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A SELF-EXPLORATION OF A PROJECT LEADER'S CAREER TILT, TRANSFORMATION,  
AND MOTIVATIONAL CHALLENGES IN THE FACE OF A MASS ORGANIZATIONAL  
LAYOFF: AN ORGANIZATIONAL EVOCATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

by

VALENTINA R. RADA

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of the University of the Incarnate Word  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

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UNIVERSITY OF THE INCARNATE WORD

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Valentina R. Rada

## DEDICATION

To my children Arun and Raul, who witnessed my transformation throughout this journey. You understood and were patient when Mom was busier with homework than you were and the many evenings and weekends, we missed spending together. I hope this journey and accomplishment will inspire you in the future and give you the strength to follow your dreams like I did.

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In this study, I reflected on my behavior as a project leader in an organizational culture undergoing significant transformations. I explored motivational and engagement best practices for personal and professional career growth in a changing environment, such as layoffs due to downsizing. This study includes my research rationale for improving performance given the impacted career of a project leader. I highlighted the role of goal setting as a critical part of project leadership to facilitate performance in times of organizational crisis. Additionally, I focused on autoethnography as a research method to self-reflect on the impact of self-determination on goal achievement. Through personal reflection, I have identified and analyzed the most effective motivational factors in project leadership and optimal strategies to efficiently achieve organizational goals related to changing organizational cultural environments.

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## Chapter I. My Career Tilt

### A Not-So-Quiet Ordinary Day

It was a quiet fall morning before the age of Covid. Our headquarters were in San Francisco, with two subsidiary offices in Los Angeles and one city in the Bluebonnet state. It was a friendly, family-orientated culture. I was the project manager for a few years and enjoyed my work. Although most initiatives had tight timelines, I learned the systems and how others performed in their positions. Mostly, I figured out ways to excel in these conditions and produce results promptly and efficiently.

My role entailed liaising between the corporation's business and functional groups and a technical group located in San Francisco. I was the go-to person for most of the technical issues or requests that would take place at that headquarters office or any corporation location. Issues could come from anywhere at any time during the day, even at night, and often during weekends. For some reason, that morning was quiet, just not for long.

That morning, I remember getting out of my office and seeing a guard at the entrance office. It was awkward, but I minded my business and walked into the hallway to check the mail as I would every morning. My mind rambled for a bit after seeing the guard. Maybe there was something about an employee being in trouble with the law. A few years back, there was an issue with an employee filming someone in the bathroom, which was a big deal. As I thought about this, I would understand if a security guard was escorting someone out of the building.

Getting back from the mail room, I saw another unfamiliar face. It was a blonde guy with a pretty face, well-groomed, and wearing nice clothes. I thought that was maybe someone from the new leadership staff. It could not be one of our field guys. They usually wear casual clothes, and sometimes they smell like food. This guy, on the contrary, was well-groomed and confident. Then I noticed an awkward, creepy smile on his face. I was wondering why he was smiling. I

smile at strangers, and they usually smile back, but this guy was smiling as if he knew me and wished me a good day. That smile stayed in my mind for many days after that.

I noticed that two of the offices I passed by were closed. That was awkward. These were the offices of two accountants, and they do not usually keep their doors closed. One was about to retire, and the other was a junior with the company. They hung out a lot together. The junior guy did it probably out of respect for his senior peer. While passing their closed doors, I thought.

*Maybe they had meetings and did not want to disturb others.*

These co-workers were friendly and did not like to hide behind closed doors. They wanted to cheer up those who passed by, especially in the morning. I was instead the grumpy one and did not want to talk to people until late in the day. I minded my business again, probably at that point, relieved that I did not have to listen to their stories or small talk questions. I would have to regret my thoughts later and miss their small chats, friendly remarks, and welcoming smiles.

While carrying on my thoughts of confusion, I saw the blonde guy again. This time he was with our Human Resources Director. He was relaxed and still smiling. The same smile as earlier, slightly mysterious, uncomfortable, and suspicious. On the other hand, the Human Resources Director was concerned, looking down, carrying a red folder. I almost touched that folder, as the hallway was tight. If three people walked in one direction and one in the opposite direction, one group needed to stop to pass by each other. This time, it was just the three of us. I did not stop but passed by and noticed the folder close to my left arm. The folder was red, new, and only had a few pieces of paper. It had that light look of a folder just picked up with one or two files, not to carry in your hand. Not because they were heavy but most likely confidential.

The Human Resources Director's face was white and sweaty. I knew he had diabetes for many years and thought he might not feel well. I was about to ask him if he was okay, but not

knowing the blonde guy, I thought again to mind my business. I smiled back at the blonde guy who had now made contact eye with me.

*Who in the world is this guy?*

I asked myself.

*Why is he walking in the hallway?*

I was thinking of introducing myself if we met again, but that was the last time we passed by each other.

At this point, there was dead silence everywhere. That hallway, once full of vibes and people cheering up, was now quiet and dark. There was no light coming from the offices with the doors opened. The lights from the hallway bulbs had shaded colors. I did not realize those lights' colors before because at least one office door was open on that side of the hallway. I felt cold suddenly. A sort of coldness that came from inside. I was not afraid but somewhat contradicted.

### **The Hallway Downlight**

I walked by the leadership room across from the office entrance. That room had big glass windows, and we could always see who was there. That is how we knew, or thought we knew, about project meetings or other leadership staff. That morning, three people were in the room: the president of the company, the operations director, and our marketing director. Usually, these meetings have pretty slides on the big screen about the business progress or upcoming initiatives, but this time, these guys were looking at a list in front of them. They were preoccupied with writing on that list.

I remember sticking my head in and asking our Ann, Marketing Director who led the meeting.

Me: Are we still holding our meeting this afternoon to talk about the new product promotion strategy?

Ann: Yes, we need to discuss and ensure the promotion is feasible.

Me: I agree. Let us meet as a team to discuss the impact from different angles.

Ann: Martha might not be able to attend, but we are confident you can cover for her.

I did not ask why or how Martha could not join. It was not the right time for the audience to ask such questions.

And I replied: Yes, for sure! Talk to you then. We will make it happen!

Looking back, I wish I had confronted her, asked the questions, and restated that we were a team and needed every team member to make things happen.

