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The Superintendent Mindset

A Dissertation by

Marc Patterson

January 18, 2023

University of Massachusetts Global

A Private Nonprofit Affiliate of the University of Massachusetts

Irvine, California

School of Education

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

January 2023

Committee in charge:

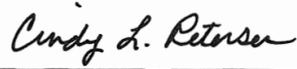
Cindy Petersen, EdD, Committee Chair

Jonathan Greenberg, EdD

George Sziraki, EdD

University of Massachusetts Global
A Nonprofit Affiliate of the University of Massachusetts
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

The dissertation of Marc Patterson is approved.



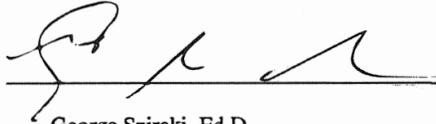
_____, Dissertation Chair

Cindy Petersen, Ed.D.



_____, Committee Member

Jonathan Greenberg, Ed.D.



_____, Committee Member

George Sziraki, Ed.D.



_____, Associate Dean

Patrick Ainsworth, Ed.D.

January 2023

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Before anyone else, I want to thank my son Jack. He is compassionate, loving, intelligent, funny, athletic and kind hearted. He has a servant heart that inspires me to be better. I would also like to thank my parents, Gary and Nancy Patterson, for your patience and understanding. You were always willing to let me be me, regardless of the headaches that caused you. I have learned so much from both of you. To my brother and sister, thank you for the love, laughter and sarcasm.

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partners and constant cheerleaders for one another.

Over the past twenty-five years of my career, I have been incredibly fortunate to have two phenomenal mentors who have listened to all of my struggles without judgment. Sheri has been a friend and confidant since the beginning. She gave me my first teaching position, as well as my first administrative position. Her wisdom, kindness and advice has made all of the difference in my career.

Lastly, I appreciate my fellow superintendent colleagues who took the time to participate in this study. The experiences you shared regarding the ways you lead those you serve was inspiring to me. These stories will help support current and future superintendents as they look to transform their organizations to better meet the needs of their students, staff and community. As a superintendent, I learned a great deal from each of you and with the knowledge I have gleaned from your experiences I hope to be a better superintendent for those I have the pleasure of serving.

ABSTRACT

The Superintendent Mindset

by Marc Patterson

Purpose: The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset framework are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose was to understand organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

Methodology: The thematic team concluded a phenomenological methodology was the most appropriate approach to identify and describe the superintendents' perceived importance of the practices of Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset to achieve exemplary results. Identifying and describing the unique lived experiences of superintendents is best captured through a phenomenological methodology.

Findings: The consistent practices exemplary superintendents utilized to achieve extraordinary results were: intentionally keeping the mission, vision, and values at the forefront; developing strategic plans for alignment to the mission; focusing on building trusting teams through open communication and providing resources and supports for success; expecting all team members to engage in professional learning and collaborative structures to improve; continuously gather information through needs assessments to understand the evolving needs of the district; commit to open and transparent communication to move towards the vision; and remain focused on the barriers their staff and organization face and engage in meaningful stakeholder engagement to overcome those barriers.

Conclusions: It was concluded superintendents who engage in the following practices achieve extraordinary results: work is aligned to the vision; strategic plans are developed; trusting teams are built through communication and providing resources; a high value is placed on professional learning and collaboration; frequent needs assessments are conducted to respond to changing needs; foster open and transparent communication; and superintendents who do not engage in meaningful stakeholder engagement will not be prepared to address challenges faced by the district.

Recommendations: Additional research should be conducted to study: other superintendents in California and the United States; cabinet level leaders; the various needs assessments utilized by superintendents; collaboration with other associations to determine strategies superintendents perceive impact their districts post pandemic; and combine the 8 thematic dissertations to identify patterns and trends.

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PREFACE

Following discussions and considerations regarding the opportunity to study Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset framework, four faculty researchers and eight doctoral students discovered a common interest in exploring how exemplary leaders perceive the practice of the five infinite mindset practices of advancing a just cause, build trusting teams, study your worthy rival, preparing for existential flexibility, and demonstrating the courage to lead are embedded within their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. Additionally, the researchers were also tasked with exploring the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of the infinite mindset within their organization. This resulted in a thematic study conducted by a research team of eight doctoral students.

The eight peer researchers and four faculty advisors ultimately chose a phenomenological design that would be most appropriate for this study of the infinite mindset constructs and their perceived impact and how they establish a culture of extraordinary results (Patton, 2015). The structure was resolved to be generally suitable as a non-experimental, descriptive approach to best accumulate the lived experiences of the leaders. Each researcher interviewed twelve leaders to describe how the five practices of the infinite mindset were embedded within their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results within their organizations. The team co-created the purpose statement, research questions, definitions, interview questions, and study procedures to ensure thematic consistency. The thematic team agreed that data collection would involve interviews and artifacts, increasing the validity of the thematic research study.

The term “peer researchers” refers to the other researchers who conducted this thematic study. These were: Jeff Heilig, Elementary Principals in South Los Angeles County, CA; Kevin Giang, Student Affairs Leaders at University and College Institutions in Los Angeles County, CA; Amna Osman, Elementary Principals in Monterey County, CA; Lindsey Gatfield, Elementary Title 1 Principals in Orange County, CA; Marc Patterson, K – 12 Superintendents in Los Angeles County, CA; Renée Gates, Alternative High School Principals in Orange County, CA & Riverside County, CA; Christina Gfell, Comprehensive High School Principals in North Orange County, CA; and Ricardo Espinosa, Community College Professors in the North Bay Area, CA.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.

—Yeats, 1956, p. 12

Educational purpose and pedagogy have been consistent focuses of conversation for more than a century. Opinions have ranged from educational practices that focus on creating a knowledgeable citizenry, to philosophies that emphasize teaching student's discrete skills and content, to beliefs that contain wide sweeping initiatives where students are expected to learn essential skills and how to apply those skills in varied contexts (Bracey, 2007; Parker, 1901; Warren, 1988). These historical perspectives continued to affect the educational leadership space through the turn of the 20th century. As politicians develop education policies at the national and state level, it is the superintendent at the local level who ultimately must navigate the manner in which these policies affect their own school district.

In addition to the external political factors facing districts, superintendents face a multitude of internal challenges. Since the 2008 economic downturn, districts have had to find creative ways to address shrinking revenues while increasing programs to meet the ever-growing needs of a diverse student population (Starrett et al., 2014). Reporting to an elected board of education presents its own problems. Working to foster a strong governance team with five potentially differing opinions adds to the stress of superintendents. Moreover, the needs and demands of the board of education have become increasingly politicized (Kowalski & American Association of School Administrators, 2011, as cited in Kamrath, 2015). Collective bargaining units have become more contentious as unions leverage their political power to lobby for augmented

salaries, health and welfare benefits, along with other resources. Having to navigate the numerous changes to educational programs due to the COVID-19 global pandemic restrictions was daunting (Roff, 2021). As a result of these pressures, many superintendents choose to leave their roles. According to Juthaba (2017), a study of 215 California school superintendents revealed 45% left in 3–5 years. With so many daunting obstacles to face, superintendents must be resilient and visionary to be effective.

Visionary superintendents capitalize on every opportunity to remind their stakeholders of the moral imperative the district has to meet the diverse needs of their students. This is a challenging notion because parents, teachers, staff, the community and the board of education constantly offer their opinions of what is needed (Hill & Jochim, 2018). In the face of these competing interests, the superintendent must have the courage to lead in an unwavering, student-centered manner. However, this courage must be tempered by finding an authentic way to take all feedback of various stakeholders into consideration. Simply having a moral imperative and the courage to lead does not translate into success nor a viable program. The superintendent must create a framework that allows for the members in the organization to work together for a common purpose (Fullan, 2016; Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Authenticity, empowerment, and transparency are necessary prerequisites to the establishment of the trusting teams needed to implement the important work of the district (Avolio & Walumbwa, 2014, as cited in Kulophas et al., 2017; Milon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2019). A strong collaborative culture is imperative for the success of the superintendent and the district. Whether dealing with challenges from outside forces or those that present themselves from within,

today's superintendent must operate with a mindset to appropriately respond to these challenges and have the vision to position the district for the future to come.

Background

Historical Perspectives of Educational Leadership

Leadership at the federal, state, and local level have both a direct and indirect impact on the programmatic decisions of districts. As accountability measures increase, districts opt for greater control of the programs offered to control variability of results (Walter & Glenn, 1986). Superintendents believe by implementing top-down processes, they could maintain consistency across the system.

Centralized Decision-Making Models

Top-down, decision-making has been a foundation of education for the past 30 years. This centralization, according to Bedard and Lawton (2008), aimed to ensure the instruction, along with the opportunities and services provided to students and communities, were similar throughout the organization. By creating systems that are replicated and implemented across a district, the administration could maintain fidelity to the programs offered to students. However, as Walter and Glenn (1986) illustrated, teachers grew more and more resentful of top-down leadership models leading many to contemplate leaving the profession.

No Child Left Behind Initiative (NCLB). The implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 caused widespread panic across K–12 school districts in the United States. High (2015) stated, “In trying to highlight transparency, closing failing schools, bringing equity, raising standards, and improving curriculum, No Child Left Behind produced a culture of assessment” (p. 183). The high-stakes, results-based

accountability system central to NCLB forced many districts to increase their focus on centralized approaches to instruction, curriculum, assessment, and evaluation. In response to the growing pressures associated with the high-stakes testing required by the federal NCLB, districts began focusing on accountability.

California Academic Performance Index. California's response to the expectations of NCLB became formalized in the California Academic Performance Index, which was introduced in 2004. NCLB was intended to make dramatic sweeping changes to education. However, with limited funding and finite resources, many states like California opted for compliance driven change in lieu of systemic interventions (Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). These reforms led to many district and school administrators to myopically focus on the results of summative assessments rather than conducting a comprehensive needs analysis to address gaps in curriculum, instruction, and services offered to students.

Shift to Distributed Leadership Models

As educators and parents became disillusioned with the goals of NCLB, districts explored the education of the whole child. The focus on Common Core State Standards, deep learning, critical thinking, career technical education, and the visual and performing arts became talking points in many districts (Herman & Linn, 2014; Schleicher, 2012). This multiple measures definition of success reinforced the need to look at distributing leadership across a district to empower staff to meet the ever-changing landscape.

Under the Obama administration, the leadership mindsets of districts began to gradually shift from compliance and accountability to one of building capacity through the lens of a growth mindset where districts looked to evaluate the effectiveness of their

overall programs. Arne Duncan, President Obama's secretary of education remarked over 80% of schools could have been identified as failing to meet their goals in 2014 if the evaluation criteria laid out in the NCLB legislation remained (McNeil et al., 2011). This fear was echoed by district leaders all over the United States. Dennis (2016) noted the language in the Federal Every Student Succeeding Act of 2015 called for a focus on meaningful professional learning opportunities for teachers and an emphasis on strong recruitment practices to attract and retain high-quality teachers.

Common Core State Standards. The implementation of the nationwide Common Core State Standards for K–12 schools called for districts to support a greater depth of learning so students would be prepared for college and career (Herman & Linn, 2014). While accountability measures were in place to measure the progress of schools, Fullan (2016) called on districts to focus on both internal and external accountability to ensure student progress. This deeper learning translated into a focus on 21st century learning skills.

Focus on 21st Century Skills. The Common Core State Standards focused on deeper learning (Herman & Linn, 2014). As a result, districts sought to reinforce the 21st century skills of collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking (Schleicher, 2012). Districts began to reaffirm their commitments to world languages; visual and performing arts; and science, technology, engineering, and career technical education courses. They also created pathways and career preparation for students that included the military, community college, career and technical trade institutions, internships, and 4-year colleges and universities (Wang, 2020). In 2012, delegates to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development annual summit confirmed

that we must revamp our focus on rote memorization and skills that can and will be done by computers (Schleicher, 2012).

Theoretical Foundations

Six major theoretical foundations address the importance of the mindset of a leader. Each leadership theory offers a different perspective of what an effective leader should strive to implement when leading their organization. Although these theories vary in scope, each provides a comprehensive roadmap to support the people and the organization toward meaningful change and transformational outcomes.

Authentic Leadership Theory

Erickson's (1995) work on authentic leadership called for leaders to consider their own values and their impact on society. Milon and Shapira-Lishchinsky (2019) identified self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and an internalized moral perspective as the four cornerstones of true authentic leadership. This values-based approach to leadership fosters a trusting team environment focused on a higher purpose or calling.

Distributed Leadership Theory

Distributed leadership theory proposes the idea that leaders can effectively impact their organizations by leveraging and empowering the knowledge and skills of those in the organization (Schleicher, 2012). To capitalize on the expertise of those in organizations, DuFour and Fullan (2013) urged districts to consider a loose and tight approach to decision-making. They argued a district or school could still provide a robust and comprehensive educational program with empowered staff members if there was clear direction and explicit expectations but the flexibility to make real time decisions to

benefit the students and staff they serve. The more opportunities staff members have to provide meaningful input, collaborate effectively, and feel empowered to affect change, the less resistant they will be when there is a scenario where the decision is not up for discussion.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Ackerman-Anderson and Anderson (2010) provided a roadmap to leaders who sought to employ transformational leadership. They argued that to be truly transformational a leader must focus on content, people and process if they are to experience breakthrough results. Although all three areas are important to the change process leaders should devote the majority of their time to both people and process. Leaders who are able to effectively integrate both “organizational and personal change” into the process can experience true transformative results.

Happenstance Theory

Krumboltz’s (2009) work on happenstance theory implored leaders to be agile when confronting unexpected challenges. Although the theory was originally applied to career planning, the theory can be transferred to other sectors and paradigms. In essence, happenstance theory asks leaders to consider the idea that the future is not predetermined. The ways in which the future unfolds is predicated on a series of planned and unplanned events. Therefore, leaders must be poised to predict and react to what is currently taking place and what is potentially on the horizon.

Growth Mindset Theory

There are many similarities to growth mindset theory and happenstance theory. Dweck (2016) believed individuals can create their own conditions for growth and

success. Dweck maintained people and organizations that operate with a growth mindset find value in the process and the work, not necessarily in the final outcome. A growth mindset leader has a strong commitment to growth. They praise effort. They rely on mutual support from their team members. With this foundation they help themselves, their team, and their organization meet the numerous challenges with which they are faced.

Servant Leadership Theory

Servant leadership theory can be traced back to Greenleaf. Greenleaf (1977) offered the following test to determine how someone should lead with a servant's heart:

Do those served grow as persons: do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived. (Greenleaf, 1977/2002, p. 27, as cited in Spears, 2010)

Leaders who truly serve their teams and constituents create trusting teams who are willing to put it all on the line for the just cause.

Theoretical Framework

The role of the superintendent is multifaceted. To transform the culture of a school district, a superintendent is expected to implement a comprehensive framework. Operating from a theoretical framework is important as superintendents work to meet the needs of those they serve. The infinite mindset proposed by Sinek (2020) is an amalgamation of several different frameworks into one that captures the essence of transforming an organization that will last into the future.

Infinite Mindset

Although there are many similarities to mindset theory (Dweck, 2007) and multipliers theory (Wiseman, 2017), there are specific characteristics that make Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset framework unique. The focus on Sinek's five practices of just cause, existential flexibility, courage to lead, trusting teams, and finding a worthy rival offered a new way of conceptualizing the aim of transformational leadership.

Literature on Variables

There are five variables Sinek identified that an infinite mindset leader must implement to create an organization that is forward thinking and self-sustaining. To accomplish this, the leader must articulate a just cause, possess the courage to lead, build trusting teams, demonstrate existential flexibility, and learn from their worthy rival.

Just Cause

The core of the infinite minded leader is the just cause. Sinek (2020) described the organization's just cause as "a specific vision of a future state that does not exist; a future state so appealing that people are willing to make sacrifices in order to help advance that vision" (p. 32). Although the literature does not specifically refer to a just cause, various authors have pointed to a moral imperative or a focus or shared vision. Fullan (2016) is a close representation of what Sinek's just cause embodies in that when schools and districts have a focused vision the entire organization can rally around, as a result, great things are possible. Finnigan and Stewart (2009) went further by stating leaders who truly transform their organizations do so by embracing the values and emotions of their teams.

Courage to Lead

Although many organizations have a clear moral imperative and a shared vision, there are potential obstacles that can deter leaders from acting on that driving force. Having the courage to lead through change and consternation makes all the difference in the success and longevity of any organization. Sinek (2020) stated an infinite minded leader must have the internal fortitude to maintain a vigilant focus on the just cause despite possible internal and external pressures. In *Dare to Lead*, Brown (2018) discussed the ineffective way leaders manage change. Leaders tend to pay too much attention to negative behaviors that surface when implementing change rather than displaying compassion, building collective efficacy, and offering meaningful support to help people through the change (Brown, 2018; Dewitt, 2018). Leading with heart coupled with strong will and determination, teams can begin to come together and form strong, collaborative cultures (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Brown, 2018).

Trusting Teams

Sinek's third prerequisite for the infinite minded leader is that of developing, maintaining, and nurturing trusting teams. Sinek (2020) defined a trusting team as one where the leader has created an environment where information flows freely, support to address obstacles is provided without judgment, and an environment of individual and group safety is nurtured. Whether called distributed leadership, shared leadership, or shared decision making, leaders who intentionally and authentically include their team members in decisions that impact them, build a collective vision for the future (Dewitt, 2018; Dufour, 2004). Dean (2007) asserted leaders who employ distributed leadership see far greater trust and synergy in their teams because the work focuses more on

relationships rather than a position someone holds. Sinek (2020) noted that, as teams work closer and closer together to strive for their just cause and support one another through adversity, they develop bonds that allow them to persevere through setbacks which could cause other teams to fold.

Existential Flexibility

An organization's ability to be agile and capable of responding to unexpected or even expected impediments is critical to its long-term success. Sinek (2020) maintained existential flexibility is the organization's "capacity to initiate an extreme disruption to a business model or strategic course in order to more effectively advance the just cause" (p. 185). The organization must confront adversity with innovation, creativity, and flexibility to achieve future success. The ability of leaders to pivot and recognize the emotionality various initiatives bring with them is an important leadership trait (Goleman et al., 2013; Brown, 2018). Leaders must use flexibility to meet the challenges they encounter by employing the emotional side of leadership (Avolio, 2005; Goleman, 1995; Shankman et al., in press, as cited in Owen, 2015).

Worthy Rival

Leaders who possess a willingness to view a rival as a source of inspiration instead of seeing their success as a loss to their company lead with an infinite mindset. According to Sinek (2020), studying a worthy rival encourages the organization to operate through a lens of improvement, recognizing there is much to learn from the strengths, successes, and abilities of one's rivals. Many businesses and institutions view the market as a win or lose situation. Other leaders choose to actively study and learn from their competitors. Baumann et al. (2019) examined the positive effects competitive

productivity could have on both a small and larger scale. They argue nations, corporations, and individuals can improve their own productivity and responsiveness to their customers and stakeholders by embracing the continuous improvement model. By reflecting on one's own practice through the lens of a competitor, enhancements can be realized, efficiency can be achieved, and growth can occur.

The Superintendent Mindset

Superintendents face a number of obstacles as they attempt to transform the culture of their district and schools. They must contend with the demands from their labor partners, the political pressures from their board of education, increased financial instability as a result of declining enrollment, and the pressures associated with external accountability systems (Hill & Jochim, 2018). A leadership framework founded on the principles of Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset described the framework needed to create and perpetuate the health and success of an organization, including school districts. Implementing such a framework can help ensure organizations maintain their focus as change efforts are initiated.

Attempting to transform any organization can be a daunting undertaking. The leader must possess the courage to lead their team through the change process (Brown, 2018). The first step in this transformation rests on the moral imperative of the district (Fullan, 2016). It is common for educators to state they chose education for a higher purpose or calling. Superintendents can capitalize on this by formally articulating a just cause that captures the hearts and minds of those they serve. With the clearly articulated call to arms, they can begin to establish the foundations for trusting teams. As trusting teams begin to take root, they can use this collective spirit to learn from both those in the

organization (Wiseman, 2017), and begin to identify worthy rivals that can be sources of inspiration for transformational change from outside the district. This continuous improvement puts the district in a position to have existential flexibility to address existing challenges head on while equipping the district with the agility and foresight to plan for what is still unseen.

Statement of the Research Problem

Creating and sustaining a successful district culture can take a superintendent 2–5 years before change can be seen taking place (Fixsen et al., 2009; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). There are many barriers in place that a superintendent must be equipped to navigate. However, political pressure from unions, internal politics associated with the board of education, increased economic constraints, and policies imposed from federal and state entities, all lead to the turnover of superintendents before change can occur. (Hill & Jochim, 2018; Klocko et al., 2019; Pickert, 2014). There has been extensive research conducted on superintendent turnover. These studies concluded the average superintendent tenure was roughly 3–5 years (Council of the Great City Schools, 2014; Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Johnson et al., 2011; Jutabha, 2017; Myers, 2011). This instability at the highest level impedes transformational change that is needed to sustain transformational change efforts (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Johnson-Howard, 1991).

The roles and responsibilities of the superintendent have dramatically changed in the last 20 years. Previously, the superintendent was responsible for a managerial approach to leadership that focused on organizational management, whereas now they must be knowledgeable in the areas of finance, assessment, accountability, messaging, establishing the moral imperative, and developing a collective vision and mission for the

district (Fullan, 2016; Groves & LaRocca, 2011; Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Moore et al., 2005). The complexity of this work can be daunting for superintendents (Shaw & Funk, 2013). Regardless of the impediments, the superintendent is ultimately responsible for change and that change must be transformational in nature (Schlechty, 2001). To address the multifaceted nature of the superintendency, the superintendent may consider adopting a framework to guide the work of the district.

The cornerstone of such a framework is creating the moral imperative that focuses the district on its collective work (Fullan, 2016). Superintendents who have created a sense of urgency and compelling case for the district's initiatives set the stage for powerful transformation (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Simply possessing a moral imperative does not translate into action. The superintendent must foster a collaborative spirit that embraces individual empowerment and collective responsibility (Dewitt, 2018; Wiseman, 2017). Emboldened by this collective will and vision, the superintendent can find the strength and determination to lead with courage in the face of adversity (Brown, 2018). Superintendents can leverage these foundational pieces to remain adaptable as they respond to unforeseen challenges that manifest themselves (Klocko et al., 2016). From this continuous improvement mindset, many great accomplishments can come to fruition. Although each of these components are important, very few can stand alone in isolation to deliver true transformational change.

There is a significant body of literature on individual components of superintendent leadership. These studies have addressed the challenges superintendents face, the importance of communicating the district's vision and mission, the necessity of creating trust in the organization, and the need to be committed to the work (Fullan &

Quinn, 2016; Wiseman, 2017; Brown, 2018). However, there is a gap in the research that ties these individual leadership components into a single, comprehensive leadership framework that could be implemented to meet these challenges while simultaneously moving the district toward success (Hodge & Larwin, 2015). Fenn and Mixon (2011) also called for further studies to take into account and measure the superintendent's effectiveness in change initiatives. Without such a framework, a district is susceptible to disjointed initiatives and reactionary policies that could impede the realization of the district's mission and vision.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset framework are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

Research Questions

The central research question is: How do successful leaders perceive the practices of an infinite mindset are embedded in their organization to achieve extraordinary results? The research subquestions are:

- 1) How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *advance a just cause* is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?
- 2) How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *build trusting teams* is embedded in their organization to inspire extraordinary results?

- 3) How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *study your worthy rival* is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?
- 4) How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *preparing for existential flexibility* is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?
- 5) How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *demonstrating the courage to lead* is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?
- 6) What supports and barriers do exemplary leaders perceive affect the embedding of infinite mindset practices in their organization?

Significance of the Problem

Education has changed dramatically over the past 100 years. Educators routinely discuss the instructional pendulum that swings from one spectrum of educational philosophy to the next spectrum (Sherman, 2005). In the past 20 years, that pendulum has swung from a focus on rote memorization and a recitation of facts to a holistic approach that attempts to teach critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and deeper levels of learning (Herman & Linn, 2014; Schleicher, 2012). In addition to navigating these instructional changes, leaders find themselves in the midst of the political maneuvering of collective bargaining units, school boards, state and federal elected officials, and the community at large (Shaw & Funk, 2013; Wilhite et al., 2018). Many are left with the question of what can be done to systematically address these internal and external influences?

Educators by and large desire to serve students and their community. It is incumbent on the superintendent to create an energy around a common purpose for all to be inspired. Appealing to the servant nature of educators and the desire to make profound changes in their communities, leaders must embrace the talents of those they lead and empower them to develop creative and innovative ways to make the common purpose come to life for the betterment of their students (Thelen & Yue, 2021; Wiseman, 2017). Capitalizing on the idea of continuous improvement, the leader must create a culture that embraces risk taking and recognizes excellence both inside and outside of the organization to improve the system (Boylan & Turner, 2017). It is with this common understanding and collective effort that change for students can begin to be realized. However, finding the careful balance to achieve such change in the face of an overwhelming desire to maintain the status quo is challenging (Krauss & Vanhove, 2022; Quin et al., 2015).

Creating transformational change in an organization is a complex multistage process (Ackerman-Anderson & Anderson, 2010). Research has demonstrated successful organizational change takes a minimum of 3–5 years to come to fruition (Jutabha, 2017; Shaw & Funk, 2018). However, with the significant challenges superintendents face, the realization of these change efforts becoming embedded in the organization is unlikely (Petersen & Young, 2004; Soltero, 2009). Therefore, superintendents and district leadership may consider the use of a leadership framework to guide the important work of the district as the tenuous nature of competing interests are addressed (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Researchers have validated that a leadership framework must be implemented to counter this instability. By clearly identifying and defining the moral imperative of the district, all stakeholders in the organization will have a clear understanding of what drives the decision-making process (Collins, 2001; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Owen, 2011). As a result, other leaders in the system will have the opportunity to galvanize their teams to collaboratively engage in the mission and vision of the district (Blackwell, 2012). This clarity of purpose provides a foundation of trust and collective efficacy that can support the entire organization in confronting impediments that can detract from the work (Dewitt, 2018).

This study will benefit superintendents, school boards, principals, teachers, classified staff, service organizations, community partners, students, and parents. By providing context, illuminating the struggles districts and superintendents face when implementing transformational change, and rallying around the collective vision, the board of education will have further clarity of the role they play in supporting change (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Eadie, 2014). District leadership will be able to see how their work at the district, site, and classroom level impacts the attainment of the vision. Classified and support staff will see how critical their roles are. Parents, community, and service organizations will have a greater concept of what they can do to support the district and the community they serve. Most importantly, students will be involved in decisions that affect them both directly and indirectly.

Although there is a significant body of research that has been conducted around leadership styles and philosophies, there is a lack of research that comprehensively brings the five components of Sinek's (2020) *The Infinite Mindset* into consideration. This study

will examine the mindset of exemplary superintendents in relation to their perceived leadership around a just cause, trusting teams, the courage to lead, existential flexibility, and the identification of a worthy rival. Although many leaders possess and lead with many of these domains in mind, this study will examine how transformational change can be attained by implementing a leadership framework where all five areas are addressed in a systematic manner.

This phenomenological study can provide superintendents, the Association of California School Administrators, and state policymakers with a resource to assist them in meeting the growing challenges that face their organizations. It will further assist them in identifying the key variables that can impact the transformational change they seek. By taking the learnings from this study, districts may realize the change they can create if they implement a comprehensive leadership framework centered on Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset principles.

Definitions

The following section defines the various terms as they are used in this study. Each term was developed by a team of peer researchers and faculty advisors studying the perceived impact of the five practices of Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset in achieving exemplary results. The definitions are organized around five practices (i.e., just cause, trusting teams, worthy rivals, courage to lead, and existential flexibility). There are also operational terms defined to provide greater clarity to the reader, such as infinite mindset, extraordinary results, and exemplary leader.

Just Cause

A just cause is a vision of an idealized, aspirational future, something bigger than ourselves and the organization. It connects to and reflects the values, emotions, and a sense of purpose of the followers, motivating them to make sacrifices to achieve it (Carse, 1986; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Noghiu, 2020; Mascareno et al., 2019; Sinek, 2019).

Trusting Teams

A trusting team is a unit where individuals work together to know each other at a deep level and care about and value one another, while creating a high performing team environment that includes active listening, vulnerability, integrity, and personal accountability in the team in a psychologically safe space (Fehr, 2018; Lencioni, 2006; Sinek, 2019).

Worthy Rivals

Worthy rivals are successful industry leaders who perform as well as or better than a leader or their organization. Leaders or organizations are inspired to study these players and improve based on the strengths and abilities identified in them (The Millennial Executive, 2021; Sinek, 2019).

The Courage to Lead

The courage to lead is a leader's ability to stand up to pressures or norms that do not align with organizational or individual goals and values and is characterized by the willingness to take risks for sustained success in an unknown, idealized future (Lassiter, 2021; Sinek, 2019).

Existential Flexibility

Existential flexibility is a leader's ability to anticipate changing conditions and initiate a potentially risky strategic disruption to set the organization on a new path necessary to achieve the idealized future (Dhiman, 2011; Sinek, 2019; see also Avolio, 2005; Goleman, 1995; Shankman et al., in press, as cited in Owen, 2015).

Infinite Mindset

An infinite mindset is a leader's desire to inspire their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits. A leader with an infinite mindset follows five essential practices: advance a just cause, build trusting teams, study their worthy rivals, prepare for existential flexibility, and demonstrate the courage to lead. (Carse, 1986; Dweck, 2007; Sinek, 2019).

Extraordinary Results

Extraordinary results are accomplishments that are remarkable, surprising, exceptional, and go beyond what is usually expected (O'Reilly & Pfeffer, 2000).

Exemplary Leader

The following characteristics were used to define an exemplary leader:

- The exemplary leader demonstrates evidence of collaboratively leading an organization, fostering creativity and future-orientation development.
- The exemplary leader actively participates in community leadership and problem-solving activities.
- The exemplary leader has a minimum of 5 years of experience in the profession.

- The exemplary leader has had articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings on leadership.
- The exemplary leader has received recognition by their peers as a leader who gives respect to all people.
- The exemplary leader is a member in good standing in professional associations in their field.

Expert

An expert is someone who has knowledge, skill, education, experience, position, or an affiliation with a company or organization in the field of study (Patton, 2018).

Delimitations

This study was delimited to 12 exemplary superintendents in Los Angeles County. An exemplary superintendent in this study is a leader who demonstrates extraordinary results and evidence of leading their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits, with a minimum of 5 years in the profession and meeting at least three of the following criteria:

- The exemplary leader demonstrates evidence of collaboratively leading an organization, fostering creativity and future-orientation improvements.
- The exemplary leader actively participates in community leadership and shared problem-solving activities.
- The exemplary leader has had articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings on leadership.
- The exemplary leader has received recognition by their peers as a leader who gives respect to all people.

- The exemplary leader is a member in good standing in professional associations in their field.

