to the cliff and I can't protect them wholeheartedly but I can try to reel them back in. I don't know. . . I know that's silly but that's what came to mind. (Lines 450-455)

Like Carol, Carolyn also found herself more attuned to employees' emotions.

I surely don't take things for granted, and I think I have a heightened sensitivity to how anxious people are, and I think I may be more attuned to looking at the signs of when people start getting in distress. . . And any employee who needs the time of day, needs to get the time of day, because it's important to them. So I think it's made me more aware. (Lines 638-640, 641-643)

David felt responsible for the emotional state of employees who were leaving. He wanted to get them into a more upbeat frame of mind before they left the organization.

I didn't feel personally responsible for the loss of their job, but I felt personally responsible to hold that person emotionally. I felt personally responsible to make sure that I needed to take care of them emotionally in that moment and then beyond. . . I guess I could say if they had a really horrible negative experience emotionally . . . I felt as though I was somehow responsible apart from the fact of losing a job. But I felt like I needed to make sure that they were as upbeat as possible and that they were being taken care of and if they needed anything, I needed to make sure I was there to help provide it if at all possible. (Lines 498-499, 503-509)

Kat recollected a poignant memory related to the downsizing event. A 70-year old woman who had worked for the organization for 20 years was being severed. The organization was like extended family to this woman. Kat was concerned about her well-being post-downsizing because the organization was not providing severance to employees. Her desire to protect this person and ensure she was financially supported nearly cost Kat her own job.

The most poignant memory I have. . . [was] when I had the CEO of the company come down, the original owner's son, to do the transition [meeting] with her because the General Manager. . . had only been there for a short time, and it wouldn't have been fair to him to have to have that conversation with her. And I don't think she would've respected his opinion. . . so when we were sitting with her, and she saw this individual come in, she automatically knew what was going on . . . she went [Kat gasps to illustrate the employee's emotion] . . . like fear

automatically caught her. And when we told her what was going on, she turned to me instead of turning to him that she had known. . . her entire life. . . and said, “You don’t understand. I have a disabled son that I take care of, and my ex-husband just stole all of my money, and I have to work. I can’t retire. It won’t pay the bills.” (Lines 255-267)

I remember after the fact I bumped into the gentlemen’s son, [who] was the CEO of the company at the corporate office, and he turned around, and he goes, “I can’t believe you went behind my back.” I said, “Excuse me?” [He said], “You know, about so and so”. . . and I said, “I didn’t. . . you had the opportunity to act, and so I had to take it to someone that I knew would respond”. . . He goes, “You know you could’ve lost your job for doing that,” and I said, “I know and I would’ve stepped away happily if that would have happened because then I would not be able to stand behind this organization.” (Lines 334-339, 343-345)

Laura saw part of her role as being like a mother figure trying to protect employees from being hurt. As employees left the organization, Laura worried about their well-being like a mother who is concerned when her children move out of the house.

The picture that I see of this is that I have now become the mother, and I now have to take care of all these people. And that’s kind of the image that comes into my head in that particular role. . . It’s having to tell my children no or give them bad news, or fear of losing them for whatever reason, that they’re moving on or that they could be hurt. (Lines 302-305, 309-310).

Lucy saw herself as “a shepherd or a support-comforter” (Lines 296-297), “more of the support role, helping people move through it” (Lines 544-545), and responsible for “the human side of change” (Line 546).

Sophia saw herself in a mothering role trying to alleviate employee fears. In her role, she tried to not only protect them but to help them see ahead into a better future.

I think as an HR person going through this and helping the organization, the image that comes to mind is almost that of a mother [laughing a little]. I felt a lot of times that I was mothering; I was mothering the organization; I was mothering the leaders; I was mothering individuals, and it’s this, “Here, it’s okay; it’s going to be fine; here’s why.” You know, I’m trying to give them that picture of the future and as much as you can, trying to protect them. Metaphorically and sometimes even physically; sometimes that’s what it took. Sometimes, you

literally had to embrace somebody and say, “It’s going to be okay.” (Lines 903-907, 913-914)

Tony spoke of how when the announcement was made and people learned 6 months out that would be losing their jobs that he and others focused their attention on trying to find opportunities within the company for those employees. They were like a family trying to help siblings or parents survive.

We were like a family trying to help our sibling or our parents survive. . . anytime a discussion was made about a position at corporate or a position somewhere in the organization, right away we went to how can we help out the guys that are going to be losing their job here in six months? So from that standpoint that was the mode that I went under. (Lines 165-169)

Many participants assumed protective roles during the downsizing events, providing a safe space for employees to express their emotions and trying to ensure that employees leaving the organization were supported. Part of this role included mothering employees, shielding employees from lingering negativity, and helping them envision a picture of a brighter future for the organization.

### **Balancing Employee and Organizational Interests**

Balancing employee and organizational interests refers to participants’ sense of obligation to do what was right for both employees and organization. Sometimes, this was challenging, for example, when participants wanted to support employees emotionally and the organization was pushing for production. Ashley struggled with wanting to mitigate employee fear while feeling pressured to get the organization back to a functional state because the longer the organization stayed in emotional limbo, the more the likelihood that productivity and profits would decline.

Personally, [said very reflectively] I wanted to help the people that were left. That was huge for me. I wanted to figure out ways to deal with the survivors on a

daily basis so that they could come to work each day, do what they're supposed to do, and try to mitigate that fear enough that they could be productive employees, and do whatever they felt they needed to do for themselves. But while they were in the workplace, do what they were supposed to do. . . so it was a juggling act. . . that side of me was struggling very hard because I really wanted to be more nurturing, and I really couldn't be because I needed to preserve the integrity of production. . .so it was a difficult place for me to be. (Lines 455-464)

Participants also tried to look out for both employee and organizational interests when making downsizing decisions and ensure that decisions were just and based on sound criteria. Barbara was involved in helping the organization decide who should be severed. A positive aspect of being involved was that she could better ensure process equality and that due diligence was observed. While people at the corporate level were concerned with financial savings, Barbara could provide a broader perspective and ensure that they also considered the organization's human resource needs to be able to move forward successfully.

I feel like when I'm the individual that's participating in some of this due diligence, I'm going to ensure that there is equality, that we really are [comparing] apples to apples. . .bringing out the what ifs in due diligence. So, I'm glad I'm able to add some insight, maybe somebody that can see in both directions, at the C-suite [corporate-suite] level, knowing that we've got to focus on the bottom line but, at the same time, thinking about the person that's sitting in claims processing claims for us. (Lines 298-304)

So while I appreciate and I have to get used to the business case, my job has always been to ensure that I'm looking out for what's best for the organization as well as the employees. So I take that role. . .to that negotiating table. . .to ensure that we are looking at the things that maybe the dollars themselves. . .don't tell. (Lines 314-320)

Like Barbara, David saw part of his role as ensuring due diligence was observed. David shared that his biggest challenge was getting people who knew the talent to make objective selection decisions about whom should be severed.

I would say that to me the biggest challenge was. . .working in the selection of individuals who are going to be severed. . .It's a challenge to get the individuals that you're working with who know the talent and who know what they bring to the table to be objective in determining who goes when and where because of all the subjectivity that comes in. . .I like this person or I don't like that person . . .you're still having to ensure that you don't appear discriminatory in the practice. So that to me is the biggest challenge. . .ensuring that no one's rights are being perceived as being violated in that selection process. (Lines 414-421)

Carolyn, like Barbara and David, was involved in helping the organization develop fair criteria for how severance decisions would be made. The process considered both present and future organizational needs.

Well, we involved management, but we also have a lot of good information through the performance review system, through the development plans, and we also identified of the [construction] jobs that we do have in queue, what are the competencies that are necessary?. . .and then we evaluated it against business need, current/past performance. (Lines 407-409, 413-414).

In Sophia's organization, directives related to downsizing would trickle down from the CEO level to the regions with each region being told how much money needed to be saved. Sophia, like Barbara, Carolyn, and David, saw part of her role as ensuring that severance decisions would be fair to the workforce and fair to the organization.

When it came to the people piece of it, then we would be totally involved in that process to start having the conversations with the managers, to say with the heads, "Who do you need to be involved? What departments are we cutting out?" So we would have to look at the org chart; we would have to put together reports for the managers; we put together actual reports where we had, for example, here's the organization, all the people in the organization, their departments, their salaries; what does it cost to have this person? (Lines 138-143)

We needed to look at what skills do we need to keep, what expertise, what knowledge and maybe somebody. . .maybe you made more money than I did, but you had expertise in a certain area that's critical to the business now; although you made more money than I did, you wouldn't necessarily get cut out just because you made more money. I would probably get cut out if I didn't have the same skills that you did. So there were a lot of factors that were taken into consideration. (Lines 156-161)

Matthew felt a strong sense of responsibility towards the organization and believed that downsizing was needed to ensure the organization's future success. "This is a course of doing business; this is what we need to do to ensure the organization's success into the future, so let's get about the business at hand" (Lines 390-393). Similar to David, Matthew found it challenging to keep those making human resource decisions focused more on the big picture and less on emotions, in other words, not letting emotional concerns cloud their business decisions. Like Ashley, Matthew also felt pressured to move the organization beyond the emotional aspects of the event and back to a productive state.

I think the biggest challenge was helping support leaders who were having a difficult time emotionally with the work that had to be done, with the identification of the employees to be impacted. It was helping them see the big picture and not get caught up in the individual stories. . .so helping them work through that on an emotional level and then also on a business level. . .I think, sometimes, the emotional impact of the situation clouded their judgment. . .so helping them stay focused on the task at hand, what the end result needed to be, the reality of the workplace. (Lines 205-211)

Tony was not involved in developing severance procedures; he was mainly responsible for developing and implementing his organization's communication strategy. The communication strategy was designed "to prepare the organization and to help the organization minimize negative consequences" (Lines 690-691) by managing employee perceptions of the decision to downsize. The organization took great care to present the downsizing action to employees as something that was necessary and something that was well considered and not decided on a whim and to help employees see that the organization was being just with respect to communication, procedures, and outcomes.

That was a biggie. And there were a lot of components of that that weren't just pure communication, but it was more how are we going to position this? How are



we going to do our best to make sure the employees that are being outsourced as well as the employees that weren't understand the rationale behind this,' the length of time and effort that went into this to think about it, consider it, all that. (Lines 461-465)

We went around the country to these 8 or 10 offices and sat down with the leader of that organization and coached them a great deal on. . .facilitating their meetings with their direct reports both in how should they present it, what we're doing for the company, accentuating the things that we were doing for the employees to make sure they landed alright. . .everything from the packages they would get when leaving, accentuating the real simple things like, "Hey, this isn't happening for x number of months because we want to make sure that you have a plan; we're not going to walk in and say you're laid off tomorrow." The company was very fair with that. (Lines 477-479, 484-489).

Participants who were involved in planning for downsizing strove to ensure that due diligence was observed so that decisions made were objective and fair to employees and the organization.

### **Putting on the Game Face**

Putting on the game face refers to participants' suppression and expression of emotion during the downsizing event. Sometimes putting on the game face required employees to compartmentalize or suppress their own negative emotions so they could focus on the work to be done. Sometimes it meant displaying different emotions with different groups of people. Other times, it meant imploring leaders to display compassion even when they did not feel like doing so.

Brad recalled that when the organization downsized in 1999, he was so angry with the outcome for his own department that he needed to compartmentalize his emotions so he could get the job done. Even though his team used a process where they checked in with each other, Brad did not always feel comfortable expressing what he was feeling

with this group. Compartmentalizing also meant being selective about whom he would talk to regarding what he was experiencing.

I found myself needing to compartmentalize. . . I was in the midst of processing being part of a group being downsized. And I was dealing with that emotionally [said very softly and pensively]. And [Brad pauses and reflects] it's not something that I was able to do in a day or two or a week or two. It took several years, and so I found myself needing to compartmentalize my own personal reactions and ferment from getting my job done. And of course, it would leak through. (Lines 362-366)

I found myself having to be very choiceful about whom I talked with. . . there were a few people at work; there were a couple of colleagues, but no one in my group because everyone in my group had their own compartments they were dealing with. There were a couple of wiser more mature people; ironically, the two that I talked with both left as part of this, and they were the older ones who said, "I've had enough of this." But I talked to them, and then I found a couple of my close personal friends I could talk with because they were completely uninvolved. (Lines 369-375)

David shared that he sometimes felt like someone with multiple personality disorder, having to change personalities to suit the audience that he was working with. He equated it to being like Sybil, a person thought to have suffered from multiple personality disorder. Sometimes he would allow himself to emote with employees, and other times he would hold back.

Sybil. . . you have all this going on in you at one time, this dissolve taking place at one time, and I think that for me. . .subconsciously probably not [being] aware of the impact that it's having on me. . . having to like flip and play at any given moment with regards to who's in front of me or what audience is in front of me; so, yeah, I would say someone with like multiple personalities disorder . . .you're trying to fit all of that inside yourself. (Lines 792-797, 801)

Carolyn reflected on how through previous downsizing experiences with other organizations both as a victim and as a survivor, she had learned to appropriately manage her emotions.

It's not my first time and so I think as a result of having more experience going through it, I built a certain level of tolerance to where I can separate. There's a time for that emotional connection to it and there is a time for that emotional separation from the event. And I think over the years and being an HR and an HRD professional, I'm able to strike a balance between the two. That doesn't mean I don't get emotional; that means that I'm a little bit more skilled at managing when I allow myself to show that emotion, and I allow myself to show that emotion more when I'm not in the place of work. So I'll come home and I cry like a baby, and my husband gives me a good hug, and my daughters give me hugs, and they make the boo-boo go away. (Lines 254-261)

Tony implicitly suggested that he had learned how to put on a game face. Like Carolyn, he had learned how to separate the emotional and business aspects of the event. By focusing on the business case for the downsizing, he was less distraught than other managers who were going through downsizing for the first time. He knew what to expect.

In this same job, several times, I had been involved in downsizing; in my previous company, I had been involved in a major downsizing; so it's interesting. . . I saw other people that had never gone through this take it a lot worse, and I think by virtue of having been through this including firing my own employees, where I had to downsize my own employees, I was probably a lot better prepared for it. . . And maybe that difference was just having gone through it before, including having to lay off my own employees, it caused me to be, shall we say, less emotionally involved and more business focused, understanding more the business side. . . I guess I wasn't as emotionally involved, maybe because I've seen it and I was numb to it, I don't know. (Lines 239-241, 243-245, 253-256, 259-260)

Several participants spoke of how they always tried to project positivity even when they were feeling otherwise. Carolyn spoke of being more attuned to others' emotions and putting a smile on her face whenever she stepped out of her office so that she could project positivity. "Regardless of what I'm going through and what I'm handling on that day, when I walk out of my office, I have a smile on my face" (Lines 640-641).

Laura, like Carolyn, felt the need to put on her professional face so she could help employees through the downsizing event. She also observed that putting on her professional face also helped her to personally cope with what was happening.

I'm kind of a helpy-type person, and even though I wanted to crawl under a rock and feel sorry for myself, I knew that in my position, I couldn't do that. So I had to put on the professional face every day and come in and help those people through it. . .I couldn't let myself. . .pout or worry about it. I had to move on and help these people. So it was tough, but at the same time, I think that helped me cope with it, also. (Lines 209-212)

Sophia, like Carolyn and Laura, spoke of putting on her game face and suppressing her own negative emotions so that she could lift people up and lead them forward.