While carrying on this conversation, the operations director smiled at me. His smile was like the new guy in the hallway. But the president seemed preoccupied and turned his back away towards the window. Like he wanted to fly away from that room, I thought he was thinking of the numbers on the list they were all reading. The president used to be an accountant, which struck me when I first met him. I always wondered what comes first for him when he aligns plans for the company, the numbers, or the people.

Although I was confused, my optimism carried on. I was optimistic about my career with the company. I had just returned to school, and my boss agreed to support my education. I was dreaming of how to take the learnings from school and apply them for the business's good. I also dreamed about getting promoted and growing my career with the company.

*How could I miss that?*

I said to myself. I was confident in my seniority with the company and how well I knew the systems, and learning about how to administer a business could only support my career growth. I was on top of the world, my imaginary world.

I kept walking down the hallway. That hallway was going in a circle. I remember that when I first came for my interview. I met the chief executive officer, marketing director, chief financial officer, information technology director, and operations director at that time. I

remember how the information technology director who first interviewed me would take me to talk with each of these people. We kept going down the hallway like it was never-ending. At one point, he smiled at me and said: Do not worry. There is no way you can get lost in this place. If you miss an office, keep going; you will find it on your next round.

His warning was mindful, but that hallway still made me dizzy. So many times, I missed my desk in the first weeks of working there, but I was hopeful and never got lost.

When I turned left, I noticed one of my co-worker's office doors was open. I have known Frank ever since I started this job. We worked together on a couple of projects. He was the Marketing point of contact for any questions about upcoming promotions or new campaigns. He and I worked well together. I had total and complete trust in him, and I think he trusted me too. However, he did not agree or support me going back to school. He felt that was a waste of my time and money. He respected my decision, but whenever we talked about the school, he would pinch me somehow. We had a divergence the other day about one idea I had from schoolwork, and I did not want to speak to him for a while. But that morning, I felt like asking him what was going on. I rushed to the open door. He was not at his desk, but his computer was on.

*He must be somewhere around.*

I thought to myself.

Across his desk, there were three cubicles. They were all empty. There used to be three marketing coordinators. Two left at the beginning of the year, and one got fired. I did not bother to question why or how the two coordinators left. They were young and had a lot of potential. I thought they might have gotten bored with their assigned work by then. The third one, I heard she had some issues bullying some co-workers. Her boss decided to terminate her position a couple of months ago. She was devastated. She was a single mother with two young kids. I felt bad for her when I heard. I think she was acting like a bully because she was scared. It was a sort

of self-defense mechanism for her. Regardless, her boss did not want to deal with her behavior, and he let her go.

I did not want to wait for my co-worker as I waited alone in his office. I felt like stepping into his privacy. I left his office to go back to the front desk and ask someone what was happening. Returning to the hallway, I noticed the door of the small conference room slightly open. That conference room was on the corner side of the building, and it had big windows. That room was tiny, square, and had a round table in the middle. The round table was a light color. There was a lot of natural light coming into that room. That is how I noticed the red folder on the table. I could not see who was in that room as that folder caught my attention. Suddenly, the door closed from the other side, and I could not see who closed the door. Again, it was dark in the hallway. This time, I was more convinced that something was going on.

### **Shrinking on the Verge**

I was close to my office and went back to check my emails. I was hoping to find an email about what was happening. Our marketing team used to send us formal announcements when significant events occurred. That is how we knew about new product promotions or events the company would attend or hold. There was nothing. What was even weirder was that I received no new emails that morning. I usually received emails about follow-ups, mainly questions from the field, clarifying questions, or even customer complaints. There was nothing new in my inbox. It is said, “No news is good news,” but this time, “no news” was terrifying—the “quiet” before the storm. I felt paralyzed. It was numbness for my brain and body at the same time.

I sat there in my office, paralyzed, looking outside the window. My office was in a quiet area of the building facing its back. The view was not great, but there were a couple of trees I would stare at during my mindfulness time. I moved into this office recently after one of our senior managers moved to the headquarters. I sat in a cubicle before. Once they remodeled the

building, they gave me this office. I took a lot of pride in it. It was a place where I felt inspired. I had a couple of personal items and a collection of souvenirs from the company's events. I spent a lot of time in that office, late evenings, and early mornings. I used to go to the office on Sunday nights to plan my and the team's tasks for the upcoming week. It was my way of preparing for the week. Monday mornings were usually intense with production issues, escalations, complaints, and emergency meetings. There was no time to prepare and plan. Sunday nights were my planning and retrospective times. Ironically, this week's Monday was slow, as if suddenly, our systems had no issues, customers were happy, and our projects were on time.

While I sat in my office, numbed, and confused, I saw the human resources director and the blonde guy passing by my office. The human resources director was carrying a yellow folder this time. He was usually friendly and would stop by to say *Hi!* with his head down. He seemed concerned and worn. They entered the office next to me, where one of my two co-workers sat.

Three technical people were in the office at that location: a system administrator, Tania, and me. They had entered Tania's office. Tania had experience with the systems but tended to go deep into the weeds. It was challenging to work with her sometimes. She would not listen but rather stay trapped in her ideas. I heard her office door closing. I decided to call my husband. I was breathing fast and whispering, I said.

Me: Something weird is happening in my office.

Husband: What do you mean?

Me: I saw this guy walking in the hallway with the HR Director.

Husband: And what is wrong with that?

Me: The offices' doors are closed. It is so quiet, and a guard is here, too.

He got quiet and spoke.

Husband: Do not worry.

I continued, rambling.

Me: The president of the company is here, too.

He knew how companies ran their businesses and learned how to handle financial crises the hard way. I remember being sad or even mad at him when I discovered that any of his

employees were fired. He would remind me that it is business and nothing personal. Some employees did not fit in, and he had to let them go. Sometimes, he would have to eliminate specific positions, but that rarely happened.

Husband: They are probably downsizing.

Me: Downsizing!?

My nervousness blurred in my mind.

Husband: That could be good for you.

Me: How could that be good for me!?

Husband: Just do not worry. Go back to your work and wait to see what happens.

I got anxious, but I knew him well and trusted his senses.

Husband: We will talk at home tonight.

I said, much calmer this time.

Me: Okay. Talk to you later!