Organization of the Study

This study was organized into five chapters along with references and appendices. Chapter I included a historical perspective of educational leadership, centralized decision-making models, the NCLB Act, the California Academic Performance Index, the shift to distributed leadership models, the Common Core State Standards, and a focus on 21st century learning. Chapter I also included a discussion around theoretical foundations and the defining characteristics of an exemplary school district superintendent. Chapter II contains a comprehensive review of the literature and research conducted on the impact of the five components of Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset on exemplary leaders and extraordinary results. Chapter III describes the methodology used to collect and analyze data for this study. Chapter IV includes a review and analysis of data collected and findings and results of the research study. Chapter V concludes the study with major findings, conclusions, implications for practice, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chapter II provides a review of the literature regarding the ways in which the five practices of Simon Sinek's infinite mindset theory, as described in his book, *The Infinite Game*, may impact the success of an organization's success and the results that may or may not be achieved. The literature review starts with a brief history of how different political environments have affected school district leaders over the course of the past 20 years. These changes range from centralized decision-making models to shared decision making models. Next, the chapter discusses the theoretical foundations of various leadership philosophies along with the theoretical framework of the study. The chapter then introduces Sinek's five practices of an infinite minded leader: identifying a just cause; possessing the courage to lead; developing and maintaining trusting teams; studying worthy rivals; and ensuring existential flexibility. The literature review goes on to examine the ways in which superintendents may navigate the complexities of their positions and competing interests by utilizing these five practices to realize exemplary and long-lasting results for their organizations. A synthesis matrix (Appendix A) was used to assist and support with the organization of ideas and the writing of the literature review. The last section of this chapter ends with a description of the gap in the research, the significance of the problem, the identified importance of this study and a summary of the chapter.

Barriers to Achieving Extraordinary Results

To fully comprehend the myriad of factors superintendents must consider when serving their districts and ultimately leading them to achieving extraordinary results, the unique political landscape facing the operations of school districts and their leaders must

be understood. The demands placed on the superintendent are far different from what has previously been required in previous decades. Navigating the external and internal politics of a district creates an added layer of complexity to the already demanding role of the superintendent. To achieve extraordinary results, superintendents must work collaboratively with all stakeholders in order to foster an intentional learning organization focused on systems thinking to achieve sustainable improvement (Wilhite et al., 2018). An examination and understanding of the external and internal politics in K-12 public education from a federal, state and local level, is imperative to fully understanding the various factors that heavily influence the superintendent mindset as they strive to achieve extraordinary results.

External Politics Under No Child Left Behind

Superintendents are often caught in the middle between local, state, and federal mandates and those they are charged with serving in their districts (Wright et al., 2009; Fowler et al., 2014). These internal and external political pressures directly impact the decisions superintendents make when determining the direction for their district programs and initiatives. Prior to 2000, the school superintendent position was primarily viewed as an executive leader who oversaw budgets, communicated with the board of education, and other local elected officials, as well as interacting with various stakeholders (Davidson, 2005; Wright, 2009; Wilhite et al., 2018). The superintendent role closely mirrored the roles and responsibilities of chief executive officers in the private sector where managerial skills in organizations were decentralized and the work was typically delegated to subordinates while the chief executive officer navigated the stakeholder communication and politics of the organization (Miles, 2007). The increased

accountability districts were required to meet along with the additional political pressures ushered in during the No Child Left Behind era compelled superintendents to re-evaluate the decentralized approach to district-decision making and potentially consider one of a more directed and centralized approach to ensure consistency and measured accountability (Davidson, 2005).

The No Child Left Behind initiative directly and indirectly impacted school district leadership styles and decision-making philosophies while significantly changing the role of the school superintendent (Petersen & Young, 2004). Now that school districts were required to annually assess students, superintendents began to centralize all facets of the instructional program, including curriculum development and implementation, instructional mapping and pacing, the utilization of common instructional practices, and the creation of standardized district formative and summative assessments to measure to student achievement (Petersen & Young, 2004; High, 2015). Each of these reactions were designed to ensure that the administration could accurately measure and pre-determine the results of standardized tests, in the hopes that their districts would avoid possible sanctions from the federal and state government. This return to centralization was reminiscent of previous initiatives in the 1980's where districts tightened control of all financial and educational operations to ensure consistency throughout the district (Walter & Glenn, 1986). This shift in leadership philosophy and decision making had significant and long-lasting implications for the work of school superintendents and the organizations that they served.

Internal Politics under No Child Left Behind

The No Child Left Behind regulations impacted school districts as there was a concerted move away from decentralized decision making to centralized decision making. The decrease in autonomy created friction with classified staff, teachers, as well as administrators. The increased scrutiny and standardization of curriculum, instruction, and assessments had an outsized impact on the instructional staff in the classroom. Because of this centralization and loss of autonomy, there was a significant decrease in morale and job satisfaction during the No Child Left Behind era (Husband & Hunt, 2015). Not only were teachers concerned about the lack of discretion afforded to them over the instructional program but the shift to have teachers focus on student memorization and rote learning so they would perform well on standardized testing measures created concern with parents, teachers, and administrators (Petersen & Young, 2004; Dewey, 1910 as cited in High, 2015; Husband & Hunt, 2015). Superintendents now not only had to contend with the pressures from the federal and state levels but also now had to effectively manage the internal pressures from staff, parents, and the community.

The level of dissatisfaction did not remain at the school level. Along with the dissatisfaction of the instructional staff, the relationships that boards of education had with their superintendents posed political issues as well. The high stakes nature of the assessment and accountability mandated by the No Child Left Behind legislation added an additional layer of complexity to the delicate balance of the superintendent and board relationship (Petersen and Young, 2004; Davidson, 2005; Wright, 2009). Both labor associations and parents became disenchanted with the shift to an instructional focus to

prepare students for high stakes testing. Teachers maintained the rote nature of carefully planned out and paced instruction with a focus on standards robbed teachers of their creative license and forced them to be lock step with other colleagues (Husband & Hunt, 2015). As elected officials, boards found themselves being lobbied by both unions and families for a return to the old ways where teaching and school was fun and focused on the whole child rather than on the scores that they produced on a single standardized assessment (Shaw & Funk, 2013; Jutabha, 2017). Due to these pressures, superintendents found themselves in a precarious situation with nearly every stakeholder group with whom they interacted (Petersen & Young, 2004). As a result, superintendents had to be measured in how they communicated the district goals and what they were attempting to achieve on behalf of their students, as the turnover rate of superintendents was alarming (Jutabha, 2017).

One of the components delineated in the accountability system with the No Child Left Behind legislation was the ability of all test results to be viewed by the public. These scores were available disaggregated by schools and aggregated by districts (US Department of Education, 2002). With the added visibility of these accountability measures, parents and community members had a basis to compare their school and district against other schools and districts. Given this greater access to detailed and comparable information, the public began to leverage their voting power to pressure board members to hold their superintendents accountable for the student achievement results their districts were producing (Jutabha, 2017).

These political pressures placed a great deal of stress on superintendents and ultimately affected the ability of the superintendent to effectively manage the operations

of the district (Petersen & Young, 2004). Superintendents had to take calculated risks when addressing the concerns of the public. Superintendents were faced with the challenge of deciding to respond to criticism from stakeholders or allow the criticism to go unanswered to avoid confrontation and possible retaliation (Jenkins, 2007; Poynton et al., 2018). Regardless of the specific communication strategy the superintendent chose to implement, the messaging ultimately created one division or another within the district and risked taking the focus off of the important work of educating and supporting students (Wright, 2009; Fowler & Johnson, 2014).

The Political Shift

Just as superintendents and district leaders were beginning to become comfortable navigating the politics surrounding the No Child Left Behind era, there was a dramatic shift in the political landscape that changed the nature of conversations around the country related to public education. This dramatic shift began when Barack Obama was elected as President of the United States of America. The Obama administration supported a shift in educational policy to a system more focused on deep learning through rigorous curriculum and instruction (Herman & Linn, 2014). The purpose and vision of public education in the K-12 system became focused on the idea of adequately preparing all students for college and career readiness. While this change in direction was welcomed by many in education, the new policies and focus on deep learning and 21st century skill attainment brought with it a number of political considerations that needed to be addressed both externally and internally by districts and superintendents. Thus, the era of the new Common Core State Standards was launched.

External Politics under The Common Core State Standards

The Common Core State Standards created nationwide expectations with a focus on developing 21st century learners. To prepare students for the 21st century job market, educators were expected to focus on providing more in-depth learning opportunities and a focus on college and career readiness (Herman & Linn, 2014). Parents, businesses, and educators became vocal regarding the slow rate that districts transitioned to the new robust expectations under the Common Core State Standards. Parents were dismayed at the lack of robust electives, world language instruction, arts, and music in their local schools (Walker, 2015). Businesses frequently warned educators that the applicants they were seeing did not align with the industry needs (Schelicher, 2018). Educators during the 2012 International Summit on the Teaching Profession, explained that the education sector needed to be mindful that many jobs which require low level thinking will be automated, digitized, or sent overseas in the very near future (Schleicher, 2012). With these critiques in the forefront of their minds, superintendents had to quickly assess the programs they were offering to prepare students for the demands of the 21st century.

Not only did superintendents have to contend with an overhaul of their instructional programs, but they also had to re-message their district vision to incorporate the expectations of the Common Core State Standards. With the focus on developing 21st century citizens, districts began embedding the four C's of 21st century learning into their instructional programs. Critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration were essential college and career readiness skills imperative for students to possess if they were going to be prepared for their high school and the increased demands of the new workforce (Schleicher, 2018).

To meet these challenges, districts developed professional learning opportunities for their teaching staff and looked to adopt new instructional materials to address the new standards. While the initial shifts required by the implementation of the Common Core State Standards were from external sources, the internal demands being placed on superintendents and districts were quite possibly even more troublesome than those from the outside.

Internal Politics under the Common Core State Standards

Educators frequently remark that the pendulum of educational initiatives come and go, resulting in hesitation on the part of educators to respond to new changes in curriculum implementation or instructional delivery models (Sherman, 2009). This was the typical response from staff as districts began messaging the new demands of the Common Core State Standards. Superintendents needed to take these reactions into consideration as they crafted their messages regarding the shifts. Jenkins (2007) noted superintendents are acutely aware of the power of the media and must use all the resources at their disposal to effectively communicate the directions of the district. This includes the utilization of social media, print media, radio, television, hosting town halls, attending Parent Teacher Association meetings, chamber of commerce events, local conferences, and political events. Taking full advantage of these modes of communication fostered strong relationships with different stakeholders while at the same time saturating the community with a clear and consistent message of the shifts under Common Core. Poynton et al. (2018) went as far as to say that in the absence of a district narrative, stakeholders may potentially become adversarial towards the district. By utilizing a variety of communication tools, the superintendent could control the narrative

and the public sentiment (Petersen & Young, 2004; Jenkins, 2007). This consistent messaging would be imperative as significant changes occurred with district programs under Common Core.

The Impact

The impact of ominous financial conditions, declining enrollment, vitriolic rhetoric, political mandates, and internal politics with the Board of Education and labor partners impacts the mindset of the superintendent. The conditions that superintendents faced with the transition from two political extremes of No Child Left Behind and the Common Core significantly impacted the ways in which superintendents planned for the future. The COVID 19 pandemic also played a critical role in the shaping of district programs and operations. Superintendents came to realize their positions were far different today than they were just ten to twenty years ago (Wright, 2009; Wilhite, et al. 2018; Davidson and Butcher, 2019).

Today's superintendent, under the Common Core State Standards initiatives and demands of the communities and stakeholders they serve, must possess strong communication skills, reorient the instructional focus on student learning versus simply teaching content, realize the importance of collaborative cultures and professional learning communities, encourage exploration and innovation, look beyond the standard curriculum by offering a robust and engaging elective program, and understand the importance of their moral leadership (Jenkins, 2007; Miles, 2007; Owen, 2015; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Hill and Jochim, 2018; Wilhite, 2018). Possessing a clear vision of both the external and internal politics superintendents have to consider when developing and implementing policies is critical to fully understanding the various factors that make up

today's superintendent mindset. Upon review of the educational and research literature, there are six significant theoretical foundations that describe foundational leadership theories that can be appropriately applied to K-12 public education leaders. These foundational theories can provide insight into the skills superintendents and district leaders should consider as they lead their organizations.

Theoretical Foundations

Six major theories were selected from the available literature that were deemed as foundational leadership theories K-12 public education leaders could employ to realize the goals of their organizations. Each of these theories address the importance of the mindset of a leader and the impact on the employees, district, and community. While each leadership theory offers a different perspective of what an effective leader may want to consider when leading their organization there are commonalities in many instances. Each foundational theory provides a comprehensive roadmap to support the people and the organization towards meaningful change and transformational outcomes.

Authentic Leadership Theory

Various definitions exist when describing the essential components of a leader who leads through an authentic leadership style. Erickson's (1995) work on authentic leadership called for leaders to consider their own values and the impact those values have on their organization and on society in general. Self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and possessing an internalized moral perspective routinely surface as the four essential domains of an authentic leader (Walumba et al., 2008 as cited in Kulophas et al., 2018; Milon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2019). These

authentic leaders create and maintain an environment based on personal, team and organizational health, safety and trust.

According to Hester (2021), the attention authentic leaders pay to developing and nurturing relationships creates a trusting team environment which allows all levels of the organization to focus on a higher purpose. These leaders develop strong levels of trust with individuals, teams, and the customers they serve. By consistently and consciously modeling the expectations the leader and organization espouse, intrinsic motivation is naturally enhanced thus resulting in intellectual conversations, creative solutions, and workplace satisfaction (Nichols, 2008; Zafar & Shahzad, 2015). Authentic leaders are able to build capacity throughout their organizations because people trust the leader has the best of intentions for them as individuals and for the entirety of the organization. This highly developed level of trust makes having a focus on continuous improvement and self-reflection a natural part of the organization's culture thus leading to improved results and a collective sense of efficacy (Donohoo, 2017).

Distributed Leadership Theory

Many similarities exist between an authentic leader and one who leads with a distributed leadership mindset. Those who lead with a distributed leadership lens go to great lengths to empower those within their organizations by capitalizing on the skills and knowledge of individuals on their team to maximize results (Schleicher, 2012). By utilizing the unique skill sets of everyone within the organization, these leaders are able to create both individual and collective efficacy as people feel valued, respected, and recognized for their talents and ideas (Wiseman, 2017; Salanova et al., 2020). From this distributed leadership model, the leader is able to demonstrate the trust and confidence

they have for team members by using the expertise of the individual members to strengthen the team. These leaders intentionally and strategically foster collective efficacy through empowerment and a growth mindset (Dweck, 2016; Donohoo, 2017).

While extraordinary results and productivity can be achieved through distributed leadership practices, it is still critical for the leader to ensure efforts are continually focused on implementing the collective vision and moral imperative of the organization (DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Empowering individuals to reach their potential while working collaboratively as a team is a nuanced skill that leaders who distribute responsibilities must repeatedly nourish and reinforce (Wiseman, 2017; Shava & Tlou, 2018). Dufour and Fullan (2013) maintained that in order to effectively create a truly balanced effort of individual autonomy and team interdependence, organizations must employ a loose and tight leadership. This delicate balance explicitly details the moral imperative that is non-negotiable while supporting creativity and innovation through individual efforts and collaborative cultures (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). As a result, organizations could still provide a system-wide consistent and comprehensive educational program with clear direction and explicit expectations, but at the same time empower those in the organization to have the flexibility to make real time decisions to benefit the students and staff they serve in the school or department. Organizations that actively distribute leadership opportunities and empower others to make calculated decisions in the name of moving closer to the realization of the vision are poised to be able to respond to the unknown future (Shava & Tlou, 2018).

Transformational Leadership Theory

Many of the inherent characteristics of both the authentic and distributed leader are found in the leadership practices of a transformational leader. There are however noticeable differences that make each theory unique in their own right. Kouzes and Posner (2007) proposed four essential characteristics to define the practices of a transformational leader. The authors maintained transformational leaders must inspire a shared vision all can rally around, model the behaviors they expect to see through the organization, challenge the process in search of meaningful changes to better the system, and finally, they must encourage and support others to take action to make substantive change. All of this while also remembering the heart and minds of people must be tended to in order to effectuate long-lasting change.

Similarly, Ackerman-Anderson and Anderson (2010) maintained that in order for a transformational leader to lead their organization to achieving extraordinary breakthrough results, they must focus on content, people, and process. Despite all three areas being vital to overall success, the authors contended that transformational leaders should devote the majority of their time to both people and process. Leaders who are able to effectively integrate both “organizational and personal change” into the process can experience true transformative results (Ackerman-Anderson & Anderson, 2010). By addressing the dynamic nature of the change process and layering that work with a focus on consciously co-creating a new reality to improve the organization, transformational leaders can achieve exemplary results (Anderson & Ackerman, 2010; Davidson & Butcher, 2017).

Fullan and Quinn (2016) offer a similar approach to transformational leadership. They contend that in order to achieve extraordinary results and truly transform an organization, there must be four essential components. First, there must be a clear and focused direction that guides the collective work of the organization. Once there is clarity regarding the direction, the organization must adequately prepare their team to meet the challenges of the goals by fostering an environment that supports collaborative cultures and deepening the learning of the team through professional learning opportunities (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). The final piece to truly transform the organization is to hold people accountable to the results and when those results are not met finding ways to layer in additional support.

Regardless of the particular author or expert on transformational leadership interpretation, the consensus is that leaders should consider the ways they communicate the direction of the organization and the ways they provide on-going support to meet the unique challenges that may arise. The ability to effectively motivate and inspire the organization to seek extraordinary results should be balanced with high expectations for operational goals but softened by a caring and empathetic leader who understands true change is going to come about through trusting relationships (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Anderson & Ackerman, 2010; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Davidson & Butcher, 2017).

Happenstance Theory

The Happenstance leadership theory model has little to no overlap with authentic leadership, distributed leadership, or transformational leadership models. The origin of the happenstance theory can be traced back to Krumboltz' (2009), where it was posited, that unexpected events can be powerful opportunities for personal growth if the change is

welcomed with an open mind of what can be achieved even if the change was not sought after initially. Kim et al. (2014) reinforced this notion when it was argued that while chance events are inevitable, it is incumbent upon leaders to develop specific skills to make the most of these instances.

This ability to respond to unforeseen circumstances required individuals, and possibly organizations, to proactively develop skills to adapt to the future. At the same time the theory required the learner to possess a growth mindset, where the learner embraced the idea of exploration and what the new opportunities could offer (Lee et al., 2017). Acheamong (2014) further argued these unexpected events had a positive impact on life-long learning and should be celebrated not feared. Happenstance theory is prominent in career exploration and career counseling. The leaders who support those who have experienced unforeseen realities and events used the happenstance theory model as a means to reassure them there is always a learning and growth opportunity in every situation (Lee et al., 2017). These leaders prioritized self-discovery, reflection, and exploration as key attributes of a resilient individual and leader (Krumboltz, 2009). These happenstance leaders can be highly effective. Their ability to see unforeseen events as opportunities for growth and adaptation sets a positive working culture where continuous improvement is a norm. Thus, these organizations may be more agile when responding to an unknown future.

Growth Mindset Theory

Growth Mindset theory along with authentic leadership, distributed leadership, and transformational leadership theories discuss the importance of motivating people to reach their full potential. However, the similarities end there. A growth mindset leader

has a strong commitment to growth. These leaders view ability as a resource that can and must be developed for the betterment of the individual, as well as the organization (Yeager & Dweck, 2020). Furthermore, by operating with a growth mindset, leaders invoke a belief in the capabilities of those they lead. As a result, individuals and teams are encouraged to take risks and learn from their experiences, so that both processes and outcomes are improved over time (Kouzes & Posner, (2019).

Dweck (2016) believed individuals can create their own conditions for growth and success through personal reflection and intentional effort. She maintained people and organizations that operate with a growth mindset find value in the process and the work. Since so much attention is paid to the growth process, these leaders are not always concerned with the final outcome in isolation. They realize that sometimes the process of growth and self-reflection can have far longer-lasting impact than a myopic focus on mere results. Johnsson et al. (2016) reinforced the importance of confirming the power of the individual mindset and the power this can have on feeling valued and appreciated for the contributions made to the organizational goals. Growth minded leaders often focus on praising effort versus solely on the end-results. This supportive relationship helps to create an organization that is resilient, reflective, and highly engaged to meet the numerous challenges with which employees are faced (Marjolein et al., 2018; Kouzes & Posner, 2019). Growth minded leaders can lead their organizations through tough times as they focus on what individuals, teams, and their organization can be with support, guidance, and effort.

Servant Leadership Theory

Servant leadership theory also possesses similar characteristics as authentic, distributed, transformational and growth mindset leaders. Each focus on empowerment and transparency in all that is undertaken. Greenleaf (1977) is viewed as the founder of the servant leadership theory. The single most identifiable characteristic of the servant leader is the way they lead from the heart to affect meaningful change in themselves, their followers, their organization, and hopefully their community. Greenleaf (1977) encouraged leaders to be reflective and ask themselves the following: “do those served grow as persons: do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” (Greenleaf, 1977/2002, p. 27, as cited in Spears, 2010.) It is through this spirit that the servant leader connects with those they serve and clearly demonstrate they will walk alongside their people and support them every step of the way.

Although the servant heart is the foundational element of the servant leader, there are a number of other characteristics inherent in the servant leadership model. Liden et al. (2014) reminded leaders that this leadership style is far more than just creating a pleasant work environment for employees. Thelan and Yue (2021) maintained that as the servant leader listens with an open heart and mind with empathy, the trust, devotion, and dedication of the employees grows substantially, to the point where employees would both defend and market the organization. These profound feelings of trust, safety, and security help to create an organizational framework that can respond effectively to any change that may be required.

The servant leadership model is so compelling and affirming that followers seek to emulate the behaviors of their leader (Liden, et al., 2014). As more and more within the organization exhibit care and putting others first, there is an undeniable collective effort to serve and help prepare others for service (Heyler, 2018). This collective effort results in an organization that operates with a shared vision to build relationships, make a difference, and be in a position to envision possible outcomes for the future (Flynn et al., 2016; Heyler, 2018; Tasker-Mitchell & Attoh, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

The role of the superintendent is complex. In addition to having to an understanding of the technical skills of planning and managing budgets, human resources, curriculum, instruction, special education, data analysis, student achievement, and technology, the superintendent must excel at the nuances of visioning, team building, communicating, and navigating the internal and external politics of the district and community (Wright, 2009; Fowler & Johnson, 2014). As the superintendent looks to transform the district culture to achieve extraordinary results, these and many more variables need to be factored into the leadership approach taken to lead the district towards the achievement of its vision and mission. Given the multifaceted nature of the superintendency, it was determined that Simon Sinek's infinite mindset framework, as presented in his 2020 book, *The Infinite Game*, would be the most appropriate theoretical framework to explore the factors that must be considered to achieve extraordinary results from the vantage point of today's superintendent.

Although Dweck's mindset theory (2007) addressed many of the critical areas superintendents must consider when leading their organizations to achieve extraordinary

results, it is not as comprehensive as the model offered by Sinek. The overall framework described in *The Infinite Game* (2020) focused on Sinek's five practices to achieve long-lasting and extraordinary results. The practices require the leader to establish a just cause, possess the courage to lead, form and maintain trusting teams, demonstrate existential flexibility, and have a mindset to learn from a worthy rival. Addressing these specific practices makes Sinek's Infinite Mindset framework unique.

Strategically focusing on these five areas offered a new way of conceptualizing the goals of transformational leadership. Sinek's framework maintains that an infinite minded leader must implement each of the five practices to create an organization that is forward thinking and self-sustaining. To accomplish this the leader must articulate a just cause, possess the courage to lead, build trusting teams, demonstrate existential flexibility, and learn from their worthy rival (Sinek, 2020). Only then can the leader, their team and the organization realize extraordinary results.

Just Cause

The foundational element of the infinite mindset framework from which Sinek's theory is built upon, is the establishment of the just cause. According to Sinek (2020), the just cause is "a specific vision of a future state that does not exist; a future state so appealing that people are willing to make sacrifices in order to help advance that vision" (p. 32). Sinek explains that the just cause is quite different from his *Find Your Why* (2017). He warns that the why is based on the past while the just cause focuses on the future and what can be achieved through the infinite mindset.

While Sinek is the only author who uses the terminology of a just cause in their works, there are a number of authors who have similar calls to action to support

significant change within organizations. Fullan and Quinn (2016) state that when schools and districts have a well-articulated and focused vision the entire organization can rally around, transformational change is possible. Leaders who truly transform their organizations do so by embracing the values and emotions of their teams thus creating strong feelings of collective efficacy and commitment (Donohoo, 2017; Dewitt, 2018). Others maintain that through constant communication, effective collaboration, shared decision making, and collective agency, visionary leaders act to translate that collective vision for their organization into reality (Goddard, 2001; Sheppard & Brown, 2009; Tichnor-Wagner, 2019).

Although identifying the just cause is a critical step for the infinite mindset leader to begin the process of creating long-lasting transformational change in the organization, Sinek (2020) advocates for going even further. He argues that far too many times organizations take a negative approach to visioning and enumerate things they are against. Organizations must stand for something and call out positive actions to inspire people to make sacrifices for the just cause. They should always have a sense of urgency that compels individuals, teams, and the entire organization to reach further to impact the organization and those it serves. Sinek (2020) affirms this belief through the words of Bill Gates when he said the goal of the just cause and those who seek it is “to empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more” (p. 19). As such, the just cause must be aspirational, yet attainable.

Fullan and Quinn (2016) argue districts and schools must base their vision for the future on what they call focused direction. They stated it is not enough to have uplifting goals. The system must operate from a continuous improvement process where all

stakeholders engage in collaborative cultures to strive to be better and do better for those they serve. Dufour et al. (2005) called on educators at all levels to focus on the purpose of schooling. They maintained that by rallying around a common purpose, educators possess the power to significantly impact the immediate and future lives of the students they serve. Moreover, Donohoo (2017) affirmed when a staff has a goal to strive for and a vision that is commonly held and espoused, the collective efficacy of the organization is solidified.

While the constructs offered by Fullan and Quinn, Finnigan and Stewart, Goddard, Sheppard and Brown, Tichnor-Wagner, DuFour et al., and Donohoo implore similar terminology and components as Sinek's just cause, there are two essential components that are not included in their constructs. To truly be a just cause, there must be both innovation and longevity. Despite having articulated visions and mission statements, the ability of organizations to adequately and appropriately create conditions for long-lasting results has been difficult over time. Sinek (2020) noted that according to the S&P 500, the average lifespan of a company declined from 61 years on average to 18 years. Sinek continues the line of logic by stating that resilient companies are those built to last and ultimately withstand changes to the market. Collins (2001) argued these institutions maintain their vigilant focus on their just cause but are constantly seeking innovation to stay current and responsive to the needs of their employees and those they serve. Covey (1990, as cited in Davidson & Butcher, 2019) mirrored this belief by stating it is the responsibility of the leader and the organization to ensure the systems are constantly refined to align to the goals of the organization. Infinite minded leaders who implement and work towards the realization of their organization's just cause, do so with

great attention, collaboration, and adaptability (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Sinek, 2020).

They model through both words and actions a focus on the espoused goal while being capable of adjusting course as the current and future circumstances warrant.

Courage to Lead

Simply possessing a clearly articulated just cause does not automatically translate into transformational change occurring within an organization. Many organizations have comprehensive vision and mission statements that are theoretical but do not show up in the daily operations of the organization (DuFour & Fullan, 2013). Organizations and their leaders face many challenges that can draw attention away from the just cause. Leaders are constantly navigating both internal and external pressures that compete for the attention of leaders and draw energy away from the stated goals (Shaw & Funk, 2013). A leader who embraces the infinite mindset theory combines the collective just cause with an undeniable courage to lead towards that vision despite the obstacles that may come. Sinek (2020) states an infinite minded leader must have the internal fortitude to maintain a vigilant focus on the just cause despite possible internal and external pressures. While the pressures leaders may face are oftentimes daunting, Sinek argues organizations founded on a just cause are built to last and not merely to weather a storm. The courage to lead sets infinite minded leaders apart from their other colleagues.

School district superintendents must contend with labor partners, school board politics, community pressures, budgetary issues, and student achievement to enumerate a few (Shaw & Funk, 2013; Fowler & Johnson, 2014). For these reasons and many more, superintendents must have an unwavering resolve to stay true to the just cause despite the pressures and competing interests that can cause the organization to lose focus (Collins,

2001 as cited in Sotero, 2009). They must consistently demonstrate their willingness to stand up and advocate for what they believe and what they are attempting to achieve (Hill & Jochim, 2018). This resiliency creates a sense of camaraderie and commitment through the organization, when followers clearly see their leader is steadfast and committed to the just cause (Klocko et al., 2019).

This resiliency and courage to lead must be felt through the entire organization. Since change can be unsettling, superintendents must strike a delicate balance between pushing for transformational change and demonstrating compassion and empathy for those they serve (Ackerman-Anderson & Anderson, 2010; Brown, 2018). By displaying compassion, building collective efficacy, and offering meaningful support to help people through change, long-lasting transformational change can occur (Ackerman-Anderson & Anderson, 2010; Brown, 2018; Dewitt, 2018). While steadfastness and courage are critical to moving the organization forward, leaders, especially superintendents, must realize change takes time to effectuate (Wright, 2009; Hill & Jochim, 2018). Brown (2018) offered the following advice to leaders when confronting the emotions and reactions to change: “Leaders must either invest a reasonable amount of time attending to fears and feelings, or squander an unreasonable amount of time trying to manage ineffective and unproductive behavior” (p.113). With their positions in constant jeopardy, the courage to lead requires great resolve and internal fortitude. Having the support of valued team members can provide the added layer of commitment needed to forge ahead in the name of the just cause.

Trusting Teams

Leaders may have clearly articulated their personal and organizational just cause and taken adequate steps to lead their teams towards the realization of that cause through courage and resilience, however, to be an infinite minded leader, developing, maintaining and nurturing collaborative and trusting teams is imperative. Sinek (2020) defines a trusting team as one where the leader has created an environment where information flows freely, support to address obstacles is provided without judgment and an environment of individual and group safety is nurtured. Leaders intending to impact their organizations through the power of trusting teams emphasize shared values, mutual respect, effective and authentic collaboration, and an element of coaching and mentoring (Dufour et al., 2004; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Sinek, 2020).

Sinek (2020) maintains that an infinite minded leader is constantly thinking about what is in the best interest of everyone, each team, and the members of the community the organization ultimately serves. The establishment and reinforcement of shared values is critical to this effort. The relational trust forged through honest and transparent communication sets the tone for true collaborative teamwork (Demerath, 2018). These infinite minded leaders are inclusive. They go out of their way to bring people into the conversations around both operational issues, as well as philosophical issues pertaining to the just cause. They are diligent when it comes to fostering a spirit of shared and distributed decision-making by intentionally and authentically including their team members in decisions that impact them and build a collective vision for the future (Dufour 2004; Demerath, 2018; Dewitt, 2018). Trusting teams can be strengthened by explicitly focusing on creating psychologically safe environments, expecting and

modeling mutual respect, and nurturing quality relationships. These servant leader practices result in far greater trust, synergy, and commitment within their teams (Kowalski, 2005; Dean, 2007; Demerath, 2018). Covey (2008) stated that “the ability to establish, grow, extend, and restore trust with stakeholders-customers...is the key leadership competency of the new global economy” (p. 21).