It hits you in the gut [laughing a bit cynically], and it hits you in the heart. But yet something inside of you says you have to go on. In my case, I felt I had to go on because I was moving into this role, coming into this organization out of the U.S. that was already hurting, and they needed somebody to come in with a positive attitude; they needed somebody to come in to keep them afloat as an organization. You almost have to step away from the personal and emotions that you have toward certain people and step back and look at an organization and say, "This is hard. But I need to keep my game face on because I've got all these other people who are still here and are counting on me and depending on me to lift them up." So you just have to dig deep and find it within you and manage through that and put on the game face for those who are left behind because they're still there and they need somebody to lift them up. (Lines 281-290)

Tony shared that what challenged and frustrated him the most was the insensitivity senior leaders sometimes displayed towards employees. He would coach them to put on their own game faces and show sensitivity towards the survivors even if they did not really feel it inside. Tony's concern was that perceived insensitivity demonstrated by leaders would further damage employee morale and productivity and could also damage the organization's reputation on the street.

The hardest part was. . .trying to get the people in high places to display some sensitivity, and not only display sensitivity but display sensitivity even when they weren't sensitive. Because at times when things started getting announced and you could feel the tension and anger level rising in the organization, their tendency right off the bat was, "Hey, tell these people that's tough. . .that's the way the business goes, and we're sorry, but we have to make business decisions and can't always make people decisions." (Lines 611-617)

And I kept saying to them even if you don't want to, show sensitivity because those people that are surviving this are going to see you and really see where you're coming from. And I kept saying, "Put on a game face. You may get beaten down; you may get tired of all the questions; you may get tired of all the rumors that are spreading and the anxiety of people—that, you know, 'Am I next?' You just got to put on that game face". . .because people in high places tend to be less human-oriented. . .sometimes the higher level executives had a coldness . . .the people that survived, you need to make sure that their dip in productivity through all this is not going to hurt us anymore than [it's already hurt]. (Lines 617--627)

So you need to think about those who are leftover; it's almost like, God forbid, I have a couple children, and one has passed away or died. . .Well, I can be so focused on that lost child that I forget the siblings, and we were trying to make sure that everybody that was left was uplifted and encouraged and at least had the executive team showing some sense of emotion about it. (Lines 631-635)

Putting on the game face involved participants' expressing and suppressing emotion to get the work done, instill hope in and uplift others, project positivity, and help employees move forward. It also involved coaching leaders to show sensitivity towards the workforce to lift employee morale and productivity.

### **Taking Care of Self**

Taking care of self refers to participants' acknowledging that to be fully effective in their roles, they needed to find time to decompress and process their own emotions. In performing their roles, however, participants often put themselves last. Barbara, David, and Pat reflected on the intensity of their roles in the context of downsizing and how the pace and short time frame between planning and implementing downsizing allowed for

little time for self. Barbara used the metaphor of the cobbler and the kids to describe what it was like for her coming down from the rush of having so much to do and then realizing that now she had to deal with her own emotions and the exhaustion that followed.

You think about yourself last; so it's like the cobbler and their kids. . . so you're coming down off of this rush of having all of this activity, thinking about everybody else, not thinking about yourself. So your body responds to all of this stress and the lack of stress. So this release that happens that's like, "Okay, I'm past it. I'm over it." And then it's almost like you turn around and go, "Oh, but wait. . .now I have to deal with it as an employee." (Lines 799-806)

David observed that the amount of work he needed to do within the given time frame to move work from the East coast to the West coast did not allow time for him to pause and take care of himself. He would finish one mission and move onto another one. What was important for him was to just keep going.

So it's not even like a sense of being able to stop and take care of yourself because it's more like after, it's like it's quickly turning. . .the image that comes to mind. . .it's almost like quickly turning and shooting off in another direction because you know you have to keep going. So there's no time for the respite if you will. It's a matter of okay, got that done, mission accomplished. Now turn, and let's shoot off in another direction to make sure we keep moving forward. (Lines 574-579)

Pat saw herself as a project manager and needing to stay "laser-focused" (Line 536) on the tasks that she and her team were expected to accomplish. This allowed little time for her to be distracted by her own emotions or others' emotions.

I think for me I was just very focused on the project. . .I was leading all the logistical elements of the project and making sure that everything was ready to go for announcement day and then all the logistics for announcement day, and so basically running the production of this as a project. For me, I could just be laser-focused on that and not get distracted by all the other things that might be going on with it because I just knew I had a deliverable. I had to get it done [laughing a little]. (Lines 533-538)

Jack and Stacey spoke of the emotional toll that participating in the downsizing event had on them and the importance of taking care of oneself throughout the process. Jack reflected on the magnitude of the event in his organization where everyone had to repost for positions and the uncertainty and organizational unrest that he experienced for the event's duration. Between the work to be done related to the downsizing event and the normal day-to-day work that still needed to be accomplished, Jack experienced both emotional and physical exhaustion.

One of the people principles was to make this happen as quick as possible. . . the legality of things is you have to follow legal rules and other procedures. . . just the sheer magnitude forced you a certain time frame. So you were working over that, and then you went into periods of where it was quiet. . . plus the uncertainty factor; so there's an emotional and a physical toll, one of just doing the work because these are all new structures; they are new teams; so you've got personal uncertainty; you've got a team you're trying to manage to design the work for whatever part of the business it is; then you've got the organizational unrest. . . So those are all not normal flows for a business day, right?. . . So they're all on top of the normal flow of getting business done; now you've got all these things on top; so it's emotional and physically exhausting. . . and a lot of people will have unnatural strength and energy and adrenaline through a crisis, and then you find out you'll pay for it if you don't take care of yourself afterwards. (Lines 433-441, 445-446, 461-462)

Stacey realized in the midst of the change management sessions she was conducting with employees that she was so immersed in helping others work through change and transition that she had forgotten about herself.

I did about one a day or two [change sessions] a day for a period of two weeks, and at the end of that time, I came home, and one night I just started crying, and of course, my husband's like, "What happened?" And it wasn't anything specific. It was just I think I was trying to hold all their emotions and sort of keep it. . . for them without dealing with any of my stuff. . . and then I realized. . . and I thought, "Man, oh man, I have to deal with my own stuff here. And pretty, pretty quickly and pretty effectively so that I can be of more service here." (Lines 432-436, 444-446)

I do think I was just feeling so much because I would have like 20-25 people in a session, so I'd have 20 people in the morning, 20 people in the afternoon, 20 people the next day, 20 in the afternoon--and I think it just became so emotional, and there were a lot of emotions that came out in the room. And I think I was encouraging that, no doubt about it, and letting them feel it, and I think I was trying to hold the space for them to feel it. And I think it just got to me after awhile. And I just needed to let it out, and I wasn't letting it out any other way. I was [like] okay, when's my next session? How many people do I have in here? What should I expect? Okay, now let me meet with the other facilitators. What are they hearing? What do we need to talk about as a team of facilitators that might be helpful? So it was all this taking care of and. . . I think I just finally let myself feel everything that they were feeling. (Lines 657-666)

Feeling overwhelmed, Stacey accepted help from a friend whom she had met during a life coaching program. Her friend helped her design a structure within which she could symbolically place all of the emotions she encountered during the day so she could leave the emotions behind when she went home in the evening. The structure was a vase that was in Stacey's office.

[The coach] said, "Look in your office right now. What do you see that might be something that is either a vase or a container or a cup or something?" And I said, "Oh, I've got this little vase here that doesn't have anything in it right now." She goes, "Okay, good. . .at the end of each day when you're doing these sessions . . .honor what you've heard and what you've been a part of. And then put it in that vase for safe keeping for tomorrow. . .Then leave it there when you leave the building. And when you come in the next morning. . .reach for it again, and see if anything has shifted or if there are other things you want to add to it. And then go do your sessions again and do the same thing." And at first I thought, "Okay, sounds really good, but I don't know that that's really going to help." And by golly, it did. Because it forced me to really think through. . .what was really important today and what would I want to save and maybe even be able to use tomorrow. (Lines 641-653)

Laura, like Carolyn, recognized the importance of emotionally disconnecting from what was happening at work and recharging her batteries when she was at home so she could continue the next day with the work to be done. She described being there for



herself and being there for others using the metaphor of being half man and half woman—the male part being there for employees and the female part being there for self.

I'm half man, half woman [laughing], split down the middle. I think the dual role is that you do have to be two different people, and you have to be the person that's there for them and then. . .you have to be there for yourself, too, so that's like a dual role. At the end of the day, you still have to go home, and you still have to figure out how this impacts you, and you have to make time for yourself. Sometimes, I think you get so involved and you go home, and you still take your work home with you. In these types of roles, you have to disconnect and say I have leave that, and now I have to go home; it's me; I have to leave the work behind. Even though what I might be dealing with is because of work, I have to devote time to myself now to work through it. . .to recharge and to be able, I think, to continue on the next day. (Lines 764-766, 774-779)

Lucy, like Stacey and Laura, acknowledged the need to take of herself so that she could be more effective with others. Lucy spoke of the need for people involved in helping roles in the context of downsizing of having to put on their own life vests or oxygen masks first.

You have to put your own oxygen mask on before you can help someone else, or you have to put your own life vest on before you can help someone else. So I had to go through that process myself in order to be both more effective and more helpful to people in my organization. If I had been totally isolated from it and never felt that kind of anger or fear then I would also have not had that transforming and kind of the grateful reaction. . .I don't know that I'd be that helpful if I'd never experienced it. It would all be theory and not real life experiences that help you help others. (Lines 671-678)

Sophia shared that in the dual role of being a survivor and an HR professional in the context of downsizing, she sometimes felt like Wonder Woman. There were so many emotions to juggle at once, and she needed to find ways to shield herself from the negativity so she could remain motivated and positive for others.

Wonder woman! She's one of my favorite superheroes! Sometimes, you feel that way. . .you're juggling all these things up in the air: emotions—your own, people's emotions—positives with negatives; it's like juggling all these things and you're trying to ward off [chung-chung-chung!] all the negativity coming at you

and just trying to shield yourself from all that so you can remain motivated and convey a positive message. (Lines 1063-1068)

Participants perceived that to be effective in their roles they needed to find ways to honor and deal with their own emotions in addition to helping other employees manage emotions. Sometimes, the pace and short time frames within which everything needed to be planned and implemented resulted in participants' neglecting their own emotional needs or waiting until most of the work had been accomplished at which time physical and emotional exhaustion became evident and needed to be addressed.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented two of the four key themes and corresponding subthemes that emerged from an inductive analysis of the interview transcripts. The two key themes presented in this chapter were (a) the emotionality of downsizing and (b) feeling responsible. In Chapter 5, the themes choice and control and possibilities for growth will be presented along with their respective subthemes.

## CHAPTER V

### FINDINGS: PART 2

This chapter continues presenting the findings of the phenomenological study on the perceptions of HRD professionals as downsizing survivors and facilitators of strategic HRD (i.e., organizational change, organizational learning, and organizational performance) in the context of downsizing are presented. The findings in this chapter emerged from an inductive data analysis.

While Chapter 4 presented the first two themes—the emotionality of downsizing and feeling responsible—this chapter presents the latter two themes—choice and control and possibilities for growth. Verbatim quotes from participants’ interview transcripts are included to illustrate themes and subthemes and illuminate the textural and structural aspects of the phenomenon. The textural aspects describe what was experienced and the structural aspects describe how the phenomenon was experienced, the contextual elements that shaped the experience. When quotations from the interview transcripts are used to support findings, participants’ pseudonyms and line numbers from the transcripts are provided (e.g., Pat, Lines 272-279). Ellipses appear when words have been omitted from a quote or only pieces of the quote specifically related to the theme or subtheme are used.

#### **Choice and Control**

What often makes downsizing difficult is that employees feel they are losing control of their day-to-day work and even their careers and their ability to make choices on their own. A key theme that emerged through the data analysis was choice and control. In the context of downsizing, choice and control refers to recognizing that one

can play the victim or can choose to do what is needed to not only survive but thrive.

Subthemes related to choice and control included: (a) choose your attitude, (b) be proactive and (c) regain control.

### **Choose Your Attitude**

In the context of this study, attitude refers to the frame of mind or orientation that we bring to a situation that confronts us. During downsizing events, it is easy to sink into despair and allow negativity to take over and to feel victimized even when you are a survivor. However, every situation and circumstance that confronts us provides a choice point where we can choose to dwell on the negatives or focus on the positives.

Carol and Lucy both spoke to the importance of choosing your attitude during difficult times. Carol, who had recently survived cancer, spoke of how having a life threatening illness had changed her perspective on life. In the context of downsizing, she believed that by having a positive attitude and contributing as best as she could that she would get through the downsizing event and be retained by the organization.

I have a different perspective than probably most people would have, only because of what I've been through in my personal life. You know, when you get a diagnosis of cancer and you survive that, everything that happens to you after that is kind of just like, "Bring it on!" You know, I beat something like that, and I moved on, and I'm still here. (Lines 369-373)

There's a mantra that I developed as I was just keeping on with everything, and I'm sure you've probably seen *Finding Nemo*, right? And Dory says "Just keep swimming; just keep swimming." That's what I just kept kind of saying to myself every day when I would come into work ... "Just keep swimming" . . . we're going to brave the storm and get past it, and I know there [are] going to be better times ahead when we get leadership in here and just keep swimming. (Lines 375-381)

Keep moving forward [and] being visible and valuable and contributing to the organization. And I believed – truly believed – that by doing that and by not allowing myself to become emotionally invested in negativity that I would be kept around in some way, shape, or form and that I was just going to keep doing what I

knew how to do best and that's being a good, contributing, hard-working employee that is there to help the staff learn and get through these type of events. That's the way I approached it. (Lines 385-390)

Lucy spoke of how the downsizing event caused her to reflect on how she judged her own value or importance. At first she felt angry and devalued because her own department lost headcount. She actually applied for a job with another organization. That experience helped her shift her own attitude from being angry and resentful to being grateful and to see the downsizing event for what it was, a business decision.

We had a book club, and the book club read two of Eckhart Tolle's books, *The Power of Now*, and there's another one. . . I forget the name of it. . . as we read through those books and talked about the content, I had a major life changing event happen to me, because initially, when I had the reduction in force, when I saw that I was not being allowed to refill positions, my initial response was one of anger and feeling devalued by the organization. Here [are] the exact thoughts I had. It's like, "So the organization must not value what I do if they aren't going to give me the people I need to do my work, and then I look over at another department and they're getting an increase in FTEs [full time equivalencies]. So they obviously must value that person's work more than they do mine." (Lines 170-172, 174-180)

Eckhart Tolle talks a lot about needing to let go of your ego, and for some reason, I viewed my own personal importance by the number of people who reported to me. And you know, it's sad and pathetic, but at the time, that was what I guess was [my] self-worth as a manager. So I learned to let go of that and to recognize that that was an ego thing and I just needed to let go. And then the other thing that I learned through that book club and watching the [Tolle] videos on Oprah's website was to accept what is. (Lines 203-204; 208-211)

Lucy believed that by choosing to be grateful rather than angry and resentful, she had secured her own position within the organization. She also shared that learning with other managers.