I cooled down and started getting ready for one of my meetings later in the day. I could stay focused and concentrate on building my meeting agenda for a few minutes. There was a topic I needed to do more research on. I liked to be on point and prepared for these project meetings and would spend time researching the issues. It was important for the audience to understand the technical aspects and to explain them in simple words, sometimes giving examples they could relate to. I marked that topic in red to follow up on it later. At one point, I heard my co-worker's office door opening. I wanted to stand up and see what happened but sat back. There was no noise, nothing, dead silence.

I went out the door and turned to my co-worker's office. She was not there anymore. Her desk was clean, but it was also dark. The lights were off, and the blinds were down. I could not see much, and I did not want to go inside without her being there. I was more confused and rushed to the system administrator's desk. His desk was in the server room. He always had

computers everywhere, and five surveillance cameras were on the walls. None of the room walls had windows. A neon type of lighting was in that room. Very bright. He was not there either, but I could not figure out his desk. I did not know which was his desk with all those computers around. I thought to look at the surveillance cameras for a second, but those cameras intimidated me. I felt like I was invading someone's privacy by looking at them. So, I left.

I went back to my office. This time, I felt so empty, disillusioned, and confused. I was sitting there, lost, and disoriented. I looked outside, absent, like something was getting pulled from who I was. I could also see the cars in the parking lot from my chair. That is how I noticed another co-worker, Martha, carrying a box to her car. I stood up and saw a plant in that box. It was an orchid that usually sat on her desk. That did not look right, so I went to her office. The guard I saw earlier was at the door of her office. I was hesitant to ask what was happening or return to my office. But I was also looking for answers or explanations of the situation. I could not passively witness this situation any longer.

While walking towards her office, I was thinking about how to approach the guard without being rude or aggressive, although at this point, I started being angry. I saw her coming close to her office, upset, breathing hard. The closer I got, the more I saw tears in her eyes. I rushed towards her and asked.

Me: What is happening? I saw you carrying a box to your car.

She was devastated.

Martha: I cannot believe this is happening to me.

She was crying even louder this time.

Martha: I worked here for twenty years. Can you believe it? And now they are saying I must go.

I looked at her, feeling her pain as much as I could understand at that moment.

Martha: I was here at the beginning of this business, and now I am out of the door by them simply saying that my job was eliminated. I have loans to pay.

She continued looking for stuff in her office to put in another cartoon box.

Martha: And you know my daughter is going to college next year.

Her anger ramped up.

Martha: Why now?

The guard was looking at us and stepped toward my co-worker.

Guard: Ma'am, it is time for you to leave the building. You can come tomorrow for the rest of your belongings.

I had tears in my eyes, too, now. I was full of anger inside, but I kept it cool outside.

Me: Everything will be okay.

I found myself saying.

Me: Do not worry.

I was trying to stay positive and encourage her.

Me: You have a lot of experience and will do great.

When I said it, I realized that is such a cliché. It is not like someone will wait for you at the exit door to give you another job, congratulate you for your twenty years of experience, trust you, and put you on your next assignment. I wish I had spent more time with my coworker, but I did not want to put her in a difficult situation with the guard. I spoke.

Me: Let's talk later.

Realizing she had to go back to her car and drive, I asked.

Me: Do you need a ride?

Martha: No. I already called my husband to pick me up. I am so tired of this place. I need nothing from this office to remind me of this terrible day.

Me: Think about it tonight, but do not worry. Your stuff will be here.

I hugged her and let her go. The guard was behind her, escorting her out of the building.

**“We rely on you!”**

I decided to return to my office, but this time, I was slower in my motions, like my legs could not move fast enough. I was passing by offices with closed doors, and the quiet in the office got deeper. I thought of asking someone what was happening. I went down the hallway to our marketing director. Clara was usually knowledgeable about our company’s events. I reached her office. She was at her desk. I entered and asked,

Me: What is going on? I just saw Martha. She left in tears. A guard escorted her.

Me: Most of the office doors are closed. Tania and Robert are gone, too.

She looked at me and said,

Clara: Yes, I know. But do not worry. You are safe.

Thinking out loud,

Me: Am I safe? What do you mean?

She turned towards me and asked me to sit down. I sat down, and she said,

Clara: There was a leadership meeting the other day with the new executives. They determined that due to this year’s numbers and the company’s poor performance, we should eliminate some roles here in this office.

Me: Who is then left?

Clara: You will be the only one from the technical side. From my understanding, you will work closely with the teams in San Francisco. You may want to reach out to Richard and Helen. They could probably give more insights.

My brain was rambling at this point. I heard before of people being fired, but not that many at once. Then I remembered that during a Human Resources class, I read about downsizing and how this could happen when new leadership takes over, or companies show significant losses. I nodded my head in agreement, but I did not understand. Reading about these scenarios sounded justified and rational, but not in real life. Books do not tell you about the desperation in the eyes of those who are let go or the emptiness of the ones who remain. Something died in me

that day. I was sad and lost my trust in the friendly and family-orientated culture. That was the beginning of my transformation.

I realized I had to talk to Richard. He was our IT Director at the time. He was an intelligent guy, but his people skills were debatable. Or at least this was my perception. On the other hand, he was not located in our office. He would come to our office every other month but did not have time to spend with us. Lately, I have been trying to build a relationship with him. I made some progress but did not feel like calling him this time. I thought for a moment.

*What if he forgot about me when he decided whom to fire and now could realize to get rid of me too?*

As confident as I was before that day, a feeling of fear began in my brain.

On the other hand, I had to learn more about this situation and my future with the company. That was the first time I ever thought about my future with the company in the way of separation. I tried a couple of times to look for another job, but I was never serious about it. I liked my job and the people I worked with. More than that, this was the first time I realized I could be fired. With all the optimism, hopes for my future career, and possible growth, I was now on the verge of being fired.

Helen, on the other hand, was our manager. She was at the headquarters. She was lovely and caring but also sharp and organized. I met her a few years ago when I flew to San Francisco for a project kickoff. It was a big project implementing an accounting system across the brands. We were in a small conference room with no windows, but on the walls were whiteboards and different colored markers. We had in the room mainly our developers, and we could feel like everyone was uncomfortable with each other. Some were shy, and some had big egos, thinking highly about themselves. I was nervous and a little intimidated by some, but I was also confident of knowing some of the systems well and felt I could contribute. In this tense atmosphere, I

could hear the Happy song by Pharrell Williams in the hallway. I thought that was an excellent song to unease the atmosphere in the room. As I went past the half-opened door, I was greeted by a short lady with blonde hair wearing a nice suit coat, carrying up her phone with the Happy song on her speaker. She said, *Hello, hello!* and then sang *'cause I'm Happy* along with the singer.