With foundational trust and mutual respect present, trusting teams can begin to take full advantage of the benefits of a collaborative culture. Creating an effective and productive collaborative team and culture requires a significant amount of time and energy (Gray et al., 2016). Maintaining open, productive, and meaningful relationships in the collaborative environment can be a shift for many individuals and even teams (King, et al., 2020). The more the leader can model these expected behaviors, the more the followers will see the desire for change is in fact authentic. When looking at the preferred characteristics various stakeholders desire their superintendents possess, the creation of a collaborative culture based on respect, trust, transparency, and support to help all reach the established goals are the most sought-after characteristics (Hill & Jochim, 2018; Wilhite, 2018). Regardless of the intentions of individuals and teams within the organization, coaching and mentoring programs, both informally and formally, can further the collective work of the organization by providing tailored support to meet the needs of all (Leithwood et al., 2007). Infinite minded leaders clearly understand the need to set high expectations to diligently work in the name of the just cause but temper those expectations by providing timely support, feedback and coaching as needed. As the infinite minded leader models the desired behaviors and authentically provides support, resources and encouragement for all to meet those same expectations, trust, camaraderie,

and commitment are solidified allowing the teams to be agile when confronted with unexpected challenges (Sinek, 2017).

Existential Flexibility

Once the infinite minded leader has expressed the just cause, demonstrated the courage to lead, and has created an environment where trusting teams can work towards the just cause, it becomes critical to the long-term success of the organization to have existential flexibility. Sinek (2020) maintained that existential flexibility is the organization's "capacity to initiate an extreme disruption to a business model or strategic course in order to more effectively advance the just cause" (p. 185). It is imperative that the leaders and those from within are adaptable to the changing landscape of their environments. Building on the foundation of having trusting teams as a core value of the organization, the infinite minded leader can leverage this framework by creating a loose and tight framework within the organizational dynamics (DuFour et al., 2004). This focus on distributed leadership and collaborative cultures can support the challenges individuals and teams face as they manage the change process (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Organizations are constantly receiving feedback from those within the organization and those from without. The infinite minded leader values open and direct communication and a free flow of ideas up, down and laterally throughout the organization (Boylan & Turner, 2017). Additionally, the leaders must find ways to encourage both individual adaptability, as well as organizational adaptability (Boylan & Turner, 2017; Goncalves & Bergquist, 2022). To do so there must be an environment of trust that views calculated risk taking and experimentation as a value-added endeavor (Boylan & Turner, 2017). Therefore, for the organization to be existentially flexible, they

must recognize the relationships individuals and teams have and their ability to cope with both perceived and real change are vital to their ability to effectively pivot to remain focused on the just cause (Goleman et al., 2013; Tang & Mo, 2017; Brown, 2018). Leaders must utilize flexibility to meet the challenges they encounter by employing the emotional side of leadership (Avolio, 2005; Goleman, 1995; Shankman, Allen, & Haber-Curran, in press, as cited in Owen, 2015). If there is absolute clarity and commitment to the shared just cause, with a leader who will courageously stay true to the cause while supported by the power of trusting teams, the organization can respond to extreme challenges and if needed initiate an extreme disruption to the strategic course in order to be in a stronger position to achieve the just cause (Sinek, 2020).

Worthy Rival

Just as infinite minded leaders place a high value on the efficacy of their teams, they see similar value in studying the successes of their rivals. Viewing one's rival as a potential source of inspiration empowers individuals and teams to be open to continual learning and assessing their current practices with those of other organizations. According to Sinek (2020), studying a worthy rival encourages the organization to operate through a lens of continuous improvement, recognizing there is much to be learned from the strengths, successes, and abilities of one's rivals. Unfortunately, according to the author, many finite minded leaders view the market as a zero-sum game where there are clear winners and losers.

There are many positive effects associated with studying a successful rival. Positively motivated rivalry has been shown to increase individual and team efforts, as well as motivation (Kilduff et al., 2016; Grant & Shandell, 2022). Individuals, teams, and

organizations can improve their own productivity and responsiveness to their customers and stakeholders by embracing the continuous improvement model (Baumann et al. 2019; Sinek, 2020). The acknowledgement of the successes and innovations of others can help promote refinement, reflection, and agility in the marketplace (Sinek, 2020).

The educational sector is no different than the business space when it comes to learning from one's rivals. Public schools have enjoyed a history of having minimal competition until the charter school movement gained attention and a strong foothold in education. Now there are increased opportunities for parents to choose between a public school and a charter school, public schools have had to be much more intentional in their outreach efforts (Milliman et al., 2017). This phenomenon has required public schools to be more forward thinking, innovative, and strategic in marketing, program development and overall communication (Bagley, 2006). In order to be successful and competitive, all educational institutions should embrace the idea of learning from their rivals so the product they are providing to their students, parents and communities is as meaningful and impactful as possible (Tichnor-Wagner, 2019). Therefore, schools and districts must acknowledge other institutions, or rivals, have specific strengths and capabilities that can support the initiatives and ultimate success of their own organizations (Sinek, 2020).

The Superintendent Mindset

Operating a school district is a difficult endeavor. The superintendent is constantly navigating a variety of complex issues while attempting to focus on the ultimate goal of preparing every student for life-long success after their K-12 education. An infinite minded superintendent who is dedicated to advancing the just cause is tasked with effectively and convincingly communicating the vision, navigating the politics of

the board of education, the community at large, and those that are associated with the employee unions of the district. Additionally, they are faced with complex issues around budgets, facilities, personnel matters, the instructional program, student achievement, student connectedness, and most importantly in the COVID-19 era, health, and safety, (Fowler & Johnson, 2014; Wilhite et al., 2018). All of these roles and responsibilities must be artfully addressed in a consistent and on-going manner in an effort to ensure the true just cause of the organization can be at the forefront of all decisions made (Wright, 2009; Shaw & Funk, 2013; Davidson & Butcher, 2017; Roff, 2021).

Health, Safety, Connectedness and COVID 19

While health, safety and connectedness have always been an important part of the K-12 public education system, the COVID 19 pandemic increased the focus on these important areas. Almost overnight districts and their leaders had to become public health experts and clinicians to support students, staff, and families while simultaneously providing instruction in ways they had never imagined previously (Roff, 2021). From March 2020 to April 2022, districts in Los Angeles County faced nearly insurmountable challenges with instruction, public health, public perception, and the physical, mental and emotional effects of the pandemic.

Instructionally, districts transitioned from 100% in person instruction on March 13, 2020 to a completely virtual instructional model three days later on March 16, 2020. What officials predicted to be a two-week timeline turned into nearly two years of changing timelines, mandates and conflicting public health orders. Instantly, superintendents were thrust into a communication and operational emergency. Districts, schools, students, and parents rallied around their communities and found creative ways

to do what they could to normalize life for the students they served. Instruction was important but the social-emotional health of students was even more critical.

Districts and communities did everything they could to support students and staff as they transitioned from in person instruction to distance learning, then to hybrid instruction then finally to in person instruction (Roff, 2021). However, for superintendents in Los Angeles County, there was increased angst as parents and community members grew frustrated with the differences between the public health orders and guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control, the California Department of Public Health and the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. Attention shifted from the instructional program to the perceived politics of the pandemic. As a result, superintendents and districts were forced to contend with public dissatisfaction for policies they had no control over. This dilemma weighed heavily on districts and their leaders which factored into many policy decisions. These external pressures required superintendents to demonstrate both their courage to lead and their existential flexibility. With such significant conjecture and misinformation, communication and visioning were the two primary vehicles superintendents had at their disposal to keep their districts focused on keeping everyone safe while providing robust instruction to their students.

Communication and Politics

As the voice of the district, the superintendent is expected to be effective and compelling when communicating the district goals, priorities, and initiatives to a variety of interested stakeholders. Infinite minded superintendents use every opportunity at their disposal to communicate the just cause to all constituents but are also keenly aware of the need to have clear and consistent communication related to the issues that are important

to stakeholders within and from outside the district (Jenkins, 2007; Wilhite et al., 2018). Given the increased visibility of the role of superintendent, it is even more critical now that the infinite minded leader reinforces the path to the realization of the just cause (Wright, 2017; Davidson & Butcher, 2017). The competing interests of these stakeholders can make staying on message and focusing on the future state challenging.

While effective communication of a district's initiatives, values and, vision have always been important, the COVID 19 environment made this skill set drastically more critical. Superintendents had to communicate their rationale for both health and safety decisions, as well as instructional decisions. As districts grappled with the complexities of both remote learning and hybrid learning, there was an increased emphasis on inter district collaboration. This focus on learning from and alongside one's worthy rival was exactly what Sinek (2020) had described as one of his essential practices for achieving extraordinary results.

This focus on learning from those around and crafting compelling messaging regarding the vision and other operational decisions was a critical component in communicating with other stakeholders as well. Effective messaging is critical to ensuring that trust is present throughout the district. The superintendent must build these trusting relationships with classified staff, teachers, itinerants, administrators, parents, the board of education, and the community at large. The infinite minded superintendent must navigate the politics associated with board and community relations so focus on the just cause is not lost (Shaw & Funk, 2014). By being open and transparent, the superintendent can develop and strengthen strong relationships with these critical stakeholders, so a collaborative effort can be forged in the name of the just cause (Hill & Jochim, 2018;

Poynton et al., 2018). This focus on trust and transparency is a direct example of Sinek's pivotal practice of developing trusting teams. By actively communicating and engaging with all stakeholders, superintendents could develop powerfully trusting relationships with their stakeholders and come together as a community.

Budget and Facilities

Another distracting factor that competes with the superintendent's attention and focus is the constant fluctuation with budgets and facilities. The fiscal health of a district is a critical component of the superintendent's evaluation. Although budget challenges are many times out of the control of the district administration, economic uncertainty and declining economic conditions play a crucial role in the strategic planning of district initiatives (Klocko et al. 2019). These external variables can oftentimes cause superintendents to shift their focus from the just cause to survival. Many superintendents are confronted with the difficult choice of fighting the good fight on behalf of students and living to fight another day, so they can retain their position and regroup to strategize a way to get back to the focus on the just cause (Hill & Jochim, 2018; Klocko, 2019). This is where the courage to lead is imperative to realize the vision despite the huge concern of turn-over and a lack of job security (Jutabha, 2017; Hill & Jochim, 2018).

To adequately prepare for and respond to the uncertain economic factors a district may face can be challenging. The superintendent must form trusting teams of experts that can help predict future possibilities so there is a focus on being existentially flexible to respond to external conditions. This convergence of two of Sinek's practices of trusting teams and existential flexibility can create a solid foundation to allow the organization to maintain focus on the just cause despite the possible disruption of other variables.

Personnel and the Associations

The largest expense in any district is personnel. The average percentage of a school district's budget allocated to personnel ranges from 80 to 85% of the overall budget (American Association of School Administrators, 2011). With such a considerable portion of the operating budget allocated to people, the superintendent must ensure great care is taken in the recruitment and retaining of the people that are charged with carrying out the just cause of the district. The ability to minimize staff turnover increases the likelihood the goals and vision of the district can be the focus of the work. Similarly, the superintendent must devote a considerable amount of time and energy to cultivating, maintaining, and strengthening the relationships between the district and the various labor partners that represent the employees of the district (Shaw & Funk, 2013; Jutabha, 2017). The more collaborative these relationships are the greater the likelihood energy and resources can be directed to achieving the just cause.

Even during the calmest of times, relationships with associations can be tense and challenging. However, the COVID 19 pandemic created adversarial relationships where there were none or exacerbated those that already existed. Negotiation sessions grew contentious as districts and associations debated what concessions needed to be agreed upon with health and safety memorandums of understandings. The huge influx of federal and state dollars also became sources of disagreement as the debate over how those funds should be allocated pitted employees against employers. Yet again, this heated environment required superintendents to continually reaffirm their just cause to focus on students and their needs and stand strong in the face of constant criticism. They had to rely on the strong relationships and trust they had developed with their teams to continue

to plan for the uncertainty. Sinek's practices provided the foundation to continue the work of providing programs and support to their students even with daunting challenges facing the district.

Curriculum, Instruction and Student Achievement

Superintendents and their districts are judged in many cases by the student achievement data reported at the conclusion of every school year. While there are no punitive measures in place in the Common Core era as there were under No Child Left Behind, there still exists incredible pressure to be favorably compared to similar districts. The transformational change process takes time to implement across an entire district effectively and systematically (Gray et al., 2016; Hill & Jochim, 2018). Superintendents and other leaders analyze the student achievement data to determine and identify potential gaps in either curriculum or instructional delivery (Goddard, 2001; Leithwood et al., 2007; Sheppard & Brown, 2009). This consistent focus on assessing and reassessing the instructional program is the cornerstone to achieving the goals associated with the just cause. This can only be achieved if the leaders possess the courage to lead and empower their teams to make impactful decisions.

Meeting the diverse needs of students is a difficult task. Districts are constantly refining and assessing their programs to find new ways to support English learners, students with special needs, at promise students, students from low socio-economic areas, homeless students, foster youth, and the list of unique needs is much longer. The infinite minded superintendent could look at the five practices of Sinek to create a robust and well-articulated district vision of what success can and should look like. Co-creating a just cause that all stakeholders can rally around is the first step. With a just cause,

surrounded by teams founded on trust, leaders can courageously lead by challenging the status quo in search of transformational change. Through the process, they can take the time to learn from others in their fields who are achieving extraordinary results so they can learn and adapt to support those they serve. This focused drive must also be aware of potential disruptions in the future and be prepared to respond by being existentially flexible. While many districts excel at many of these practices, few possess all five to the level that will ensure extraordinary results.

Gap in the Research

Although there is a significant body of research that has been conducted around leadership styles and philosophies in education, there is a gap in research that comprehensively brings the five components of Sinek's infinite minded leadership theory into consideration for school leaders and superintendents (Sotero, 2009; Larwin & Hodge, 2020). There is an additional gap describing the positive effects associated with many of the individual components of the infinite minded leader as described by Sinek and how all of these characteristics of a just cause, courage to lead, trusting teams, existential flexibility, and worth rival, when combined together, impact the results of a district (Larwin & Hodge, 2020; Roff, 2021).

Overall, the researcher believes although current research thoroughly describes leadership theories and their corresponding characteristics, there is a gap in the research that points to the need to further study how all five of Sinek's practices can create the conditions for achieving extraordinary results. Furthermore, the gap in the research is even more dramatic when taking the effects of the COVID 19 pandemic into account and how superintendent leadership practices may have been impacted. Therefore, given the

on-going challenges superintendents face, it is imperative to learn what exemplary superintendents do to achieve extraordinary results.

Summary

Serving in the capacity of a K-12 school superintendent has become an increasingly complex and at times volatile position. Dealing with declining enrollment, shrinking budgets, rising health and welfare benefits costs, contentious unions, political divisiveness, increased academic, social and emotional needs of students, and the fear of a high turnover rate can significantly impact the ability of a superintendent to implement and effectuate meaningful transformational change (Petersen & Young, 2004; Jenkins, 2007; Wright, 2009; Shaw & Funk, 2013; Fowler & Johnson, 2014; Jutabha, 2017; Poynton et al., 2018). These constant pressures make it extremely difficult to maintain focus on a district's vision and mission. Transformational change takes time, patience, and diligence. For a superintendent to effectively lead their district to the attainment of extraordinary results they must have three to five years to begin to see change occur (Soltero, 2009; Davidson & Butcher, 2017; Jutabha, 2017; Hill & Jochim, 2018; Klocko et al., 2019). Therefore, to sustain the competing pressures superintendents must endure, there should be consideration of adopting an infinite minded leadership approach that takes into account a just cause, the courage to lead, trusting teams, studying a worthy rival and possessing existential flexibility.

Researchers studying leadership in general and school leadership specifically assert there is a strong correlation to the realization of a collective vision and the leader's ability to be courageous and foster truly trusting teams (DuFour et al, 2004; Gurley et al. 2015; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Davidson & Butcher, 2017; Brown, 2018; Dewitt, 2018;

Klocko et al. 2019). Most districts, if not all, have a mission and/or vision that is explicitly shared with the entire community. Those school districts that use that vision and mission to intentionally plan their programs and initiatives set themselves apart. Leaders who take the time to explicitly and candidly talk about their vision create synergy, commitment, and a focus for the work to be undertaken (Kowalski, 2005; Hanson et al., 2016; Demerath 2018; Wilhite et al 2018). This commitment to the goals of the district can be a powerful source of political capital for the superintendent as they confront unforeseen issues that arise.

Researchers have looked at the need of superintendents to be flexible to meet the needs that are both foreseeable and unforeseeable. To meet the ever-changing landscape of education, superintendents must adapt. This adaptation can come in the form of resilience, innovation, and shared decision making that takes multiple perspectives into account, as well as learning from one's rivals (Witmer & Mellinger, 2015; Kilduff, 2019; Tichnor-Wagner, 2019; Baer & Duin, 2020; Operti et al., 2021; Gonclaves & Bergquist, 2022; Grant & Shandell, 2022). The charter school movement has been a strong motivator for K-12 superintendents as they examine the practices of charters that have taken students away from their districts (Bagely, 2006; Milliman et al., 2017). Existential flexibility requires districts to find new and creative ways to meet the diverse needs of those they serve (Henkin & Dee, 2001; Wright, 2009; Heyler, 2018; Baumann & Cherry, 2019; Krauss & Vanhove, 2022).

Finally, superintendents have to take all of the above considerations into account when defining and operationalizing the day-to-day work to ultimately achieve the extraordinary results they are seeking. They must find a way to consistently communicate

the vision, adequately contend with the politics of the district, and share the state of the district budget and facilities to instill confidence in the organization and community (Jenkins, 2007; Soltero, 2009; Fowler & Johnson, 2014; Jutabha, 2017; Poynton et al., 2018; Wilhite et al., 2018). Building relationships with employee associations, supporting individuals and teams with meaningful professional development, authentic opportunities for collaboration, and on-going mentoring and coaching are components of the framework superintendents should consider to provide the necessary support to continually improve operations to realize the just cause and achieve extraordinary results (Dufour et al. 2004; Schleicher, 2012; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Hanson et al., 2016; Howard et al., 2017).

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Chapter III describes the methodology used in this study to understand how exemplary superintendents perceive the practices of Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset framework (i.e., just cause, trusting teams, worthy rivals, existential flexibility, and courage to lead) are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. Additionally, the methodology seeks to understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

The chapter opens with the purpose statement, research questions, and a description of the research design created to meet the objective of the study. The chapter then provides a description of the population, sample, and sampling frame employed. Next, the chapter describes the instrumentation developed to complete and compile the information gathered through participant interviews. The data collection and subsequent analysis is also described. The final two sections of the chapter describe the limitations of the study and end with a brief summary.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset framework are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

Research Questions

The central research question is: How do successful leaders perceive the practices of an infinite mindset are embedded in their organization to achieve extraordinary results? The research subquestions are:

- 1) How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *advance a just cause* is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?
- 2) How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *build trusting teams* is embedded in their organization to inspire extraordinary results?
- 3) How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *study your worthy rival* is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?
- 4) How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *preparing for existential flexibility* is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?
- 5) How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *demonstrating the courage to lead* is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?
- 6) What supports and barriers do exemplary leaders perceive affect the embedding of infinite mindset practices in their organization?

Research Design

Research design is a critical aspect of the research process. Research design is the set of protocols and procedures used by researchers to collect and analyze to obtain

answers to the research questions of the study (Creswell, 2014; Kothari, 2004). An effective research design ensures the research questions are addressed in a clear, coherent, and purposeful manner. Researchers are tasked with deciding whether a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approach will produce sufficient data to answer the research questions as the research process is designed. Although each approach follows similar procedures, each yields data in a specific and intentional manner. Qualitative research design provides the researcher with a construct to allow data collection through interviews and the collection of artifacts (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Quantitative research is the collection of numerical data that are analyzed mathematically to explain a particular phenomenon being researched (Aliaga & Gunderson, 2000). Creswell (2003) contended the mixed-methods approach uses the strengths of qualitative and quantitative research.

Creswell (1994) maintained the qualitative process allows researchers to examine “a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (pp. 1–2). Given the purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Sinek’s (2020) infinite mindset framework are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results, the thematic team and faculty advisors determined the most appropriate approach for this study was a qualitative research methods approach. Furthermore, the qualitative research design supported the process of collecting data through semistructured interviews and a review of artifacts. This process allowed the researcher to gather additional anecdotal information from respondents to triangulate the information collected. The information

gathered from the respondents and the review of artifacts were coded and themed. The data were then synthesized to identify findings.

This study used a nonexperimental design with pre-identified participants (Godwill, 2015; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The collection of the interview data and artifacts was descriptive in nature. This research design allowed the researcher to identify and describe how superintendents perceived the practices of Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset framework were embedded in their organization to achieve extraordinary results.

Method

A team of peer researchers, together with faculty, concluded a phenomenological methodology was the most appropriate approach to identify and describe the superintendents' perceived importance of the practices of Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset to achieve exemplary results. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) noted the purpose of a phenomenological study is to understand the experiences of a particular phenomenon. Additionally, Patton (2015) explained phenomenological studies focus on descriptions of lived experiences by looking to capture how people experience and make sense of a particular experience. Therefore, identifying and describing the unique lived experiences of superintendents is best captured through a phenomenological methodology.

Population

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described a population as a group of individuals that "conform to specific criteria and to which we generalize the results of this research" (p. 129). Each school district in the United States is led by a senior administrator often called the superintendent. The role of the superintendent is similar to

that of a chief executive officer in an organization because the superintendent oversees finances, instruction, communication, and board member relations, to name a few (Shaw & Funk, 2013). In 2018–2019, there were 13,452 public school districts in the United States (Riser-Kotitsky, 2019). This number would suggest there are approximately 13,452 public school superintendents in the United States. Further narrowing the population, the California Department of Education’s (CDE, 2022) website reported 1,029 public school districts in the state of California as of 2022. The composition of these districts included 523 elementary school districts, 344 unified school districts, 76 high school districts, and 86 school districts with unique configurations (CDE, 2022). The researcher determined the population of approximately 1,029 California superintendents was too large a population for the researcher to effectively study.

Sampling Frame

Patton (2002) noted:

No rule of thumb exists to tell a researcher precisely how to focus a study. The extent to which a research or evaluation study is broad or narrow depends on the purpose, the resources available, the time available, and the interests of those involved. (p. 258)

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) suggested the use of a smaller group in the population to be studied. It was determined the population of California superintendents was too numerous to study; therefore, the sampling frame was narrowed to superintendents in Los Angeles County. Los Angeles County’s Office of Education (2022) identified there were 88 public school districts in the county during the 2021–2022 school year. These 88 districts consisted of 27 elementary districts, 5 high school districts, 6 charter school

districts, 48 unified school districts, and 1 county program district (CDE, 2022). The researcher selected this sampling frame because it provided a varied representation of the different types of districts that superintendents lead, including elementary districts, unified districts, and high school districts. There was also a mix of urban and suburban districts in this population. Each of these characteristics are represented throughout California. Therefore, the population for this study was the 88 superintendents serving in school districts in Los Angeles County.

Sample

A sample can be described as the group of participants selected from the population (Creswell, 2012; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Numerous sampling methods exist to support qualitative research studies, including convenience, purposive random, and criterion sampling (Patton, 2015). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described purposive sampling as a method of selecting specific participants from the identified population to provide information on the subject. The researcher used purposive sampling to select the superintendents to participate in this study by using specific criteria. Additionally, criterion sampling was used. Patton (2001) defined criterion sampling as the process of “selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (p. 238). This pre-identified criterion required the researcher to research whether or not the potential respondent met the threshold for inclusion into the study using this criterion sampling method (Patton, 2015). Patton (2001) also noted the use of this sampling method helps to ensure a greater likelihood of having sources that provide rich information relevant to the study. In determining the appropriate sample size, the team of thematic researchers along with faculty determined the sample size of 12

superintendents was sufficient to yield the data necessary to have rich information. Mason (2010) concluded in a meta-analysis that studies where interviews were the primary source of data, the sample size ranged from 15–20 participants. Boddy (2016) stated samples of 15 participants can yield sufficient data with largely homogenous populations. This study was delimited to 12 exemplary leaders in California. An exemplary leader in this study is a leader who demonstrates extraordinary results and evidence of leading their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits, with a minimum of 5 years of experience in the profession and meeting at least three of the following criteria:

- The exemplary leader demonstrates evidence of collaboratively leading an organization fostering creativity and future-orientation improvements.
- The exemplary leader actively participates in community leadership and shared problem-solving activities.
- The exemplary leader has had articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings on leadership.
- The exemplary leader has received recognition by their peers as a leader who gives respect to all people.
- The exemplary leader is a member in good standing in professional associations in their field.

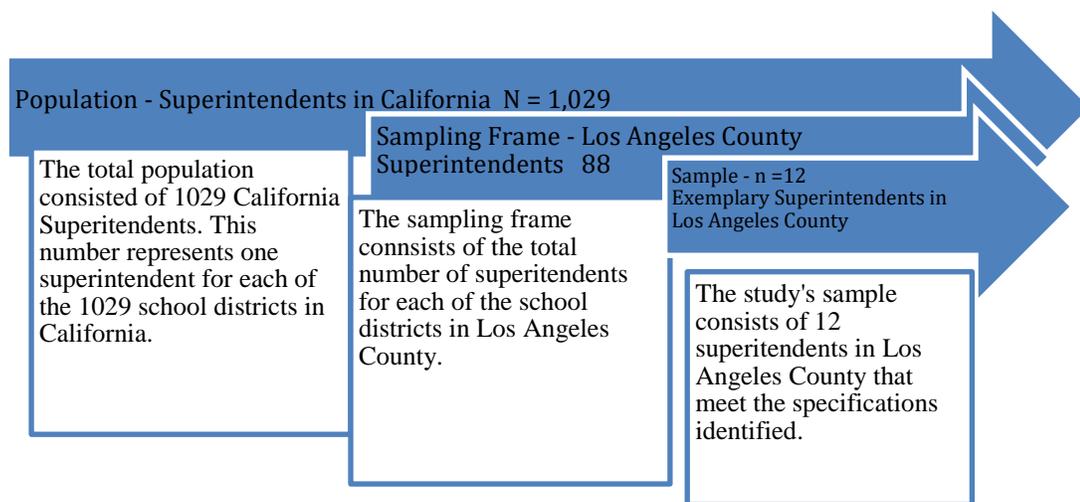
Sample Selection

The researcher compiled a list of the 88 school districts and superintendents in Los Angeles County to support the expert panel with the process of identifying participants to be included in the study (see Figure 1). An expert panel of three was

convened. The panel consisted of (a) the superintendent from the Los Angeles County Department of Education; (b) a retired superintendent; and (c) the Deputy Superintendent of the Los Angeles Department of Education. Each of these panel members are familiar with these Los Angeles County superintendents and are in a position to provide meaningful feedback regarding the population and whether or not the potential superintendents meet the threshold of the study’s criteria. The expert panel was provided with the delimitations used to define the characteristics of an exemplary superintendent. The panel had access to district websites; district data; statistics from the California Department of Education website, the Association of California School Administrators website, and California School Boards Association website; the LinkedIn profiles of each superintendent; and the personal and district social media platforms for each superintendent and district. All data collected were reviewed with the expert panel. The expert panel identified 20 exemplary superintendents using the criteria.

Figure 1

Population and Sample Funnel of Superintendents



The researcher contacted the recommended superintendents who met at least three of the previously identified criterion of an exemplary superintendent from the recommendations of the expert panel. Subsequently, an email was sent to each of the potential participants asking if they would be willing to participate in the study (see Appendix B). The first 12 superintendents to respond were contacted via a follow-up phone call. The content of the telephone call with each superintendent included a review of the purpose of the study, discussion of any concerns or additional questions, and reassurance of the confidential nature of the study given the importance and high profile nature of their positions. Following the phone conversations, the first 12 superintendents who agreed to participate were included in the study. A letter of introduction and explanation (see Appendix C) was emailed to participants, plus an interview protocol (see Appendix D), the informed consent and audio recording release (see Appendix E), and the University of Massachusetts Global's Participant Bill of Rights (see Appendix F). The researcher scheduled the Zoom interviews at a time of the participants' choosing. Each interview was scheduled for a 60-minute timeframe. The interviews were recorded using the embedded recording function in the Zoom platform. Each interview included the participant providing verbal consent of having received and read the informed consent document and for the interview to be recorded.

Instrumentation

This study used a qualitative research approach. The researcher used a qualitative instrument to answer the research questions. The peer researchers and faculty worked collaboratively to develop the interview questions. Sentence stems were developed to cover each of the five characteristics that were integral to an infinite minded leader

described by Sinek (2018). The peer researchers were paired together to work on the development of potential interview questions. Once each team had developed their draft questions, the thematic team came together to review and modify the proposed questions as needed. This process occurred over several meetings. To ensure alignment between the research questions and the interview questions, the thematic team created an alignment table. This table provided the thematic team an opportunity to make certain the interview questions were aligned to the research purpose and research questions. Once consensus was reached on the appropriateness of the interview questions and question probes, the questions were added to the interview protocol. To create greater reliability, thematic members agreed the protocol would be read verbatim during each interview. The protocol contained a brief description of the theoretical framework being used for the study, an informed consent section, demographic questions, and interview questions. Additionally, the protocol required an oral confirmation of the informed consent. The researcher provided each participant the opportunity to ask questions prior to the start of the interview. The protocol did not have the additional probes created by the thematic team.

Data were collected by interviewing 12 superintendents. Additional artifacts were also gathered and examined. This triangulation of data supported the researcher in identifying patterns that can be used to describe findings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The peer researchers worked collaboratively with the faculty advisors to develop questions that sought to describe how exemplary superintendents perceive the practices of Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset framework are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to

understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

Qualitative Interviews

Qualitative interviews were conducted to gather data related to this study. The researcher, in collaboration with seven peer researchers and four University of Massachusetts Global faculty members, crafted 15 interview questions to identify and describe how exemplary superintendents perceive the practices of Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset framework are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. These questions also sought to provide an understanding of the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset. The question development focused on the five infinite mindset characteristics that Sinek identified: advance a just cause, build trusting teams, study your worthy rival, prepare for existential flexibility, and demonstrate the courage to lead. The final area of focus for the question development focused on the barriers that could impede the realization of the just cause and the supports needed for success.

Researcher as an Instrument of the Study

According to Patton (2015), in qualitative research, the researcher is predetermined to be an instrument of the study. As data are collected, coded, themed, and analyzed, there is the potential for the researchers' own personal biases and opinions to inadvertently influence the process (Patton, 2015). The researcher had 14 years of experience as a site level school administrator and 7 years as a district administrator, including 5 years as a superintendent. In these roles, the researcher has conducted

numerous interviews in the educational setting. The 12 interviews were conducted in person in an environment selected by each individual superintendent.