I personally was able to turnaround from being kind of angry and resentful to being grateful. I had a job [chuckling] that I didn't have to work 60 hours a week; I mean, it was amazing. It was wonderful. But I think also my attitude shift secured me in this position. If I had continued to be angry and resentful, I probably would have been the one that would have been RIF'd. So then I look at

my colleague who was RIF'd, and she was fearful and kind of withdrawing, and she did get RIF'd, and I was positive and grateful, and I didn't; so I felt like one of my learnings was that you've got to manage your attitude. (Lines 218-224).

Participants recognized that in the midst of stressful situations, something that they always had a choice about and could control was the attitude that they brought to the situation. They perceived that choosing to be positive rather than negative helped them put the downsizing event into perspective while also helping them to secure their positions in that moment.

### **Be Proactive**

Another aspect of choice and control is choosing to be proactive with one's personal life and career or choosing to be reactive. Employees who are proactive take charge of their personal and professional lives. They are always looking ahead and being mindful of what is going on around them so that if they perceive something negative might happen, they can develop a contingency plan. Employees who are reactive tend to ignore the signals and wait for something negative to happen before thinking about a contingency plan, or they wait for the organization to act and make critical decisions for them. They disenfranchise themselves.

Four participants (Ashley, Brad, Carol, and Carolyn) reflected on the importance of being proactive rather than reactive and always looking one step ahead. Ashley, for example, managed her own sense of job insecurity and her perception that the organization only valued people for their instrumentality by proactively thinking about what her next career move would be if she were downsized. As Ashley observed:

I saw through this experience that you must have a Plan B when you work for a global corporation where you are just a salary that needs to be cut from a P&L [profit and loss] line. That's what it taught me. (Lines 297-299).

Following the initial downsizing event, Ashley voluntarily moved from a recruiter position to a learning and development position knowing full well that this would be a risky move for her. She had been forewarned that as a learning and development employee her job would be less secure than if she stayed employed as a recruiter. With this knowledge in mind, she spent time developing her contingency plan, which was to take the severance money that she would be offered and open her own consulting business.

It's like you know that it will be happening to you. You know that for a fact. You know that training and development goes when these things start to happen, and when an organization gets into this frame of mind, you absolutely know you will be next at some point; it's just a matter of when and what can you do? Do you deny it, bury it under the carpet and say, "Oh, I'll deal with it when it happens; I'll get a severance package; I'll be fine," or do you take the bull by the horns and really set yourself up to be a survivor outside of the organization if it happens to you? (Lines 445-451)

Six months after moving into the training department, Ashley's worst fear came true and she was downsized. Because Ashley had anticipated future job loss and had developed her Plan B, she was able to more smoothly transition into independent consulting.

I literally had been out of the office. . .and I finally was back. And Monday, I walked in, and at 9:30 a.m., I saw the Human Resources Director that I used to actually work for come over, and I'm like, "Oh isn't this nice; he's welcoming me back." I went to say hi, and he just kind of waved at me, and he walked right into my boss's office, and closed the door. Five minutes later, they said, "Ashley, please come in here." [Ashley gasps] (Lines 535-540)

So it worked out really well for me to think that way because I had a year to start getting things accomplished in my personal life so that when it did happen a year later to me, I was prepared, and I had my next step in my career planned and lined up. (Lines 290-293)

Like Ashley, Carol and her colleagues proactively manage their own job insecurities by updating their resumes so they would be ready just in case they were let go in the future.

I think in my own department, we handle change better. . .we got together at somebody's house one night and we had like a résumé-writing party. Like, we got our résumés done and we gave each other feedback on them and we were trying to get prepared for what might happen. (Lines 312-316).

Brad observed that being proactive where one's career is concerned meant paying attention to what's going on around you and then planning accordingly. During the 1999 downsizing, when Brad worked for a U.S. affiliate of the international parent company, he helped to plan for and implement organizational restructuring within the affiliate resulting in job loss to 7,500 people. Brad's own unit was cut from 25 to 3 people. While he was waiting to hear about his own job fate, Brad proactively took a job with the parent company overseas. Brad recalled how in 2007, he began to sense that perhaps another downsizing event was on the horizon. He began to proactively think about what he might want to do if the organization were to downsize and encouraged colleagues to do the same.

Being proactive and being in control of your own life doesn't just mean when decisions face you, making the decision. It's getting a sense of what's going on, what's going on in the environment. So this was 2007. . .I saw all this was coming; especially [with] the younger people and the OD group, I would jokingly make comments and drew sheer disbelief. [Employee reactions] "Oh, that would never happen here," or paranoid the other way, "Am I going to lose my job?" [Brad's response to them] "I don't know; it's 2 years down the road, but if I were you, I would think very carefully around what do I want to do with my life and what's going on here." (Lines 646-652)

During the 2009-2010 downsizing, which involved global restructuring, Brad who had proactively thought about his contingency plan in 2007 based on what he saw coming



down the road decided that after nearly 30 years with the organization, it was time to leave to pursue his passion, engaging in full-time OD consulting.

When all of this hit, I had already made a number of my decisions about what to do and that made it a lot easier for me. . .So what was my attitude about it? It was, gosh, saw it coming, planned my life. I'm now in a position [where] the three jobs that I am qualified for are first level. I'm to a point [where] I love consulting, and it's what I'm good at. . .So I was at a point. . .where if I really wanted to be paid and recognized for what I did, I needed to be a team leader or a department manager, which I hate; so it was very easy for me. Okay, I can move to Houston and be a team leader, or I could go back to Europe and be a team leader. Oh gosh! Or I can take 2 years' salary and set up my own business, and do what I've always wanted to do. Wow, that's tough. (Lines 661-672)

Carol, like Brad, also believed in always being proactive and aware of the signals in the environment. Carol shared that her experience as a cancer survivor taught her how important it was to be proactive and get regular checkups. When asked what came to mind when she thought of herself as a change agent and change recipient, she shared, "a pink ribbon" (Line 882). For Carol, the pink ribbon symbolized staying aware and being proactive with her health. Just as she was proactive with her health by getting regular checkups, Carol took every opportunity at work to proactively stay abreast of what was happening in the organization and took every opportunity to prepare employees for changes on the horizon.

I also take every opportunity to educate people that I know and that I come into contact with about awareness of getting their checkups and all of that because they can survive it if it is detected early enough, and I take every opportunity to kind of be a zealot with that and I do the same thing at work. That's what I try to do. So a pink ribbon. (Lines 877-881)

Even as a Senior Vice President (SVP), Carolyn was aware of how no one's job is safe and secure in today's business environment. Just like everyone else, she too needed to take a proactive stance and keep her own skills and knowledge current.

I need to keep my skills and my knowledge [laughing a little] at the highest level . . . I've been affected! I've lost my job twice due to downsizing, and I find that making sure not only from a credential standpoint, but that's important too, but from a knowledge-base. . . keeping sharp and keeping up with--whether it's technology, new learnings, new developments in the field of HRD. I just need to stay abreast of it so that I can be most marketable, because I'm not ready to retire, and there are no promises out there. (Lines 668-673)

Participants recognized the importance of keeping their eyes and ears open and anticipating changes on the horizon that could affect themselves and other employees. They encouraged others to do the same. They spoke of the importance of proactively managing one's personal and professional lives and having a contingency plan to ease the discomfort of possible job loss.

### **Regain Control**

Regaining control refers to one's ability to find a sense of focus in an environment that seems out of control. Carolyn observed that what creates difficulty for those leaving the organization is uncertainty and that once that uncertainty is reduced, victims can regain a sense of control.

One of the things that I've learned, and this is through my own experience as well as with other employees, the most difficult thing to deal with is uncertainty. Once you know you're going to be let go you can deal with it because that's when, I mean maybe initially there's shock and. . .but if you know things are happening and you don't know if you're going to be affected, it's brutal. As soon as you have an understanding that it's happening, then you can position it in your mind as, "Okay, what are my options; okay what do I do now?" And you go through a process to where you regain control, but when you don't know what's going to happen, you lose control. That's an ugly place to be. When you have control, even when it's just the illusion of control, and you say, "Well, I can market myself this way, I can apply here, I can do this, I can do that." You're regaining control. That's a much better place to be. (Lines 490-500)

Brad shared that his life philosophy and his approach to coaching emphasized the importance of making one's own choices and on focusing on those things that can be

controlled or influenced. He further commented that he coaches victims and survivors the same way,

One of the things we wrestled with is what do we call the people who were changed because who wants to be changed. People want to change, but they don't want to be changed. So do we call people, targets? Probably not a good idea! Change agents and change targets! And what we ended up with is we are all part of the change, and we want people to take control of what they can influence and especially, their lives. I feel strongly about that. (Lines 327-332)

I give the same coaching to the stayers and the leavers. . .whichever you are, make it your choice, and if you are presented with, "You have to leave," make it your choice. . .So for me. . .it's a matter of you make the choice that's best for you and your family, and one of the boundary conditions is that you can't stay with ABC, if we're firing you. But okay, I am still making a choice, and I am going to chose to exit under my conditions, and I am going to do whatever I'm going to do with my life, and I'm in charge. I don't think there's a more healthy way to live. (Lines 293-296, 305-309)

Lucy worked with her own unit and helped them to regain control by sharing information with them on the realities of the economy and its impact on the industry and by involving them in decisions to be made related to the unit's work.

So I started to kind of work through that and say well the "what is" is that healthcare is way too expensive and the "what is" is that we need to reduce our costs; so I just need to accept that that's the economic environment that we're working in, and instead of getting upset and angry about it, I'm going to do the best possible job I can with the resources I'm given. That's kind of the mental shift that my staff and I had. We all just said, you know, here's what we're going to quit doing, and we're just going to do the best possible job that we can do with the resources we're given, and so we were able to kind of turnaround. (Lines 211-218)

As a learning and OD professional, Lucy also was responsible for helping the greater organization recover, and she tried to instill the same mindset in other managers.

I try to show other managers how they might be able to replicate the process that we used in our department for involving staff and dealing with the change and relooking at the work they do and seeing where there might be things that they can streamline. So my personal learning, I think, helped me to advise other managers. (Lines 225-228)

In her role, Sophia spent time with surviving employees who were worried about future downsizing. She would educate them on how downsizing decisions were made to reduce some of the uncertainty for them and help them to move past their own inertia. With respect to daily work to be accomplished, she would encourage them to not look too far ahead and to regain control by focusing on what they needed to do now and to not worry about things that might or might not come to pass.

I would sometimes walk somebody through, “Here’s the process; this is how this happens; this is how these decisions are made.” [Employee response] “Oh, I didn’t know that.” [Sophia to employee] “So now you understand, right? This isn’t something that happens one day to the next; there are a lot of factors that get taken into consideration; there are a lot of criteria that get taken into consideration; there are a lot of people that are involved in the process. And decisions are not final until the day that somebody sits with you and says, ‘I’m sorry, but your position has been eliminated. Even to that last moment before they have the conversation, your name can be pulled off of the list. So don’t worry about it so much; focus on what you have to do.’” (Lines 559-566)

“Have a plan, just in case, because I can’t promise you that you’re going to have a job. So, yeah, go home sit with your wife, sit with your husband or with whomever it is that you need to sit; look at your current situation; have a plan, just in case. But don’t spend all of your energy on that because at the end of the day, you may or may not lose your job; so why even worry about something that hasn’t happened?” [Sophia is now laughing]. So it was a lot of almost coddling a little bit and trying to calm people down, so that they can focus on what they needed to focus [on]. (Lines, 566-572)

Stacey would coach leaders on how to manage their own change and transition so they could then help their own teams do the same. Like Sophia, Stacey encouraged managers to regain control by focusing their teams on the goals they needed to attain rather than trying to look too far ahead.

I would say if there was one thing I can look back on and say what made the difference in all of this in terms of how people dealt with it, whether you were a survivor or whether you were one of the laid off ones, it was leadership and whether the leadership was able to deal with their own stuff and understand their own change and transition so they could feel comfortable with the teams that they

led saying to them, “I don’t know what all’s going to happen forever. I’ll let you know when I do. But let’s focus on the goals that we can get done while we’re here and while we’re moving forward.” That made all the difference. (Lines 485-492)

Tony, like Sophia and Stacey, interacted with employees who were worried and distracted about the future and the prospect of more downsizing and how they might be impacted. He, too, tried to get employees to stay focused on those aspects of their jobs that they could control.

They [employees] would say, “What could be next or who’s going to be next?” and my reaction is, “You know what, you won’t be able to control any of that; you just need to stay focused and work hard, and you’re always going to get distracted. But what you need to do is stay in focus with what your job is and not let the things you can’t control influence you.” (Lines 654-657)

Downsizing results in uncertainty and the feeling that one has lost control. In their roles, participants coached employees to look for opportunities to regain control and move forward by focusing on those things that they could control or influence in their day-to-day work.

### **Possibilities for Growth**

The theme possibilities for growth refers to the opportunities that change through downsizing presents to both individuals and to the organization to grow and undergo transformation. As painful as going through a downsizing event might be, downsizing provides both victims and survivors with opportunities to clarify their purpose, their values, and what matters most to them in life. Sometimes downsizing provides the needed nudge to leave unfulfilling jobs and careers and try something different. Downsizing also provides organizations with the opportunity to rethink their own purposes and, if needed, reinvent themselves. Subthemes in this section include the

following: (a) possibilities for self-growth, (b) possibilities for employee growth, and (c) possibilities for organizational growth.

### **Possibilities for Self-Growth**

Many participants (Barbara, Brad, David, Kat, Lucy, Pat, Sophia, and Stacy) engaged in personal and professional introspection as they went through the downsizing event. This process helped them clarify what mattered most to them and helped them see possibilities for their own personal and professional growth. Barbara's downsizing experience helped her see that the organization was preventing her from living up to her own personal and professional expectations. She found it hard to work for an organization where people and resources that she needed to perform in her role were being cut and simple perks like employees' being given holiday hams and turkeys were being taken away (Line 61); however, the CEO still allowed himself a personal chauffeur (Line 264) and boat captain (Line 355). This dissonance between what she needed in her career and in the employment relationship and what she was actually experiencing led to her decision to leave the organization.

I saw that the reaction always ended up being the same. So where weren't we preparing ourselves better? So the first time, the second time, what had we changed in between? I didn't see a change in mindset or strategic approach and that concerned me; so I made a decision to move on. . .and there have been three more [downsizings] . . .in three years...so that organization in particular didn't learn or didn't find a way to keep themselves fiscally and financially sound. (Lines 609-613, 617, 621-622)

I couldn't do my job. . .It had become a pretty tough environment, and I had an obligation to the organization and to the employee population. . .Our leadership's direction and approach to things changed; so the teams started to feel it, and I really wasn't able to invest any money in training or engagement. . .everything just came to this grinding halt ,and the morale changed and. . .the hammer came down really hard, and it was such a switching of gears that it was harsh to the employee-base. (Lines 632-623, 637, 640-642)

There was a little guilt too – leaving my team behind. But it became an emotional necessity [to leave] because every day, there were a handful of individuals coming in saying, “Tell me how to do this. I can’t do this. I need HR to support me. I need you to intervene in this. They are not treating us the way that we deserve to be treated.” And that wasn’t from an entitlement perspective; it wasn’t raises; it was literally just the humanity. . .so, literally my hands [were] tied . . . knowing that if I had the life raft to throw out to somebody, to keep them from drowning, my hands were tied to it. . .It just wasn’t a safe place, and I couldn’t come in calling myself an HR professional every day in an organization that. . . [was] going back to calling us “minions,” you know? (Lines 651-655, 661-662, 666-667)

Kat, like Barbara, experienced some values-based dissonance between what was professionally important to her and what she perceived the organization expected of her. She perceived that the direction in which the organization was moving was forcing her to change her work ethic.