Helen: Yes, 'cause I'm happy you are all here, and we are going to do great things today.

She said over the song, but the volume was lower this time. Suddenly, people in the room started feeling friendlier with each other. At least I did.

That morning, I decided to call Helen instead. She answered right away.

Helen: Hello, my dear!

Me: Hello, Helen! Is this a good time to talk?

Helen: Sure, it is. How can I help you?

Me: You know, I have been confused since morning. The offices are empty. It is so quiet everywhere. Elisabeth is not here, nor is Robert. What is going on?

Helen: Yes. I know, you poor soul, you must be terrified.

Me: I am, and I do not understand.

Helen: Richard was asked last week to reduce our technical personnel and move everyone to San Francisco office. The new leadership believes we can run more efficiently from one central location.

Me: That does not make any sense.

Me: Robert supported everyone's computer in the office and most of the restaurant's infrastructure. How are we going to do that now?

Helen: We have some people here, and they will travel, and there will be a company that will support any infrastructure issues moving forward.

Me: Okay.

Helen: I am more concerned about Tania's type of work, but she said she would do some knowledge transfer with our team in the next 2 weeks.

Me: I am glad she is willing to help.

I spoke. I did not expect her to help and did not trust it, but I agreed with my boss politely.

Me: What about Carol?

Carol joined the company at the same time as me. We were both selected by the IT Director to represent each brand. We were peers. Many times, we talked about the challenges of

the brands we represented. We worked in parallel on similar projects and shared the lessons learned. We would sometimes compete to produce technology for the brand we represented.

Helen: Oh, Carol, she will leave in Spring next year. She confronted Richard about the layoff process in front of the HR director. She told them she still had projects to work on and that the company could not eliminate her position.

I did not ask much. I was too tired of everything happening, but I often thought of how one who gets laid off can fight the decision. I have never found out. Carol and I talked a few times after that, but I did not ask her anything about this incident.

Me: I'm happy she is still with us. She contributed a lot to the systems we built, and her support will be needed in the future.

Helen: Yes, absolutely.

My boss said in agreement.

Helen: Plus, she fought with Richard about the layoffs, saying that she has loans to pay, and they cannot cut jobs like that. They should give people some time to search for jobs too.

Me: Oh, Wow! She had the courage to talk like that. I guess she felt like she did not have much to lose.

My boss remarked.

Helen: I'm happy Richard did not involve me in all this mess.

My boss confessed more as a relief from her frustration with the entire layoff process.

Me: What about Elisabeth? What happened to her?

Helen: They let her go.

Me: I cannot believe this is happening. She is such a bright girl.

Helen: I know. I hired her. She is a smart and hard worker. She will find a job quickly.

Richard and I will support everyone in finding jobs. We will provide them with references. They are great people. It was not their fault.

I felt like crying suddenly but held it. My boss could not see me. We talked on the phone, but I did not want to let this get me down. There was a feeling that I had to stay strong. It was like an earthquake. It was quick, but the aftermath was devastating. So many ruins and people were hurt. In those moments, you do not have time to cry. One must stay strong and stand up.

Helen: But do not worry. You are safe.

My boss said it like she felt I was about to crash.

Helen: Richard knows your value and contribution well. We all appreciate you. You will be that office's primary technical contact, and we know you will do great.

*I will be so freaking alone.*

I said to myself. I did not trust anything they said anymore. I knew I could do the work. I was not afraid of that, but how they pushed these people out gave me a bitter taste. They were all hard workers. They all did their best. Slowly, insecurity started growing in me.

*How would I know I will not be next? When will my time come?*

It was not even an hour ago when I thought I could impact the business and the brand, and now I fear not losing my job. A feeling of insecurity started parting over my brain, and it went that way for a long time after that day. While my boss bragged about me and tried to support me morally, I saw my co-worker, Frank, passing by my office. He was in a rush and did not look toward my desk. I could not understand his mood because he was too fast. I could not listen to my boss anymore. I knew she meant well and probably believed in all the bragging, but it still sounded fake. At that point, my confidence dropped, being replaced by insecurities instead.

Me: Yes, I appreciate your kind words. You are too nice to me. I must admit I am in shock, but sure I will see things differently tomorrow.

After that day, things changed utterly.

I wanted to go home, but how can one ask to go home when the "sword" of being possibly fired is now above your head? I should have asked to go home earlier, but I did not.

Me: Let's stay in touch.

Helen: Yes, sure! Call me any time you need anything. I'm here to support you.

## Integrity at Stake

I put the phone down and rushed to David, my friend's office. I do not know what I hoped to learn, but I needed to vent and be mad freely. I knew he would be the only one who would understand and would not judge, and even if he did it, I trusted him.

Me: Hey!

I stepped into his office.

Me: What the hell is going on?

David: I've just come back into my office. They sent me out in the field this morning with some boards at the store in Bandera.

Bandera was almost 50 miles away from our office. That was awkward.

David: I heard about the layoffs. It is a mess. They let go more than half of the other brand employees, and a couple of others were told to go home today at the corporate office.

Me: How do you know?

I asked.

David: Brian called me and told me they had let him go. They only have one IT guy left there too. Accounting and Marketing are mostly gone. They plan to outsource accounting and IT and do not want to invest resources in marketing.

My friend was much more approachable than me. People would call him to vent or tell him things around the office. On the other hand, I was driven and focused on getting things done.

Most of my co-workers would avoid me for small chats.

Me: We have just learned about downsizing at one of the HR classes in school.

David: Sure, you did! But this is the real thing.

Me: I understand, but on the other hand, downsizing is justified from a business administration perspective.

David: Bullshit with your school stuff. I do not say it is not justified, but they could have avoided these layoffs. They are greedy. They wanted to sell the company, and people were too expensive assets.

Me: Who are they?

David: The owners and the fricking board of directors.

Me: How do you know?

David: Because, unlike you, I listen to people. You and your school are so boring, so useless.

I did not want to start a fight with him.

Me: All I said is mass layoffs are part of the downsizing process. I am wondering how they determined who they are and who leaves.