Field Test

To increase the validity of the interview questions and protocols, a field test was conducted by each of the eight peer researchers. Each researcher selected an exemplary leader that matched the criteria that had been established for their respective sample population but that would not be a participant in the study itself. The selected exemplary leader was provided the interview protocol. The leader was asked to consent to participate in the interview and to complete the demographic survey. To triangulate feedback, an impartial observer was selected to observe the interview. The observer was selected due to their experience and expertise with both qualitative research and interview processes. At the conclusion of the interview, the researcher asked the observer to provide constructive feedback on the questions posed during the interview and the effectiveness of the interview process (see Appendix G). Additionally, the participant provided feedback to the researcher using a feedback form (see Appendix H). Once each peer researcher completed their field test, the faculty and peer researchers met to consider any necessary revisions to the protocol or interview questions. As a result of this analysis, there were slight changes made to the interview questions and the interview protocol to increase the degree of validity of data collected.

Validity

For the finding of a study to be valuable and purposeful, the study must have validity. Roberts (2010) stated an instrument with a high degree of validity is one that closely measures what it was intended to measure. To create a higher degree of validity in

the study, the researcher—along with the seven peer researchers and four faculty members—crafted the original interview questions and interview protocols. The team developed an alignment chart to ensure the interview questions posed were adequately aligned to the research questions of the study (see Appendix I). Once the first draft of the interview questions was completed, the team created additional probes that could be asked if further elaboration was needed during the interviews. The validity of the study was increased by the input of the team of peer researchers, the support faculty, field test, artifacts, and interviewee feedback.

Reliability

Reliability is demonstrated by achieving consistent results from the researcher's instrument (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Roberts, 2010). To achieve greater reliability, the researcher used semistructured interview questions with pre-identified follow-up probes. Once the data were collected, intercoder reliability was used.

Interview Protocol

To increase the reliability of data collected from the interviews, all 12 questions and the additional probes were prescripted. At the beginning of each of the 12 interviews, the same directions and explanations were given. There was no deviation from the initial questions nor the follow-up probes during the interviews.

Intercoder Reliability

Intercoder reliability is another measure taken to ensure there was a strong correlation between the data collected and the analysis of those data. Kurasaki (2000) defined intercoder reliability as a measure of agreement between multiple coders about how they apply codes to the data (p. 179). The use of intercoder reliability when coding

data seeks to mitigate the effects of the researcher as an instrument of the study. Kurasaki (2000) warned qualitative researchers can be susceptible to both systematic and nonsystematic errors when applying codes to data. Patton (2015) stated the triangulation of the data analyzed by the researcher and verified by a neutral third party ensures a greater degree of reliability. To further enhance the reliability of the research, a peer researcher served as the coder for the coding and theming of this study. The peer researcher conducted an analysis of 10% of the coding from this study, with the standards of agreement set to the 80% level (Patton, 2015). Kurasaki (2000) stated intercoder reliability is a critical component of research as it “can strengthen the validity of conclusions based on coded text data and respond effectively to ongoing criticisms about the apparently subjective nature of qualitative methods” (p. 179).

Data Collection

The qualitative data were collected through individual, Zoom interviews and an examination of various artifacts obtained on the different district websites and directly from the exemplary leaders who were interviewed. Prior to collecting the data, the application to conduct research, including the informed consent form (see Appendix E) and the Participant’s Bill of Rights (see Appendix F) were submitted to the University of Massachusetts Global Institutional Review Board for approval. All participants either gave recorded affirmative consent or a physical signed consent form giving their informed consent to be included in the study. The data were collected based on the following steps:

1. Using the delimitation criteria developed by the thematic team, the researcher used an expert panel to identify potential superintendents to be included in the

study. The panel consisted of (a) the superintendent from the Los Angeles County Department of Education; (b) a retired superintendent; and (c) the Deputy Superintendent of the Los Angeles Department of Education

2. Based on the list of potential interview candidates derived from the expert panel, individual emails were sent to each of the identified superintendents (see Appendix B). The initial email described the purpose of the study, the time commitment associated with the study, and the potential benefits and risks that could be associated with participation in the study.
3. Once an agreement was reached to participate in the study, the superintendent was sent detailed information including the informed consent document (see Appendix E), the Participant's Bill of Rights (see Appendix F) and the background information on the research study.
4. Each superintendent was asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire prior to the interview. Upon receipt of the demographic questionnaire, the 1-hour interview was scheduled.
5. Interviews were conducted at a time that was mutually agreed upon.
6. The interviews were recorded using the recording feature in the Zoom platform.
7. The interviews were transcribed into a narrative word document that was supplied back to the superintendent for verification of accuracy.
8. The data were uploaded into the NVivo software for coding.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed following the conclusion of each interview. All video recordings were downloaded and saved on a password-protected

drive. The transcripts of each interview, once transcribed, were sent to the interviewee for confirmation of accuracy. All video, audio, and transcript files were stored on a password-protected drive and the files destroyed 3 years after the completion of the research.

Artifacts were also collected as a source of data. At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher asked each participant if there were any additional artifacts, documents, or files that could be provided to add to the study. Artifacts provided directly from the superintendents were analyzed and included in the coding and theming. The researcher also conducted a search for additional artifacts on the respective district websites of each superintendent who was interviewed. These artifacts were also analyzed and coded and themed accordingly. Participant confidentiality was protected at all times and no identifying information was connected to the transcripts and artifacts in the research. Participants were given pseudonyms (e.g., Superintendent 1, Superintendent 2) in all reporting of data.

Once all interviews were completed, coded, and themed, the researcher sent an email to each of the participating superintendents expressing appreciation for their time (see Appendix J). The email also reinforced the offer to provide them with a copy of the study upon completion and approval.

Data Analysis

This study employed a qualitative research methods approach. Qualitative data were collected in two different ways. The first set of data were collected through a series of 12 in-person interviews with superintendents who met the qualifications under the

study's exemplary criteria. Secondly, the researcher collected artifacts from the participants themselves and the respective district websites of the participants.

Analysis of Interview Data

The data collected from the 12 interviews consisted of two parts. The first part occurred prior to the scheduled interview where each participant was sent a copy of the demographic questions requested for the study. These demographic questions were sent via a Google form for the ease and comfort of the 12 participants. This procedure streamlined the process by not requiring the participant to take their personal time to upload or send the results of the demographic survey to the researcher. The interview consisted of a 1-hour Zoom interview with each of the 12 participants. The researcher followed each of the steps outlined in the interview protocol document (see Appendix D) to ensure consistency and reliability. The interview was recorded using the recording feature on Zoom. The following steps were used by the researcher to analyze the data collected from the interviews:

1. Transcripts were printed from Zoom and reviewed.
2. Codes were created based on the frequency of similar responses.
3. Codes were categorized into themes and recorded in the findings.

Although qualitative coding software was used for the analysis of the data collected, the study ultimately relied on the researcher to accurately examine all data collected; thus, the researcher scanned the data for an initial interpretation (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Sarsfield & Garson, 2018). Using the data collection software, the researcher placed the data into categories or codes and compared the codes. The frequency tables in each coded phenomenon were studied, and a relationship was found

between each code and any related subcodes (Sarsfield & Garson, 2018). The researcher's goal was to validate the relationships between the data and the research question and better understand the phenomenon.

Analysis of Artifacts

There were two parts to the analysis of the artifacts collected from the participant. At the conclusion of each interview, the participant was asked if they had any relevant artifacts that could be provided related to the questions posed in the interview. Additionally, the researcher conducted a comprehensive search of each of the participant's district websites to locate and study any artifacts that could add depth to the data collected from the interviews. Once both sets of data were collected, the researcher followed the following steps to analyze the data:

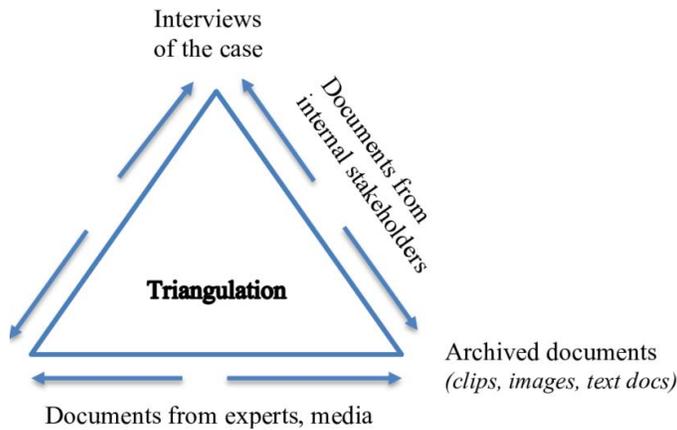
1. The artifacts were reviewed.
2. The artifacts were analyzed to determine if any new themes emerged.
3. The data were added to existing themes.

Triangulation of Data

Interview data and artifact data were captured and presented in frequency tables. Triangulation in qualitative research includes the use of multiple data sources to deeply understand an identified phenomenon (Patton, 1999). In this study, the researcher used interview data along with the supporting artifacts to provide a layer of triangulation to increase the validity and reliability of the data collected and findings presented in Chapter IV as noted in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Data Collection Triangulation of the Research



Note. Adapted from Carter et al., 2014; Flick, 2018c; Kaczynski et al., 2013. In the public domain.

Limitations

All research studies must work in various constraints and limitations that may impact the results and generalizability of the outcomes of the study. In this study, there were two limitations identified: sample size and time.

Sample Size

Given there were 13,452 school districts in the United States, each with a superintendent; 1,029 districts in California; and 88 districts in Los Angeles County, the researcher had to limit the sample size of the study to be feasible. As a result, the researcher selected a sample of 12 superintendents in Los Angeles County who met the delimitations that were identified. Although these 12 superintendents served a diverse group of students across the county, the limitation nevertheless existed.

Time

Arranging for and carrying out an interview is a time-consuming process. The constraint of time was a significant limitation in scheduling interviews with superintendents. Identifying superintendents who met the delimitations and securing their consent to be interviewed was difficult. However, scheduling a time conducive to their calendars was daunting. To be fluid and responsive to emergencies and unforeseen incidents superintendents had to respond to, the interviews were scheduled for 1 hour at their convenience. The 1-hour constraint also posed a limitation because it could have affected the level of depth a superintendent could provide in response to the 15 questions that had to be covered.

Summary

Chapter III provided a comprehensive review of the methodology employed for this phenomenological study that sought to identify and describe how superintendents perceived the various characteristics of an infinite mindset leader were embedded in their districts to achieve extraordinary results. The researcher conducted interviews and collected artifacts to gather and analyze data to answer research questions from the selected sample population. Through a collaborative process with the researcher's thematic colleagues, the purpose statement, research questions, design of the study, sampling methods, and qualitative instrumentation were aligned to the chosen methodology. The researcher also described the validity, reliability, and limitations in the study. The analysis of the data collected from the study is presented in Chapter IV. Chapter V includes the findings and conclusions from the study, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

This qualitative study was conducted to explore and describe how exemplary superintendents perceive the practices of Simon Sinek's infinite mindset framework are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. Chapter IV begins with an overview of the purpose statement, research questions, methodology, data collection procedures, and population sample of the study. The specific demographic information of each of the twelve superintendents who participated in the study are summarized. The majority of the chapter identifies the qualitative results gathered through semi-structured interviews and the collection of artifacts relative to each research question. The data were coded, themed, and organized into tables followed by narrative descriptions to illustrate the themes that emerged from the interviews. The chapter concludes with a summary of the study's findings.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset framework are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

Research Questions

The central research question is: How do successful leaders perceive the practices of an infinite mindset are embedded in their organization to achieve extraordinary results? The research subquestions are:

- 1) How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *advance a just cause* is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?
- 2) How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *build trusting teams* is embedded in their organization to inspire extraordinary results?
- 3) How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *study your worthy rival* is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?
- 4) How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *preparing for existential flexibility* is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?
- 5) How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *demonstrating the courage to lead* is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?
- 6) What supports and barriers do exemplary leaders perceive affect the embedding of infinite mindset practices in their organization?

Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures

Research design is a critical aspect of the research process. An effective research design ensures the research questions are addressed in a clear, coherent, and purposeful manner. Qualitative research design provides the researcher with a construct to allow data collection through interviews and the collection of artifacts (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Creswell (1994) maintained the qualitative process allows researchers to examine “a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with

words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (pp. 1–2). Given the purpose of the study was to explore and describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Sinek’s (2020) infinite mindset framework are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results, a qualitative research methods approach was selected.

Data was primarily collected through semi structured interviews. The researcher, in collaboration with seven peer researchers and four University of Massachusetts Global faculty members, crafted 15 interview questions designed to address each of the research questions. To increase the validity of the interview questions and protocols, a field test was conducted. Based on the feedback from the field tests, slight modifications were made to the interview questions and the interview protocol.

Using the selection criteria developed by the thematic team, the researcher used an expert panel to identify potential superintendents to be included in the study. Based on the list of potential interview candidates derived from the expert panel, individual emails were sent to 20 superintendents (see Appendix B). Once an agreement was reached to participate in the study, the superintendent was sent detailed information including the informed consent document (see Appendix E), the Participant’s Bill of Rights (see Appendix F) and the background information on the research study. Each superintendent was asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire prior to the interview. Upon receipt of the demographic questionnaire, the 1-hour interview was scheduled. Interviews were conducted at a time and place mutually agreed upon. In addition to the interview questions, the researcher collected artifacts directly from the twelve superintendents as well as from their district’s respective websites. This process allowed the researcher to

gather additional information from respondents to triangulate the information collected. The interview transcripts and artifacts were then uploaded into the NVivo software to begin the process of coding and theming.

Population

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described a population as a group of individuals that “conform to specific criteria and to which we generalize the results of this research” (p. 129). In 2018–2019, there were 13,452 public school districts in the United States (Riser-Kotitsky, 2019). This number would suggest there are approximately 13,452 public school superintendents in the United States. Further narrowing the population, the California Department of Education’s (CDE, 2022) website reported 1,029 public school districts in the state of California as of 2022. The researcher determined the population of approximately 1,029 California superintendents was too large a population for the researcher to effectively study.

Sample

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) suggested the use of a smaller group in the population to be studied. It was determined the population of California superintendents was too numerous to study; therefore, the sampling frame was narrowed to superintendents in Los Angeles County. Los Angeles County’s Office of Education (2022) identified there were 88 public school districts in the county during the 2021–2022 school year. Therefore, the sampling frame for this study was the 88 superintendents serving in school districts in Los Angeles County.

Numerous sampling methods exist to support qualitative research studies, including convenience, purposive random, and criterion sampling (Patton, 2015).

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described purposive sampling as a method of selecting specific participants from the identified population to provide information on the subject. The researcher used purposive sampling to select the superintendents to participate in this study by using specific criteria. Additionally, criterion sampling was used. Patton (2001) defined criterion sampling as the process of “selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (p. 238). Patton (2001) also noted the use of this sampling method helps to ensure a greater likelihood of having sources that provide rich information relevant to the study. The team of thematic researchers along with faculty determined the sample size of 12 superintendents was sufficient to yield the data necessary to have rich information.

This study was delimited to 12 exemplary leaders in California. An exemplary leader in this study is a leader who demonstrates extraordinary results and evidence of leading their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits, with a minimum of 5 years of experience in the profession and meeting at least three of the following criteria:

- The exemplary leader demonstrates evidence of collaboratively leading an organization fostering creativity and future-orientation improvements.
- The exemplary leader actively participates in community leadership and shared problem-solving activities.
- The exemplary leader has had articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings on leadership.
- The exemplary leader has received recognition by their peers as a leader who gives respect to all people.

- The exemplary leader is a member in good standing in professional associations in their field.

Demographic Data

After review by the expert panel, 20 superintendents were identified as meeting the established criteria of the study. Those 20 superintendents were invited to participate in the study. Of the 20 superintendents who were invited, the first 12 superintendents who responded to the invitation were selected to participate in the research study. Eight of the superintendents self-identified as White or Caucasian, 4 as Hispanic or Latinx and 1 superintendent identified as African American or Black. Three of the superintendents were female and 9 were male.

All 12 of the superintendents indicated they have been in the field of education for over 13 years. Eight superintendents have been in their organization in their current role between 1-4 years, 3 for 5-8 years, and 2 have been in their district in their current role for 13 or more years. Ten of the superintendents interviewed indicated the highest degree they held was a doctoral degree (or equivalent) while two indicated a master's degree was the highest degree they had earned. Four of the superintendents were currently serving as the superintendent of an elementary school district serving student in grade TK-8. Six of the superintendents were in unified districts serving students in TK-12 grades and 2 were superintendents of union high school districts serving grades 9-12. The range of student enrollment in the districts of these 12 superintendents ranged from 2,418 to 15,815. The researcher chose to share the demographic information in narrative form in an effort to further protect the confidentiality of the superintendent participants.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Data contained in this chapter were collected through virtual, semi structured interviews using Zoom. Digital artifacts were also collected. The data are presented to explore and describe how exemplary superintendents perceive the practices of Sinek’s (2020) infinite mindset framework are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. The data from the interviews and artifacts were organized and coded to determine themes that emerged from the 12 superintendents. To allow for rich data to be collected, the interview questions were intentionally designed to afford the superintendents the opportunity to reflect upon and share their practices in an organic manner. In total there were 1,598 total coded entries from the 12 interviews and 50 unique artifacts. Table 1 illustrates the tabulation of all data coded for the research study.

Table 1

Tabulation of All Data Coded

Research Question and Variable	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
RQ 1: Just cause	12	31	257	94	351	21.9
RQ 2: Trusting teams	12	24	285	46	331	20.7
RQ 3: Worthy rival	12	11	177	30	207	13.0
RQ 4: Existential flexibility	12	40	219	61	280	17.5
RQ 5: Courage to lead	12	17	171	41	212	13.3
RQ 6: Supports and barriers	12	30	172	45	217	13.6

Note. There were a total of 50 unique artifacts gathered. The total number of artifacts coded is greater than 50 due to some artifacts supporting more than one question/theme.

The analysis of the data from the 12 interviews and artifacts are organized and presented individually by each research question.

Data for Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked, “How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of advance a just cause is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?” For the purposes of this study, just cause was defined as a vision of an idealized, aspirational future, something bigger than ourselves and the organization. It connects to and reflects the values, emotions, and a sense of purpose of the followers, motivating them to make sacrifices to achieve it (Carse, 1986; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Sinek, 2019; Mascareno et al., 2020). Fullan and Quinn (2016) state when schools and districts have a well-articulated and focused vision the entire organization can rally around, transformational change is possible. In order to transform their organizations, leaders must appeal to the self-efficacy of their team members (Donohoo; Dewitt, 2018).

Two interview questions were posed to obtain data on how exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *advance a just cause* is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. The two interview questions were asked of each of the 12 participating superintendents to gather data to answer Research Question 1. The first interview question sought to identify and describe how superintendents ensure priorities are connected to the organization’s vision and aspirations. The second interview question sought to identify and describe how the organization connected values and a sense of purpose to advance the organization’s just cause. The data were categorized into three larger themes for advancing a just cause based on the responses of the superintendents along with 257 interview frequencies and 94 artifact frequencies. Figure

3 provides a visual representation of the frequency of the coded entries for the three themes identified for advance a just cause: Mission, visions and values; strategic planning; and stakeholder engagement.

Figure 3

Frequency of coded entries for advance a just cause



After concluding the theming and coding the data for advance a just cause, three themes emerged from the data. Table 2 captures the overall coded data for advance a just cause disaggregated by the three themes of mission, vision, and values, strategic planning, and stakeholder engagement.

Table 2

Overall Frequency of Coded Entries for Advance a Just Cause

Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Strategic planning	11	26	109	35	144	41.4
Stakeholder engagement	12	18	87	23	110	31
Mission, vision and values	12	19	61	36	97	27

Strategic Planning. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the theme with the highest frequency under *advance a just cause* was strategic planning. The responses for strategic planning included 109 interview frequencies and 35 artifact frequencies, a total of 144, which accounted for 41% of the coded data for advance a just cause. The 144 frequencies represented 9% of the overall 1,598 frequencies coded by the researcher. Eleven of the twelve respondents, representing 92% of the superintendents, spoke to this theme.

The coded sub themes found within the larger theme of strategic planning included the use of accountability plans, a focus on data, curriculum, instruction, professional development and collaboration opportunities (see Table 3).

Table 3

Overarching Theme: Strategic Planning

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Use of accountability plans	10	7	65	12	77	53.4
Professional development and collaboration	9	9	24	11	35	24.3
A focus on data, curriculum, and instruction	7	10	20	12	32	22.2

When responding to the interview questions for research question 1, there were general references describing perspectives on the importance of strategic planning. These responses included goals, priorities and actions aligned to the district’s vision. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents related to the use of

accountability plans to move towards the realization of the organization's just cause.

Superintendent 10 described the way in which data is tied to the accountability plan and shared with the board of education in the following statement:

I share at least one board meeting a year. We shared it in a special study session in October, where I went through all of the academic metrics...so that they can see from a district wide perspective, and then individual schools. And then, in addition to that, I'll write an executive summary for all of the annual reports that were submitted to me, will reformat them, and then put them on the board agenda.

Superintendent 1 described the process by which the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) is used as a guiding document for conversations with all stakeholders to strategically plan the district priorities in the following statement:

We use that LCAP process with some degree of fidelity and gather input under the umbrella of the mission of the district of what we are out to achieve. We develop the specific activities and the priorities that we're going to place our efforts on in the district for that year. We have an LCAP schedule that throughout that development process gets back in front of the board and in front of the cabinet... to make sure everything is meeting those priorities that we had set against what it is we want to achieve our mission.

Superintendent 11 reiterated the importance of the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) being aligned with the district's vision in the following statement:

Building through our LCAP and our strategic plan, that vision and the mission and those strategic priorities begin driving the focus and intention on what LCAP

goals are? What are the metrics? What are the objectives that we're trying to achieve and ensure all of it is intentionally aligned back to those core principles.

Superintendent 2 discussed the importance of having open conversations when proposed initiatives are not aligned to the strategic plan in the following statement:

Whenever we're making any major decisions, we say, what goal does it fall under? If it doesn't fall under any goal we have discussion about it, and see how it can be part of a goal. There are sometimes, when it doesn't fall under the goal, and we still move forward with it, but 98% of all our priorities are connected to those 4 goals.

Superintendent 4 also described the importance of revisiting the strategic plan to ensure alignment with decisions being made in the following statement:

We ensure our LCAP is aligned with our mission and with our vision and is aligned with our priorities, and the same could be said for single site plans. What we want to do is frame every purchase, every program request, around our priorities....It's very easy to want to do something that's outside of a priority or outside the vision, and it's understandable why you'd want to do that. But I also think it's really important that you know your first filter, if not your only filter at times, is, does this align with our priorities. Does that align with our vision, and if it's not, then we have to have a different conversation about it.

Superintendent 5 discussed the importance of professional development and collaboration to support the work of the strategic plan in the following statement:

One of our district focus areas is exemplary educators. So we talk about that. But one thing is that we haven't had in this district a very clear definition of what great

teaching is. So we're working with the center for Ed Leadership at a University of Washington on implementing the 5 dimensions of teaching and learning.

Superintendent 6 explained how their organization operationalizes the strategic plan through collaboration and accountability in the following statement:

Based on this idea that I presented to them around defined autonomy like, let's give them the bumper rails right? And then within that, the sites do whatever they feel is necessary as long as they're aligned to the priorities and the goals.

Superintendent 9 made a similar statement with regard to collaboration, alignment and accountability in the following statement:

When you look from one to another principal at the same level, and you look at cabinet and you look at the board priorities in my evaluation, they are pretty similar. There isn't a lot of variance that it does allow for some autonomy in some individualization.

Each of the 8 superintendents quoted, reinforced the importance of being intentional to ensure the decisions made were in alignment with either the School Accountability Report Card (SARC), the Western Association of School and Colleges (WASC), the Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAP) or the Single Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA) plans. There was also consistency regarding the importance of providing clear direction while affording staff the latitude to make decisions that fit their particular situations as long as there was alignment to the vision. Artifacts gathered within the strategic planning theme included the Local Control and Accountability Plans and Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) summaries.

Stakeholder Engagement. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the theme with the second highest frequency under *advancing a just cause* was stakeholder engagement. All twelve superintendents, representing 100% of respondents, identified this theme. The responses for stakeholder engagement included 87 interview frequencies and 23 artifact frequencies, a total of 110, which accounted for 31% of the coded data for advance a just cause. The 110 frequencies represented 6.9% of the overall 1,598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme of stakeholder engagement included formal and informal interactions, communicating and connecting the vision and use of surveys (see Table 4).

Table 4

Overarching Theme: Stakeholder Engagement

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Formal and informal interactions	12	7	55	9	64	58.1
Communicating and connecting the vision	8	9	21	11	32	29.1
Use of surveys	4	2	11	3	14	12.7

When responding to the interview questions for research question 1, there were general references describing perspectives on the importance of meaningful stakeholder engagement. All 12 or 100% of superintendents spoke to the sub theme of formal and informal interactions. These responses included traditional meeting structures, informal interactions which occurred organically, as well as the utilization of surveys.

Superintendents mentioned the importance of using every opportunity to communicate

the vision. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents related to the importance of stakeholder engagement to move towards the realization of the organization's just cause.

Superintendent 5 described the importance of ensuring the vision cascades throughout the organization in the following statement:

Well, the biggest thing is now that we've established these things it's making sure that people know about them and understand them and buy into them. So we've obviously started with our leadership team because they're probably the most logical first step in terms of here is what the board has decided with our assistance, put in place and established, and then trying to unpack some of those things. And then from there we've taken that out to a broader audience. We've shared those things with our parents and our community members.

Superintendent 11 illustrated the importance of being present to witness how the district's expectations are being implemented throughout the organization in the following statement:

If we have values around empathy, and caring and nurturing, how do you see that evidence on a campus when you walk a campus, when you interact, actually when you're more of a fly on the wall not what I necessarily see when I walk on a campus, but when I observe how adults interact with other adults, how I see adults interact with scholars, and then how I see scholars interact with other scholars. I mean all of those things really share with me what type of culture, what type of environment there is.

Superintendent 3 discussed the importance of administering surveys to gather meaningful

feedback in the following statement:

Let's make sure that our stakeholders are engaged as well. What starts the process is surveying our populations. So those surveys go to parents, to our high school students and to our staff members about what they feel they would benefit them and improve our student academic achievement. It is about serving our folks and to make sure that we're looking at that data and based on those surveys and input that we build the initial LCAP plan before it gets adopted by the

Superintendent 7 also described the importance of gathering stakeholder feedback through the utilization of surveys in the following statement:

We have a staff survey through panorama that measures these different areas. The students went over it also. Staff takes it as well and so we're going to actually be going through that data soon. We do it twice a year.

Each of the 4 superintendents quoted reinforced the importance of having multiple ways to connect with their various stakeholders. They also reinforced the importance of continually reminding each stakeholder group of the vision of the district and the plan to achieve the vision. These communication and outreach strategies help support the implementation of the strategic plan. The artifacts gathered included Local Control and Accountability Plans, superintendent newsletters, and various communications sent out in both traditional formats and social media.

Mission, Vision, and Values. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the final theme under advancing a just cause was mission, vision, and values. The responses for mission, vision, and values included 61 interview frequencies and 36 artifact frequencies, a total of 97, which accounted for 27.6% of the coded data for

advancing a just cause. The 97 frequencies represented 6% of the overall 1598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme of mission, vision and values were governance team work and referencing and displaying the goals (see Table 5).

Table 5

Overarching Theme: Vision, Mission and Values

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Referencing and displaying the goals	12	9	32	21	53	54.7
Governance team work	6	10	29	15	44	45.3

When responding to the interview questions for research question 1, there were general references describing perspectives on the importance of clearly articulating the vision, mission, and goals of the district. These responses included the importance of the governance team being active participants in the process. All 12 or 100% of superintendents spoke to the sub theme of referencing and displaying the goals. Superintendents mentioned the importance of consistently referencing the goals and ensuring they are displayed throughout the organization as a reinforcement of their importance. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents related to the importance of clearly articulating the vision, mission, and goals of the district to move towards the realization of the organization’s just cause.

Superintendent 1 discussed the importance of a strong governance team in the following statement:

I think that starts at the top with our superintendent and our board. We are very clear on what the district's mission is and what it is we want to achieve for our district.

Superintendent 11 described the importance of ensuring the vision, mission and values are not simply rhetoric but meaningful parts of the organization's culture in the following statement:

I think the first thing is making sure that the vision and the priorities are not just words on the wall, but that we bring them to life. So we're very intentional about reading our mission and vision and priority statements at every single board meeting. It is memorialized in our on our board agendas. It is posted throughout our district office. We allude to it.

Superintendent 5 described the importance of the governance team modeling the value placed on the development and refinement of the district's vision, mission, and values in the following statement:

We kind of compared ours to some exemplars and had some really good discussions about what they wanted. Then we went through a full process actually through a board retreat to have them go through the process of revamping it. They created both the new vision and the new mission. Once we have that part completed, one of the things that I worked with them on was then identifying some really clear areas of focus, not necessarily specific goals, but areas of focus that we would try to align the work with.

Superintendent 8 also described the importance of the governance team engaging in the work of defining their goals in the following statement:

One of the things I started with was having the Board go through an activity of defining key terms in the Vision and Mission statements. So that way., the board was on the same page with each other and will get exactly what we are talking about when we cite our vision or mission. We created a one pager of our vision, mission, core values, and goals that has those common definitions. We have been rolling that out with our school site council to use as they develop their school plans.

Each of the 4 superintendents quoted reinforced the idea of the critical importance of the governance team to set the tone for ensuring the vision, mission and values are embedded components of the district. Artifacts gathered within the vision, mission, and values theme included published visions, missions, core values, and guiding principles from various districts. The artifacts also included superintendent messages and newsletters.

Data for Research Question 2

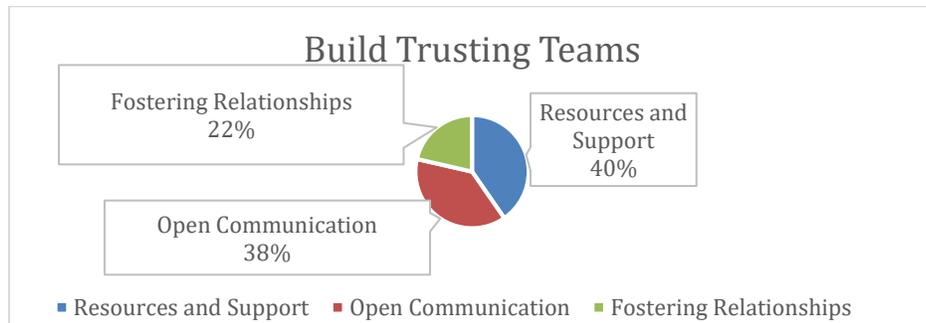
Research Question 2 asked, “How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *build trusting teams* is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?” For the purposes of this study, a trusting team is a unit where individuals work together to know each other at a deep level and care about and value one another, while creating a high performing team environment that includes active listening, vulnerability, integrity, and personal accountability in a psychologically safe space (Fehr, 2018; Lencioni, 2006; Sinek, 2019). Covey (2008) declared “the ability to establish, grow, extend, and restore trust with stakeholders-customers...is the key leadership competency of the new global economy” (p. 21). Creating an effective and productive collaborative team and culture requires a significant amount of time and

energy (Gray et al., 2016). Building trusting teams is one of the foundational elements necessary for creating the conditions to achieve extraordinary results.