I’ve always been someone who had a long-term. . .vision in my projects, you know? It turned into that instant gratification. . .more short-term. . .It just changes your work ethic, and it got to the point where I wasn’t comfortable with what I was doing anymore. I didn’t feel like I could stand by the product that I was producing. So it changes your perspective. It really, truly changes your perspective and not in a positive light. (Lines 719-721, 725-728)

Like Barbara, Kat experienced some personal and professional dissonance that surfaced during the downsizing event. Kat’s downsizing experience helped her clarify what mattered most to her in an employment relationship. For Kat, it was not about making a lot of money or having visibility with leaders. Like Barbara, Kat needed to work for an organization that really cared about its employees and be in a job where she could make a positive impact.

When I finally decided to transition from that organization, one of the deal breakers for me [was that] I had to know that the organization I went [to] stood behind their employees. . .they really cared. And a lot of organizations profess to care about the employees; there are a few that really do it. . .I wasn’t going to go anywhere until I found that deal-breaking clause, we’ll say. (Lines 495-499)

It really makes you look at opportunities differently, because as I said, I made a sufficient amount of money; I was very comfortable in my position; I was very visible in the organization; I mean the CEO often called me at night to ask my opinion on things, but money isn't everything and visibility isn't everything, you know? If you feel that you can't make a positive impact in an organization, at least for me, I won't work there. (Lines 499-504).

Pat, like Barbara, realized through her downsizing experience that the organization had lost its strategic focus and had not learned from its poor business decisions. The organization had digressed to where it had been six years before. Additionally, like Barbara and Kat, she felt she could no longer have the impact she wanted to have in her role.

A lot of the reason why I left is that this was. . . a change but without a new direction, so there wasn't anything to really get the employees focused and rallied around and learning new skills for or increasing their capabilities around. It was just, "Hey, we're going back to the business that we were in six years ago," and it's not very motivating for most people. So I think that that part is very hard. When you change and you're pivoting toward a new direction, and you're growing the company, then there are better opportunities for OD folks to be helpful in that process. You have to do something in the other one to keep employees engaged, but it's really hard with the absence of strategic direction. (Lines 660-666)

Pat decided to leave the organization and open her own consulting business. Something that made it easier for her to leave the organization was that she did not have an emotional connection to the new CEO and leadership team as she did with the former CEO who had died and the previous leadership team.

I think I was always very positive about the company, very loyal, and really liked being a part of it. I knew after the CEO died that it would not be the same company. So, in some ways, it's helpful to have had an event like that that helps you start to already separate a little bit emotionally from the company, and by the time something like this big layoff happened, to be a little more removed from it because you already weren't quite as emotionally connected to the company as you had been. . . I don't feel a connection to this executive team like I did in the past. I really wasn't there that long to work with them. . . it was a very emotional, loyal company before, and I don't think that's the way it is now; so that changes



my perceptions. And some of the things that they've done in terms of the retention and those kind of things, I think they've done a lot. Their finances are great, but they did that on the backs of laying off 70% of the company at that time. So it doesn't feel really great. (Lines 588-603)

Stacey, like Barbara, Kat and Pat, was unhappy. She had worked for the organization for nearly 30 years, was making more money and was in the highest position that she had ever aspired to be, had resources available to her to perform in her role, yet she was unhappy.

It's been a very interesting ride for me, and what I think I have learned through this experience [is that] I'm certainly not any better at change than anybody else is...it was so difficult in this company when we were under the management of this CEO. . .there were times...where I thought, "I don't know that I can do this anymore." And I actually had the highest position that I. . .would have ever, and I never even aspired to it. I just got it and I was in the right place at the right time, but here I was making the most I ever made and was the most unhappy because of the way that whole group was behaving and what they valued, and ugh! That was so icky that I thought, "Oh, I'm either going to have to leave here or something's going to have to happen." And so when the company was going to be sold, my change and transition was one of, "Oh, thank God. Something's going to happen here that is going to take away this fear state management." I was less concerned about the identity of the company, which turned out to be what most people were very concerned about. But I felt like, um, hmmm, this has got to be better. (Lines 753-765)

Stacey's unhappiness prompted her to leave the organization and open her own consulting business. She asked the leadership team for a severance package to help her transition into consulting, and they agreed to it and negotiated an exit date with her.

They were going through more restructuring. I said, "First of all, you don't want a Director of Organizational Change indefinitely in this company. I'm not interested in any other position. I really want to go off and do it on my own." And so they said, "Well, okay, we get that." And I said, "That way, you'll have an open head count space in talent management for someone else." And they said, "We'll do that if you'll stay with us this fiscal year," which was February, and. . .I basically asked them, "Will you give me the severance for. . .my length of years so that I can actually start my own business?" And they were just wonderfully gracious and. . .said, "Yes, we'll do that." (Lines 206-213)

Stacey viewed her survivor experience with the organization as something that made her stronger and helped take her to the next level in her career. “It’s definitely not a death for me. . .I would draw a picture maybe of some steps. And I really see the survivor thing as just helping get [you] stronger and taking you to the next level” (Lines 861-863).

David shared how the downsizing event caused him to really think about what he wanted to do career wise. While he could have stayed with the organization, had he accepted a relocation offer, he chose to move on. He used the metaphor of being a man on an island in the middle of the ocean considering the choices available to him.

I was a man on an island in the middle of the ocean, like I was by myself . . . not really knowing where I was going to go next. . .knowing I could go in any direction and confused about what direction I wanted to go in. And as a result of the downsizings I had been through, including that one that we’re talking about, [I was] really starting to say, “Do I want to stay here and continue to do the same thing, or do I want to something different than might give me a better opportunity [and] not to have to go through this as frequently?”. . .even from an industry perspective, because I’d always been in insurance and medical; so it was kind of saying, “Where do I want to go next” (Lines 366-368, 372, 375-379)

The downsizing event resulted in David’s assessing his purpose and his professional skill-sets and provided him the opportunity to reinvent himself.

It forced me to take stock of who am I, what do I bring to the table, where do I want to go next, and it might even be some place completely different. . .it gave me an opportunity to reinvent myself. (Lines 872-875)

Sophia, who stayed with her organization shared that her personal growth was recognizing that work was part of her life but not her whole life. The downsizing experience helped her see how expendable people are in today’s organization. This realization helped her to establish work-life boundaries.

My personal attitude still remains, but I don't feel that I need to give more than 100% [somewhat more softly]. I'll give 100%, but I don't necessarily want to give more than 100% . . . if I take a vacation or if I take a vacation day or vacation week. . . I'm not going to go out of my way to stay abreast with my emails. . . Those are decisions that I made not only because of the company situation; they're also personal decisions that I wanted to make for myself. But when you look at what's going on in the organization. . . I've come to think that it doesn't matter how much you give. When your job is not needed, they're going to cut you out anyway; so I need to set some boundaries and some balance for myself, so that I can keep some sense of sanity. I'm not going to make work my number one priority. It's just a part of my life, but it's not my life. (Lines 363-367, 380-386)

Lucy reflected on how her best personal learning or transformation often resulted from negative experiences like the transformation she experienced through the downsizing event of accepting what is and choosing to be grateful.

I just got through teaching what we call culture circles this last week with a group of trauma surgeons and what I told them was I sometimes learn the most, which is sad, from really challenging or painful experiences – that's when I have the greatest learning or transformation, and the quote that I pulled up from the Internet today. . . it said, "God turns you from one feeling to another and teaches by means of opposites so that you have two wings to fly, not one." (Lines 635-641)

And it's an image of a bird. I guess I believe that you can have a transformation or a significant growth from a negative experience, so I guess I feel like I've had that myself and I hadn't thought about the analogy of a bird flying and you have to have kind of the negative to get the positive. (Lines 645-648)

Laura viewed her experience as temporary survivor and then as a severed employee as something that helped her to approach work more positively and to see that there was life after downsizing. She could indeed go out there and find another equally satisfying job even after working long-term for the same organization. She was a "survivor."

I think it helped me to approach my job more positively. I think you always worry about losing your job, but this particular event helped me realize that there is life after that job, and that you can survive it, and you can go on. . . There was a

time in my life when I was at [the company], when I was young and had young kids that you worry about losing your job and you obsess with that. “Oh my God, what would I do if I lost my job?” Then you grow and your kids get a little older. When this happened, fortunately, my child was a little bit older. It wasn’t that big of a thing. But now in my new job, I don’t even worry about. . .the possibility of my company closing or downsizing. I mean, if it happens, it happens. But I don’t think about that or dwell on it like I might have. . .because I know that I can find something else. . .that I can move on, that I am capable of going to a different job and moving on. (Lines 443-451, 455-456)

Jack stayed with his organization. He reflected on how going through a downsizing event provides an opportunity to ask purpose related questions that often we do not take the time to ask ourselves.

When you go through this, you’ve got to get real clear on what your purpose is; most crises do [that]. They cause you to reflect to the point. . .because you can’t answer most of these questions and go like, “What job do I want to post for?” Well, what is it you’re trying to do? Are you trying to maximize your income? Are you trying to maximize your contribution to the company, your contributions to the world? Are you trying to just get through a day? . . .so as an individual going through it, you get stuck if you try and just answer on a tactical basis; so it causes you to say how long, what matters to me, where do I want to live? And those are hard questions. (Lines 534-538, 539-541)

I think I’ve gotten some clarity on those questions that I didn’t have. You’re always asking them, but I think for me, it’s easy to not engage yourself in it because you just keep going. . .So I think it put me into that space and caused me to answer some of those questions. And my colleagues who have left. . .I spend a lot of time talking with them about why they chose to leave or whether they didn’t choose, how they felt about it, and they gave me some advice on what I would do if. . .*when* this happens again. (Lines 541-547)

The downsizing events caused some participants to reflect on their own purpose, what mattered most to them in the employment relationship, and whether they wanted to stay with their organizations.

### **Possibilities for Employee Growth**

As emotionally difficult as being downsized can be, it does provide opportunities for employees to grow whether within or outside the organization. Several participants

observed that employees often stayed in unchallenging and unrewarding employment because they were afraid to venture out and try something new. In other words, staying and living with career discomfort or dissatisfaction was sometimes safer than moving on. Downsizing, however, forced employees to move on. Jack believed that if organizations and people did not change that they would die. Life was about reinventing oneself at the individual or organizational levels at different points in the life cycle.

Oh, I have no doubt. There's no doubt; it's part of the cycle of life, right? You either reinvent yourself and restructure and move forward or you die. And so I think it's just a belief I have, and if no changes happen over time, I would wonder if it's probably dying. So I think that's where it's like. . .change is a great thing when you initiate it, right? When you're initiated to it, you think, well is it the right time? Is it the right change? (Lines 552-556)

Jack equated career inertia to the laws of physics and how an object in motion stays in motion until acted upon by an outside force.

It's the laws of physics. An object in motion tends to stay in motion until acted [upon] by an outside force. And these are outside forces, and so inertia will keep you going in a certain way unless either you, your spouse, your financial situation causes you to do something different; your business is that outside force. (Lines 313-316)

Matthew, like Jack, also spoke of the career inertia that sometimes takes over until something like downsizing forces people to move on. He compared career inertia to exercise inertia.

Well I equate it to exercise. A lot of people don't exercise until they have a heart attack, or they have some life threatening situation that forces them to do it. And I equate the same thing to. . .career exercise. People don't make those difficult moves, look for new opportunities, those kinds of things, until something forces them to do that. (Lines 505-508)

Brad shared a story of a woman who had lost her job through one of the downsizing events. Initially, she was angry; however, several years later, she shared with him how being downsized had transformed her life.

I had a woman, single parent that couldn't afford to lose her job, who did ... she was extremely angry. I worried that she was going to bring a gun to work, but she came back two years after that, voluntarily, and she literally said, "Thank you. That was the wakeup call I needed. My life was going nowhere. I went back to school. It was tough, but basically the severance package allowed me to live when I went back to school. I now have a much better job, and I feel good about myself." (Lines 484-490)

Jack, like Brad, had also found that people he knew who had left the organization whether voluntarily or involuntarily had fared well. Downsizing provided the needed career nudge.

I'd say the majority of people who've moved on have done quite well, either because they needed to move on and this just forced them to [laughing a little] ... they made a good decision that they didn't want to make because it was convenient to stay. . . So either it was time to go, which a lot of this is [that] the time is right because we just don't want to make that choice ourselves; we don't want to admit it. Or I wanted to; I wanted to, but again, it was safe, so I stayed longer than I needed to. (Lines 299-301, 305-307)

Matthew, like Brad and Jack, also observed that people who involuntarily left the organization often ended up in more personally and professionally satisfying jobs.

I had one woman that we notified. . . she had been with the company for 25 years and she said, "I've had nothing to do for the past nine months; I've been bored out of my mind; I knew this day was coming; you know I'm glad it's finally here." I remember thinking to myself specifically when she said that, "Wow, you've known for nine months, and yet you haven't looked for other jobs internally? . . . You haven't said to anyone, 'Hey, what else can I do? I don't have anything else to do right now.'" So that was an interesting commentary from her point. But she left the organization and within a few months had a job somewhere else doing something that she truly loved doing. I ran into her post that; the person that we had notified versus the person I saw at the mall later on, a night and day difference between just, kind of like, personal appearance, you know, this glow for her personally because she was out of that period; she was doing something she loved. (Lines 482-492)

Sophia spoke of how sometimes she would coach leaders and help them see that it was time for them to move on. She recollected a situation where she coached a general manager who had become disconnected from his work during a downsizing event. His disengagement had affected employees who looked to him for guidance and support. Through the coaching engagement a mutual agreement was reached for him to leave the organization.