David: Two days ago, the heads of the departments were asked to make a short list of the people who stayed, and each received a script on how to approach every employee laid off early this morning. They read that script. HR was there, and a consultant was there too. They had a guard at each office to take the employees out of the door in case of any incidents.

Me: So, they knew what they were doing, but they only let people know 2 days ago?

David: They did not want noise around this layoff. It would not have looked good on the brands.

I was making connections in my mind. The blonde guy was the consultant. That explains the way he looked and carried himself.

Me: Why did they need a consultant for each layoff?

David: To explain to each employee the severance and confidentiality of the layoff process.

Me: Oh, I did not think of that... Did they receive severance?

David: Most of them received good money. It depends on their time with the company.

Me: I am tired already. Let's go and eat something.

David: I have a meeting with a vendor in half an hour. I can not.

Me: I will grab something fast. I have a meeting at two too.

I left his office worn out with my head down, overwhelmed, and tired at the same time. I went down to my car. I did not want to sit somewhere to eat. I was by myself. I went to a restaurant nearby and ordered a soup and salad drive thru. I turned on the music and blanked out my thoughts. I used to do that when I felt overwhelmed. Then, I drove, not sure for how long in the surroundings.

I came back for the meeting scheduled at 2 p.m. that day. I was mainly prepared except for the issue I highlighted earlier in red. I knew I had to research how to show some breakfast products in a particular order for the online menus. I realized I had to get on a call with one of our vendors to learn more about it.

Me: Hey, George! How are things?

George: Business is good. What about you?

I was hesitant to talk to him about what had happened. It was an internal business issue, and I did not have the power or the capacity to discuss the layoffs with him.

Me: I am doing good as well. Busy, as you know.

George: Busy good? I assume.

Me: Sure, busy good.

I said mechanically. I was trying to stay focused on the clarification I needed.

Me: We have a meeting about the online systems shortly, and I am unsure what the process is to show multiple products and what the order is.

He explained the process to me. I took a couple of notes, and at the end, he said

George: Call me if you still have any questions.

Me: I will pass along your process to the team and call you back.

Usually, I would be enthusiastic about learning more about the processes, seeing our development's progress, and sharing the good news with our team. This time, I did not feel any excitement.

*Who cares if this works or not anymore?*

I suddenly felt withdrawal and indifference but forced myself not to show it. Then, I thought.

*You must do your best no matter what happens. It is your job!*

I grew up with professional integrity and respect for others and their work. But these two feelings of indifference and “doing the right thing” started fighting with each other. It is like the bad guy and the good guy argued. Although I did not like the person I was becoming, there was not much I could do to improve things—at least not on that day.

I went down the hallway to the large conference room. Only three of us showed up out of the seven people invited. I kept myself as professional as I could at that meeting. Carla, the marketing director, was there, one of the developers and me. We did not have the analysts or the

network administrators on the call or in the room. Carla was trying to stay positive. Only she knew what was on her mind.

Carla: We are now a small group working on this project, but we will make it happen.  
Me: We will do it somehow.

I nodded. I just wanted to go home and forget everything.

I talked over my findings and updated quickly. My passion was slowly going away.

*Why would I invest myself in this project if I might be told to leave one day?*

But then the other side of me would fight back.

*Because you are paid and started this project, you must make it work.*

We ended that meeting fast. None of us complained. I had to do some testing and analytical work since Martha and Tania were not there anymore. It was work I knew how to do. I had done it before and did not mind doing it again. But then, a feeling of guilt strokes me.

*What if I did not try to be such an overachiever and multitasker? Martha and Tania would have been still here.*

I thought of my husband's words.

*This could be good for you.*

There was nothing good about this situation. At least I could not see anything good. There will be more work and less time to be efficient, to think, strategize and plan. But what can I do now? I could not just quit. However, I had that idea for a moment.

*So, what if you leave? You will hurt yourself and the other team members.*

After that meeting and some testing, I forced myself to perform. I decided to go home. It was around 4 p.m. I could not be there anymore. I just left. I drove back and tried not to think of anything but to listen to the music. I passed by a church. I usually like to pray. I prayed harder this time and had those who had to experience the layoff in my mind. That would have been a challenging, traumatizing day for them. Then I thought of those who are left to stay with the

company and are probably hated now by those who were let go. Most of the time, the focus is on those who were terminated, but what about the survivors? People would say at least they have a job and a paycheck. And that is true, but what about all the emotional rollercoasters they go through?

I reached home and contacted some of those laid off that afternoon. Some were angry with their bosses and the new leadership. Some of them would not talk. Most of them were with the company for almost their entire career and waiting to retire. Some had just recently started, and they were looking with hope for their future in the friendly and family-oriented culture that the company advertised. Now, those dreams are over for all of us. The future wasn't that bright, at least in my eyes.

The following day, the new leadership called a town hall meeting. It was held the same as before in our large conference room. I was hesitant to go. I was too upset and disappointed. I went down for the sake of being present. We were less than half compared with our previous town hall. Some of my coworkers were happy they still had jobs, but most were indignant and scared. We were all deep inside, scared and wondering when our turn would come. The company's president stood before us with his head down and an unconvincing speech about losing great employees.

President: Yesterday was a sad day in the history of the brand. We lost a significant number of great employees. We tried to save their positions, but due to the company's poor performance, that was the best we could do to move forward.

I wanted to get out of the room. I was not afraid anymore suddenly, but then I remembered that I respect others regardless of their position. With integrity, I continued staying and listening to the speech but completely disengaged. I did not trust them anymore. I could not trust some leaders who gave up on the people who brought that brand to what it was the day before.

## **Was I Lucky?**

That fall, before the age of Covid, I was in the middle of studying for the MBA program that I began because I wanted to learn more. I hoped the learning process and knowledge I gained would take me to the next level in my career. I was full of hope and so optimistic until that quiet fall morning changed me.

Furthermore, there needed to be more trust. Results and numbers drove the new leadership. Another issue was that the company had three offices in three locations that could not be financially supported anymore. Thus, they aimed to eliminate or reduce our office's personnel and move to a smaller, more affordable location.

How did I manage to bypass the "blacklist?" Initially, I thought I was lucky, but then I discovered it wasn't luck. They needed me there. A couple of years ago, the entire point-of-sale system had been upgraded and optimized, and I was the key player in its design. I knew the process well and the new system.