Two interview questions were posed to obtain data on how exemplary leaders perceive the practice of build trusting teams is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. The two interview questions were asked of each of the 12 participating superintendents to gather data to answer Research Question 2. The first interview question sought to identify and describe how superintendents intentionally create the conditions to build trust within and amongst their various teams. The second interview question sought to identify and describe how the organization promotes a psychologically safe environment that fosters trust. The data were categorized into three larger themes for build trusting teams based on the responses of the superintendents along with 285 frequencies and 46 artifact frequencies. The three identified themes were resources and support, open communication and fostering relationships. Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the frequency of the coded entries for the three themes identified for build trusting teams: Resources and support; open communication; and fostering relationships. As previously noted, artifact frequency may exceed 50 as some artifacts supported more than one research question, theme or sub-theme.

Figure 4

Frequency of coded entries for building trusting teams.



After concluding the theming and coding for the data for build trusting teams, three themes emerged from the data. Table 6 captures the overall coded data for build trusting teams disaggregated by the three themes of resources and support, open communication, and fostering relationships.

Table 6

Overall Frequency of Coded Entries for Build Trusting Teams

Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Resources and support	12	12	115	16	131	39.5
Open communication	12	14	109	18	127	33.1
Fostering relationships	9	9	61	12	73	22.1

Resources and Support. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the theme with the highest frequency under build trusting teams was providing resources and support. All twelve superintendents, representing 100% of respondents, identified this theme. The responses for resources and support included 115 interview frequencies and 16 artifact frequencies, a total of 131, which accounted for 39.5% of the coded data for building trusting teams. The 131 frequencies represented 8.2% of the overall 1,598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme of resources and support included reflection and guidance, creating a sense of belonging, and professional development (see Table 7).

Table 7*Overarching Theme: Resources and Support*

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Reflection and guidance	7	2	52	2	54	41.2
Creating a sense of belonging	12	6	38	9	47	35.9
Professional development	7	4	25	5	30	22.9

When responding to the interview questions for research question 2, there were general references describing perspectives on the importance of providing the necessary resources and supports to build trusting teams. These responses included having dedicated time to collaborate with peers to reflect in practices, time to engage in professional development as well as the importance of creating a sense of belonging. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents related to the importance of providing the necessary resources and supports to move towards building trusting teams.

Superintendent 10 discussed the importance of having a robust professional development focus in the following statement:

And so, starting in probably the mid 2000's is when we started with that very robust summer professional learning system of bringing teachers together to revise their common assessments and look at teacher data and share best instructional practices. But what's frustrating for many people is that it is slow. It

takes time for teachers to work together because sometimes they just want to say, well, can't you just tell me what you want me to do? If I told you that then where's the buy-in on your part.

Superintendent 11

I think, from building a trustworthy environment it's honoring and valuing the individual strengths of people. So I think this is the best opportunity for me, as a leader, to eliminate any fear within the organization. I don't want people to be worried about doing their job. I don't want people worried about trying to serve kids. I don't want people worried about trying to build a better school community in a better city. I wanna create the environment, and a condition for people to feel like they can thrive. So I think it's a leadership component, and it's living and breathing that out every day.

Both superintendent reinforced the need to provide adequate time for team members to learn from one another. One superintendent also commented on the need to provide grace, space and support to people within the organization through empowerment. The artifacts gathered to provide further data on this theme were accountability plans.

Open Communication. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the theme with the second highest frequency under build trusting teams was open communication. All twelve superintendents, representing 100% of respondents, identified this theme. The responses for open communication included 109 interview frequencies and 18 artifact frequencies, a total of 127, which accounted for 38.4% of the coded data for advancing a just cause. The 127 frequencies represented 7.9% of the overall 1598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme

of open communication included accessibility, collaboration, and transparency (see Table 8).

Table 8

Overarching Theme: Open Communication

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Accessibility	7	1	47	1	48	37.8
Collaboration	12	6	34	8	42	33.1
Transparency	8	7	28	9	37	29.1

When responding to the interview questions for research question 2, there were general references describing perspectives on the importance of providing the necessary resources and supports to build trusting teams. These responses included the importance of the leaders being accessible as well as the value of collaboration and transparency. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents related to the importance of providing being accessible, collaborative, and transparent to move towards building trusting teams.

Superintendent 3 discussed the importance of being present and accessible to under the needs of the staff in the following statement:

The superintendent has to have an open door policy, the superintendent is visible, he or she is on campus frequently and every week if you're not stepping onto those campuses you have no idea what students, teachers, and administrators at the school sites are dealing with everyday, so you need to have a pulse for the schools and the district.

Superintendent 4 discussed the importance of collaboration as an effective support to

ensure alignment of the work in the following statement:

I think at every step we expect to have teams work together. My philosophy has always been, if there's not an agenda it's a party. I mean it could just go in all kinds of ways so we want to be strategic about how agendas are made collaboratively.

Superintendent 7 reinforced the importance of leaders having the necessary support to lead meaningful collaboration in the following statement:

We need to rely on our principals and leadership. We've really been focusing a lot on our PLCs. Teachers love PLC time, but is it done with fidelity? Are they going through the cycles of inquiry properly.

Superintendent 9 discussed the importance of providing individual support as needed to build trusting teams in the following statement:

We're all human. We are all going through some tough times, and sometimes we don't know what people are going through at home in their personal lives, and we expect them to come in and be 100%. They're not always going to be 100%. We have to be comfortable also asking for help, and being vulnerable and saying, I'm not having a good day today. I'm here, I'm showing up, but I'm struggling with this and for us to be able to support each other, help each other out.

Superintendent 4 talked about the need to ensure empathy is used to provide support to staff and show they are valued in the following statement:

I think it's addressing the issue in the room. Oftentimes you'll hear, the district doesn't listen to us. I always ask who's the district. Do you know who that person is? Then I follow that up with saying talk to me about that.

Superintendent 5 discussed frequent check-in as a needed on-going support in the following statement:

We've tried to do some little things here or there. Get together. Each of our directors, we have a secondary director and an elementary director, huddle up with their teams pretty frequently, just to do check-ins. The same frequent check-ins and frequent communication about what we're up to, what we're working on, what's working, that kind of thing and checking in with people, seeing what's going on in the campus observing, teaching, and learning, and just sharing and talking and hearing what people have to say has been, I think, an important step to that.

Superintendent 6 described the importance of being visible on campus to offer support to all stakeholders in the following statement:

I try to start my day every day at one of the school sites. So, before I even come to the DO, I go to one of the school sites to help. You know to check out how things are going. To welcome students. To check in with our principals. To check in with a couple of the new teachers. How are you doing? You have everything you need? So this form of communication is super helpful.

All 7 superintendents quoted expressed the need to ensure the appropriate time was spent with staff to determine the supports needed to build trusting teams and move ever closer to the organization's just cause. Artifacts gathered to describe this theme included links of district websites, professional development descriptions contained in the Local Control and Accountability Plans, and a variety of superintendent and district messages.

Fostering Relationships. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts,

the final theme under build trusting teams was fostering relationships. The responses for fostering relationships included 61 interview frequencies and 12 artifact frequencies, a total of 73 which accounted for 22.1% of the coded data for build trusting teams. The 73 frequencies represented 4.6% of the overall 1598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme of fostering relationships were finding time to connect and collaboration and teamwork (see Table 9).

Table 9

Overarching Theme: Fostering Relationships

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Finding time to connect	9	1	39	2	41	56.2
Collaboration and teamwork	9	8	22	10	32	43.8

When responding to the interview questions for research question 2, there were general references describing perspectives on the importance fostering relationships to build trusting teams. These responses included finding time to connect with team members in both professional and personal ways. Superintendents also commented on the need to create meaningful opportunities for team work and team building when teams come together to collaborate. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents related to the importance of providing the necessary time to connect and have authentic opportunities to engage in team work to move towards build trusting teams.

Superintendent 10 commented on the need to find time to connect with team members when fostering relationships in the following statement:

The most important thing is the relationship. But it all starts with the affirmation. I think that one of the structural things we do is a lot of building relationships and building trust by spending time with people. When administrators are focused on trying to do all of the contact tracing and testing, and you know, notification regarding COVID, building those relationships with staff and being in their classrooms, was what was lost.

Superintendent 1 discussed the need to connect with team members on a personal and human level in the following statement:

I go back to that relationship. So we narrow down to seeing people as people and giving them opportunities to be the best versions of themselves, and they typically rise to it. right.

Superintendent 11 also commented on the need to see the unique talents in people and build them up to foster relationships to build trusting teams in the following statement:

We're also a Gallup strength based leadership. Yeah, different. Now, how does that build? trust? Well, number one, if you care enough about a person to find out what they're good at and what they're naturally gifted and talented at? And then you're and then you honor that by then reflecting that back to them, saying, Hey, I know that these are your strings. I know these are talents you're inherently good at. You're going to build a more trustworthy environment. You're inherently going to build a deeper relationship in connection with people.

Superintendent 6 talked about the need to recognize people, their accomplishments, and

milestones in their lives to foster relationships and build trusting teams in the following statement:

Acknowledgements. We're in a small district. It's easier to get to know every teacher by name. You get to know and celebrate those milestones right.

Somebody's having a baby. Somebody just got married. Somebody just bought a home. Somebody had a passing in the family. Somebody had a divorce. All those things either get acknowledged and hey we're here for you or they get recognized and celebrated. I think that goes a long way right. That old saying about they are not gonna follow unless they know you care.

Participating superintendents generally stated the importance of getting to know people on a personal level. Having connections with people beyond work creates a sense of belonging and value to people. These personal gestures were seen as a basis to build trusting teams in their organizations. The limited artifacts to support this theme were found in the accountability plans from districts.

Data for Research Question 3

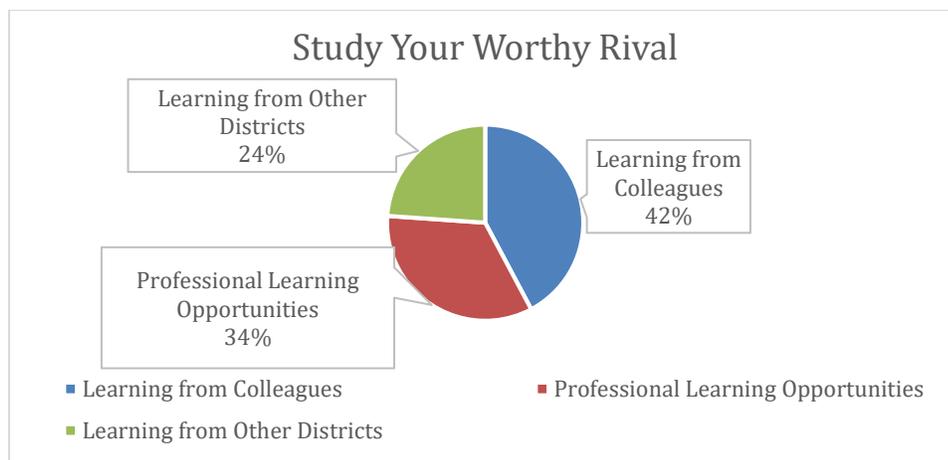
Research Question 3 asked, “How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of study your rival is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?” For the purposes of this study, worthy rivals were defined as successful industry leaders who perform as well as or better than a leader or their organization. Leaders or organizations are inspired to study these players and improve based on the strengths and abilities identified in them (The Millennial Executive, 2021; Sinek, 2019). Tichnor-Wagner (2019) noted educational institutions should embrace the idea of learning from their rivals so the product they are providing to their students,

parents, and communities is meaningful if they want to remain successful and competitive.

Two interview questions were posed to obtain data on how exemplary leaders perceive the practice of study your worthy rival is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. The two interview questions were asked of each of the 12 participating superintendents to gather data to answer Research Question 3. The first interview question sought to identify and describe how superintendents learn from other successful leaders or organizations. The second interview question sought to identify and describe how people within an organization learn from successful people who hold the same or similar positions. The data were categorized into three larger themes for study your worthy rival based on the responses of the superintendents along with 177 interview frequencies and 30 artifact frequencies for a total of 207 total frequencies. Figure 5 provides a visual representation of the frequency of the coded entries for the three themes identified for study your worthy rival: Learning from colleagues; professional learning opportunities; and learning from other districts.

Figure 5

Frequency of coded entries for study your worthy rival.



After concluding the theming and coding for *study your rival*, three themes emerged from the data. Table 10 captures the overall coded data for study your rival disaggregated by the three themes of learning from colleagues, professional learning opportunities, and learning from other districts.

Table 10

Overall Frequency of Coded Entries for Study Your Worthy Rival

Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Learning from colleagues	9	4	73	11	84	41.4
Professional learning opportunities	10	9	61	11	72	34.2
Learning from other districts	8	4	43	8	51	24.3

Learning from Colleagues. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the theme with the highest frequency under study your worthy rival was learning from colleagues. The responses for learning from colleagues included 73 interview frequencies and 11 artifact frequencies, a total of 84, which accounted for 40.1% of the coded data for study your worthy rival. The 84 frequencies represented 5.3% of the overall 1,598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme of learning from colleagues included job alike opportunities, coaching, and content specific opportunities. (see Table 11).

Table 11*Overarching Theme: Learning from Colleagues*

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Job alike opportunities	9	3	43	3	46	54.8
Content specific opportunities	9	4	16	4	20	23.8
Coaching	6	4	14	4	18	21.4

When responding to the interview questions for research question 3, there were general references describing perspectives on the importance of learning from colleagues as a means to learn from your worthy rival. These responses included taking advantage of opportunities to collaborate with job alike colleagues. Superintendents also commented on the need to create meaningful opportunities for coaching in both content specific pedagogy as well as instructional delivery. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents related to the importance of learning from colleagues. Superintendent 1 described the collaboration structure used to provide meaningful time to their grade level teams to learn from one another in the following statement:

So we've got a schedule in the elementary that every grade level team gets a grade level collaboration period at least once a week. They get 50 min a week for collaboration to be together during the school day. This is on top of their planning. So that collaboration is that opportunity to learn from one another.

Superintendent 3 talked about the need to have individual coaching opportunities

available for colleagues to learn from peers in a non-threatening manner in the following statement:

I've heard many times that our own people can do this job of supporting instruction and development of curriculum and effective teaching strategies. So we would provide those opportunities to our own folks and they're gonna actually have that relationship with that teacher that's struggling. Instead of having someone come in and tell us what we're doing wrong and have a program that's already kind of a cookie cut program that's not going to work for us.

Superintendent 5 discussed the need to have multiple opportunities for staff to learn from one another in the following statement:

We've had some professional development days that we've used for some site collaboration, some site conversation, and site led professional development. This year we reorganized that so we have 4 total days and we've kind of rearranged how they fall. So 2 of them now are at the very beginning of the year, and 2 of them now are at the very beginning of the second semester, and we did that intentionally. In the past we've had one of those days focused on tech, which has been kind of like our mini version of CUE, which has been very powerful. So we're excited to continue some of those things this year. We've also used our folks to share best practices around instruction.

Each of the 3 superintendents reinforced the need to have their teams engaged in on-going conversations and professional development opportunities to support and learn from one another. These strategies were identified as key components of implementing a continuous improvement cycle. The artifacts used to gather additional data were in the

form of accountability plans which listed key activities and initiatives to support continual growth.

Professional Learning Opportunities. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the theme with the second highest frequency under study your worthy rival was professional learning opportunities. The responses for professional learning opportunities included 61 interview frequencies and 11 artifact frequencies, a total of 72, which accounted for 34.8% of the coded data for study your worthy rival. The 72 frequencies represented 4.5% of the overall 1598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme of professional learning opportunities were belonging to associations, attending conferences, building internal capacity, and working with consultants (see Table 12).

Table 12

Overarching Theme: Professional Learning Opportunities

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Belonging to associations	9	0	25	0	25	34.7
Build internal capacity	8	9	12	11	23	31.9
Attending conferences	6	0	12	0	12	16.7
Working with consultants	10	0	12	0	12	16.7

When responding to the interview questions for research question 3, there were general references describing perspectives on the importance of engaging in on-going professional learning opportunities. Superintendents referenced the importance of

belonging to professional organizations, attending conferences, working with consultants, and building internal capacity to continually improve practices in the district. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents related to the importance of districts providing professional learning opportunities to support continuous improvement.

Superintendent 3 discussed the ways in which their organization builds internal capacity so they do not have to enter into contracts with consultants in the following statement:

I personally feel that in this school district we've invested in a good program for developing leaders, not only school leaders, but also instructional leaders so that we do not have to go out every year and invest in consultants.

Superintendent 5 commented on the importance of joining professional associations to improve practice in the following statement:

We can learn a lot from the unique and innovative public school models, but also charter school models to change the way we run things.

Superintendent 9 discussed the importance of the coaching model as a means to support continual growth in the organization in the following statement:

I really encourage our directors and principals and up to have a coach to be able to learn from someone else that's not their supervisor. So with cabinet everybody got a coach for more than one year from an outside consultant as another way that they can learn from other people who've had similar roles.

Each of the 3 superintendents quoted discussed the importance of creating an atmosphere of being open and receptive to learning from others in the field. They generally spoke of professional learning from the context of reflection and collaboration. The artifacts used

to provide additional data on professional learning opportunities came from the accountability plans gathered from districts.

Learning from Other Districts. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the final theme under study your worthy rival was learning from other districts. The responses for learning from other districts included 43 interview frequencies and 8 artifact frequencies, a total of 51, which accounted for 24.6% of the coded data for study your worthy rival. The 51 frequencies represented 3.2% of the overall 1598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme of learning from other districts were researching other districts, visiting other districts, collaborating with other districts, and being vulnerable to set the stage (see Table 13).

Table 13

Overarching Theme: Learning from Other Districts

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Collaborating with other districts	8	4	10	7	17	33.3
Researching other districts	7	1	12	1	13	25.5
Visiting other districts	5	0	12	0	12	23.5
Being vulnerable to set the stage	4	0	9	0	9	17.7

When responding to the interview questions for research question 3, there were general references describing perspectives on the importance of learning from other districts as a means to learn from your worthy rival. These responses included reaching out to districts

to learn from their experiences, formally collaborating with other districts around programs, and visiting districts to see programs in action. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents related to the importance of learning from other districts to continually improve.

Superintendent 10 discussed the importance of modeling the openness to learn by visiting a district to see powerful practices in action in the following statement:

The best example is way back when we went to Stevenson High. They were doing some really cool things regarding common assessments and building, subject like groups, link crew, and some of those strategies for transitioning kids into high school.

Superintendent 1 commented the importance of researching and learning from other districts in order to inform their internal practices in the following statement:

When we see these examples, when we see these best practices, when we see these vignettes, we want to bring those in and use them. We ask why was this group, why was this organization, why was this school successful? What can we learn from that? Are these things that we could easily implement? Are these things that we could create? And innovate within to do something different than what we're already doing. Because we see these other great models. This is a place and a space that looks, feels and sounds like us right. These look like our kids. This looks like our community and here's a roadmap for how they were successful.

Superintendent 6 talked about the need to be empathetic and understand the emotions change can elicit and respond to the vulnerability of seeking support in the following statement:

We needed to shed light on some of the things that just weren't making sense like, why are we doing that? It doesn't make sense that's not a best practice. We thought that in many ways we were like trendsetters, because the kids actually perform very well, it wasn't because of us it was in spite of us. I think that's one recognizing like hey what we're doing is not necessarily the best thing. It takes a little bit of courage or a little bit of humbling to be able to say, okay, now, teach me. I wanna learn from you right and I think that that's been again tough, because for the longest time our district has actually excelled, despite the demographic trends which typically don't excel and so that has helped. We still have some folks who think like, hey, we're still rocking it, so we don't need to change anything and we're working on those.

Each of these three superintendents affirmed the importance of finding new and creative ways to learn from others. These superintendents took varied paths to bring new information and experiences to their teams based on the identified needs. The artifacts gathered around collaborating with other districts came from accountability plans.

Data for Research Question 4

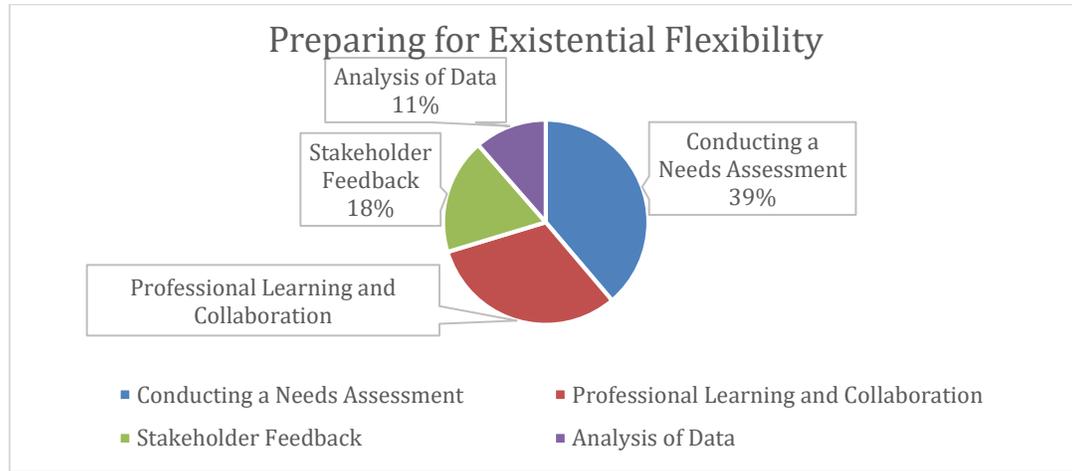
Research Question 4 asked, “How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of preparing for existential flexibility is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?” For the purposes of this study, existential flexibility was defined as a leader’s ability to anticipate changing conditions and initiate a

potentially risky strategic disruption to set the organization on a new path necessary to achieve the idealized future (Dhiman, 2011; Sinek, 2019; see also Avolio, 2005; Goleman, 1995; Shankman et al., in press as cited in Owen, 2015). Putting the organization in the position to be existentially flexible requires attention to be paid to individuals, the team and the organization as a whole (Boylan & Turner, 2017; Goncalves & Bergquist, 2022). This also includes the need to address the emotional side of leadership (Avolio, 2005; Goleman, 1995; Shankman, Allen & Haber-Curran, in press, as cited in Owen, 2015).

Two interview questions were posed to obtain data on how exemplary leaders perceive the practice of preparing for existential flexibility is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. The two interview questions were asked of each of the 12 participating superintendents to gather data to answer Research Question 4. The first interview question sought to identify and describe how superintendents identify new opportunities to achieve the organization's vision. The second interview question sought to identify and describe how the organization ensured the path it was following was aligned to achieving the vision. The data were categorized into three larger themes for preparing for existential flexibility based on the responses of the superintendents along with 219 interview frequencies and 61 artifact frequencies. As previously noted, artifact frequency may exceed 50 as some artifacts supported more than one research question, theme or sub-theme. Figure 6 provides a visual representation of the frequency of the coded entries for the four identified themes for preparing for existential flexibility: Conducting needs assessment; professional learning and collaboration; stakeholder feedback; and analysis of data.

Figure 6

Frequency of coded entries for preparing for existential flexibility



After concluding the theming and coding for preparing for existential flexibility, four themes emerged from the data. Table 14 captures the overall coded data for preparing for existential flexibility disaggregated by the four themes of conducting a needs assessment, professional learning and collaboration, stakeholder feedback, and analysis of data.

Table 14

Overall Frequency of Coded Entries for Preparing for Existential Flexibility.

Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Conducting a needs assessment	12	12	85	14	99	35.4
Professional learning and collaboration	9	5	69	14	83	29.6
Stakeholder feedback	12	11	40	20	60	21.4
Utilization of feedback	6	12	25	13	38	13.6

Conducting a Needs Assessment. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the theme with the highest frequency preparing for existential flexibility was conducting a needs assessment. The responses for conducting a needs assessment included 85 interview frequencies and 14 artifact frequencies, a total of 99, which accounted for 35.4% of the coded data for preparing for existential flexibility. The 99 frequencies represented 6.2% of the overall 1598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme of conducting a needs assessment included identification and assessment of needs and the ability to adapt and pivot (see Table 15).

Table 15

Overarching Theme: Conducting a Needs Assessment

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Identification and assessment of needs	12	12	48	12	60	60.6
Ability to adapt and pivot	12	2	37	2	39	39.4

When responding to the interview questions for research question 4, all 12 or 100% of superintendents spoke to the sub theme of the importance of conducting a needs assessment to be able to respond to changing conditions. These responses included looking at current conditions through a new lens and being open to new possibilities despite past practice. The superintendents also commented on the need to effectively communicate the potential outcomes of the intended decisions. The following statements

are specific accounts from superintendents related to the importance of conducting a needs assessment to adapt to changing conditions and preparing for existential flexibility. Superintendent 1 described the importance of identifying needs, allocating resources but ultimately making the decision which is in the best interest of students in the following statement:

We really say we want equity, we want access. We want inclusion for everyone right. Lot of people look at that only as ethnicity. But it's ability and gender and of it. We've had for decades an educational structure that put kids into special day classes and removed them from their gen ed class. In 2019-2020 we said we can no longer have all of those SDC classes. Our kids have to go back into a general education class, and we have to figure out how we're going to get the supports to them. So we trained teachers on what to expect. We hired a little more staff, and then we ripped the band aid. We had a lot of Pd. kids out of their class.

Superintendent 11 discussed the importance of having difficult conversations with influential stakeholders in response to identified needs and a response which is a departure from past practice in the following statement:

I was just talking to one of my board members that we have been drifting along as a district. There was this kind of willingness to continue to keep things status quo, and continue to limp along in hopes that the state might fix something. The state might change funding, etc. You know none of those things were gonna happen right. The State wasn't gonna give us more money. It was more expensive to live in this area, and people don't aren't having children at the same clip. So we finally

had to boldly declare if we can continue on this path we're gonna slowly die a death of 1,000 cuts.

Superintendent 3 talked about the need to align decisions to the overall plan and not give in to pressures which are not based on needs assessments in the following statement:

So we try to align whether these initiatives really fit the school district's mission and vision, right? So everybody can come up with a good idea, but if it doesn't fit into our different mission vision, or goals, then we probably should not entertain that. It could be created, and it could be dynamic, but that's something that probably belongs somewhere else and we want to be careful about that, because then we open up a can of worms about bringing too many initiatives onto campuses. It's like trying to do every program at every high school. There are not enough resources. There is not enough personnel.

Each of the 3 superintendents reinforced the importance of conducting a needs assessment to determine the response needed to further the vision of the district. They also maintained the need to have difficult conversations in the face of opposition, basing decisions on data and need rather than opinion. The artifacts used to provide additional data were accountability plans and superintendent messages to the community.

Professional Learning and Collaboration. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the theme with the second highest frequency under preparing for existential flexibility was professional learning and collaboration. The responses for professional learning and collaboration included 69 interview frequencies and 14 artifact frequencies, a total of 83, which accounted for 29.6% of the coded data for preparing for existential flexibility. The 83 frequencies represented 5.2% of the overall 1598

frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme of professional learning and collaboration included staying connected, internal professional learning, and providing intentional support (see Table 16).

Table 16

Overarching Theme: Professional Learning and Collaboration

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Providing intentional support	7	5	25	5	30	36
Staying connected	7	0	29	0	29	35
Internal professional learning	8	4	15	9	24	39

When responding to the interview questions for research question 4, there were general references describing perspectives on the importance of providing professional learning opportunities and collaboration to prepare for existential flexibility. These responses included staying connected to one another to understand the needs of the district.

Superintendents also commented on the need to provide internal professional learning opportunities and intentional and differentiated support. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents related to the importance of providing professional learning opportunities and collaboration to prepare for existential flexibility. Superintendent 1 described the need to be intentional in the support provided to members of the team in the following statement:

So I think a lot you have again have to be intentional. You have to be. You have to read. You have to be part of professional organizations. You have to allow your

staff to be part of professional organizations and challenge them to do the same thing. Then be open to bringing in opportunities. Send people to conferences. Superintendent 6 described the importance of offering professional learning opportunities to increase the internal capacity of the team in the following statement:

So we revamped the MTSS process. People have a better understanding of what MTSS is. We are working on developing what is that rigor that is a guaranteed and viable curriculum for all. And then what are going to be the supports. One of the things that I did describe to the team is, we were in a state of harmful harmony. People didn't want to rock the boat. They just kind of went along to get along, and even though they knew what a lot of people were doing was wrong, they Didn't want to see it because it would be disruptive, and it would make people uncomfortable.

The superintendents identified the need to provide supports based on circumstances. They assessed the situation and found creative ways to provide differentiated support. The artifacts used to provide additional data were from the accountability plans of the districts.

Stakeholder Feedback. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the third theme under preparing for existential flexibility was stakeholder feedback. The responses for stakeholder feedback included 40 interview frequencies and 20 artifact frequencies, a total of 60, which accounted for 21.4% of the coded data for preparing for existential flexibility. The 60 frequencies represented 3.8% of the overall 1598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme of stakeholder feedback were staff feedback, leadership feedback, and community

feedback (see Table 17).

Table 17

Overarching Theme: Stakeholder Feedback

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Staff feedback	7	3	22	3	25	41.7
Community feedback	3	11	6	14	20	33.3
Leadership feedback	6	3	12	3	15	25

When responding to the interview questions for research question 4, there were general references describing perspectives on the listening to stakeholder feedback when preparing for existential flexibility. These responses included gathering staff feedback, feedback from leaders within the district, and gathering community feedback. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents related to the importance of gathering stakeholder feedback to prepare for existential flexibility.

Superintendent 2 discussed the importance of listening to feedback to determine if the current direction is worth sustaining in the following statement:

I think back to how we received the feedback from teachers, the really innovative teachers in our district and how they were just not happy with the scriptedness of direct instruction. With the formality of direct instruction, the teachers who needed to move away from workbooks and pamphlets and stuff loved it, but the majority of our innovative teachers just did not. They said we were stifling their creativity. We heard that loud and clear and got rid of it.

Superintendent 8 talked about the need to take into consideration the mindset of people providing feedback in the following statement:

Unfortunately you do have to consider you know people's mindset and the perception of whether people are going to receive what you're giving them. If they can't receive it then you have to change course

Superintendent 9 discussed the need to listen to feedback from the board while trying to manage expectations in the following statement:

You know this is one where I think we struggle. I know my board has a lot of ideas and you know they're coming from different sectors and not necessarily with an educational background. So they have questions. They have ideas. They hear things. They talk to people. So they do a pretty good job of pushing us to think differently and try to be innovative.

Superintendent 10 discussed the importance of carefully weighing the feedback given when making decisions about future plans in the following statement:

Sometimes people say, oh, I think we should bring in this presenter. I think that's a solution in search of a problem and that is not our goal. You're always fighting against someone who says oh, well, I think we should bring in so and so from another place.

These 4 superintendents reinforced the importance of considering the feedback of all stakeholders when preparing for existential flexibility. They also reinforced the need to weigh the context as well as the content of the feedback when using the anecdotal information to make decisions. The artifacts used to gather the additional data for this theme were accountability plans, meeting notices, newsletters and marketing tools.