I had had one-on-ones with certain people, and I did an organizational diagnostic. And I told him what came out of that diagnostic was his disengagement-- that people perceived it; that it was very obvious; I gave him examples of comments that he made, things that he would say that people would hear, and the message that that was sending to the organization, and it was interesting because he and I had had a lot of conversations, and he used the metaphor of a family—husband and wife—when they’re divorcing. And he felt at that stage that he was in a marriage where it wasn’t working. (Lines 510-516)

Earlier on when we started talking [and] when he used the metaphor, we felt that with therapy, that this relationship could still survive, but that therapy didn’t come on time; it didn’t happen. And so he was already at that stage where I don’t think this marriage is going to survive. So I used his metaphor to say, “The marriage is on the rocks. It looks like it’s not going to survive, but you have the kids out here and the kids were the organization. And when a marriage is breaking up, you do everything that you can to protect the children. So I need you protect the children because whether you stay or whether you leave, they’re going to be here, and they need to stay motivated; they need to see something positive even within all of the negativity, all of the things that are going on around them.” (Lines 516-525)

“So, I need you to be the dad, and I need you to take care of the kids, and I need you to send some positive messages.” [General Manager to Sophia] “Well, I can’t lie to them.” [Sophia to General Manager] “I don’t expect you to lie to them. But you have to find small wins and you have to communicate, and you have to watch what you say and how you say it because you’re sending a very negative message to them. There’s no way they’re going to be motivated or even want to be here. A lot of people were looking for jobs; they won’t want to be here, and when you leave, then what do we have left?” So that’s when I told him. “I need you to be motivated; I need you be engaged, but if you can’t do that then you need to tell me so that I can help you leave.” And later that evening, he said, “I thought about what you said, and I don’t want to be here anymore.” So from then on, we just worked on getting him out. (Lines 525-534)

Stacey shared how she would coach employees to confront negative thoughts and feelings they were having, assess their skills, and think about possibilities for themselves whether within or outside the organization. It was exhilarating for her to see them move from fear and paralysis to confidence so they could make the right personal and professional decisions for themselves.

With the acquisition and people just being so undone by all this, that's when I started using the coaching that I had learned in helping people to . . . think about where you are and what your skills are, what you're thinking, what you're feeling . . . and I could watch the confidence level of people who didn't feel they had any options, and by the time we finished, I got them thinking about not just what you're good at, but what you're really energized by and when you really feel alive. And, of course, they were looking at me, you know, retail people, going, "What are you talking about?" By the time I got them into it, it was like whoo! I'd have people go home and put incense, you know, and light aromatherapy candles and really think about those things. And it was wonderful because I watched people go from paralysis to a confidence that allowed them to make a decision that was really right for them and [not] just out of fear. (Lines 366-369; 371-378)

Several participants (Kat and Lucy) reflected on how downsizing provided opportunities for survivors to learn new things and move into new roles. Something that Kat was able to implement before she left the organization was a process that allowed the organization to share employees across entities so the organization could close skill gaps left by the downsizing. While this process moved some employees outside of their personal comfort zones, it provided opportunities for them to grow through development.

We had to do a skills assessment to see what we had left at each location, and I actually introduced the sharing of resources, which hadn't been done at that organization. . . initially, legal was against it because they were separate legal entities. We had to find a way around being able to employ them at two different locations. . . so again, evaluating resources, finding a strategy on how to implement those resources appropriately, and then training some of the resources to be able to take them out of their comfort zones and put them into positions that needed to be filled. (Lines 520-527)



Kat took a lot of pride in having implemented that process and providing the organization with a more efficient way of using human resources while also providing employees with opportunities to grow and become more valuable.

The one thing I was able to take away from that last experience was being able to develop some of the survivors to point where they really excelled. And. . .I don't think, if it weren't for that experience, they would've had the opportunity to get to where they got. And I take away that I might've had a little bit to do with that because we implemented training where some organizations don't. And previously at that organization, they didn't. It was, "Here. . .now you go do it, and you're either successful or you're not and you have to do it quickly because if not we got ten people in line to take your job." (Lines 533-539)

Lucy shared how through the downsizing event, she was able to help an employee voluntarily transfer into another job that would provide her with more career opportunities.

I manage two areas. . .I have a medical library and then the Organizational Learning & Development function. As we downsized, I really looked at the work and where we needed to have the resources. And there was a woman who actually was working in the library at the time, which would have meant that I had two people in the library and only myself in Organizational Learning & Development. And I thought. . .she's talented enough to actually transition into a different role. So I approached her and I said, "I'd really like you to think about moving into the Organizational Learning & Development function." (Lines 380-387)

And now that she looks back, she says, "That was such a wonderful opportunity, and I'm so glad I did it." You know that's an example of that flexibility, kind of letting go of not being so attached to that job description that you had. . .it was a role that actually paid more and had more opportunities anyway. But I was just glad that she had that same mindset that we all did where we're going to be flexible and do the best we can with the resources we have, which might mean shuffling duties and those kinds of things. (Lines 387-392)

Downsizing can provide opportunities for those staying to develop new capabilities. It can also provide a needed nudge for those who are unfulfilled in their jobs

to move out of their comfort zones and seek more fulfilling employment outside of the organization.

### **Possibilities for Organizational Growth**

Downsizing provides opportunities for the organization to change direction and transform itself to remain competitive. Jack observed that as disruptive and as uncomfortable as downsizing was for his organization, it sent a clear signal to the workforce that the company was changing the way it did business.

A lot of times you'll do selective downsizing in businesses. . .so it's isolated . . .where it cuts across many businesses, it's very disruptive. But it also creates a change; so. . .if you're looking to change the way a business runs, that's one way to demonstrate it. This is how things are going to be different. . .on the individual side, you'd say, "Well this doesn't feel very good" . . .On the business side, it says, "This is a new way of doing business." (Lines 242-243, 247-250)

Matthew observed that downsizing represented a shedding or changing of organizational direction; however, organizations needed to better manage it by moving away from their focus on short-term gratification and engaging in better long-term strategic planning.

I would say downsizings are a necessary part of the organizational life cycle, but the need for downsizing and the magnitude of downsizing can be managed with better long-term strategic planning from the organization's part. . .it's a shedding of or changing of direction. (Matthew, Lines 693-695, 704)

Sophia referred to downsizing as a "necessary evil" (Line 1097), something that was "part of the landscape" (Line 1109). To survive, organizations needed to redefine themselves from time to time. As organizations redefine themselves, the skills needed within the workforce will also change. However, Sophia also believed that to attract and keep top talent that organizations needed to find creative alternatives to downsizing.

It's an evil that will not disappear, and it can't disappear. I think it's always going to exist. . .It's a necessary evil. . . [When] you think about our own personal lives, we do downsizing ourselves, right? We're going to move to a smaller house, or we're going to move to an apartment, or I'm going to cut expenses. So I'm not going to go the movies as much; I'm not going to buy the magazines or the newspaper. Everybody has to do that in order to survive at different stages in their lives. So I don't think that businesses can survive without it. . .for good talent. . .as businesses restructure, reorganize, and redefine themselves, and they want to continue to keep the good talent, they need to find creative ways to reduce costs without the large downsizing. But I don't think it's ever going to disappear completely. (Lines 1091-1092, 1097-1105)

It's part of the landscape. . . I can think about my own organization, 82 years. This company started building one type of product, and now we're in a totally different type . . . same industry but different technology, different types of products, right? So in order for that to happen, change has to happen, and redefinition has to happen; so you're going to have different skills; you're going to have different types of people. So it will change, and you will have to move things around; so I just don't see that downsizing is something that will ever disappear. (Lines 1109-1115)

Sophia used the image of the Titanic and painted a picture of the organization going through rough water and suffering some damage and human casualties. Unlike the Titanic, however, the organization survived and transformed itself.

There were times when we talked about the organization as the Titanic, this huge organization going through a lot of changes. And many times this was the metaphor that was used at the company, where it's going to take some time to turn this boat around. It's like the Titanic. We're heading toward the iceberg, and we're trying not to hit it, but we know that part of the ship is going to get hit by the iceberg no matter what. It's not going to sink; it's going to survive, but it's going to take some time to turn it around. And that's the way that it's felt. It's like this huge ship that did get hit, and we got some water in there, and we lost some people along the way, but we didn't totally sink. (Sophia, Lines 393-400)

We've been through difficult times, and granted this has been one of the most difficult times that I have seen this company go through, but each and every time we've survived. . .This company will survive; it will arise again like the phoenix, and it'll be a different company, but it will survive, and we'll make it through. Whether we're here or not, we'll make it through. (Lines 415-420)

Stacey spoke of downsizing as representing both death and rebirth for the company. Like Sophia, she used the metaphor of “the phoenix rising from the ashes” (Lines 678). She spoke of employees’ having to lose or let go of the old company to embrace the new one.

The one thing that comes to my head is like this death and rebirth. And it’s almost like the phoenix rising from the ashes. That it really needed to be almost, in this sense, to lose this company that they [employees] all so strongly identified with. And I really think it was a death and a rebirth. It’s kind of a picture. I mean it was that--it was that strong. And in the Bridges model, when you talk about endings and what can you bring with you. . .we even talked about taking . . . their [company] business cards with their current role and. . .putting it in a frame and just being able to take that with you in the future to remember but to know that it’s not you anymore. (Lines 677-684)

Stacey recalled how one division broke from the past to embrace the new organization by staging a mock funeral. To move on, the division needed to leave one identity behind and embrace a new one.

We had one of our divisions actually create a funeral. . .They had a coffin and they all wrote down things that they thought they needed to let go of to move forward on, and they had a New Orleans jazz band come in. The HR people were the mourners. . . it was really amazing. And after this guy was telling me about this, and I said, “Tell me what happened after. Were you able to maintain that?” He said, “Yeah . . .We would get in meetings and somebody would bring up something from the old and they’d say, nope, we buried that.” (Lines 697-698, 702-7045, 708-711)

Some participants acknowledged that downsizing was part of the landscape, a necessary evil, or part of the organization’s life cycle. To survive in a competitive environment, organizations needed to reinvent themselves from time to time. Reinvention often required organizations to make workforce adjustments to ensure that the organization had needed skill sets and competencies to be successful.

## **Summary**

This chapter presented two of the four key themes and corresponding subthemes that emerged from an inductive data analysis. The two key themes presented in this chapter were (a) choice and control and (b) possibilities for growth. Chapter 6 provides a discussion that answers the main and secondary research questions. It includes a composite textural-structural description of the phenomenon. It also provides recommendations for organizations and HRD practice and recommendations for research.

## CHAPTER VI

### DISCUSSION

This chapter is divided into four sections: (a) responses to the research questions, (b) recommendations for organizations and HRD practice, (c) recommendations for research, and (d) summary of the chapter.

#### **Responses to the Research Questions**

The main research question is as follows: How do HRD professionals perceive the experience of surviving downsizing and facilitating SHRD before, during, and/or after downsizing? Secondary questions include the following:

1. How do HRD professionals' perceptions of their survivor experiences influence their abilities to facilitate SHRD before, during, and/or after downsizing?
2. How do HRD professionals' perceptions of the social exchange relationship between employer and employee influence their own survivor experiences?
3. How do HRD professionals' perceptions of the social exchange relationship between employer and employee influence how they facilitate SHRD before, during, and/or after downsizing?

The main research question and secondary research question #1 will be answered first followed by the answers to secondary research questions #2 and #3. The main research question and secondary research question #1 will be answered together as they speak specifically to how participants perceived downsizing as survivors and SHRD facilitators. Similarly, secondary research questions #2 and #3 will be answered together

as they both focus on participants' perceptions of the phenomenon in the context of the social exchange relationship between employer and employee.

The answer to the main research question and secondary research question #1 also will provide the composite textural-structural description of participants' perceptions of the phenomenon: what participants perceived and experienced and how they perceived and experienced it, that is, the contextual elements that shaped their perceptions and experiences.

### **Responses to Main Question and Secondary Question #1**

Strategic HRD is “the process of facilitating organizational learning, performance and change through organized initiatives and interventions and management actions for the purpose of enhancing an organization’s performance capacity, capability, competitive readiness, and renewal” (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000, p. 6). The 15 participants in this study worked for 14 different organizations and held positions from professional to senior level in which they facilitated one or more of Gilley and Maycunich’s (2000) three practice domains of SHRD: organizational change, organizational learning, and organizational performance. While all three domains are important to SHRD, in the context of downsizing, the focus was on facilitating organizational change, getting the organization through three phases of downsizing—planning, implementing, and recovering—the goal being to improve organizational performance (i.e., profits and ability to remain competitive) through headcount reduction.

Participants in this study were involved in one or more of three phases of downsizing within their respective organizations. They perceived that surviving downsizing and facilitating SHRD in the context of downsizing was emotional for

themselves and for others. Participants felt a strong sense of responsibility to protect employees (Renwick, 2003) and to balance employee and organizational interests (Foote & Robinson, 1999). They also acknowledged the need to be self-responsible and take care of themselves so they could perform effectively in their roles. Participants perceived that the experience was one that provided opportunities for them and for others to exercise choice and control whether that was choosing one's attitude, being proactive with respect to one's career, or moving forward by focusing on those things that were within one's control or influence. They also perceived that as difficult as downsizing could be for both victims and survivors that downsizing provided opportunities for self, employees, and organizations to grow and transform themselves. Table 3 shows the downsizing phases in which the themes and subthemes presented themselves in the context of participants' experiences.

Table 3

*Themes from Inductive Data Analysis*

	Before (Planning)	During (Implementing)	After (Recovering)
The Emotionality of Downsizing			
Feeling Dishonest	X		
Experiencing Guilt	X	X	
Experiencing Doubt	X	X	X
			(continued)



Table 3

*Themes from Inductive Data Analysis (continued)*

	Before (Planning)	During (Implementing)	After (Recovering)
Experiencing Loss	X	X	X
Experiencing Apprehension	X	X	X
Experiencing Chaos	X	X	
Experiencing Shock		X	
Feeling Responsible			
Protecting employees	X	X	X
Balancing Employee and Organizational Interests	X	X	
Putting on the Game Face	X	X	X
Taking Care of Self		X	X
Choice and Control			
Choose Your Attitude		X	X
Be Proactive		X	X
Regain Control		X	X
			(continued)

Table 3

*Themes from Inductive Data Analysis (continued)*

	Before (Planning)	During (Implementing)	After (Recovering)
Possibilities for Growth			
Possibilities for Self-Growth	X	X	X
Possibilities for Employee Growth		X	X
Possibilities for Organizational Growth	X	X	X

As shown in Table 3, the themes and subthemes that emerged through the inductive data analysis presented themselves in different phases of the downsizing events. Some of the subthemes spanned all three downsizing phases, for example, experiencing doubt, experiencing loss, experiencing apprehension, protecting employees, putting on the game face, possibilities for self-growth, and possibilities for organizational growth. Others like taking care of self, choose your attitude, regain control, and possibilities for employee growth were most evident in the during and after phases. Experiencing guilt, experiencing chaos, and balancing employee and organizational interests were evident during the before and during phases. Feeling dishonest emerged during the before phase, while experiencing shock was tied to the during phase.

During the interviews, participants were asked to metaphorically describe different aspects of their experiences as change recipients (downsizing survivors) and change agents (SHRD facilitators). Metaphors are “the understanding of one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5; as cited in Barner, 2010),

Metaphors help us understand others' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs (Ortony, 1993; as cited in Barner, 2010). For example, common metaphors participants used to describe the tension, anxiety, or fear they experienced within the workforce included, "You could almost cut the tension in the air...you could just feel that" (Laura, Lines 147-149), or "There was a lot of fear and people just walking on eggshells" (Carol, Lines 316-317), or "It was like... anxiety – so being told you have to present a paper in front of the crowd – a classroom – without any preparation, that feeling of anxiety you get when you have to do that" (Jack, Lines 331-332).