Moreover, there was also a complex item mapping that only I knew how to handle. It was through my leadership that the entire system was developed and maintained. Subconsciously, I knew that was my power, but I was also an over-performer, committed, and always ready to take on new responsibilities. However, while studying for the MBA, I discovered new ways of doing things and wanted to be a leader. I developed a drive to coach and mentor others and see the big picture of the business. I wanted to grow but maintaining that point-of-sale system became business as usual, and there wasn't any challenge.

## **The Transformation Onset**

After that mass layoff day, I started detaching myself from the company and the people left there. My trust was zero, and I was focusing heavily on my education. As time passed, I was

emotionally detached and couldn't see any future in the company that was once a friendly environment.

Close to my graduation, a new CEO joined the company. He was full of energy and funny, and his perspectives were ambitious. It had been almost eight months since the layoff day. By then, that day's memories had washed out in my head, and I thought that maybe things were not over and there might be hopes for a bright future with the company. I became more engaged in the company's initiatives, and my drive to perform returned. I was excited to take my MBA learning to the next level. I could see some potential in how I might support the team, but not as a technical liaison this time. I thought about leveraging the analytics to reach the customers' needs and investing myself in different ways rather than simply maintaining a system and being on the jump if any technical issues arose. I also wanted to know more about how best to manage projects. I learned about the Project Management Institute and started to become a certified project manager.

In the meantime, fear started to take place. The fear of being let go. I lived with an unhealthy mental state of being fired at any point. I occasionally heard how so-and-so had been let go, but things were not talked about or publicized. I would learn about someone being allowed to go when someone else fulfilled their tasks. My performance review that year was the poorest I had ever received. My boss recommended I should be more assertive with our vendors. He put that feedback on the performance review paper and emailed it to me before the holidays. He never addressed that concern before or after any of our discussions. It was part of the performance review process at the end of the year. I asked if we could discuss his suggestion, but I never heard back. This review and feedback only intensified the lack of trust. I remember feeling so lonely during the 8 hours a day I spent at work. I felt trapped, smothered, and tired. But issues, new requests, and projects kept coming. My spirit was low.

Slowly, I let go of my support for the point-of-sale system. I was done with that type of work anyway, and although I knew letting go of my knowledge would jeopardize my position with the company, I did it anyway. I did it for my mental health and my freedom.

**“It is happening. It is over!”**

A year later, it was a Thursday afternoon after the mass layoff day. I knew my boss was in town, and we were supposed to discuss ways to revamp some of my projects and better support the team. I emailed him some ideas, knowing he would be in our office for several days. He stopped by my desk and asked if I had a minute to talk, and he took me to the HR director’s office. We all sat down. Then, I heard my boss saying,

Richard: How was your day?

I smiled and mumbled,

Me: A good day...

Richard: You know you are a great employee of the company.

You provided so much support for our team.

Then the human resources director, trying to help my boss with his statement, continued,

Human resources director: But unfortunately, you see, we must eliminate your position. We are trying to have only a technology team in the San Francisco office.

I started smiling and said to myself,

*It is happening.*

*It is over!*

From that point forward, I got numb, and everything became blurry in my head. I was prepared for this, but when things like that happen to you is different than hearing it from others. They explained some paperwork, but I did not pay attention to it as my brain started rumbling in different directions. My boss took me to my desk to pick up my stuff and asked if I needed to take something on my computer. No, there wasn’t anything because I never stored personal material on a company’s computer. I didn’t trust them. My boss escorted me to the office exit. He

was smiling, trying to show compassion, but he was so fake. I kept smiling at myself, and I was faking it too.

### **The Recovery**

That afternoon, I called my husband and told him shortly,

Me: They let me go.

Husband: I'm going home now.

He knew from my previous stories that the company wasn't doing well, and he didn't ask any questions. He just replied,

Husband: Don't worry about it. Everything will be fine.

I reached home around 2 p.m. in the afternoon. I never watch TV during the day, but that afternoon that's all I did. I don't remember what I watched. I was paralyzed. I wasn't upset, not angry, not even afraid. Suddenly, I experienced a feeling of freedom. I was free. I told myself I could not let this get me down and promised never to look back. It was my time to reinvent myself! I got up and planned for the days to come. Every day I woke up at 6 a.m., went to the gym, and engaged in hard exercises to increase my adrenaline. I would jog, lift weights, or do Ashtanga yoga. I remember jogging on the treadmill faster as if running away from my anger. Afterward, I would return home, apply for jobs, take interviews, and start seriously studying for the project management certificate. Overall, I was hurt, but I refused to feel bad for myself. I didn't want to let myself down.

## Chapter II. Developing the Study

### Introduction to the Problem

In recent years, high demand for project leadership has been attributed to significant progress in product development technology in the United States. Technology development is a growing field projected to increase 13% from 2020 to 2030, faster than the average for all occupations, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022, January 6). Further, the technology development subculture is highly related and embedded into the corporate organizational culture by following the same core values (Robbins & Judge, 2018; Van Roken et al., 2006). Thus, any changes in values, beliefs, assumptions, or norms of the corporate culture will impact the entire structure of the company, including its subcultures (Schein & Schein, 2016). Additionally, project leaders' behavior and motivation are highly affected by organizational cultures (Lanaj et al., 2016; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

Since this is a problem coming from the real world, I would like to add some personal context and my rationale for this research. I'm a certified project leader with high work ethical values and standards. I successfully led, and continue to do so, teams of developers that build solid product technology for various organizations in the United States. I'm compassionate and follow integrity, teamwork, and respect for others as ethical work values. However, a couple of years ago, I witnessed a mass layoff due to downsizing at one of the organizations I worked for. That experience was traumatizing enough to trigger my engagement in this research, to tell that story and let others relate and reflect on similar stories.

Given that the human aspect in the context of organizational crisis has been a controversial topic in recent years, further research and discussion are required about work values and behavior internalization against attractive pay, career advancement at the professional

level, and leadership strategies to review employees' performance after the mass layoff takes place.