Utilization of Data. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the final theme under preparing for existential flexibility was utilization of data. The responses for utilization of data included 25 interview frequencies and 13 artifact frequencies, a total of 38, which accounted for 13.6% of the coded data for advancing a just cause. The 38 frequencies represented 2.4% of the overall 1598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme of utilization of data were district data and anecdotal data (see Table 18).

Table 18

Overarching Theme: Utilization of Data

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
District data	6	12	16	13	29	76.3
Anecdotal data	6	0	9	0	9	23.7

When responding to the interview questions for research question 4, there were general references describing perspectives on the need to effectively use data to prepare for existential flexibility. These responses included the need to utilize local district data as well as anecdotal data from the entire organization. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents related to the importance of utilizing data to prepare for existential flexibility.

Superintendent 3 commented on the need to constantly revisit data to ensure the district is moving towards its goals in the following statement:

But ultimately, if we're not meeting our district goal or our school goals, then we need to address those concerns. At the same time as well, ultimately, gonna drive

those decisions is data, looking at standardized assessments looking at outcomes, whether it's by department benchmark assessments, whether it's D and F rates, whether it's maybe one particular school that isn't being successful, we have to look at data to say this is the reason why we're moving in different directions. I think no one can argue against data.

Superintendent 5 discussed the importance of utilizing data to determine if a program or initiative has value in the following statement:

The biggest thing is looking at what the results were telling us, you. That's the big part. It's great when you have all these things and you're doing all this stuff, but if you don't have a whole lot of data behind it to justify if it is making it a real difference or not, then then why are you doing it? And so that's been the lens that we've used. We've tried to address that particular question, and then the other part that goes with it is, all right so if we don't like the data we're getting or we don't like some of the outcomes we're seeing, is it a matter of implementation or something else? Is it a matter of lack of buy-in?

Superintendent 6 commented on the need to use data in a proactive rather than reactionary manner in the following statement:

Okay, this is what we're struggling with, let's target that we were identified for significant disproportionality for Hispanic students being designated for specific learning disabilities. So that's now become an opportunity to improve on, so we're still in very much a reactionary mode. Eventually I want to get to them over to where we're kind of proactive, and we're being able to identify, ok, this may be an

issue. Let's tackle it but the good thing is, when we do present the data, people don't dwell on it.

Each of these 3 superintendents reinforced the idea of carefully analyzing the data and creating a compelling narrative to explain the data and the steps being taken to address the data. The artifacts used in supporting this theme came from district accountability plans.

Data for Research Question 5

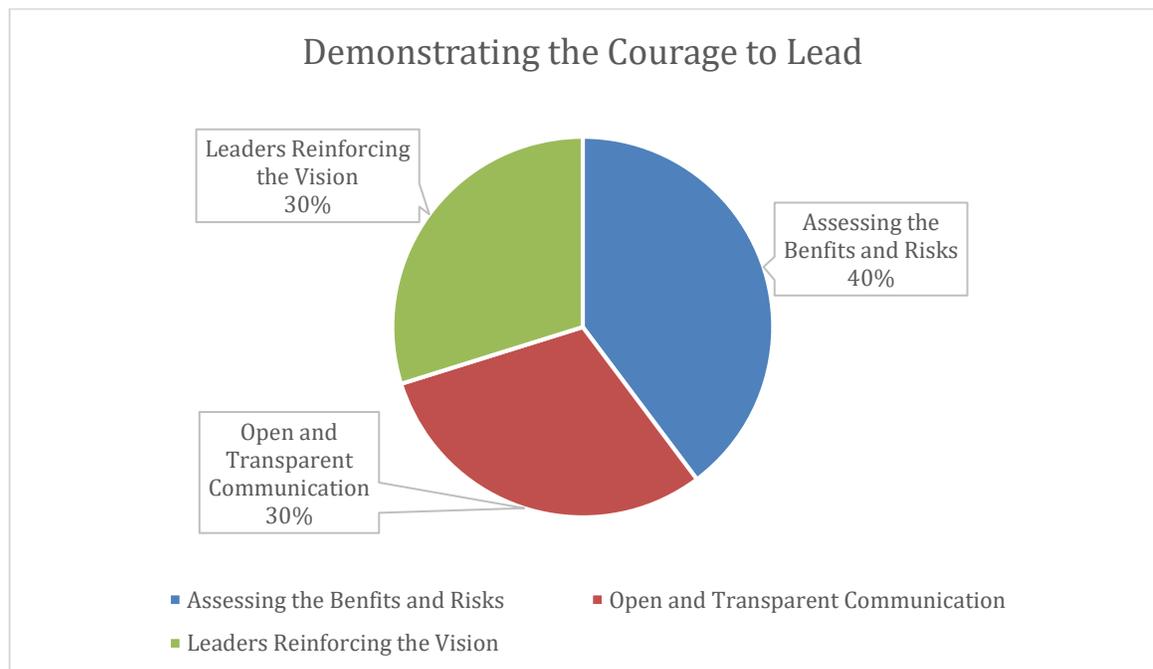
Research Question 5 asked, “How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of demonstrating the courage to lead is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?” For the purposes of this study, demonstrating the courage to lead was defined as the ability to stand up to pressures or norms that do not align with organizational or individual goals and values and is characterized by the willingness to take risks for sustained success in an unknown and idealized future (Lassiter, 2021; Sinek, 2019). Shaw and Funk (2013) noted many leaders and organizations have a vision, but these leaders are constantly battling internal and external pressures which draw their energies away from these stated goals. Superintendents must have an unwavering resolve to stay true to the just cause despite these pressures (Collins, 2011, as cited in Sotero, 2009).

Two interview questions were posed to obtain data on how exemplary leaders perceive the practice of demonstrating the courage to lead is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. The two interview questions were asked of each of the 12 superintendents to gather data to answer research question 5. The first interview question sought to identify and describe how

superintendents ensure the organization stays aligned with its values and goals when pressured to take a different path. The second interview question sought to identify and describe how the organization models the willingness to take risks. The data were categorized into three larger themes for demonstrating the courage to lead based on the responses of the superintendents along with 171 interview frequencies and 41 artifact frequencies. Figure 7 provides a visual representation of the frequency of the coded entries for the three themes identified for demonstrating the courage to lead: Assessing the benefits and risks; open and transparent communication; and leaders reinforcing the vision.

Figure 7

Frequency of coded entries for demonstrating the courage to lead



After concluding theming and coding the data for demonstrating the courage to lead, three themes emerged from the data. Table 19 captures the overall coded data for demonstrating the courage to lead disaggregated by the three themes of assessing the

benefits and risks, open and transparent communication, and leaders reinforcing the vision.

Table 19

Overall Frequency of Coded Entries for Demonstrating the Courage to Lead

Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Assessing the benefits and risks	9	8	68	22	90	42.5
Leaders reinforcing the mission and vision	8	6	51	10	61	28.8
Open and transparent communication	8	5	52	9	61	28.8

Assessing the Benefits and Risks. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the theme with the highest frequency under advancing a just cause was strategic planning. The responses for strategic planning included 68 interview frequencies and 22 artifact frequencies, a total of 90, which accounted for 42.5% of the coded data for demonstrating the courage to lead. The 90 frequencies represented 5.6% of the overall 1598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme of assessing benefits and risks included assessing needs, identifying potential outcomes, and predicting possible benefits (see Table 20).

Table 20*Overarching Theme: Assessing the Benefits and Risks*

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Identifying potential outcomes	9	4	31	4	35	38.8
Assessing needs	7	8	20	12	32	35.6
Predicting possible benefits	7	4	17	6	23	25.6

When responding to the interview questions for research question 5, there were general references describing perspectives on the need to accurately assess needs when leaders are demonstrating the courage to lead. These responses included the importance of assessing the needs of the organization, identifying potential outcomes and predicting possible benefits of a particular decision. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents related to the importance of assessing the benefits and risks when demonstrating the courage to lead.

Superintendent 3 discussed the importance to accurately assessing the current needs versus containing blindly with past practice in the following statement:

Why should we continue allowing our kid exploring SAT test preparations, if SAT probably will be going away soon. How are we informing our parents? This is what SAT means today versus what SAT meant to our students 10 years ago. And I've had to have the dialogue with our principals and with our parents.

Superintendent 4 discussed the potential pushback associated with change efforts even

when the data supports the need for change in the following statement:

I would say taking risks is critical. I think that we need to put ourselves in a position to be adaptable, to be flexible and take risks. Taking risks in education is different than risk in other places, because risk in education usually involves change. It usually involves programs changing, curriculums changing, and expectations of how collaboration happens with staff and students. It's hard because a lot of these things in education move at a turtle's pace and so changing something that's existed for 10 years, 12 years, 20 years, it's a risk.

Superintendent 5 discussed the importance of listening to opinions and finding a way to support new ideas in a risk-free environment in the following statement:

So many people have ideas...I'll do this and try that. Do this and try that. I think sometimes being able to go back and say you know that could be great, and it could be helpful, but how does that fit in with the broader puzzle? And they might have a great argument, and then it becomes well, at the same time, we can't take on too much and we can't spread ourselves too thin. I think having those things established now, and understood and referred to as the way that we navigate that whether it's you know we're gonna take a procedure or a for long standing practice, and just not do anything. We're gonna try something different. Give it a shot because in the end I've told them you can always go back.

Superintendent 6 discussed the need to be open, transparent and reflective when leading in the following statement:

I mean we screwed up a lot, and we owned it, and I stood up and said, hey, you know, remember when we did this it didn't work. We had to admit that we made a

mistake. And it was things like that that I think helped, because now people are more open to taking risks because they know that they're not gonna be necessarily thrown under the bus because they made a mistake.

Superintendent 11 described the importance of listening to feedback and guidance and having the courage to take risks even when the outcome is uncertain in the following statement:

Our decision to pursue school bond in the middle of a pandemic was a risk. We took that to the voters in November of 2020 and I will admit I had shaky knees. I wanted to walk it back... Somehow they convinced me to just stay the course and do an opinion poll on how the community sees the district right now. It came back overwhelming that the community thought we were doing a good job...

The 5 superintendents reinforced the importance having using a variety of information and data to guide their decisions. They also reinforced even with strong data and information at your disposal, climate, context and perceptions are as important and at times even more important when making courageous decisions.

Leaders Reinforcing the Mission and Vision. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the theme with the second highest frequency under demonstrating the courage to lead was leaders reinforcing the mission and vision. The responses for leaders reinforcing the mission and vision included 51 interview frequencies and 10 artifact frequencies, a total of 61, which accounted for 28.8% of the coded data for advancing a just cause. The 61 frequencies represented 3.8% of the overall 1598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme of communication included alignment, leadership, and putting students first (see Table

21).

Table 21

Overarching Theme: Leaders Reinforcing the Mission and Vision

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Alignment	8	3	24	3	27	44.3
Leadership	5	2	18	2	20	32.8
Putting students first	3	5	9	5	14	23

When responding to the interview questions for research question 5, there were general references describing perspectives on the importance of leaders constantly messaging and reinforcing the mission and vision of the district. These responses included the need for alignment to the mission and vision. Superintendents also stated the importance of strong leadership and putting students at the forefront of decisions being made. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents related to the importance of leaders reinforcing the district’s mission and vision when demonstrating the courage to lead. Superintendent 4 discussed the benefit of having the governance team aligned to the work in the following statement:

Our board approved our priorities. They approved our vision and our assurances to the community. We have 5 assurances priorities along with our vision and our purpose. And so I think having that governing document and that governing approach allows us to really just lean on it.

Superintendent 5 talked about the importance of referring back to the district vision when confronted with pressure in the following statement:

You've identified values and it's great that you have identified focus areas, or you have a vision, but it's a whole other thing when I crisis comes and political winds blow a certain way and kind of takes you off track. I think the important thing is going back to those and referring to those. And then, when you do start to get some of that pressure and you go back and ask how does this really fit in in the spirit of being student centered. How does this really make us more transparent? How does this build trust?

Superintendent 6 commented on the importance of reframing conversations around what is in the best interest of students in the following statement:

It could be just people have different interests at times that maybe isn't always with the lens of what's best for students. So bringing it back to this is our vision, here's our mission, and how we're going to do it.

Superintendent 11 talked about the importance of strong leadership at every level of the organization in the following statement:

It's leadership. I mean I think it's the superintendent. It has to start from the top down. I think it's board president leadership. Then it's board leadership. It's superintendent leadership, cabinet leadership, association leadership, actually, let me not forget that school site principal leadership which is critically important. Sometimes I have to remind our principals just how influential they really are. I said, People know you more than they know me, because I see you more often.

Superintendent 3 commented on the importance of effectively communicating the mission and vision in the following statement:

Personally, I feel that the more you communicate to our school community, the more you're going to allow people to better understand what's your mission and what's your vision. We feel that will ultimately continue to lead us in the right path.

Each of the five superintendents quoted reinforced the notion of effectively communicating and referring to the mission and vision of the district to ensure decisions are framed in a way to constantly move towards the realization of the vision. The artifacts used to provide additional data on this theme were accountability plans, superintendent messages and vision and mission statements.

Open and Transparent Communication. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the final theme under demonstrating the courage to lead was open and transparent communication. The responses for open and transparent communication included 52 interview frequencies and 9 artifact frequencies, a total of 61, which accounted for 28.8% of the coded data for demonstrating the courage to lead. The 61 frequencies represented 3.8% of the overall 1598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme of open and transparent communication were internal feedback, external feedback and direct communication (see Table 22).

Table 22

Overarching Theme: Open and Transparent Communication

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Direct communication	8	3	34	3	37	60.1
External feedback	5	3	11	3	14	23.5
Internal feedback	5	3	7	3	10	16.4

When responding to the interview questions for research question 5, there were general references describing perspectives on the need to openly and transparently communicate with all stakeholders. These responses included the importance of providing direct communication to stakeholders as well as listening to and responding as appropriate to both internal and external feedback. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents related to the importance of having open and transparent communication when demonstrating the courage to lead.

Superintendent 2 described the need to communicate to control the narrative in the following statement:

Communicate, communicate, communicate. If we are getting pressure to go in a different direction or we are hearing from a group, my job is to communicate with the board right away. I have to be very explicit as to why we don't want to go in that direction.

Superintendent 3 talked about the importance of having on-going structures in place to provide and receive information in the following statement:

So we hold ourselves accountable by making sure that we are communicating to our stakeholders. Every day there are opportunities to support, to learn, to have a dialogue with them. We have public meetings that are engaging because we invite schools to share their instructional plans.

Superintendent 5 talked about the need to be completely transparent with the board to ensure everyone is on the same page in the following statement:

That's something we talk about a lot is like okay you guys say you want change and you're interested in something different. You want a new taste. Well we can

do that but when your phone starts ringing and the lady you know at the supermarket gives you grief about something that's a little new or feels different, you have to be ready for them. We're blessed here because they are.

Superintendent 8 talked about the need to make sure everyone is aware of the path and well informed of what could lay ahead in the following statement:

I also believe you go slow to go forward, so you know if it's a risk you make sure you have as many people, at least with as much information as you can give them.

These superintendents reinforced the need to have open and on-going conversations and outreach to all of their stakeholders. They also reinforced the importance of being proactive in communicating issues both real and potential. The artifacts used to provide additional data on this theme included accountability plans, superintendent messages and meeting notices.

Data for Research Question 6

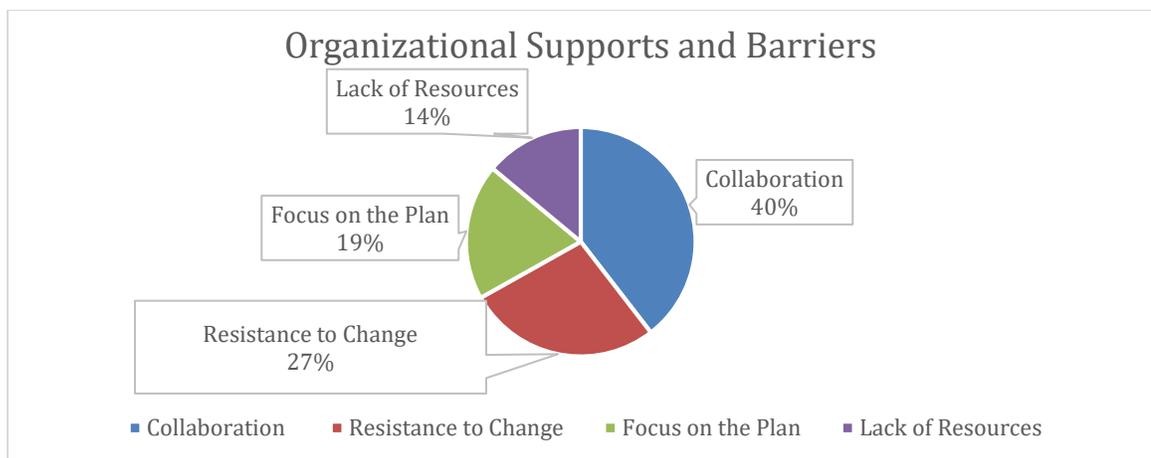
Research Question 6 asked, “What are the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset?” For the purposes of this study, an infinite mindset is a leader’s desire to inspire their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits. A leader with an infinite mindset follows five essential practices: advance a just cause, build trusting teams, study their worthy rivals, prepare for existential flexibility, and demonstrate the courage to lead (Carse, 1986; Dweck, 2007; Sinek 2019). Superintendents must contend with labor partners, school board politics, community pressures, budgetary issues, and student achievement, as well as a number of other issues (Shaw & Funk, 2013; Fowler & Johnson, 2014). Superintendents must take these factors

into consideration when deciding what supports need to be put into place when developing plans to respond to potential barriers.

Two interview questions were posed to obtain data on how exemplary leaders perceive organizational supports and barriers affect the development of an infinite mindset in their organization. The two interview questions were asked of each of the 12 participating superintendents to gather data to answer Research Question 6. The first interview question sought to identify and describe the supports that exist in organizations that foster the embedding of infinite mindset practices. The second interview question sought to identify and describe what barriers exist in organizations that hinder the embedding of infinite mindset practices. The data were categorized into four larger themes for defining organizational supports and barriers based on the responses of the superintendents along with 172 interview frequencies and 45 artifact frequencies. Figure 8 provides a visual representation of the frequency of the coded entries for the four themes identified for organizational supports and barriers: Collaboration; resistance to change; focus on the plan; and lack of time.

Figure 8

Frequency of coded entries for organizational supports and barriers



After concluding theming and coding the data for organizational supports and barriers four themes emerged from the data. Table 23 captures the overall coded data for organizational supports and barriers disaggregated by the four themes of collaboration, resistance to change, focus on the plan, and lack of time.

Table 23

Overall Coded Entries for Organizational Supports and Barriers

Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Collaboration	9	9	68	29	97	44.7
Focus on the plan	5	8	33	16	49	22.6
Resistance to change	8	0	47	0	47	21.7
Lack of resources	7	0	24	0	24	11.1

Collaboration. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the theme with the highest frequency under defining organizational supports and barriers was collaboration. The responses for collaboration included 68 interview frequencies and 29 artifact frequencies, a total of 97, which accounted for 44.7% of the coded data for advancing a just cause. The 97 frequencies represented 6.1% of the overall 1598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme of collaboration included job alike professional learning and horizontal and vertical collaboration (see Table 24).

Table 24*Overarching Theme: Collaboration*

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Horizontal and vertical collaboration	9	9	38	18	56	57.7
Job alike professional learning	5	6	30	11	41	41.2

When responding to the interview questions for research question 6, there were general references describing perspectives on the collaboration structures and supports needed to adequately address the possible barriers to achieving extraordinary results. These responses included the need of having both horizontal and vertical collaboration structures as well as having job alike professional learning opportunities. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents related to the importance of having collaboration structures and supports needed to adequately address the possible barriers to achieving extraordinary results.

Superintendent 10 described the importance of job alike collaborative structure being in place to support continual growth in the following statement:

We have our the way that we organize our subject to like groups I think there's 15 different subject alike groups that exist. We now even have a special education subject group...So all of those structures are in place for teacher leaders, and then that exists on the other job a-likes that exist in the admin level. The deans meet. We have a school law enforcement meeting...with deans and Aps all sitting

together to work through issues. Every one of the assistant principal groups has a director that they meet with...The principals all meet with us as cabinet.

Superintendent 11 also talked about the need for collaboration at all levels of the organization in the following statement:

So we have built that on all the different tiers of the organization. So, if you are a certificated employee we have the ability for you to have coaching and support within your classified ranks, informal in nature, all the way up to me. I have a superintendent coach. The Board has a board coach who supports the Board through our board retreats, and our governance and books and development... I tell our leaders that they're really responsible for are creating conditions for people to be successful. If somebody comes to me and they're and they're looking to be a leader that wants to have more capacity. Then I want them to articulate what that looks, feels, and sounds like for them that way I can then go out and figure out like how to cultivate those resources, how to create that opportunity to create that space.

Superintendent 4 commented on the need to have open and transparent conversations when groups come together to collaborate in the following statement:

We really make sure that our agendas and our meeting topics are all aligned with our just cause so that our just cause still stays really relevant as we go through those meetings. It also offers a chance for different points of view to come into place. For example, there are various groups at various levels of the district, and people are all coming from these different perspectives, which then forces us to have conversations about adaptability about flexibility, about making sure that

we're not in this with a fixed mindset. We need everybody's voice on this. It is just really really important that people feel valued and people feel respected.

Superintendent 6 talked about the importance of giving people adequate time to meet the challenges of their work in the following statement:

It's important to give our teachers time to do what we asked them to do. So those the 5 tenants that you talked about, they get discussed during that time. It's really around improving practice. It's really around focusing on student needs. It's around reflecting on practices on data they talk about individual students. They talk about groups, they talk about grade levels, they develop curriculum maps, and they look at refining the maps based on the data.

Each of these 4 superintendents reinforced the importance of allowing people the opportunity to work with others who share their experiences. This concerted and intentional collaboration provides needed supports to work through potential barriers in realizing the vision of the district.

Resistance to Change. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the theme with the second highest frequency under identifying organizational supports and barriers was resistance to change. The responses for resistance to change included 47 interview frequencies with 0 artifact frequencies, a total of 47, which accounted for 21.7% of the coded data for identifying organizational supports and barriers. The 47 frequencies represented 2.9% of the overall 1598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme of resistance to change included staff pushback and public opinion (see Table 25).

Table 25

Overarching Theme: Resistance to Change

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Staff pushback	8	0	35	0	35	74.5
Public opinion	4	0	12	0	12	25.5

When responding to the interview questions for research question 6, there were general references describing perspectives on how resistance to change can pose a significant barrier to achieving the district’s vision. These responses included the finding appropriate ways to address pushback from staff members as well as ways to navigate public opinion which may hinder achieving extraordinary results. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents related to how resistance to change can pose a significant barrier to achieving the district’s vision.

Superintendent 10 discussed the difficulty in getting staff to be open to changing practices in the following statement:

You do not want to rock the boat or the status quo sometimes. We have a difficult time getting rid of practices because we've well, we've always done that, so shedding those becomes difficult. Our previous superintendent used to say sometimes you need to open up your garage and take everything out, and, you know throw some things away.

Superintendent 4 talked about the difficulty in responding the loud voices of a few discontent team members when attempting change efforts in the following statement:

We battled a lot early on in in doing this with two teachers at a school site that had been there 20 or 30 years, who just wanted to bully the meeting. They really wanted to take over the meeting and be the leaders. Their input is good to a degree, but the other people's input is phenomenal right? And yes, it's good to have historical knowledge and history, but when you allow a person who is so fearful of change to say we've done it this way, you're going to have people in the that are gonna feel less empowered to speak.

Superintendent 5 commented on how the bureaucracy of education can impede on the innovative processes to achieve the district's vision in the following comment:

And so to me the biggest barrier is the way our bureaucracy is set up. It gets in the way, and it sometimes will tend to dictate some of that work, and that's why I think the persistence is so important of your principals. They've got to be persistent and then there's gotta be enough support for it that they're like nope, I don't care how long it takes you're gonna get this thing. I don't care if you have to do these entries by hand, you're going to do it because this is important, and it's good for kids, and it goes back to that mission and vision. But that bureaucratic piece makes us not as nimble as I think we should be.

Superintendent 9 discussed that the entire system is challenge and barrier to change in the following statement:

I think the other thing, too, is that we do have some constraints within school systems. I mean K-12 systems were created a long time ago by an agrarian society. Take the summers off, 6 hour work day. Times have changed.

Demographics have shifted over to urban areas. Cities, and we have lights now. I

mean all these things that you think about how they affected and influenced school systems at their start, are still here today.

Each of the superintendents reinforced the barriers in place that can impede substantive and lasting change in districts. The four superintendents pointed to the human barriers as well as structural barriers which impede change. There were no artifacts coded or themed to support his theme.

Focus on the Plan. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the third theme under identifying organizational supports and barriers was focus of the plan. The responses for focus on the plan included 33 interview frequencies and 16 artifact frequencies, a total of 49, which accounted for 22.6% of the coded data for identifying organizational supports and barriers. The 49 frequencies represented 3.1% of the overall 1598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme of focus on a plan was communicating the plan and planning for the future (see Table 26).

Table 26

Overarching Theme: Focus on the Plan

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Communicating the plan	5	8	12	13	25	51
Planning for the future	5	3	21	3	24	49

When responding to the interview questions for research question 6, there were general references describing perspectives on. These responses included the need of to effectively

communicate the plan and focus on planning for the future. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents related to the importance of referring to the focus on the overall district plan as a needed support when addressing potential barriers to achieving extraordinary results.

Superintendent 1 commented on the importance of adequately preparing for the unknown future in the following statement:

We do not know what's coming, and so we invest heavily in our energies in what we know today. Maybe planting the seed. Maybe we'll be getting a program that won't bear fruit for another year or 2. Our profession is built on that infinite mindset. We are taking children today and teaching them to read, listen, speak, and more importantly, think for a future. I think, in more concrete ways, with even facilities, looking ahead at some of the needs we may have, years down the road, given the number of kids that are coming in and some kind of changes that we need to make or to not do something.

Superintendent 4 discussed the importance of effectively communicating the vision of the district to maintain focus in the following statement:

But I think we do have some real some silver linings in the organization. I think, first and foremost, as I shared, everything we do, we try and communicate our vision. We're trying to make sure that our purpose is identified again. We want to improve in those areas, too. But having those conversations regularly puts us in a collective position to be able to have that conversation to better provide support for the programs and the projects.

Both superintendents reinforced the importance of communication, alignment to the plan, and ensuring the necessary support is provided to meet the ever-changing landscape of education. The artifacts used to provide additional data for this theme were accountability plans.

Lack of Resources. After analyzing the interview responses and artifacts, the final theme under identifying organizational supports and barriers was lack of resources. The responses for lack of resources included 24 interview frequencies with 0 artifact frequencies, a total of 24, which accounted for 11.1% of the coded data for identifying organizational supports and barriers. The 24 frequencies represented 1.5% of the overall 1598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The coded sub themes used within the larger theme of lack of resources was money, time and resources and constraints of regulations (see Table 27)

Table 27

Overarching Theme: Lack of Resources

Coded Sub Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Money, time and resources	7	0	16	0	16	66.7
Constraints of regulations	3	0	8	0	8	33.3

When responding to the interview questions for research question 6, there were general references describing perspectives on how regulations along with the lack of money, time and resources serve as barriers to achieving extraordinary results. These responses included descriptions of how the lack of money, time and resources affect the ability of

organizations to achieve extraordinary results. superintendents also identified the barriers certain regulations pose as well. The following statements are specific accounts from superintendents on how regulations along with the lack of money, time and resources serve as barriers to achieving extraordinary results.

Superintendent 11 discussed the need for on-going resources to support the work verse one time allocations in the following statement:

Everything we're doing is still for the benefit of that child...it's all about creating this wraparound holistic approach to building a school system that students can then thrive in...a lot of the stuff that we're doing right now is with one time money...we need professional development supports that are ongoing... It is time intensive but it's also cost intensive. So I would say it's money. Having enough time to be able to authentically connect, authentically explore and develop opportunities to figure out what people need, and how we can help them be their best selves.

Superintendent 6 commented on the lack of time being a significant barrier in the following statement:

I think the biggest one is time. We just don't have enough time in the day. Now in order to implement our 5 practices with fidelity you need time to plan, time to implement, and then time to reflect on how it went, and then refine and then reinforce It is like a lesson study. You plan it out, you implement it, you debrief, you tweak it to improve it, and then you do it again. And then that cycle of improvement needs to happen but that takes time, and we don't have it.

Superintendent 4 discussed the lack of content knowledge as a potential barrier in the following statement:

I think also content knowledge is a big barrier for us, particularly at the elementary schools. You have people in these positions that lack content knowledge. It is now much different than it was 20 years ago, and expectations of teachers is much more and there is so much more accountability.

Each of the superintendents reinforced the need for more money, more time, and more resources to meet the needs of their students, staff and communities. The artifacts analyzed to provide additional context for this theme were accountability plans.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset framework are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset. The sample of superintendents in this study were identified as exemplary by an expert panel. Each of the superintendents have demonstrated extraordinary results and evidence of leading their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits. They all had a minimum of five years of experience in the profession and met three of the following criteria: 1) demonstrated evidence of collaboratively leading an organization fostering creativity and future-orientation improvements; 2) actively participates in community leadership and problem-solving activities; 3) has had articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at

conferences or association meetings on leadership; 4) has received recognition by their peers as a leader who gives respect to all people; 5) is a member in good standing in professional associations in their field. Twenty superintendents were identified as meeting the delimitation criteria, and 12 participated in the study. The qualitative results were gathered through semi-structured interviews and the collection of artifacts relative to each research question.

Brief Summary of Findings

After analyzing the data collected through the semi structured interviews and review of the various artifacts, 100% of the 12 participating superintendents indicated they use one or more of the five practices of advancing a just cause, building trusting teams, studying your worthy rival, preparing for existential flexibility, and demonstrating the courage to lead within their organizations to achieve extraordinary results. The practice superintendents referenced the most was building trusting teams. There were 285 interview frequencies along with an analysis of 24 unique artifacts. The second most referenced practice by superintendents was advancing a just cause with a total of 257 interview frequencies and 31 unique artifacts analyzed. Existential flexibility was the third highest practice with a total of 219 interview frequencies and 40 unique artifacts analyzed. The practice with the second lowest frequency was studying your worthy rival with 177 interview frequencies and 11 unique artifacts assessed. Demonstrating the courage to lead was the least referenced practice of the five, with a total of 171 interview frequencies and 17 unique artifacts studied. Table 28 provides an overall summary of the total combined frequencies from interviews and artifacts of the 20 major themes coded for the 6 research questions.