Many participants likened the experience of going through a downsizing event as being like preparing for, going through, and recovering from a storm. Some participants viewed their organizations as ships going through a storm and suffering an accident where there were casualties but where, ultimately, the organization survived. The metaphor of an organization being a ship bracing for, braving, and recovering from a bad storm may help readers better understand the logistical and emotional challenges that HR professionals experience as agent-survivors, organizational agents leading and facilitating different aspects of downsizing and employees experiencing change as survivors. The composite textural-structural description that follows speaks at a high level to the essences of the phenomenon. While this description may not reflect each participant's experience and perceptions 100%, it provides the essences of their collective experiences.

**Composite textural-structural description.** Bad storms, like other things we do not anticipate in life, carry with them powerful forces. These forces can change our plans, interrupt us, hurt us and those we care about, or even kill us. These forces also bring challenges: keep breathing, moving, living, and believing, and making sense of the future

in a confusing and emotional present. In many ways, organizations undergoing downsizing are like ships braving a bad storm. Downsizing can change our plans, interrupt us, hurt us and those we care about, or even kill us. Downsizing challenges an organization's human resources to keep breathing, moving, living, believing, and making sense of the future in a confusing and emotional present.

Even when planned for properly and when the rationale for downsizing makes sense, downsizing still hurts. Even when the workforce understands that job security no longer exists and that organizations are in the business of making money, downsizing still impacts our sense of humanity. For those being severed, there is the sudden loss of one's livelihood, which is often accompanied by a sense of loss related to one's social, professional, and personal identities. For those surviving downsizing, there is confusion resulting from not really knowing how to move forward, sadness and loss seeing valued colleagues be plucked out of the organization, and a lingering sense of uncertainty about what the future might bring. Survivors live in constant anticipation of the next storm and if they will be among those thrown overboard.

McMahan, Pandey, and Martinson (2012) observed that although downsizing is a strategic decision made by an organization's leaders, "the process of downsizing becomes an HR practice, since it directly influences the human resources of the organization" (p. 148). In other words, although managers implement HR practices, employees assess those practices and form attributions and perceptions about why the practices were implemented. Those attributions and perceptions can influence employees' perceptions of justice or injustice and can contribute to feelings of job satisfaction or dissatisfaction that can impact organizational performance.

Participants in this study helped their organizations navigate the tactical and the emotional aspects of the downsizing event as they guided the workforce through the storm. As survivors, they emotionally experienced the storm like other employees did; in other words, they experienced survivor syndrome consisting of a spectrum of positive and negative emotions (Appelbaum & Donia, 2000, 2001; Appelbaum, Delage, Labib, & Gault, 1997; Mirabal & DeYoung, 2005; Noer, 1993). As human resource professionals, they also felt responsible for ensuring employee well-being (Renwick, 2002). They put others before self, often suppressing their own worries and feelings about the event. They put on their professional faces so they could be the beacons of light showing employees the way through the emotional darkness of downsizing just like a lighthouse helps mariners navigate their boats and ships through heavy fog, dark nights, and bad storms.

They were “the corporate lifeline that pulls employees from troubled waters” (St. George, 1998, p. 51). Participants tried to bring order to chaos by ushering employees to the safety of the life boats. They wanted to protect, nurture, ease others’ pain, lift them up, and instill hope and optimism that the downsizing storm would pass and the organizational ship would come through the storm stronger.

Although some participants indicated that they had learned how to manage their emotions so that they could do the work at hand, this did not mean they were emotionless or inhumane. Many participants immersed themselves in emotion and worked with emotion as they facilitated the human and business aspects of their downsizing roles. They were the toxic handlers, bearing the brunt of others’ emotions and trying to transform pain into healing (Frost, 2004). Moving towards and working with emotion,

however, runs contrary to Clair and DuFresne's (2004) and Clair et al.'s (2006) studies that revealed that downsizing agents tended to use emotional and physical distancing as coping strategies to get through downsizing events.

Sometimes, participants experienced ambivalence related to what they were asked to do and how they saw themselves professionally (Foote & Robinson, 1999). For example, the amount of confidentiality that needed to be maintained during the planning phase caused ambivalence for many participants (Clair et al., 2006). Some participants were also ambivalent about their organizations' decisions to downsize (Clair et al., 2006). As organizational agents and strategic partners, they were sometimes "stuck in the middle" (Redman et al. [1997] as cited in Renwick, 2003, p. 345) trying to juggle organizational needs and employee needs (Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1997; Sronce & McKinley, 2006). They were expected to support organizational actions and decisions that they were uncomfortable with, actions that might not have been in the best interests of employees, in other words, put the ship's well-being before the crew's well-being. A coping strategy that seemed to help some participants resolve their ambivalence was cognitive reframing, rationalizing the need for downsizing and seeing it as inevitable or as a normal part of organizational life (Clair et al., 2006). Participants used comments like downsizing is a "necessary evil" (Sophia, line 1097) or "a shedding or changing of organizational direction" (Matthew, Line 704).

Participants did not label their survivor experiences as good, bad, or indifferent. They were able to identify positive and negative aspects of their experiences. However, as I read through the interview transcripts multiple times, I perceived certain aspects of their survivor experiences helped them be more or less effective in their roles. For

example, understanding the rationale for downsizing and feeling that it was not happening simply because of poor business decisions made by the organization's leaders or that it was happening simply to save money helped participants buy into the decision and communicate the message to others. Something else that contributed to better survivor experiences was leaders who were visible, sincere, involved, and compassionate. Although downsizing was still emotional and traumatic, feeling that leaders were supportive and that they were in it together made it easier for participants to work through their own survivor experiences and help others do the same. Another element that was important was having resources needed to carry out one's job during downsizing and to support the workforce following downsizing.

Perhaps, however, what helped participants the most was their own abilities to deal with ambiguity and change, their personal attitudes, their own sense of self-efficacy, their own sense of right and wrong, and their abilities to focus on what they could control or influence. Participants did not define themselves by their work. Work was part of their lives and their social identities but was not their entire identities. Some were able to take their own positive lessons learned through their survivor experiences and share them with managers and other employees to help them move forward whether within or outside the organization.

Something that was unclear from this study was how well participants were able to move their organizations into true recovery and facilitate organizational learning and organizational performance. Although participants accomplished the tactical aspects of downsizing and helped their organizations implement change, the story seemed to stop there. Some spoke of not really knowing what the priorities were or what

the organization's strategic direction was. With the exception of four organizations, the focus seemed to be predominantly on plugging up the holes that had breached the hulls of their ships, in other words, reactively stop the organization's financial bleeding in the short-term rather than proactively look for ways to thrive in the long-term by uncovering and addressing the root cause of performance gaps.

At best, organizational learning focused on survival learning (Hitt, 1995; Senge, 1990) with no deep dialogue on how the organizations had reached the breaking point and what could be done to prevent them from reaching that point again. If double loop learning processes were used to challenge existing norms affecting organizational success and to overcome defensive routines (Argyris, 1980; Hatch, 2006; Lipshitz et al., 2006; Marquardt & Reynolds, 1994; Van Woerkom, 2004; Yorks, 2005), participants did not speak of being involved in or facilitating these processes. The mere fact that many of the organizations kept employees in the dark until they were ready to implement downsizing demonstrates that they did not leverage the intellectual capital of the workforce to help them address organizational problems leading to downsizing or even to identify viable alternatives to downsizing.

The focus seemed to be on simply moving the organization back to calmer waters and reestablishing a semi-stable state by working with managers to determine the best ways to proceed with workloads within reconfigured teams. Some participants also encouraged surviving employees to be role flexible and to learn new skills through cross-training, for example so the organization could move forward. Many participants spoke of continued downsizing that occurred in the months and years following the events



shared during the interviews, another indication that organizational learning did not seem to occur.

What follows is a depiction of what it might be like to be an HR agent-survivor going through three phases of downsizing using the storm metaphor as an organizing framework.

***Bracing for the storm.*** There is a heavy black cloud hanging low on the horizon, and an uneasy quiet pervades the organization like the calm before a bad storm. For several weeks, leaders have been meeting late into the night in the captain's conference room assessing the ship's current financial state and where it ought to be. Perhaps the signs were there all along. Vacant positions have gone unfilled. Remaining crew have been pulling double and sometimes triple duty, and everyone perceives that the captain has been running a very tight ship.

The captain convenes a meeting with a selected group of crew members comprised of leaders, managers, and HR professionals to brief them on the ship's current state. Poor business decisions along with economic decline have necessitated a drastic response. To improve profitability, stay competitive, and ultimately survive, the ship needs to restructure and shed human weight. Those gathered will lead the downsizing brigade. Some will work on severance processes; others will work on the communication strategy; some will coach managers on how to break the news to their teams. Others will work with remaining crew and help them move through the change and return to business as usual.

The downsizing brigade has been directed to work quietly and discreetly behind the scenes. They are asked to sign an oath that they will not divulge what they know to

anyone outside of the team. For some, working secretly does not feel right. They feel devious and deceptive. It goes against the grain of how they perceive themselves personally and professionally, open and honest individuals who care about people. But the captain does not want to alarm the crew with distressing news and run the risk of a drop in production or of crew prematurely jumping ship or worse yet, having critical crew—those the ship needs to retain—jumping ship voluntarily. The captain reminds the brigade that their first obligation is to ensure the ship's survival and sometimes that means human sacrifices must be made. Those being sacrificed should be glad to know that sacrificing their lives made it possible for others to continue working and for the ship to survive.

Still, as the severance lists are drawn up, the discomfort intensifies. Everybody has a story. Some have worked on this ship for more than half their lives. The ship is their second home and crew members are like extended family. Some will be hard pressed to find jobs that pay as well as the ones they are being forced to leave. The HR professionals on the team begin to grieve over losses that have not yet happened.

As the weeks go by, the rumor mill kicks in. The HR professionals continue to interact with colleagues who talk incessantly about the downsizing rumors. They comment on how strange it is that people keep disappearing behind closed doors. Colleagues ask them if the rumors are true, and who might be terminated, certainly none of them. The HR professionals answer evasively and become overwhelmed with feelings of guilt and deception once again. Some of their colleagues are on the severance list, but they cannot say anything. They worry about how their colleagues will treat them when everything is out in the open. Will they understand and forgive, or will they be

disappointed, angry, and resentful that the ship's well-being was put before their well-being?

It is difficult to walk amid the crew seeing them chatting and laughing and working so hard oblivious to the fact that in a few short weeks, many of them will be involuntarily walking the plank. But there is no time now to deal with the discomfort, the guilt, the deception, the sadness, and the sense of loss. The storm is fast approaching and final preparations must be made. All energy must stay laser-focused on fulfilling the mission to ensure that downsizing is executed flawlessly.

As announcement day approaches, doubt in self and doubt in the captain's decision to downsize begin to surface. What if recommendations made to the leaders were wrong? Will they be viewed as credible HR professionals once this is over? What if the leaders made the wrong decision to downsize? What if there could have been a better way, one that did not require so much human sacrifice?

The skies have turned darker and the rumblings are growing louder. The winds have grown stronger and the sea has become choppy. A light rain begins to fall. There is a palpable tension in the air that is so thick you can almost cut it with knife. The crew intuitively senses something is amiss, and the storm clouds are becoming heavy with emotion. The crew are keeping their heads low as if trying to stay under the radar.

***Braving the storm.*** Announcement day arrives and the crew learn their fates. The storm clouds, heavy with the collective emotions of the crew—nervousness, fear, worry, tension—burst, and the flood begins. The ship is leaning from the emotional weight. Waves are breaking onto the outside decks. Lightning bolts strike the deck and chaos ensues. People are screaming and crying. They are fearful and panicked. How

will they survive if they lose their jobs? Some are sliding off the deck into the turbulent water below. The HR professionals want to throw life rings to them but cannot because their hands are tied to them. It's horrifying to watch people struggle and not be able to help them.

Some of the crew are walking around shocked and dumbfounded like people who have walked away from a bad accident. Some are angry. Why were they not told sooner so they would be better prepared? The HR professionals become the beacons of light guiding the crew through the chaos and confusion, trying to protect them and keep them out of harm's way. Some of the survivors decide to voluntarily jump ship before they too are forced to leave.

Saying goodbye to severed crew members as they board the lifeboats to leave the ship is sad and throws the ship into a state of mourning as if at a funeral. Everyone hopes the lifeboats will make it safely through the storm to the shore. The HR professionals try to comfort distraught crew. They are the human shields, the grief counselors, absorbing others' emotions and providing a safe harbor so the crew can mourn their losses and share their concerns.

***Recovering from the storm.*** The heavy rain has subsided and is now a steady drizzle. The sky is still grey, but up ahead, the sun is beginning to peek through. The ship is returning to somewhat calmer waters now. The HR professionals begin to assess the damage and sift through the debris. As the crew begin to settle into a new routine evidence of downsizing surrounds them: empty posts and empty cabins and quiet hallways. They wonder what has become of their fallen mates. Did they make it safely to shore? Will they find new posts quickly?

Several HR brigade members solicit help from the crew to bail water from the ship. The crew is still worried. What if more weight needs to be shed? What if the ship doesn't survive? A brigade member who has been with the ship for a very long time and has seen the ship go through other trials offers assurances that the ship will survive. It will be like the phoenix rising from the ashes. It may have a different look to it and have a different crew and different leaders, but the ship will prevail.

The HR professionals shift their attention to recovery. The mission they were asked to fulfill was accomplished. The change was facilitated. Beyond that, however, it is difficult to fully support others. The captain's vision for the ship and the new strategic direction remain unclear. Apprehension remains high among the workforce and distracts the crew from moving forward. They continue to ask questions that cannot be answered. What if there is another storm? What if there are more human casualties?

Leaders are impatient. It is time for the underlings to stop being so emotional and get back to work. They should feel grateful to have jobs! The HR professionals encourage the crew to focus on the present and the work that can be done now. Do not look too far ahead and try not to worry about things that may or may not come to pass. Be flexible. Learn new things. Increase your value. The managers want more support than the HR professionals can give. Morale is low, and although no money is available for learning, engagement initiatives, and other incentives, the captain continues to drink fine brandy and eat expensive caviar. Rank has its privileges even in the midst of crisis.

As the ship settles into a new routine, the HR professionals begin their own recovery process. There is a sense of satisfaction for having accomplished the mission but lingering sadness for what was lost. With the change completed, now there is time

for them to come down from the adrenaline rush that sustained them through planning and implementation and acknowledge their own mental, emotional, and physical fatigue. Now there is time for them to assess the roles they played during the downsizing and how well they were able to honor their own personal and professional values. Do they want to stay with this ship or move on to another one?

But maybe there is not enough time to do this at all. A heavy black cloud hangs low on the horizon, and once again, an uneasy quiet begins to pervade the organization like the calm before a bad storm.

### **Responses to Secondary Questions #2 and #3**

Social exchange refers to relationships we develop with others in which we exchange tangible and intangible resources (Erdogan & Enders, 2007). These relationships involve give and take (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001). In social exchange relationships, there are expectations of reciprocity (Blau, 2005; Gouldner, 1960), fairness (Blau, 2005), and trust (Blau, 2005). From an employment perspective, we evaluate the quality of the exchange relationship based on our perceptions of different things, for example, organizational justice, how the organization fulfills our expectations of the psychological contract, and perceived organizational support (POS; Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007; Parzefall & Salin, 2010).