### **Context of the Problem**

From 2015 to 2019, there were 1.8 million layoffs per month nationwide in several industries, including technology development, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022, April 18). These layoffs culminated in March and April of 2020 with 22 million layoffs. In 2021, the average number of monthly layoffs dropped to 1.5 million. Existing literature discusses the layoff phenomenon from different perspectives, such as how to communicate the bad news in the context of downsizing (Richter et al., 2016) or how layoff survivors further manage their work-life balance (Virick et al., 2007). Layoffs happen due to organizations undergoing downsizing. Little research is directed toward how employees adapt to new and transformed cultures while still in the workplace during downsizing. Many employees impacted by the layoff phenomena don't share their experiences due to confidentiality concerns or because they are too focused on recovery and finding other jobs.

In the case of this research, the central story will be a mass layoff that took place before the age of COVID-19 at a subsidiary office of a business corporation in a city in the Bluebonnet state. My story, approached in an autoethnographic manner, will cover my experience during the layoff day, the tensions and frictions after that day, and my recovery after being let go. The layoff triggered a personal and professional transformation. The intent is, through personal reflection, to further analyze the phenomenon of career development, engagement, and motivation in an organizational culture undergoing financial or structural crises.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework diagram below depicts concepts of goal setting, self-determination, and self-efficacy related to my career advancement drive. I analyzed and

researched the impact of the massive layoff on my personal and professional behavior. The stories accompanying this research are not meant to portray a chronological order of the events but rather to outline the emotional and time-related intensity of my perceptions throughout my transformation.

The before and after of the mass layoff trauma in terms of organizational cultural observations are significant focuses of my transformation and how the cultural changes impacted me emotionally and professionally. I will analyze the drive for professional improvement from a personal perspective and in the context of organizational culture transformation.

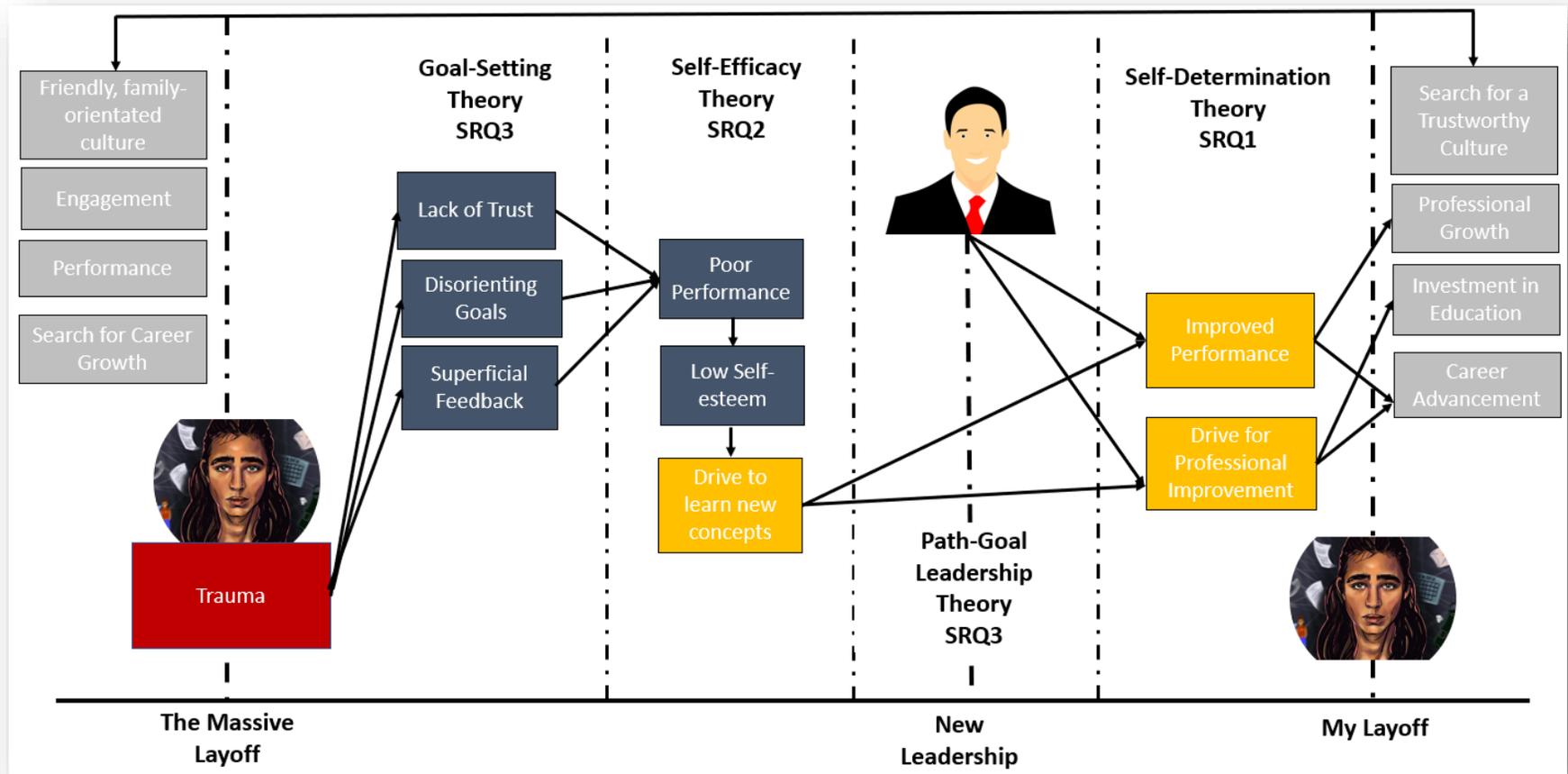
Key events in the transformation are intentionally outlined to emphasize the impact on my behavior and the drive for career growth and professional improvement. Although right after the massive layoff, I experienced frustration, lack of trust, and even depression, these are triggering factors for my poor performance and my need to learn new concepts or adopt a new behavior.

The external factors impacting my behavior from a personal perspective, such as being in shape or financially independent, will be tangentially analyzed in relationship with setting personal goals, which have impacted my professional growth through increased self-esteem in the long run. Overall, the conceptual framework below provides clarity and direction to the concepts analyzed and how cultural background and critical events impacted my drive for professional and personal development.

At first, I outlined the friendly and family-oriented culture, my high performance, and the search for career growth. The mass layoff trauma triggered a lack of trust, followed by personal and organizational disorienting goals and superficial feedback provided that year. All these contributed to my poor performance and impacted my self-esteem as a person and a project leader.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework*



*Note.* I used this conceptual framework to reflect on my experience and trauma starting the day the company I worked for started the layoff process due to downsizing and my layoff a year later.