Table 28

Summary of the overall frequencies for major themes coded for the 6 research questions

Major Theme	Infinite Mindset Practice	Total Frequency (Interviews/Artifacts)
Strategic planning	Just cause	144
Resources and support	Trusting teams	131
Open communication	Trusting teams	127
Stakeholder engagement	Just cause	110
Conducting a needs assessment	Existential flexibility	99
Collaboration	Supports and barriers	97
Mission, vision and values	Just cause	97
Assessing the benefits and risks	Courage to lead	90
Learning from colleagues	Worthy rivals	84
Professional learning and collaboration	Existential flexibility	83
Fostering relationships	Trusting teams	73
Professional learning opportunities	Worthy rival	72
Leaders reinforcing mission and vision	Courage to lead	61
Open and transparent communication	Courage to Lead	61
Stakeholder feedback	Existential flexibility	60
Learning from other districts	Worthy rival	51
Focus on the plan	Supports and barriers	49
Resistance to change	Supports and barriers	47
Utilization of feedback	Existential flexibility	38
Lack of resources	Supports and barriers	24
Total:		1598

Within the disaggregation of the five practices, the coded strategy with the highest frequency was the need for superintendents to have a strategic plan to guide the work of the district to achieve the district's just cause. This strategy included 109 interview frequencies and 35 artifact frequencies, a total 144, which accounted for 8.9% of the overall 1598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The strategy with the second highest

frequency was the need for superintendents to provide adequate resources and supports to all staff to build trusting teams. The responses included 115 interview frequencies and 16 artifact frequencies, a total of 131, which accounted for 8.1% of the overall 1598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The second lowest coded strategy was the utilization of data by superintendents to plan for existential flexibility. There were 25 interview frequencies and 13 artifact frequencies, a total of 38 which accounted for 2.4% of the overall 1598 frequencies coded by the researcher. The lowest coded frequency was the identification of a lack of resources as being a significant barrier to achieving extraordinary results. This coded strategy had 24 interview frequencies with 0 coded artifacts. This total of 24 frequencies represented 1.5% of the 1598 overall coded frequencies by the researcher.

Based on the 12 semi-structured interviews and 50 unique artifacts, there were 54 practices or considerations addressed by superintendents to achieve extraordinary results. These included supports needed to be implemented to overcome perceived barriers to achieving the extraordinary results of their organizations. To support the identification of the key findings of the study, the researcher created a table to illustrate the overall frequencies of each of the 54 identified practices or considerations (see table 29).

Table 29*Summary of practices or considerations identified by superintendents*

Practices	Total Frequency (Interviews/Artifacts)
Use of accountability plans	77
Formal/Informal interactions	64
Identification and assessment of needs	60
Horizontal and vertical collaboration	56
Reflection and guidance	54
Referencing/Displaying goals	53
Accessibility	48
Creating a sense of belonging	47
Job alike opportunities	46
Governance team work	44
Collaboration	42
Finding time to connect	41
Job alike professional learning	41
Ability to adapt and pivot	39
Direct communication	37
Transparency	37
Identifying potential outcomes	35
PD/Collaboration	35
Staff pushback	35
Assessing needs	32
Collaboration and teamwork	32
Communicating/Connecting Vision	32
Data/Curriculum/Instruction	32
Professional development	30
Providing intentional support	30
District data	29
Staying connected	29
Alignment	27
Belonging to associations	25
Communicating the plan	25
Staff feedback	25
Internal professional learning	24
Planning for the future	24
Build internal capacity	23
Predicting possible benefits	23
Community feedback	20
Content specific opportunities	20
Leadership	20
Coaching	18
Collaborating with other districts	17
Money, time, and resources	16
Leadership feedback	15
External feedback	14
Putting students first	14
Use of surveys	14
Researching other districts	13
Attending conferences	12
Public Opinion	12
Visiting other districts	12
Working with consultants	12
Internal feedback	10
Anecdotal data	9
Being vulnerable to set the stage	9
Constraints of regulations	8

While Table 29 ranks the overall frequency of each of the 54 strategies identified by the superintendents, during the theming and coding process, the researcher noted many similarities between a number of the identified themes across the 6 research questions. As such, there were four overarching common practices all 12 or 100% of the superintendents utilized to achieve extraordinary results which included strategic planning, professional learning opportunities, stakeholder engagement, and communicating the vision and mission (see Table 30). Overall, the most referenced common practice superintendents employed to achieve extraordinary results was professional learning opportunities. These opportunities included focusing on teamwork, using consultants, vertical and horizontal collaboration, and all forms of professional development. The second referenced common practice was the use of strategic planning to identify the path to achieving extraordinary results. The common strategies included conducting a needs assessment, assessing benefits and risks of decisions, developing a strategic plan, and ensuring the organization was agile to adapt and pivot based on circumstances. The third most common practice was effectively engaging with all stakeholders. This included being transparent and proactive in communication strategies along with implementing formal and informal practices to gather feedback. There was also intentionality in creating a sense of belonging and connectedness by superintendents. The final common practice utilized by superintendents to achieve extraordinary results was effectively communicating the vision and mission of the district. This included constantly messaging and displaying the vision, but also a concerted effort to ensure all programs were aligned to the vision.

Table 30*Four Overarching Themes across All Research Questions*

Overarching Theme	Individual Themes Previously Coded
Strategic Planning	Accountability Plans Adapting and Pivoting Assessing Benefits and Risks Conducting a Needs Assessment
Professional Learning Opportunities	Teamwork Use of Consultants General Collaboration Vertical Collaboration Horizontal Collaboration Membership in Associations General Professional Development Internal Professional Development Content Professional Development External Professional Development
Stakeholder Engagement	Transparency Formal Interaction Informal Interactions Building Connections Creating a Sense of Belonging
Communicating the Vision and Mission	Aligning to the Vision Communicating the Vision Displaying/Referencing the Vision

Upon reviewing the 20 major themes from the 6 research questions, the practices identified by the superintendents along with the 4 overarching themes of strategic planning, professional learning opportunities, stakeholder engagement, and communicating the vision, the researcher identified the 7 key findings from the study.

The researcher used a total frequency of combined interview and artifact frequency as the cut point for classification as a key finding. The 7 key findings identified were strategic planning, resources and support, open communication, stakeholder engagement,

conducting a needs assessment, collaboration, and mission, vision, and values. Table 31 provides a summary of the key findings identified.

Table 31

Identified key findings

Key Finding	Total Frequency (Interviews and Artifacts)
Strategic planning	144
Resources and support	131
Open communication	127
Stakeholder engagement	110
Conducting a needs assessment	99
Collaboration	97
Mission, vision, and values	97

Chapter IV provided an overview of the purpose statement, research questions, methodology, data collection procedures, and population sample of the study. Based on the interview data collected and the artifacts analyzed, key findings were discovered to describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Sinek’s (2020) infinite mindset framework are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results and to understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset. Chapter V will provide a comprehensive and detailed summary of the major findings of the study, discuss unexpected findings, as well as conclusions based on the major findings. It will also address implications for future actions, and recommendations for further study. Chapter V will conclude with reflections and closing remarks.

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

This qualitative phenomenological study was a thematic study conducted by a team of eight doctoral students, guided by four faculty advisors. The study sought to explore how exemplary leaders perceived Simon Sinek's (2019) five infinite mindset practices of advancing a just cause, build trusting teams, study your worthy rival, preparing for existential flexibility, and demonstrating the courage to lead are embedded within their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. Additionally, the researchers were also tasked with exploring the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of the infinite mindset within their organization. Each researcher collected data in the form of semi-structured interviews and artifacts from the districts of those interviewed. This particular study focused on 12 exemplary superintendents within Los Angeles County.

Chapter IV contained a comprehensive summary of the data collected from the 12 interviews and artifacts. Chapter V begins with a restatement of the purpose statement, research questions, research methods, population and sample. Additionally, Chapter V includes the presentation of major findings, conclusions, implications for action, and recommendations for future research. The chapter ends with concluding remarks and reflections from the researcher.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset framework are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A

further purpose of this study was to understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

Research Questions

The central research question is: How do successful leaders perceive the practices of an infinite mindset are embedded in their organization to achieve extraordinary results? The research subquestions are:

1. How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *advance a just cause* is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?
2. How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *build trusting teams* is embedded in their organization to inspire extraordinary results?
3. How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *study your worthy rival* is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?
4. How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *preparing for existential flexibility* is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?
5. How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of *demonstrating the courage to lead* is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?
6. What supports and barriers do exemplary leaders perceive affect the embedding of infinite mindset practices in their organization?

Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures

Given the purpose of the study was to explore and describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset framework are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results, a qualitative research methods approach was selected. Data was primarily collected through semi structured interviews and the collection of artifacts. The researcher, in collaboration with eight peer researchers and four University of Massachusetts Global faculty members, crafted 12 interview questions designed to address each of the research questions. Artifacts were also gathered directly from superintendents as well as through published literature, district websites, and social media platforms.

Population

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described a population as a group of individuals that “conform to specific criteria and to which we generalize the results of this research” (p. 129). In 2018–2019, there were 13,452 public school districts in the United States (Riser-Kotitsky, 2019). This number would suggest there are approximately 13,452 public school superintendents in the United States. Further narrowing the population, the California Department of Education's (CDE, 2022) website reported 1,029 public school districts in the state of California as of 2022. The researcher determined the population of approximately 1,029 California superintendents was too large a population for the researcher to effectively study.

Sample

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) suggested the use of a smaller group in the population to be studied. It was determined the population of California superintendents

was too numerous to study; therefore, the sampling frame was narrowed to superintendents in Los Angeles County. Los Angeles County's Office of Education (2022) identified there were 88 public school districts in the county during the 2021–2022 school year. Therefore, the sampling frame for this study was the 88 superintendents serving in school districts in Los Angeles County.

Numerous sampling methods exist to support qualitative research studies, including convenience, purposive random, and criterion sampling (Patton, 2015). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described purposive sampling as a method of selecting specific participants from the identified population to provide information on the subject. The researcher used purposive sampling to select the superintendents to participate in this study by using specific criteria. Additionally, criterion sampling was used. Patton (2001) defined criterion sampling as the process of “selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (p. 238). Patton (2001) also noted the use of this sampling method helps to ensure a greater likelihood of having sources that provide rich information relevant to the study. The team of thematic researchers along with faculty determined the sample size of 12 superintendents was sufficient to yield the data necessary to have rich information.

This study was delimited to 12 exemplary leaders in California. An exemplary leader in this study is a leader who demonstrates extraordinary results and evidence of leading their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits, with a minimum of 5 years of experience in the profession and meeting at least three of the following criteria:

- The exemplary leader demonstrates evidence of collaboratively leading an organization fostering creativity and future-orientation improvements.
- The exemplary leader actively participates in community leadership and shared problem-solving activities.
- The exemplary leader has had articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings on leadership.
- The exemplary leader has received recognition by their peers as a leader who gives respect to all people.
- The exemplary leader is a member in good standing in professional associations in their field.

Major Findings Related to the Literature

In this phenomenological research study, data were analyzed and utilized to determine the major findings. Based on the interviews and artifacts from the 12 superintendents, there were 20 major themes identified from the 6 research questions. Within these 20 major themes, there were a total of 54 practices or considerations one or more of the superintendents identified they used as an exemplary leader. From there, the researcher used 97 total frequencies as the cut off line for identification as a major finding of the study. The seven major findings were arrived at because they had a frequency of 97 or more. There was alignment between the literature review and the data collected from both the semi structured interviews and artifacts. Major findings are presented for each of the six research questions and variables which include advance a just cause, build trusting teams, study your worthy rival, preparing for existential flexibility, demonstrating the courage to lead, and identifying the supports and barriers.

Major Finding 1: Exemplary Superintendents Intentionally Keep the Mission, Vision, and Values of the District at the Forefront through Consistent Messaging

Exemplary superintendents in this study expressed the importance of ensuring the mission, vision, and values of the district are consistently referred to and used to create alignment throughout the system. Fullan and Quinn (2016) described how it is imperative for district leaders to clearly articulate what they called the focused direction of the district. By routinely making connections of how decisions, programs, and initiatives align to the mission, vision, and values of the district, leaders model the commitment to the vision. All 12 or 100% of the participating superintendents referenced how critical it is to reference and display the mission, vision, and values of the district to support the operation of the district. This theme was referenced 97 times 6.1% of the overall coded data for the study.

The superintendents discussed the need to reinforce the mission, vision, and values are not simply words on a wall, but a compass by which the district functions. It was also stressed how all levels of the organization need to support the mission, vision, and values. In order to advance the just cause as described by Sinek, superintendents identified a number of practices. Six of the superintendents commented on the power of having the governance team discuss, revisit, and use the mission, vision, and values in board meetings and any other communication utilized. When there is clarity and commitment around these deeply held beliefs, superintendents are empowered to have courageous conversations to move closer and closer to the realization of those beliefs.

Major Finding 2: Exemplary Superintendents Develop Strategic Plans to Carefully Align All Programs, Initiatives, and Decisions to the District’s Mission, Vision, and Values.

During their interviews, exemplary superintendents reiterated the necessity of developing and implementing comprehensive strategic plans to guide the work of the district. While there were a number of references to the formalized Local Control and Accountability Plan required by the state, the comprehensive strategic plans referred to by the superintendents were more operational in nature. Ten of the superintendents or 83% commented on the importance of strategic plans. The 144 total frequencies coded from interviews and artifacts accounted for 9% of the overall coded data for the study.

Superintendents discussed the challenges and opportunities of using strategic plans to ensure alignment to the vision while at the same time nurturing and supporting an innovative and focused program. Shava and Tlou (2018) supported this notion when arguing it was the leader’s responsibility to actively distribute leadership to empower others to move closer and closer towards the articulated goals of the organization. Creating an environment where the non-negotiables and moral imperative of the work were clear to all, allows team members to take risks, be creative, and innovate to find new ways to make the goals come to fruition (Dufour & Fullan, 2013; Wiseman, 2017).

Major Finding 3: Exemplary Superintendents Focus on Building Trusting Teams through Open Communication and an Intentional Focus on Providing the Needed Resources and Supports for Team Members to Experience Success

Exemplary superintendents in this study identified open communication as a critical aspect of the development of trusting teams. Open communication was mentioned

by 12 or 100% of the superintendents. The 127 interview and artifact frequencies accounted for 7.9% of the frequencies coded by the researcher. Within the larger theme of open communication, the superintendents discussed being accessible, being collaborative, and being transparent as three major components of the open communication necessary to build trusting teams.

Demerath (2018) supported these findings by noting how relational trust is built through open communication. By being accessible and collaborative, these exemplary superintendents demonstrate the trust they have in their team members. This trust is furthered through fostering a spirit of shared decision-making by intentionally and authentically including their team members in decisions that impact them thus helping to build a collective vision for the future (Dufour 2004, 2004; Demerath, 2018, Dewitt, 2018).

Major Finding 4: Exemplary Superintendents Expect All Members of Their Organizations to Engage in a Variety of Professional Learning Opportunities and Collaborative Structures to Improve as Individuals and as an Organization

During their interviews, the exemplary superintendents discussed the need to continually reinforce the expectation for all staff members to participate in on-going professional learning opportunities. All 12 of the superintendents, or 100% of those participating, talked about professional learning from the context of vertical articulation, horizontal articulation, work with consultants, internal and external professional learning as well as attending conferences and belonging to various associations and networks. Collaboration accounted for 97 frequencies which was 6.1% of the overall coded data. In addition to the focus on the formal collaborative structures, these exemplary

superintendents discussed the need to provide their teams ample time to discuss programs, strategies, initiatives, and data along with a number of other operational issues.

The 12 exemplary superintendents realized the realization of the district's vision, mission, and values was wholly dependent on their team members ability to execute the strategic plans. As such, these superintendents understood the factors which could impede progress. Brown (2018) encouraged leaders to provide their teams sufficient time to grapple with change and its unintended consequences to ensure energy was not wasted on addressing feelings of being overwhelmed, frustrated, or at worse sabotaging. This focus on meaningful collaboration builds collective efficacy and commitment on the part of the team to work diligently to accomplish the vision (Dewitt, 2018).

Major Finding 5: Exemplary Superintendents Are Continuously Gathering Information through Needs Assessments to Ensure They Have a Firm Understanding of the Evolving Needs of the District

During the interviews, all 12 or 100% of the superintendents discussed the need to conduct needs assessments to confront and adapt to changing situations. These needs assessments seek to gather important data to respond to both internal and external changes. The needs assessments the superintendents discussed ranged from informal feedback gathered through various interactions to data obtained through formal structures such as surveys, data analysis, and stakeholder feedback. There were a total 99 interview and artifact frequencies related to conducting a needs assessment which accounted for 6.2% of the overall coded data for the study. The sub themes identified by the superintendents were the need to identify and assess needs and the need to use the data to adapt and pivot when needed.

To be in a position to respond to changes in the district, superintendents must allow for a free flow of ideas horizontally and vertically (Boylan & Turner, 2017). Superintendents used the COVID-19 pandemic as a point of reference when discussing the importance of continually assessing the changing needs of the district. Those districts where frequent needs assessments were conducted, were able to respond more nimbly to the constantly changing requirements from health departments (Roff, 2021). Regardless of the challenge facing districts and superintendents, organizations can be in a better position to improve their work and their responsiveness to those they serve by embracing the continuous improvement model through assessing their needs on a frequent basis (Baumann et al., 2019; Sinek, 2020).

Major Finding 6: Exemplary Superintendents Are Committed to Open and Transparent Communication to Move Towards the Realization of the District’s Vision

The exemplary superintendents referred to the critical importance of open and transparent communication 127 times during their interviews. This total frequency of the interviews and artifacts accounted for 7.9% of the overall frequencies coded by the researcher. All 12 or 100% of the superintendents mentioned this theme. The sub themes used to define open and transparent communication were accessibility, collaboration, and transparency. Superintendents stated open and transparent communication has always been an important component of their leadership philosophy, but the political acrimony, public scrutiny, and turbulent nature of the pandemic along with the national politics have made it even more critical to the success of the district.

The superintendent is the most visible person within the district. Given this visibility, it is imperative the superintendent uses every opportunity to espouse the vision of the district and to explain how programs, decisions and initiatives align to the vision (Davidson & Butcher, 2017; Wright, 2017). Even despite political pressures, the superintendent must continue to discuss the focus of the district in achieving its vision (Shaw & Funk, 2014). Those superintendents who are accessible, open, and transparent create trust and foster relationships which ultimately support the work of the district and the realization of the vision (Hill & Jochim, 2018; Poynton et al., 2018).

Major Finding 7: Exemplary Superintendents Remain Focused on the Barriers Their Staff and Organization Face and Engage in Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement to Overcome those Barriers

Exemplary superintendents noted the many barriers they face when instituting change efforts to realize the vision of the district. Each of the 12 superintendents or 100%, described the importance of meaningfully engaging with all stakeholders to address and overcome those barriers to realize the district's vision. There were a total of 110 combined frequencies from the interviews and artifacts which accounted for 6.9% of the overall frequencies coded by the researcher. The sub themes contained within the stakeholder engagement theme were formal and informal interactions and communicating and connecting the vision with all stakeholders. These exemplary superintendents described how they use every opportunity to tell the story of the district.

Leading a district is a complex task with many factors to take into consideration when planning for the present and the future. Exemplary superintendents are keenly aware of the need to have clear and consistent communication for stakeholders within

and from outside of the district (Jenkins, 2007; Wilhite et al., 2018). The superintendent must tend to the needs of all stakeholders to achieve success for the district. As such, the superintendent must devote a significant amount of time to cultivating, maintaining, and strengthening the relationships with the board of education, prominent community members and their labor associations. This messaging reinforces transparency and ultimately builds trust within the organization so the perceived barriers can be adequately addressed and the focus can shift back to the vision of the district.

Unexpected Findings

There were two unexpected findings from this research study. The first unexpected finding was the absence of any mention of external accountability in the form of the pressures resulting from test scores or curriculum. The second unexpected finding was the limited number of frequencies superintendents commented on the negative factors influencing their work and the work of their districts.

Unexpected Finding 1: Absence of Any Mention of External Accountability in the Form of the Pressures Resulting from Test Scores or Curriculum

There was a significant amount of literature addressing the pressure superintendents face related to state and federal assessment data and the corresponding accountability. After concluding the 12 interviews and reviewing the 50 unique artifacts, it was unexpected to find not one single superintendent mentioned the pressures associated with high stakes testing and state and federal accountability measures. The research pointed to these pressures and the realization of many superintendents that their positions had dramatically shifted from the end of No Child Left Behind to the Common Core State Standards era ((Wright, 2009; Wilhite et al., 2018; Davidson & Butcher,

2019). Therefore, for these superintendents to not mention the pressures of high stakes testing was highly unexpected.

Unexpected Finding 2: Limited Number of Frequencies Superintendents

Commented on the Negative Factors Influencing Their Work and the Work of Their District

The research presented numerous factors which highly impacted the job satisfaction and sense of job security of superintendents. It was unexpected to find such few frequencies devoted to addressing or commenting on the negative factors impacting the work of the superintendents and the work of their districts. Even though there were 35 total frequencies for the sub theme of staff pushback and 16 total frequencies for the subtheme of a lack of money, time, and resources, the comments from the superintendents were focused on positive structures they put into place to support people through those negative opinions or reactions. Petersen and Young (2004) found superintendents were placed in precarious situations with nearly every stakeholder with whom they interacted due to political pressures from the inside and outside. Therefore, it was unexpected how few comments were directed to negative interactions by the superintendents in comparison to the existing literature on the stress superintendents feel from multiple realities of their positions.

Conclusions

The findings from this research study were used to draw conclusions on how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Sinek's (2020) infinite mindset framework, which include advance a just cause, build trusting teams, study your worthy rival, preparing for existential flexibility, demonstrating the courage to lead, are

embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results.

Conclusions were also formed on how the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset. Based on those findings, the following conclusions were drawn from the 12 interviews of exemplary superintendents and 50 unique artifacts.

Conclusion 1: It is concluded that the alignment of district work to the district vision leads to extraordinary results.

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, the researcher concluded exemplary superintendents intentionally reference the vision, mission, and values of the district set themselves and their district up to achieve extraordinary results. This intentional practice can be seen in district communication, district messaging, presentations, board meetings, and in the various plans developed at both school sites and the district level. These exemplary superintendents encourage the board of education, district administrators, site administrators, and other leaders to make certain they are also connecting and aligning their programs, initiatives, and messaging with the mission, vision, and values of the district. Finally, they stress the importance of staying true to these deeply held beliefs when confronted with external and internal pressures to act in ways counter to those beliefs.

This conclusion is supported by the data collected from the interviews with the 12 exemplary superintendents and the artifacts collected. One hundred percent of the participating superintendents affirmed the importance of the consistent use of the mission, vision, and values of the district. The literature suggests leaders who truly transform their organizations do so by embracing the values and emotions of their teams

thus creating strong feelings of collective efficacy and commitment (Donohoo, 2017; Dewitt, 2018). By keeping the mission in the minds of everyone in the organization, these leaders compel others to work for higher purpose. Thus, districts can achieve Sinek's (2020) goal of espousing a just cause that is aspirational yet, attainable which creates a sense of urgency to create meaningful change and results for both the organization and those it serves.

Conclusion 2: It is concluded that exemplary superintendents who collaboratively develop strategic plans achieve the vision of the district.

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, the researcher concluded exemplary superintendents work in a collaborative manner to develop comprehensive strategic plans to achieve extraordinary results for their district. These leaders utilize these comprehensive strategic plans to create alignment throughout the organization. The plans cascade from the district level to the site level and ultimately guide and impact the work in the classroom. These leaders engage in on-going conversations with all stakeholders to ensure there is a clear connection between the plan and the implementation of the plan.

This conclusion is supported by the data collected from the interviews with the 12 exemplary superintendents and the artifacts collected. Eighty-three percent of the participating superintendents discussed the critical aspect strategic plans played in the operation of their district. The literature suggests it is the responsibility of the leader and the organization to make certain the systems are constantly refined to align to the stated goals (Covey, 1990, as cited in Davidson & Butcher, 2019). Leaders must also find the courage to remain steadfast in the face of internal and external pressures which can take

time, energy, and focus away from the mission of district (Shaw & Funk, 2013; Fowler & Johnson, 2014). Superintendents who have these strategic plans have placed their districts in a position to achieve extraordinary results for their districts.

Conclusion 3: It can be concluded that extraordinary results are achieved when exemplary superintendents build trusting teams by focusing on open communication and providing needed resources for success.

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, the researcher concluded exemplary superintendents build trusting teams by focusing on open communication and strengthened by providing needed resources to achieve extraordinary results for the district and individuals. These exemplary leaders placed a high value on being present on school campuses, in the district office, and out in the community. This accessibility and approachability reinforced their focus on building relationships. In addition to these informal interactions, these exemplary leaders created formal opportunities to solicit feedback and collaborate on important decisions affecting the district. By being present, acknowledging people for their hard work, and giving them a forum to discuss ideas, these superintendents build trust within their organization

This conclusion is supported by the data collected from the interviews with the 12 exemplary superintendents and the artifacts collected. One hundred percent of the participating superintendents commented on their commitment to open communication and using the information gathered through these interactions to guide the work and identify the resources people needed to be successful in their jobs. This responsiveness and accessibility helped to create high levels of trust in their districts. The literature also supported this conclusion. The power of trusting teams can be harnessed by emphasizing

shared values, creating an atmosphere of mutual respect, valuing authentic collaboration, and offering intentional opportunities for coaching and mentoring (Dufour et al, 2004; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Sinek, 2020). By embracing these practices greater levels of trust, synergy, and commitment are found amongst these teams (Kowalski, 2005; Dean, 2007; Demerath, 2018).

Conclusion 4: It can be concluded that exemplary superintendents who place a high value on professional learning and collaboration put themselves and their districts in a strong position to achieve extraordinary results.

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, the researcher concluded exemplary superintendents who place a high value on professional learning and collaboration put themselves and their districts in a strong position to achieve extraordinary results. These leaders believed in continuous improvement as a foundational principle of their work with their district. Whether it be internal professional learning opportunities, conferences, or belonging to networks and associations, all twelve superintendents expected everyone in the district to engage in on-going professional learning. While they all found great value in professional learning, they all believed collaboration was the key to organizational success. By working alongside colleagues to analyze data, implement best practices, and determine next steps forward, the collaborative process allowed all team members the opportunity to learn from the experiences of those who understand their role. All of this was in an effort to improve on practices to reach the vision of the district.

This conclusion is supported by the data collected from the interviews with the 12 exemplary superintendents and the artifacts collected. One hundred percent of the

participating superintendents commented on how valuable on-going professional learning was to the future of their organization. All 100% of the superintendents also stated how critical meaningful collaboration was as well. The literature also supports this conclusion. Leaders need to be well versed in data analysis to determine gaps in instructional methodology, curriculum design, and curriculum content (Goddard, 2001; Leithwood et al., 2007; Sheppard & Brown, 2009). Creating these opportunities for staff to refine their craft and learn the newest strategies supports the achievement of extraordinary results.

Conclusion 5: It can be concluded that exemplary superintendents who conduct frequent needs assessments will make course corrections that respond to the changing needs of the district.

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, the researcher concluded exemplary superintendents conduct frequent needs assessments to respond to the changing needs of the district to achieve extraordinary results. While the COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented shift in priorities, exemplary superintendents are constantly assess the needs of their districts to make certain practices, policies, and procedures are aligned to achieving the district vision. These needs assessments include surveys to any and all stakeholders, town halls, board meetings, meetings focusing on the development of the Local Control and Accountability Plans, the development of WASC accreditation plans and informal gatherings. Regardless of the venue or structure, superintendents are consistently monitoring various forms of data to make small and sometimes dramatic course corrections to meet the ever-changing needs of the district.

This conclusion is supported by the data collected from the interviews with the 12 exemplary superintendents and the artifacts collected. One hundred percent of the

participating superintendents commented on the important role of conducting on-going needs assessments plays into both their short and long term planning. While the needs of districts dramatically shifted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, exemplary leaders who had long held practices of conducting needs assessments were well positioned to respond to the demands they faced. The literature also supported this conclusion. Districts were forced to become public health experts to support students, staff, and the community. Not only did they have to immediately figure out the most effective way to deliver curriculum remotely, they had to implement health and safety features they had never imagined (Roff, 2021). As schools were allowed to return to in person instruction, superintendents were able to leverage needs assessments conducted both prior to the pandemic and post pandemic to realign the work to the district vision. Thus, it is imperative for these exemplary leaders to model and encourage individual adaptability, as well as organizational adaptability to achieve extraordinary results (Boylan & Turner, 2017; Gonclaves & Bergquist, 2022).

Conclusion 6: It can be concluded that exemplary superintendents who utilize open and transparent communication will achieve the district vision.

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, the researcher concluded exemplary superintendents utilize open and transparent communication to achieve extraordinary results. These leaders strive to provide timely and relevant information to all stakeholders. They are committed to two-way communication which provides students, staff, and the community the opportunity to receive and communicate the impact potential decisions may have or have had on them. These leaders use this informal data as a means to inform their plans and improve the services and support they

provide all stakeholders in the district. The communication ranges from newsletters, social media, formal meetings and informal gatherings. The intent behind this communication is to provide data, information, and celebrate the wonderful programs, initiatives and people in the district and community.

This conclusion is supported by the data collected from the interviews with the 12 exemplary superintendents and the artifacts collected. One hundred percent of the participating superintendents commented on the necessity of maintaining open and transparent communication in their district. The literature also supported this conclusion. By being open, proactive, and transparent leaders can develop and strengthen strong relationships with all stakeholders and reinforce the vision of the district (Hill & Jochim, 2018; Poynton et al., 2018). The more readily available information is , the greater the level of trust built within the district. This clarity of communication and messaging helps to keep the district work focused on achieving extraordinary results.

Conclusion 7: It can be concluded that exemplary superintendents who do not engage in meaningful stakeholder engagement will not be prepared to address challenges faced by the district.

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, the researcher concluded exemplary superintendents engage in meaningful stakeholder engagement to address challenges faced by the district. Superintendents and the districts they serve face challenges with budgets, facilities, politics, public opinion, labor associations among many other issues. Exemplary superintendents realize they must engage with all stakeholders to hear these issues and find collaborative ways to discuss potential solutions to address concerns. These leaders identified a combination of both formal and

informal ways they engage with stakeholders to share, receive, and discuss issues and topics throughout the district.

This conclusion is supported by the data collected from the interviews with the 12 exemplary superintendents and the artifacts collected. One hundred percent of the participating superintendents identified the need for leaders to engage in meaningful stakeholder engagement to address and resolve potential barriers to the achievement of extraordinary results. The literature also supported this conclusion. One of the most essential roles of the superintendent is navigating stakeholder communication and politics of the organization (Miles, 2007). However, with so many competing stakeholder interests weighing in on topics important to them, superintendents had to be aware of the power of the public and the media (Jenkins, 2007). Poynton et al. (2018) cautioned leaders to be mindful when clear and consistent messaging is absent, stakeholders will create their own narrative. Therefore, once again exemplary superintendents used every means of communication at their disposal to engage and communicate with internal and external stakeholders, all in an effort to maintain focus and alignment with the vision of the district to achieve extraordinary results.

Implications for Action

The following implications are based on the conclusions from the research study describing the necessary conditions exemplary superintendents should consider creating within their organizations to achieve extraordinary results. The literature and research indicate the role of the superintendent is extremely complex with a multitude of internal and external political factors to be considered when developing plans to reach the vision of the district (Petersen & Young, 2004; Jenkins, 2007; Jutabha, 2017; Poynton et al.

2018). The following implications for action are presented to support exemplary superintendents to achieve extraordinary results for their districts.