Organizational justice refers to our perceptions of fairness within the exchange relationship (Greenberg, 1990). In the context of downsizing, employees assess the fairness of procedures used (i.e., procedural justice), the outcomes to both victims and survivors (i.e., distributive justice) and how people were treated throughout the event (i.e., interactional justice). The psychological contract refers to the unspoken and

unwritten contract that each employee perceives based on his or her expectations of the employment relationship (Rousseau, 1990, 1995). Perceived organizational support or POS refers to employees' perceptions of the extent to which the organization values their contributions, cares about their well being, and helps them fulfill their socioemotional needs for affiliation, approval, and esteem (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Participants were asked to share their perceptions of the employment relationship. Many had long tenure with their organizations and had personally experienced the evolution of the employment relationship from one that had a strong relational component to one that had become less relational and more business-like, one that was less mutual and more self-serving on both sides. In other words, they perceived that they and other employees no longer expected nor wanted a lifetime commitment and that employees were more inclined to use current employment as a stepping stone for something better outside the organization. Similarly, participants perceived that employers were more likely to sever the employment relationship when they perceived the instrumental value of employee skills and knowledge had been expended. Carolyn summed it up when she observed, "I may want you; I may have every intention of keeping you employed, but if I do not have a business need, and I cannot justify the funds to pay your salary, I have to make a tough decision" (Lines 727-729).

Understanding that the relationship was more business-like and less relational and that either party could end the relationship at a moment's notice provided a big picture perspective and helped participants stay focused on the work that needed to be done even when it did not feel right. Still, while participants understood that work was a business

transaction and perceived that people were valued for their instrumentality, they also had a non-negotiable expectation that they and others be treated humanely. A humane workplace was one that treated people fairly and with dignity and respect, cared about them not only as workers but as people, and valued their contributions no matter how long or short the employment relationship might be. As Sophia observed:

I don't expect my company to provide everything for me; I'm not offended that they're changing policies and that maybe there are certain benefits that I had, and I'm not going to have them anymore. That's too bad...but I understand; it's a business, and they need to watch the bottom line...but I do expect a decent salary for what I do; I expect decent benefits; and I expect to be treated as a human being; I expect to be treated with certain respect and not just as another piece of furniture or as a robot. (Lines 1025-1031)

I could infer from the data that those participants who were actively involved in planning for downsizing and who felt that they had a voice in shaping processes and procedures perceived that there was a degree of procedural justice and also felt valued as employees. Being actively involved also contributed to their sense of being in control in the midst of an event that tends to disempower employees and make them feel out of control. Additionally, in the dual role of change agent-survivor, participants often had more information available to them than other employees did and perceived more interactional justice. Participants who perceived there was a degree of procedural and interactional justice seemed to have had better survivor experiences than those participants who simply carried out pre-determined directives or who felt kept in the dark where information sharing was concerned.

Those participants who worked in organizations where leaders were visible, involved, and demonstrated sensitivity towards them and towards others throughout the downsizing event perceived higher levels of interactional justice and POS than those who



did not. Leader visibility, involvement, and sensitivity along with perceptions of justice also contributed to some participants trusting leaders' decisions, which helped them to cope (Hargrove et al., 2012; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998). Participants who worked in organizations where victims were helped through severance, job search, counseling, and other types of assistance perceived that there was distributive justice for victims.

Sometimes, however, outcomes to survivors were not perceived as being just. In Carol's organization, surviving employees were expected to take compensation and benefits cuts (Lines 321-322). In Barbara's organization, a simple employee perk—giving employees holiday hams and turkeys—was taken away (Line 61) even though the CEO continued to have a plane and boat captain (Line 334) and a private chauffeur (Line 243). In Stacy's organization, the CEO whose poor business decisions had resulted in the organization's financial woes still left the organization with millions of dollars in his pocket (Line 129). It could be inferred that these types of actions resulted in perceptions of distributive injustice.

Erickson and Roloff (2007) found that survivors' organizational commitment was positively related to POS. Perceptions of organizational justice and POS can influence employees' job satisfaction as well as their intent to stay with the organization (Spreitzer & Mishra, 2002). Participants' perceptions of the social exchange relationship contributed to their feelings of job satisfaction or dissatisfaction and to their sense of emotional commitment towards their organizations and influenced some participants' decisions to stay with or to leave the organization post downsizing. Several participants who left spoke of having lost the emotional connection to the leadership team (Pat and Barbara) or perceiving that the organizational culture had changed for the worse (Stacey).

Others felt that they could no longer perform well in their roles because of a lack of strategic direction (Pat) or not having the resources to properly support the workforce (Barbara).

Spreitzer and Mishra (2002) found that when employees felt empowered they were more likely to remain attached to their organizations. Empowerment was defined as one's sense of having personal control at work. Some participants who voluntarily left their organizations had considerable control over their own work and were in positions where they shaped processes that were used during the downsizing events in their organizations. While this contributed to their perceptions of procedural justice and feeling valued, they were dissatisfied with other aspects of the employment relationship, for example, perceiving that leaders lacked compassion.

What was interesting was that the participant who seemed to have the most dissatisfying downsizing experience stayed with her organization. This participant felt the organization was disrespectful towards her and other employees; she perceived that distributive outcomes and procedures used were unfair, interactional justice was totally lacking, and she seemed the least empowered in her role. However, what sustained her was her positive attitude; she had a high degree of positive psychological capital—hope, optimism, confidence, and resilience (Luthans et al., 2004)—which she attributed to having survived cancer just a few years before. This would seem to support the findings in Avey, Wernsing, and Luthans' (2008) study on how positive psychological capital and positive emotions can counter unproductive attitudes and behaviors that can hinder organizational change.

Something else that sustained her was the new leader whose transformational leadership style was the exact opposite of the previous leader's style. The new leader was highly communicative with the workforce and solicited employees' assistance to help him turn the organization around. He was able to repair some of the perceptions of procedural and interactional injustice and build positive psychological capital by being communicative, providing information, and giving employees a voice and soliciting their help to return the organization to a profitable state, showing that he valued their contributions. He was also able to repair perceptions of distributive injustice by promising to restore cut and lost compensation and benefits if employees could help him rebuild the organization and meet specified financial targets by certain dates.

Whether or not participants perceived there was justice or injustice and whether or not they perceived their organizations were supportive or not, participants focused on the one thing that they knew they could fully control—themselves. As Jack observed, "It may be me next time, so I better do unto others as I would like them to do unto me" (Lines 896-897). My sense was that participants tried to compensate for perceived injustices and perceived lack of support. Carol, for example, kept an ear to the grapevine and tried to compensate for perceived unfairness related to communication by clarifying rumors and sharing what she knew. Sophia would coach employees who perceived procedural unfairness by explaining the complexities of assessing the workforce and determining whom to retain and whom to sever based on business needs and other legal factors.

Participants recognized that they could choose the attitudes that they themselves brought to the situation. They could choose to be positive, hopeful, and optimistic. They

could choose to be compassionate and provide emotional support to others. By modeling dignity, respect, and compassion for others, they helped the workforce manage change and transition better.

Although participants did not speak of employee overt resistance to change, they recognized that unresolved employee emotions were a distraction and prevented employees from moving forward and focusing on their work. All of their energy was being poured into worrying about what might happen next. This supports Bridges' (2003) observation that it is not the change event itself that creates the problem but the emotional, psychological transition process that accompanies a change event. During implementation and recovery, some participants spent time coaching employees and helping them see opportunities in change and helping them take control of their lives by focusing on setting and accomplishing short-term goals. Many participants created psychological safety for employees (Carmeli, Brueller, & Dutton, 2009; Edmondson 1999, 2002; Lipshitz et al., 2002, 2006; Sharkie, 2005) by providing a compassionate space for employees to emotionally decompress. They helped employees in both group and individual settings explore and navigate through the neutral zone of change and transition (Bridges, 2003) so they could learn to cope with uncertainty and move beyond emotions and take the first steps forward into recovery or the new beginning.

Hargrove et al. (2012) observed that it is important to continue to care for surviving employees post-downsizing and “to treat employees with compassion, respect, dignity, and empathy in order to restore equilibrium in the organization” (p. 318). Some participants spoke of being more attuned to the organization's emotional climate post downsizing and making themselves available to those still struggling with the emotional

aspects of change and transition so that this could be addressed before it affected individual and organizational performance. Other participants even stayed in touch with severed workers and continued to provide informal coaching, guidance, and emotional support to them.

### **Recommendations for Organizations and for HRD Practice**

This study deepens practitioners' and scholars' understanding of the perceptions and experiences of a special group of downsizing survivors, those in HR-related roles who are change recipients and change agents involved in facilitating SHRD before, during, and/or after downsizing. Recommendations for organizations and HRD practice include the following: (a) create an explicit employment contract, (b) develop and publish a downsizing strategy, (c) communicate early and often with employees, (d) build positive psychological capital, (e) provide more formal support to HR professionals as agent-survivors, and (f) involve HR professionals as true strategic partners in all three phases of downsizing. These recommendations were derived from this study, the literature, and from my own long experience in the field of HRD.

#### **Create an Explicit Employment Contract**

In the absence of being able to provide an assurance of job security or long-term employment, organizations should create more explicit relational contracts that clearly spell out what employees can expect relationally in the employment relationship. For example, organizations can promise to treat employees fairly, keep them informed and give them a choice in decisions that might impact their personal and professional lives. They can promise to ensure that employees will have opportunities to stretch, grow, and develop skills that will help them increase their value within and outside the organization.

This more explicit relational contract should be shared with prospective employees during recruitment and be reinforced during on-boarding and other learning and organizational development initiatives.

### **Develop and Publish a Downsizing Strategy**

Organizations develop disaster recovery plans that spell out how the organization will ensure business continuity following events like fires, hurricanes, and other natural disasters; yet they typically do not put the same care into developing downsizing plans to proactively determine how to ensure business continuity following a downsizing event. Having a downsizing plan would fulfill two purposes: first, it would give HR professionals and managers involved in planning and implementing downsizing to follow and would help alleviate some of their own stress as agent-survivors; second, if the downsizing plan is published and available for all employees to review, it will help employees understand the complexities of making human resource decisions and will help prepare them for what to expect should the organization need to implement downsizing. This can help the organization better manage employee perceptions of procedural, distributive, and interactional (interpersonal and informational) justice. Furthermore, having the downsizing plan pre-established can allow HR professionals to focus more energy on helping managers move their units beyond simply making the change but on how to best restructure work and train survivors to take on new responsibilities.

### **Communicate Early and Often with Employees**

Organizations want employees to be less needy and dependent on them and take charge of their own careers; however, many persist in encouraging codependent

relationships by keeping employees in the dark over organizational decisions that can have a profound negative impact on their lives (Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1996). Although downsizing will create discomfort for most people even when it is anticipated and even when the organization has carefully planned for the change, something that has been emphasized repeatedly in the practitioner and scholarly literature is the need for organizations to be as transparent as possible with employees (Noer, 1993). It is fully within the control of organizations to manage employee justice perceptions with respect to the two components of interactional justice--interpersonal and informational justice.

When rumors start to circulate and employees cannot get straightforward answers, mistrust and cynicism begin to develop (Weakland, 2001). Lack of information can also result in decreased productivity (Kim, 2009) as employees pour their energies into keeping an ear to the grapevine, which often contains information blown out of proportion. Organizations need to empower their employees to take charge of their lives and provide them with information needed to make informed choices and decisions. Employees should hear the message first from the organization's leaders. Then HR professionals can help ensure that the message filters down through the ranks from leaders to manager to supervisor to employees consistently.

Organizations need to consider the ethics of withholding information from employees (Pompa, 1992). It is critical for organizations to be transparent and provide employees with as much information as possible and as soon as possible to help them cope with their own sense of career uncertainty and make the best choices for themselves (Hargrove et al., 2012). It is unconscionable and inhumane to not give employees adequate time to plan for job loss and how this might impact their ability to provide for

themselves and their families. Often the fear that employees will make a mass exodus from the organization if they learn of the organization's intention to downsize is totally unfounded.

### **Build Positive Psychological Capital**

As I read through the interview transcripts multiple times and reflected on the data, I found myself asking if a “survivor” is any less a “victim” or if a “victim” is any less a “survivor.” For victims, there is the finality of knowing they are being let go, which helps them move on and become survivors outside the organization. The survivors, however, live in continual fear of losing their jobs in subsequent downsizing events that may or may not happen and feel victimized by the organization.

Organizations need to find ways to build positive psychological capital—hope, confidence, optimism, and resilience (Luthans et al. 2004)—within the workforce. Leader involvement is essential. Leaders must play a more active role in leading organizational change by being visible, optimistic, and providing a vision and blueprint for the future's success that employees can wholeheartedly embrace.

Furthermore, if change is indeed what is now for breakfast then employees need to learn strategies for managing change and transition from the onset of the work relationship so they can tap into those strategies as needed. By making change and transition workshops part of the core HRD curriculum, employees will learn strategies to apply to any change that they may face, personally and professionally, and be more prepared to manage change whether immediately or in the future. This will help them be more resilient. These workshops will also help to normalize negative emotions that people often feel when confronted with involuntary change. Employees will be able to



self-identify where they are in the change and transition process and also better understand emotions associated with each stage of the process.

Many participants spoke of training budgets being substantially cut as a result of downsizing. Training departments are often viewed as nice to have but nonessential functions and easy to cut expenses. However, there is evidence that organizations that invest in learning and development are able to weather downsizing better than those organizations that cut learning and development (Gandolfi, Renz, Hansson, & Davenport, 2012). Continuing to invest in employee development will show employees that the organization cares about them, values them, and wants to ensure that they have the skills to perform in their jobs (Weakland, 2001). This can result in more motivated, committed, and satisfied employees (Gandolfi et al., 2012; Nadeem, 2010).

However, organizations need to take this investment in training and development one step further and focus on helping employees become more employable outside of the organization, a practice that currently does not appear to be widespread (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). Organizations that invest in the employability of their employees may even be able to develop the reputation of being an employer of choice even in a work environment where job security can no longer be offered (Clarke & Patrickson, 2008). Furthermore, the organization's commitment to learning and development for employee success within and outside the organization can become an element of an organization's more explicit employment contract and serve as an attractive recruiting tool.

### **Provide More Formal Support to HR Professionals**

HR professionals facilitating organizational changes like downsizing run the risk of suffering from emotional burnout as they perform in their roles. Most participants in

this study had no formal support systems to help them decompress from others' emotions and manage their own emotions and concerns throughout the downsizing event.

Organizations need to understand that while facilitating change events like downsizing might be part of the HR professional's role, this does not mean that they will instinctively know how to manage the emotional aspects of downsizing. Organizations, therefore, need to ensure that professional counseling services are available so that their change agents can emotionally decompress throughout all three phases of the downsizing event.

Many participants also did not have formal training in facilitating change or even in coaching victims and survivors. Some learned as they implemented; others learned through previous experiences. The agent-survivor role is a very important role, and organizations should not leave it to chance that those assuming these roles will know what to do. Organizations need to invest in the training and development of their HR professionals so that they are better equipped to contribute during organizational crises such as those brought on by downsizing.