Implication 1: Develop an Annual Calendar of Opportunities to Share and Reinforce the Vision, Mission, and Values of the District

Based on the finding that exemplary superintendents intentionally keep the mission, vision, and values of the district at the forefront as they develop the strategic plans to guide the work of the district and the conclusion that exemplary superintendents utilize the district vision to align the work of the district, an annual calendar should be created to clearly outline opportunities to share and reinforce the vision, mission, and values of the district. There are numerous informal opportunities for leaders to share the extraordinary programs found throughout the district. Open houses, back to school nights, music performances, sporting events, and PTA sponsored events are a few opportunities where leaders can highlight the vision, mission, and vision of the district. Similarly, board of education meetings, PTA Council meetings, Chamber of Commerce meetings, and various gatherings throughout the community offer opportunities for leaders to message the successes and goals of the district. Taking the time to strategically review annual events to coordinate appropriate messaging can be a simple and effective way to ensure all stakeholders are clear about the focus and work of the district. Superintendent member organizations such as the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) and AASA (The School Superintendents Association) will be provided model calendars with timelines, suggestions, templates and model district examples that are shared openly on their resources web page. These tools would be widely distributed

through not only these entities but also within all new superintendent and aspiring superintendent workshops and academies.

Implication 2: Develop an Annual Plan with District and Site Administrators to Define Opportunities for Team Building, Collaboration, and the Development of Goals to Achieve the District's Vision

Based on the finding that exemplary superintendents develop strategic plans to carefully align all programs, initiatives, and decisions to the district's mission, vision, and values and the conclusion that exemplary superintendents collaboratively develop strategic plans to achieve the vision of the district, superintendents should set aside dedicated time at the beginning of the year with both district and site leaders to define opportunities for team building, collaboration, and the development of goals to achieve the district's vision. The research indicated it was critically important to devote time to connect with members of the team to create stronger bonds and build deep levels of trust. By focusing on team building activities and embracing a culture of collaboration and shared decision making, superintendents can capitalize on the efficacy of their teams to develop strong comprehensive plans to achieve the goals of the district. The researcher will work with the Los Angeles County Office of Education and the Superintendent Leadership Network to provide superintendents with resources around team building, collaboration and goal development which could be used by superintendents, as well as district and site leaders during the summer planning months. These resources would serve as a guide to support leaders to work collaboratively with their teams as they discuss ways they can model team building and foster collaboration. These resources will also provide guidance on how time can be dedicated during regularly scheduled cabinet

meetings, extended cabinet meetings and regularly scheduled meetings with administrators to frequently revisit the goals and the plans. Superintendents and site leaders can use these resources with all departments at the district office and at site staff meetings. These resources can additionally support any other collaborative structures in the district. This intentional planning will help superintendents strategically plan out the year so there is a focus on plan alignment with the vision of the district.

Implication 3: Utilize the Goals in the Strategic Plan to Identify Potential Professional Learning and Collaboration Opportunities to Support Continuous Improvement

Based on the finding that exemplary superintendents expect all members of their organizations to engage in a variety of professional learning opportunities and collaborative structures to improve as individuals and as an organization and the conclusion that exemplary superintendents place a high value on professional learning and collaboration, superintendents could utilize the defined goals in the strategic plan to identify potential professional learning and collaborative opportunities to support continuous improvement. The research indicated superintendents highly encourage and expect all members of the district to seek out and participate in professional learning and meaningful collaboration. This professional learning and collaboration may include grade level collaboration, content collaboration, vertical collaboration, department collaboration, attending conferences, professional learning sessions, and working with coaches and consultants. The researcher will work with the Los Angeles County Office of Education and the Superintendent Leadership Network to provide superintendents, assistant superintendents, curriculum experts with resources to support the important

work of their Teachers on Special Assignment, content experts, and instructional coaches. These resources will detail the value of encouraging and incentivizing participation in both synchronous and asynchronous professional learning by offering additional pay, advancement on the salary schedule and digital badging should be considered. Regardless of the format or structure, it was evident superintendents expected authentic collaboration and on-going professional learning to be a non-negotiable in the districts.

Implication 4: Monitor the Implementation of Programs and Activities Identified in Existing Plans by Developing Strategic Check In Periods to Gather Formal and Informal Feedback to Modify Plans Accordingly

Based on the finding that exemplary superintendents are continuously gathering information through needs assessments to ensure they have a firm understanding of the evolving needs of the district, superintendents may consider monitoring the implementation of programs and activities identified in existing plans by developing strategic check in periods to gather formal and informal feedback to modify plans accordingly. With the extreme busyness of the superintendent's office, strategic calendaring and managing of time is imperative to make certain important items do not become buried in the day to day operations. By strategically planning formal meetings with all stakeholder groups, the superintendent can ensure information and communication is free flowing. The researcher will work with the Los Angeles County Office of Education, the Superintendent Leadership Network, and Thoughtexchange to provide superintendents, district leaders, and site leaders with examples of the ways in which exemplary superintendents intentionally visit departments, schools, and community events to seek out and receive input through these informal settings. These

resources will also detail how PTA meetings, School Site Council meetings, student performances, athletic events, school assemblies, special school events, community fundraisers, and parks and recreation events can provide tangible opportunities for district leaders to interact in an informal manner to get a wide range of feedback from a variety of stakeholders. Having access to this information provides another data point for superintendents when analyzing the progress towards achieving the goals of the district and allowing timely revisions to plans as necessary.

Implication 5: When Faced with Challenging Situations, Consider Creating Intentional Opportunities to Meaningful Engage with Stakeholders to Reinforce the District’s Mission, Vision, and Values

Based on the finding that exemplary superintendents believe in open and transparent communication to move towards the realization of the district’s vision and the conclusion that exemplary superintendents engage in meaningful stakeholder engagement to address challenges faced by the district, superintendents should consider creating intentional opportunities to meaningfully engage with stakeholders to reinforce the district’s mission, vision, and values when faced with challenging situations. One of the most important roles the superintendent holds is chief communicator. Although the COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented need for consistent and thoughtful communication, the superintendency has always required on-going communication to ensure adequate messaging was occurring to tell the story of the district. The researcher will work with the Los Angeles County Office of Education, the Superintendent Leadership Network, and the California Association of Public Information Officials to provide superintendents with resources and information identifying the benefits of hiring

a dedicated public information officer to support communication with all stakeholders. However, regardless of having a public information or not, resources will be provided to assist superintendents and their teams to engage with all stakeholders so there is a clear opportunity to seek and receive input. These resources will support outreach and engagement to fulfill the statutory requirements to complete the Local Control and Accountability Plan or the Western Association of Schools and Colleges plan. Additionally, superintendents will receive information on how to leverage existing meetings such as PTA meetings, School Site Council meetings, Community Advisory Committee meetings as well as city meetings, chamber of commerce gatherings, Associated Student Body meetings and gatherings of local non profit or service organizations. Feedback can also be gathered through surveys, social media campaigns and formal communication structures through the student information systems. Superintendents might also consider informal settings like coffee with the superintendent, town halls, and video conference meetings. By proactively engaging with stakeholders when challenges arise, the superintendent can foster good will and trust with stakeholders as they discuss potential solutions to address the challenges.

Recommendations for Further Research

Recommendation 1: Other Superintendents in California

It is recommended that this study be replicated with superintendents from other counties within California. It will be beneficial to see if the particular region of the state has any impact on the results, as this study was comprised of superintendents in Los Angeles County.

Recommendation 2: Other Superintendents in the United States

It is recommended that this study be replicated with superintendents from other states within the United States. It will be beneficial to see if the particular state of the country has any impact on the results, as this study was comprised of superintendents in Los Angeles County, in the state of California.

Recommendation 3: Cabinet Level Leadership

It is recommended that this study be replicated with other cabinet level administrators including but not limited to assistant superintendents of business, educational services, and personnel. It will be beneficial to see if the results are similar with these high level leadership positions.

Recommendation 4: Boards of Education

It is recommended that this study be replicated with members of boards of education. This study could help current and aspiring members of boards of education understand the impact of their leadership and how that leadership leads to the achievement of extraordinary results.

Recommendation 5: Collaboration with Associations

It is recommended that professional organizations such as the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA), the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), the California School Boards Association (CSBA), and the National School Boards Association (NSBA) consider conducting research to determine the leadership strategies superintendents perceive impact their districts to achieve extraordinary results in the contentious political climate in the post pandemic era. This

study would be beneficial to all school and district leaders as this is a challenging political climate to be an educational leader.

Recommendation 6: Thematic Analysis

It is recommended that the 8 thematic dissertations are combined into one study to identify patterns and trends. It will be beneficial to see how the different populations studied by each researcher are similar and different.

Recommendation 7: Labor Partner Leadership Teams

It is recommended that this study be replicated with labor partner leadership teams. This study could help labor associations and the districts they serve understand the impact of their leadership and how that leadership leads to the achievement of extraordinary results.

Concluding Remarks and Reflections

Leading a district is both rewarding and challenging. Superintendents are under constant pressure to address concerns, respond to public opinion, find solutions to declining enrollment, shrinking allocations and facilities issues, all on top of developing sound instructional plans to support the diverse needs of students (Fowler & Johnson, 2014; Wilhite, 2018). These pressures grew substantially during the pandemic. Despite these challenges, superintendents, district and site leaders, teachers, itinerants and classified staff members rallied to offer safe, supportive and creative educational solutions in a time of great crisis (Roff, 2021). As circumstances begin to normalize, superintendents must continue to lead with a sense of urgency to meet the needs of those they serve.

As this study validated, exemplary superintendents possess every one of Simon Sinek's (2020) five infinite mindset practices to some degree.

- **Just Cause:** These superintendents used the district's mission, vision, and values to create synergy and focus to achieve extraordinary results.
- **Build Trusting Teams:** These superintendents were present, accessible and supportive as they walked alongside their team members. This accessibility and collaboration helped create and enhance the development of trusting teams.
- **Study Your Worthy Rival:** These superintendents modeled and expected everyone in their organization to operate with a growth mindset and openly learn and collaborate with others to improve their craft
- **Preparing for Existential Flexibility:** These superintendents were agile thinkers and planners. They understood the importance of not only having detailed plans, but also the insight to ensure they had frequent opportunities to assess the progress being made to achieve the goals set out in the plans.
- **Demonstrating the Courage to Lead:** Possessing the other four infinite mindset practices mean little if the superintendent does not have the courage to lead. These superintendents actively sought out opportunities to collaborate and communicate with all stakeholders.

Equipped with these sound practices, superintendents are poised to meet and respond to any challenge that may occur while still focusing on their vision.

Having served as a superintendent four years prior to the pandemic and now two years into the pandemic, the literature review and the data gathered in the research both validate my experiences but also allowed me to reflect and reconsider the intentionality

behind some of my practices. Although we have structures and systems in place to reinforce our vision and mission, prior to the pandemic we did not actively seek out stakeholder engagement, but rather waited for stakeholders to reach out to us. Now on the other side of the pandemic, we have become far more intentional with our engagement strategies. As a result of the findings of this study, I will be even more intentional in calendaring specific events where I can share our story and the successes we have achieved. This information will inform our plans, drive our professional learning and collaboration, all in an effort to ensure we are continually assessing where we are and where we are going as a district as we seek extraordinary results on behalf of the students, staff, and community we serve.

Having the opportunity to sit with 12 of my colleagues and have dedicated time to listen to their leadership stories and philosophies was both humbling and inspiring. Their descriptions of the ways in which they lead and support their community made me proud to be a superintendent and challenged me to reconsider the way I lead. These 12 dedicated and committed educators made me a better superintendent just by being fortunate enough to spend time with them away from the noise of everyday life even if only for an hour. My hope is that an aspiring superintendent or a current superintendent will be inspired to emulate and learn from these wonderful leaders or see themselves in these recounts and feel validated by the work they do on behalf of the children they are charged with educating.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Literature Review Synthesis Matrix

References	NCLB/CCSS	Distributed	Authentic	Happenstance	Servant	Transformation	Roles/Barriers	Just Cause	CTL	Teams	Flex	Rivals
A Comparison of core competencies of school							X					
A review of the empirical literature on no child left behind	X											
A student-centered approach and mindset												
Adult Learning	X		X									
American Association of School Administrators (2011).	X						X					
An empirical study of leader ethical values, transformational leadership			X			X						
An investigation of ethical leadership perspectives			X									
Authentic leadership as a mediator between professional identity			X									
AUTHENTIC TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND IMPLICIT			X			X						
Centralized Decision Making Threatens Teacher Autonomy	X						X					
Character and servant leadership					X							
Choose your enemies well												X
Coherence:								X	X	X		
Collective efficacy: A neglected construct								X		X		
Collective efficacy: How educators' beliefs impact student learning.								X		X		
Common Characteristics of the Superintendency							X					
Comparison of transformational leadership practices						X						

Exploring the relationship between leader's core self evaluations					X			X	X			
Exploring the Relationship between School Growth Mindset		X										
Find your why								X				
Finite and infinite games								X				X
From silos to solutions	X	X										
From the Leader's Values to Organizational Values: Toward a Dynamic				X				X				
Good to great								X	X	X		
Governing at the top:	X						X					
Happenstance capitalized through cultural immersion in Ghana.					X							
Haven't we seen this before?	X										X	
Hidden value: How great companies achieve extraordinary results						X						
Higher education institutions and entrepreneurship											X	
How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness	X						X					
How startups utilize organizational adaptability											X	X
How the iPad helped bring down the Los Angeles schools	X						X				X	
Influence of managers' mindset on leadership							X					
Influence of Mentorship Experiences in the Development of Women Supt					X					X		
Initial validation of the planned happenstance					X							
Innovation and Leadership Values	X							X			X	
Innovation in sub-central education											X	

Application of Principle Centered												
Rural Superintendents' Experiences with Empowerment						X					X	
School Board Conflict, Decision-Making Processes Effect on Superintendent	X										X	
School choice and competition	X										X	
School climate: Leading with collective efficacy											X	
Servant leadership and serving culture						X						
Servant leadership theory						X						
Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power						X						
Shaking up the school house	X					X	X					
Social motivation at work:				X							X	
Spiritual capital											X	
Student assessment: What do superintendents need to know											X	
Superintendent and Principal Perceptions of Superintendent Instructional Lead						X					X	
Superintendent length of tenure and student achievement											X	
Superintendent response to the financial downturn	X										X	
Superintendent turnover in Kentucky	X										X	
Superintendents Building Public Trust and Engagement											X	
Superintendents describe their leadership styles Implications for practice											X	
Superintendents' experiences with distance learning practices	X										X	
The attributes of organizational change											X	
The change leader's roadmap					X						X	

The courage to lead									X			
The emotional ecology of school improvement										X		
The first time everything changed	X											X
The five dysfunctions of a team								X		X		
The governance core: School boards, superintendents	X						X					
The happenstance learning theory				X								
The impact of group efficacy beliefs and transformational								X	X	X		
The importance of authenticity for self and society			X							X		
The Infinite Game								X	X	X	X	X
The Influence of Mentoring on Developing Leaders	X				X		X			X		
The leadership challenge								X	X			
The Mediating Effect of Faculty Trust in Principals on the Relationship					X					X		
The new meaning of educational change	X						X					
The No Child Left Behind Act and its Influence on Current and Future	X											
The power of trust										X		
The struggle for power and control: Shifting policy making models	X						X					
The Superintendent's Role In Promoting Relationships With Selected Stakeholders			X					X		X		
Theory into Practice: A cry from the field for innovative leadership	X											
Thinking globally: The national college of school leadership						X				X		
Transforming leadership development		X				X						
Unlocking potential						X						
Urban school superintendents: Characteristics,								X	X			

Warding off competition											X	X
What can be learned from growth mindset controversies					X							
Whatever it takes								X	X	X		
Why superintendents turn over.	X						X					

APPENDIX B

Email Request to Participate

Dear Prospective Study Participant-

I would like to invite you to participate in a qualitative research study to identify how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Simon Sinek's Infinite Mindset Framework (Just Cause, Trusting Teams, Worthy Rivals, Existential Flexibility, and Courage to Lead) are embedded within their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. We are seeking to better understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

The main researcher of this study is Marc Patterson, Doctoral Candidate in University of Massachusetts Global Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership program. You were chosen to participate in this study because you are a superintendent within Los Angeles County who met the criteria for this study because of your known expertise as a superintendent who has experienced extraordinary results.

Twelve superintendents from Los Angeles County will participate in this study through an electronic survey and an interview. Participation in the survey should take 5-10 minutes. Participation in the interview should take 45 minute to an hour via Zoom and audio recorded. Both are entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research. I understand that the Investigator will protect my confidentiality by keeping the identifying codes and research materials in a locked file drawer that is available only to the researcher.

The possible benefit of this study to you is that your input may help add to the research regarding the lived experiences of exemplary Superintendents that produce extraordinary results. The findings will be available to you at the conclusion of the study. You will not be compensated for my participation.

I realize how incredibly busy you are under normal circumstances let alone during a pandemic at the beginning of the holiday season. I truly thank you in advance for considering participating in the study. If you would like to participate or have additional questions please do not hesitate to email or call me at 562-325-7380.

Sincerely,

[Marc Patterson](#)

APPENDIX C

Introduction Email

Dear Study Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to take time out of your incredibly busy schedule to participate in this research study to explore and describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Simon Sinek's Infinite Mindset Framework (Just Cause, Trusting Teams, Worthy Rivals, Existential Flexibility, and Courage to Lead) are embedded within their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. We are seeking to better understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

As was previously shared, there will be two parts to the research study. The first phase consists of a short demographic study that should take 5-10 minutes to complete. Please click on the link to access the [survey](#). If you prefer to complete the survey by hand I have attached a pdf for your convenience.

The second phase is a 45 minutes to one hour Zoom interview. To make sure that you have as much information at your disposal as possible, I have attached the Thematic Infinite Mindset Interview Protocol and the Participant's Bill of Rights for you to review prior to our time together on Zoom.

I am looking forward to meeting with you.

If you would have additional questions please do not hesitate to email or call me at 562-325-7380.

Sincerely,

Marc Patterson

APPENDIX D

Thematic Infinite Mindset

Demographic Survey and Interview Protocol

“My name is Marc Patterson and I am a doctoral candidate at University of Massachusetts Global in the area of Organizational Leadership. I am a part of a team conducting research to explore and describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Simon Sinek’s Infinite Mindset Framework (Just Cause, Trusting Teams, Worthy Rivals, Existential Flexibility, and Courage to Lead) are embedded within their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. We are seeking to better understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

I want to thank you for agreeing to participate in the interview on Infinite Mindset. The information you give, along with the others, hopefully will provide a clear picture of how exemplary leaders achieve extraordinary results. I sent the definitions related to the variables of the framework to you prior to this interview to help you understand the aims of the study and the concepts related to the interview questions I will be asking.

The questions I will be asking are the same for everyone participating in the study. The reason for this is to try to guarantee, as much as possible, that my interviews with all participating *superintendents* will be conducted in the same manner.

Informed Consent

I would like to remind you that any information that is obtained in connection to this study will remain confidential. All of the data will be reported without reference to any individual(s) or any institution(s). For ease of our discussion and accuracy I will record our conversation as indicated in the Informed Consent sent to you via email. I will have the recording transcribed to a Word document and will send it to you via electronic mail so that you can check to make sure that I have accurately captured your thoughts and ideas. The digital recording will be erased.

Did you receive the Informed Consent and UMass Global Bill of Rights I sent you via email? Do you have any questions or need clarification about either document? Do you consent to move forward with the interview?

We have scheduled an hour for the interview. At any point during the interview, you may ask that I skip a particular question or stop the interview altogether.

Do you have any questions before we begin? Okay, let’s get started, and thanks so much for your time.

First, I have some confidential demographic questions to ask you. The input gained from these questions helps to better understand the background of the participants and to provide context to the final results

Demographic Survey

Thematic Demographic Questions

Ethnicity

With which race/ethnicity do you identify? (Select all that apply)

- African American or Black
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian American or Asian
- Hispanic or Latinx
- Middle Eastern or North African
- Pacific Islander
- White or Caucasian
- An identity not listed, self-identify_____

We realize that the racial/ethnic category you selected encompasses many different nationalities. If you are interested in sharing more, please describe your nationality (i.e., Armenian, Puerto Rican, Vietnamese):

Gender

With which gender do you identify?

- Woman
- Man
- Agender
- Transgender
- Non-binary
- Genderqueer or gender nonconforming
- An identity not listed, self-identify_____
- Decline to state

Years of Experience Field

1. How many years of experience do you have in the field of education?

- a) 1-4 b) 5-8 c) 9-12 d) 13 or more

Years of Experience in Current Position

1. How many years of experience do you have in your organization in your current position?

- a) 1-4 b) 5-8 c) 9-12 d) 13 or more

Degrees

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?

Are there any additional professional certificates or degrees that you have earned?

Are you currently enrolled in any educational programs?

Interview Questions

1. Please share how your organization ensures priorities are connected to the organization's vision and aspirations.

- **Probe:** Please share an example of how this occurs in your organization?

2. How does your organization connect values and sense of purpose to advance the organization's just cause?

- **Probe:** How do you know your people are motivated and committed to achieving the just cause?

3. What practices does your organization use to create a trusting and mutually supportive team environment?

- **Probe:** When and how are these practices employed?

4. How does your organization promote a psychologically safe space that fosters trust?

- **Probes:** What does a psychologically safe space look like in your organization?

5. How does your organization learn from other successful leaders or organizations?

- **Probe:** Think about a leader or an organization who you admire, how did you go about learning about what makes them successful?

6. How do people within your organization learn from successful people who hold the same/similar positions?

- **Probe:** How do you as a leader support this practice?

7. How does your organization identify new opportunities to achieve the organization's vision?

- **Probes:** How are people encouraged to develop ideas to adapt to changing conditions?

8. Tell me about the time that staying on the same path was not going to fulfill your organization's just cause?

Probes:

- How did the organization identify the need to change?
- How did the organization address the concerns about the potential risks?
- How did making the changes affect your organization's outcomes?

9. How does your organization stay aligned with its values and goals when pressured to take a different path?

- **Probe:** Please describe a specific experience.

10. How does your organization model the willingness to take risks?

- **Probe:** Please provide an example.

11. What supports exist within your organization that foster the embedding of Infinite Mindset practices?

- **Probe:** Please give me more details.

12. What barriers exist within your organization that hinder the embedding of Infinite Mindset practices?

- **Probe:** Please give some examples of barriers that impeded your organization.

“Thank you very much for your time. If you would like, when the results of our research are known, we will send you a copy of our findings.”

General Probes

Possible Probes for any of the items – For researcher’s eyes only ☺

The General probes may be used during the interviewee when you want to get more information or expand the conversation with them. These are not questions you share with the interviewee. It is best to familiarize yourself with these probes and use them in a conversational way when appropriate to extend their responses.

1. “Would you expand upon that a bit?”
2. “Do you have more to add?”
3. “What did you mean by
4. “Why do you think that was the case?”
5. “Could you please tell me more about.... “
6. “Can you give me an example of
7. “How did you feel about that?”

APPENDIX E

INFORMED CONSENT FORM INFORMATION

ABOUT: Superintendents as Exemplary Leaders: A Phenomenological Study

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Marc Patterson

PURPOSE OF STUDY: You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Marc Patterson, a doctoral student from the School of Education at University of Massachusetts Global. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Simon Sinek's Infinite Mindset Framework are embedded within their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

By participating in this study, I agree to participate in an individual interview. The interview will last approximately 45 – 60 minutes and will be conducted electronically using Zoom. Completion of the individual interview will take place November 30, 2022.

I understand that:

- a) There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research. I understand that the Investigator will protect my confidentiality by keeping the identifying codes and research materials in a locked file drawer that is available only to the researcher.
- b) I understand that the interview will be recorded. The recordings will be available only to the researcher and the professional transcriptionist. The recordings will be used to capture the interview dialogue and to ensure the accuracy of the information collected during the interview. All information will be identifier-redacted and my confidentiality will be maintained. Upon completion of the study all recordings will be destroyed. All other data and consents will be securely stored for three years after completion of data collection and confidentially shredded or fully deleted.
- c) The possible benefit of this study to me is that my input may help add to the research regarding the lived experiences of exemplary Superintendents that produce extraordinary results. The findings will be available to me at the conclusion of the study. I understand that I will not be compensated for my participation.
- d) If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Marc Patterson mpatter6@mail.umassglobal.edu or by phone at (562) 325-7380; or Dr. Cindy Petersen (Advisor) at cpeterse@umassglobal.edu.
- e) My participation in this research study is voluntary. I may decide to not participate in the study and I can withdraw at any time. I can also decide not to answer particular questions during the interview if I so choose. I understand that I may refuse to participate or may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the Investigator may stop the study at any time.

f) No information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, I will be informed and my consent re-obtained. I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, UMASS GLOBAL, at 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the “Research Participant’s Bill of Rights.” I have read the above and understand it and hereby consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

Signature of Participant

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

APPENDIX F



UMASS GLOBAL INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Research Participant's Bill of Rights

Any person who is requested to consent to participate as a subject in an experiment, or who is requested to consent on behalf of another, has the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.
2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.
3. To be told about the risks, side effects or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.
4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.
5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.
6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study.
 7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.
8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.
 9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.
10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

If at any time you have questions regarding a research study, you should ask the researchers to answer them. You also may contact the UMASS GLOBAL Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. The UMass Global Institutional Review Board may be contacted either by telephoning the Office of Academic Affairs at (949) 341-9937 or by writing to the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, UMASS GLOBAL, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA, 92618.

UMass Global IRB Adopted 2021

APPENDIX G

Field Test Feedback (Observer)

Field Test Interview Feedback Report

Student: Marc Patterson **Chair:** Dr. Petersen **Date:** June 28, 2022

Synthesize the feedback received from the field test participant, observer, and self-reflection and concisely report the important findings in each area. May include what worked and what did not work.

Feedback on the Interview Process

1. The recommendation was to begin the interview with a less daunting question. Potentially consider a question around teams first to lower the awkwardness at the beginning of the interview process.
2. There was a suggestion to provide the participants with the thematic definitions so they have a better understanding of the background of the verbiage.
3. This may be particular to the demographic of superintendent, but there was confusion on why the experience ranges were written in that manner. One participant asked if there was an underlying assumption based on those ranges.

Feedback on the Interview Questions

1. Questions three and four were confusing for the participant. The participant reported that the questions seemed redundant.
2. It was suggested to break question 8 into small chunks or into multiple separate questions.
3. The observer stated that the way that some of the questions were constructed made an assumption that those practices are in place, therefore potentially skewing the responses.

Suggested changes to the Interview Script or Questions

1. It was suggested to the qualifying statements in question 8 into the probes rather than in the body of the question.
2. Provide definitions to the participants ahead of time.
3. Make the experience ranges three ranges versus four.

APPENDIX H

Filed Test Feedback (Participant)

Field Test Interview Feedback Report

Student: Marc Patterson

Chair: Cindy Petersen

Date: June 28, 2022

Synthesize the feedback received from the field test participant, observer, and self-reflection and concisely report the important findings in each area. May include what worked and what did not work.

Feedback on the Interview Process

Feedback on the Interview Questions

Suggested changes to the Interview Script or Questions

APPENDIX I

Alignment of Research and Data Collection

Research question	Variable	Definition	Interview question
How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of advance a just cause is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?	Advance a just cause	A just cause is a vision of an idealized, aspirational future, something bigger than ourselves and the organization. It connects to and reflects the values, emotions, and a sense of purpose of the followers, motivating them to make sacrifices to achieve it. (Carse, 1986; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Mascareno et al., 2019; Noghiu, 2020; Sinek, 2019).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Please share how your organization ensures priorities are connected to the organization’s vision and aspirations. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probe: Please share an example of how this occurs in your organization? 2. How does your organization connect values and sense of purpose to advance the organization’s just cause? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probe: How do you know your people are motivated and committed to achieving the just cause?
How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of build trusting teams is embedded in their organization to inspire extraordinary results?	Build trusting teams	A trusting team is a unit where individuals work together to know each other at a deep level and care about and value one another, while creating a high performing team environment that includes active listening, vulnerability, integrity, and personal accountability in a psychologically safe space (Fehr, 2018; Lencioni, 2006; Sinek, 2019).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. What practices does your organization use to create a trusting and mutually supportive team environment? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probe: When and how are these practices employed? 4. How does your organization promote a psychologically safe space that fosters trust? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probes: What does a psychologically safe space look like in your organization?
How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of study your worthy rival is embedded in their	Study your worthy rival	Worthy rivals are successful industry leaders who perform as well as or better than a leader or their organization. Leaders or organizations are	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. How does your organization learn from other successful leaders or organizations?

Research question	Variable	Definition	Interview question
organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?		inspired to study these players and improve based on the strengths and abilities identified in them. (The Millennial Executive, 2021; Sinek, 2019).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Probe: Think about a leader or an organization who you admire, how did you go about learning about what makes them successful? <p>6. How do people within your organization learn from successful people who hold the same/similar positions?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Probe: How do you as a leader support this practice?
How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of preparing for existential flexibility is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?	Preparing for existential flexibility	Existential flexibility is a leader's ability to anticipate changing conditions and initiate a potentially risky strategic disruption to set the organization on a new path necessary to achieve the idealized future. (Dhiman, 2011; Sinek, 2019; see also Avolio, 2005; Goleman, 1995; Shankman et al., in press, as cited in Owen, 2015)	<p>7. How does your organization identify new opportunities to achieve the organization's vision?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Probes: How are people encouraged to develop ideas to adapt to changing conditions? <p>8. Tell me about the time that staying on the same path was not going to fulfill your organization's just cause?</p> <p>Probes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How did the organization identify the need to change? How did the organization address the concerns about the potential risks? How did making the changes affect your organization's outcomes?
How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of the demonstrating the courage to lead is	Demonstrating the courage to lead	The courage to lead is the ability to stand up to pressures or norms that do not align with organizational or individual goals and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does your organization stay aligned with its values and goals when pressured to

Research question	Variable	Definition	Interview question
embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?		values and is characterized by the willingness to take risks for sustained success in an unknown, idealized future. (Lassiter, 2021; Sinek, 2019).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> take a different path? • Probe: Please describe a specific experience. 9. How does your organization model the willingness to take risks? • Probe: Please provide an example.
What are the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset?	Supports and barriers	An infinite mindset is a leader's desire to inspire their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits. A leader with an infinite mindset follows five essential practices: advance a just cause, build trusting teams, study their worthy rivals, prepare for existential flexibility, and demonstrate the courage to lead (Carse, 1986; Dweck, 2007; Sinek, 2019).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10. What supports exist in your organization that foster the embedding of infinite mindset practices? • Probe: Please give me more details. 11. What barriers exist in your organization that hinder the embedding of infinite mindset practices? • Probe: Please give some examples of barriers that impeded your organization.

APPENDIX J

Appreciation Emails to Superintendents

Introduction Email

Dear Participating Superintendent,

Thank you for agreeing to take time out of your incredibly busy schedule to participate in this research study to explore and describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Simon Sinek's Infinite Mindset Framework (Just Cause, Trusting Teams, Worthy Rivals, Existential Flexibility, and Courage to Lead) are embedded within their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. We are seeking to better understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

If you would have additional questions please do not hesitate to email or call me at 562-325-7380.

Sincerely,

Marc Patterson