### **Involve HR Professionals as True Strategic Partners**

Downsizing is a complex phenomenon. An organization's decision to downsize can result from many factors such as social forces that encourage leaders to resort to downsizing (McKinley et al., 1995) or even business ideologies embraced by the organization's leaders (Rust et al., 2005; Sronce & McKinley, 2006). Additionally, downsizing can be precipitated by other factors such as the many rationales participants' shared in this study. For example, the recession created economic hardship that many participants' organizations were unable to recover from without resorting to downsizing. For others, downsizing was used as a strategic intervention along with other interventions

such as changing the business model or changing the organizational design to help the organization stay competitive. In some cases, downsizing resulted from poor business decisions made by the organization's leaders, for example, pursuing a non-profitable product line or granting high mortgage loans to consumers who did not qualify for the amounts underwritten. Financial loss to the organization resulted and downsizing was used to bring the organization back to a profitable state. In many cases, the rationales provided for downsizing supported the ideologies of shareholder value and market competition (Rust et al., 2005; Sronce & McKinley, 2006).

A concept that informed this study was the RBV of the firm that posits that organizations can leverage unique bundles of tangible and intangible resources (i.e., organizational capital, human capital, and social capital) to create and sustain a competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). Teece et al. (1997) built on this concept by suggesting that these resources are dynamic and not static; in other words, as organizations change their business focus, some of their tangible and intangible resource bundles will also change. As an organization's external environment changes, the internal environment may also need to change to create alignment. A goal then of strategic HR is to guide leaders to ensure that in the context of changes that might need to be made that the best effort is also made to place the right people in the right jobs. Additionally, individuals impacted by the change need to be provided with effective support and development opportunities so that the organization can meet changing business needs. Sometimes, this also means changing the composition of the workforce, letting go of those whose skills and experiences no longer serve the organization and even bringing in new talent that present a better fit.

From a strategic HR perspective, however, one might be left pondering what appears to be a saying/doing gap in organizational rhetoric. If people are among an organization's greatest assets and are part of the unique bundles of internal resources that organizations can use to create and sustain a competitive advantage, then why would an organization engage in a practice like downsizing that creates so much angst and that harms the workforce? HR professionals can guide management to recruit the right people based on the organization's strategic direction at a particular point and time. Organizations can develop and grow people to help the organization execute its strategy. What happens though if the strategy is wrong? From a strategic HRD perspective, how then can HRD professionals make the shift from being simply the messenger or a pair of hands executing directives emanating from the corporate-suite to being true strategic business partners involved in both shaping and executing business strategy (Torraco & Swanson, 1995)? How can they play a more active role in questioning, voicing concerns, and challenging strategic decisions that do not seem to be moving the organization in the right direction?

### **Recommendations for Research**

Participants in this study worked for organizations in a variety of industries in the private sector. Research on this topic should be expanded to include experiences of HR professionals facilitating SHRD in the public sector, which has typically been perceived as a more stable work environment less prone to downsizing and where traditionally, seniority has ruled over individual performance with respect to severance decisions.

Participants in this study fell into two generational groupings—Baby Boomers (53% of participants) and Generation Xers (47% of participants). Many of the Baby

Boomers had over 20 years of tenure with their organizations (Brad, Jack, Lucy, Sophia, Stacey, Tony) and were able to clearly see their organizations' evolutions from paternalistic/familial, cradle to grave-like cultures to more business-like cultures. The Generation Xers in this study became employed during this period of change and downsizing but grew up under the Baby Boomer work ethic of their parents. This phenomenon should be explored further with HR professionals who belong to Generation Y/Millennials to see if their perceptions of the phenomenon differ from those expressed by participants in this study.

Many participants experienced ambivalence related to their expectations of themselves as HR professionals, their personal and professional values, and what they were charged to do during the downsizing event. Research should be done to further illuminate perceived values-based or ethical dilemmas that may result for HR professionals facilitating downsizing events.

The experiences of participants in this study attested to the emotional nature of downsizing and how in the change agent role, they often felt compelled to regulate emotion. Further research should be done around emotional expression and suppression and its impact on HR professionals implementing change initiatives like downsizing while also coaching managers who also will be assuming change agent roles on emotional or feeling rules (Turnbull, 1999) related to change implementation.

This phenomenon could also be studied through the lens of Durkheim's social class theory and the concepts of division of labor, anomie, and workplace solidarity. For example, how does downsizing create corporate anomie and erode solidarity in a global workplace and what are the implications for SHRD?

A number of quantitative studies might be developed based on the findings of this research. These studies might explore the relationship between leadership styles and each of the following: (a) organizational compassion, (b) organizational recovery, and (c) survivor resilience. These studies might be completed using a large-scale survey during downsizing recovery.

### **Summary**

Chapter 6 concluded this phenomenological study of the experience of HRD professionals as downsizing survivors and SHRD facilitators in the context of downsizing. Responses to the main and secondary research questions were provided along with recommendations for organizations and HRD, and recommendations for research. Also included was a composite textural-structural description that captured the essence of the experience of being an HRD professional surviving a downsizing event while also being an organizational agent facilitating SHRD in the context of downsizing.

This study provided an in-depth glimpse into what it was like for 15 HR professionals who professionally identified with one or more domains of SHRD—organizational change, organizational learning, and organizational performance—to experience downsizing as agent-survivors, those who are on the receiving and facilitating ends of organizational change. Four key themes emerged from the inductive analysis of the interview data: (a) the emotionality of downsizing, (b) feeling responsible, (c) choice and control, and (d) possibilities for growth.

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## APPENDIX A

### Sample Invitation Memo to Participate in the Study

Date

Dear HRD Manager/Professional:

My name is Claire Kostopulos Nackoney, and I am a doctoral candidate at Florida International University in the College of Education's Adult Education and Human Resource Development program.

I am in need of professionals employed in the human resource development (HRD) field in the areas of learning and development and/or organizational development to participate in my doctoral dissertation study. My doctoral chair is Dr. Tonette S. Rocco, Program Leader, in the College of Education's Adult Education and Human Resource Development program.

The name of my study is *Living on Both Sides of the Fence: A Phenomenological Study of Human Resource Development Professionals as Downsizing Survivors and Strategic HRD Facilitators*. Strategic HRD refers to the facilitation of organizational change and learning activities to enhance organizational performance and help the organization achieve its strategic goals and objectives.

I am looking for people who work professionally in the field of HRD (for example, training and development; learning and development; organizational development) and who:

- Survived a downsizing event within an organization in which they were employed as an HRD professional
- Helped the organization plan for, implement, and/or recover from the downsizing event
- Are willing to share their experiences with me one-to-one through an in-depth interviewing process.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please send me an email at [my personal email address here]. If you know someone who meets the criteria above and who you feel may be interested in participating in this study, please give him/her my email address to contact me directly.

Sincerely,

Claire Kostopulos Nackoney  
Doctoral Candidate  
Florida International University

APPENDIX B

*Living on Both Sides of the Fence: A Phenomenological Study of Human Resource Development Professionals as Downsizing Survivors and Strategic HRD Facilitators*

**Screening Questionnaire**

*Please save your completed screening questionnaire and send it to me at [my personal email address here].*

1. Your Name:
2. Your Gender:  Male       Female
3. Your Age:  
 18-29  
 30-49  
 50+
4. Your Ethnic Group/Race
5. How long have you been employed as an HRD Professional?
6. Which of the following best describes your role? [Check all that apply.]  
 I facilitate organizational learning.  
 I facilitate organizational change.  
 I facilitate organizational performance.  
 Other [Please specify]:
7. What caused the downsizing event that occurred within your company? [Check all that apply]  
 The company went through a merger and acquisition and eliminated redundant positions.  
 The company went through internal restructuring not resulting from a merger and acquisition.  
 The company reengineered (i.e., radically redesigned) a key business process.

- The company sold off a piece of the business.
  - The company outsourced a key function to a domestic provider.
  - The company moved part of the business offshore (i.e., to another country).
  - The company suffered a severe financial loss and eliminated jobs to improve financial condition.
  - The company discontinued a service or product line.
  - The company reacted to a downturn in the economy.
  - Other: [Please specify]
8. Were you involved in the downsizing process (i.e., helping the organizational plan for it, implement it, and/or recover from it)?
- Yes     No
9. During which phases of downsizing were you involved in the process? [Check all that apply and describe your involvement.]
- Before downsizing:
- During downsizing:
- After downsizing:
10. Approximately how many people did the company employ before the downsizing event?
11. How many employees lost their jobs because of the downsizing event?
12. What is your company's industry classification (i.e., banking, retail, insurance, etc.)?
13. Please provide a phone number and email address for contact.

Daytime phone:

Evening phone:

Email address:

***Thank you.***

## APPENDIX C

### *Living on Both Sides of the Fence: A Phenomenological Study of Human Resource Development Professionals as Downsizing Survivors and Strategic HRD Facilitators*

#### Interview Guide

##### **Ice Breaker Questions**

1. What is your name?
2. What is your current position in this company? What are your responsibilities in this position?
3. How long have you held this position?
4. What was the position you held when the downsizing event occurred? What were your duties?
5. How long were you in that position?
6. What was the industry that you were employed in at that time? How does it differ now?
7. Tell me about your job.

##### **The Downsizing Event - Logistics**

1. Tell me about the downsizing event.
  - When did it take place?
  - How many employees were let go?
  - What was the organization's rationale for downsizing?
  - What processes were used to make downsizing decisions?
  - What processes were used to carry out the downsizing?
  - How much advanced notice did employees receive?
  - How did employees react to the announcement?

- If you were to describe the atmosphere within the organization following the downsizing announcement to an outsider, what metaphors or analogies come to mind?
- If you were to describe the atmosphere within the organization following the downsizing announcement to an outsider, what images or pictures come to mind?

### **The Downsizing Event – Your Strategic HRD Facilitator Experience**

1. Tell me about your experience as an SHRD facilitator related to the downsizing event.
  - How/when did you, as an HRD professional, learn that the organization was going to downsize?
  - What was your initial reaction to the downsizing decision?
  - What caused you to react that way?
  - What was your involvement before-during-after the downsizing event?
  - What was it like for you to be professionally involved in the downsizing event?
  - What made it a positive or negative experience for you to be involved in the downsizing event?
  - What were the biggest personal challenges for you in facilitating SHRD during and after the downsizing event?
  - What were the biggest professional challenges for you in facilitating SHRD during and after the downsizing event?
  - What support resources were available to help you work through these challenges?
  - If you were to describe your own experience of facilitating SHRD following downsizing to an outsider, what metaphors or analogies come to mind?
  - If you were to describe your own experience of facilitating SHRD following downsizing to an outsider, what images or pictures come to mind?

### **The Downsizing Event – Your Survivor Experience**

1. Tell me about your own experience as a downsizing survivor.



- What was it like for you to survive downsizing?
  - As a survivor, what was your rational reaction to the downsizing event?
  - As a survivor, what was your emotional reaction to the downsizing event?
  - What was the most difficult part of being a downsizing survivor?
  - What helped you the most to get through your survivor experience?
2. If you were to describe your own experience of surviving downsizing to an outsider, what metaphors, analogies, images, or pictures come to mind?
  3. How did your downsizing experience influence the way you approached your day-to-day work?
    - Tell me how downsizing influenced your attitude towards your work positively or negatively.
    - Tell me how downsizing influenced your ability to perform your job positively or negatively.
    - Tell me how your downsizing experience influenced your perceptions of the organization positively or negatively.
    - Tell me how downsizing influenced your attitude towards the organization positively or negatively?

### **Additional Questions**

1. How do organizational changes like downsizing affect HRD's ability to facilitate organizational learning and performance?
2. How does downsizing affect surviving employees' motivation to learn?
3. How can HRD best facilitate learning and performance in the midst of traumatic change such as that resulting from downsizing?
4. How can HRD best help the organization move forward following traumatic changes like downsizing?
5. What should be HRD's role in relation to downsizing?

### **The Employer-Employee Relationship**

1. How would you describe the nature of the employee-employer relationship in your organization?
2. What are your own perceptions of the nature of the employee-employer relationship in general?
  - What are an employee's obligations to the organization?
  - What are the organization's obligations to the employee?
3. How do events like downsizing support or hinder the employee-employer relationship?

### **Questions to Ask if the Participant Has Been Through Downsizing Before**

1. How did your previous experience as a downsizing survivor influence how you reacted to the downsizing experience that you have shared with me?
2. How did your previous experience as a downsizing victim influence how you reacted to the downsizing experience that you have shared with me?

### **Closing Questions**

1. What else would you like to share with me about your experience as a downsizing survivor and SHRD facilitator?
2. What should I have asked you that I did not?
3. What is the most important thing I should know about downsizing?
4. Who else do you know who has worked in HRD and has survived downsizing and was involved in the recovery process and who might be willing to participate in this study?

APPENDIX D

**Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

***Living on Both Sides of the Fence: A Phenomenological Study of Human Resource Development Professionals as Downsizing Survivors and Strategic HRD Facilitators***

You have been invited to participate in a research study. The principal researcher for this study is Claire Kostopulos Nackoney, a doctoral candidate at Florida International University in the College of Education's Adult Education and Human Resource Development program. This study is being conducted as Mrs. Nackoney's doctoral dissertation.

The study will include HRD professionals from diverse industries who have survived downsizing while employed as HRD professionals and who played a role in helping their respective organizations plan for, implement, and recover from the downsizing event. Your participation in this study will help Mrs. Nackoney gather information that may benefit HRD professionals charged with facilitating organizational change, learning, and performance following traumatic events like downsizing. The contents of this study may be used in other publications.

Your participation will require you to be available for a minimum of two 1-hour interviews that will be scheduled over a 3-12 month time frame. These interviews will be conducted at a private location of your choice. The interviews will be audio-taped to facilitate the Mrs. Nackoney's analysis and synthesis of participants' individual and collective experiences. Mrs. Nackoney will ensure that you have the opportunity to review your interview transcripts so that you can verify content accuracy. If you have further insights to share with her between scheduled interviews, you will be able to contact Mrs. Nackoney through email, in person, or by phone.

No harm is expected to come to you by participating in this study. All information you provide will be treated confidentially and anonymously. Neither your name nor your employer's name will ever appear in this study or in any subsequent publications derived from this study. To maintain your anonymity, you will be referred to in the study by a fictitious name of your choice and only the industry. All electronic information pertaining to this study will be password protected and all written information pertaining to this study will be kept in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. You may withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation in this study at any time with no negative consequences.

You have the right to ask questions at any time and questions asked must be answered to your satisfaction. If you would like more information about this study, you may contact Claire Nackoney at (954) 830-6060 or through email at [my email address]. If you would like to talk with someone about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact Dr. Patricia Price, the Chairperson of the FIU Institutional Review Board at 305-348-2618 or 305-348-2494. Your signature below indicates that all questions have been answered to your liking. You are aware of your rights and you would like to be in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I have explained the research procedure, subject rights and answered questions asked by the participant. I have offered him/her a copy of this informed consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## VITA

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Born, Lynn, Massachusetts

- 1973-1977 Bachelor of Arts in Communications  
University of New Hampshire  
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### PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

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