At the same time, my graduation and a new CEO joining the company improved my performance and made me hope there was an opportunity for professional growth. Yet, since the company struggled financially, my position was eliminated, generating another trauma of searching for a trustworthy culture and professional development with low self-esteem and leadership self-efficacy.

Feedback throughout the performance review process after the mass layoff significantly impacted my performance, motivation, and, thus, my career development path. That, in part, has led me to the four motivational theories I have selected for this study. My inability to gain self-efficacy as a project leader was another reason, I chose these theoretical lenses for reflection. As the paper's title suggests, the idea is not only about how I “survived” after the mass layoff but how I adapted, or not, my career aspirations in the changing organizational culture.

### **Problem Statement**

This study addresses the lack of organizational strategies to create supportive work environments while downsizing, how to support career growth at the professional level for the layoff survivors, and ways to improve leadership strategies for communication and engagement with the layoff survivors throughout the downsizing process.

### **Lack of Concern and Support for Employees' Well-Being Resulting from the Mass Organizational Layoff**

In the case of the layoff, survivors perceive unfairness as the most intense negative emotion, according to Behr & White (2003). Considering Latham's (2012) perspective that “when employees feel unfairly treated, they respond both affectively (e.g., low commitment) and

behaviorally (e.g., decrease in helping behavior and an increase in retaliation),” creating supportive work environments becomes even more challenging throughout the downsizing process. Noer (2009) proposes a four-level organizational intervention model after the downsizing. The model starts with intervention, grieving, empowerment, and systems intervention. However, this model or other research does not describe how to manage best the layoff survivors' emotional side or what motivational mechanisms employers should engage to maintain employees' commitment and productivity.

### **Limited Career Growth Opportunities at the Professional Level for The Layoff Survivors**

Understanding how to strategize career goals is important for employees' performance and efficiency and equally relevant for employers in technology development organizations (Ashforth, 2012; Hermann, 2022). In the context of the layoff, according to survey research by Right Associates (1992), layoff survivors are insecure about their future with the company and future careers. When organizations are downsizing, careers and career planning are “short-term and situational” (Noer, 2009, p. 163). Thus, career growth opportunities in the downsized organization are limited, and support for growth at the professional level could constitute a way to keep layoff survivors motivated and optimistic about their future with the organization or other organizations.

### **Poor Leadership Strategies for Communication and Engagement with the Layoff Survivors Throughout the Downsizing Process**

According to House and Mitchell (2007), accomplishing work goals and attaining work satisfaction is dependent on “(a) personal characteristics of the subordinates and (b) the

environmental pressures and demands with which subordinates must cope” (p. 244). To this extent, House (1996) outlines that when work environments are stressful or frustrating, subordinates’ effort and satisfaction are enhanced by supportive leader behavior by increasing self-confidence and lowering stress and anxiety. However, there is limited research on the impact and influence of directive or supportive leadership behavior in the case of stressful work environments associated with the organization’s downsizing.

### **Research Gaps**

#### **Lack Of Research on the Topic of Work Values and Behavior Internalization in a Dramatically Changing Culture**

According to Deci and Ryan (2011), humans are inherently active, intrinsically motivated, and capable of naturally integrating. Thus, there are significant influences on attitudes, values, motivations, and behaviors when performing in a social environment (p. 416). In the workplace, autonomy-supportive environments are highly related to performance and well-being if equitable pay is provided (Deci et al., 2017). In this context, there is little research on how attractive pay influences work values and behaviors in organizations undergoing an organizational crisis. Therefore, this proposed research intends to contribute to this gap through self-reflection on the impact of non-supportive environments in a restructured organization, even when competitive pay exists.

#### **A Gap in Time on the Topic of Career Advancement and Opportunity at the Professional Level in Times of Organizational Crisis**

According to Ashforth (2012), individuals move opportunistically from one role to another within an organization or out of it, aligning their desires and qualifications with available

choices (p. 235). Additionally, Greco et al. (2020) point out that career mentoring can mainly support professional identification (p. 54). In this way, students, junior employees, or employees who intend to shift their careers could advance by exploring opportunities through the lens of their professions. Although career advancement in terms of career mentoring and professional identification has been researched at the organizational level, there is little research on career advancement at the professional level.

This proposed study will fill the above research gap by self-reflecting on the impact of career mentoring on professional advancement considering career shifts due to professional trauma, such as a layoff. This study will also explore the lack of support between career mentoring and professional identification. I will self-analyze in the context of the technology development subculture.

### **Lack of Research on the Topic of Enhancing Supportive Leadership Behavior to Support Commitment and Motivation in a Dramatically Changing Culture**

Locke and Latham (2006) support feedback, commitment to the goal, and task complexity as key moderators for goal setting. People need feedback to track their progress, self-efficacy, and mastery when acquiring complex tasks (p. 265). However, the role of coaching in promoting goal orientation while discouraging individual performance orientation requires future research, according to Phillips and Gully (1997). Factors like socialization and coaching promote goal orientation at the group level by discouraging individualist performance orientation are also to be investigated (p. 800). Through self-reflection, this research will contribute to an overview of motivation strategies to unleash motivation for performance and involvement in a cultural crisis.

## **Purpose of the Study**

This autoethnographic study explores my experience as a project leader and the impact of the mass layoff on my personal and professional transformation. The intent is to examine the self through autobiographical lenses and explore personal behavior related to the cultural environment, a technology development subculture in the case of this study. My position is closely examined from the inside to analyze better and critique the impact of the lack of a supportive workplace, limited career growth opportunities, and poor leadership engagement on my personal and professional transformation.

## **Rationale**

From my experience, in the corporate world, there is a drive for results and performance and minimal focus on reflection, strategy, or emotions. People and their needs are undermined, and few employees or employers contemplate this phenomenon. Further, although frequently occurring in recent years, layoffs are not discussed or analyzed for emotional impact. It is an untold phenomenon that employees do not discuss. Most people do not share their stories because they have signed confidentiality agreements with former employers.

On the other hand, there are concerns about possible negative consequences in upcoming job searches if they are perceived as disgruntled employees. Both employees and employers should be exposed to stories that explore perspectives after witnessing a mass layoff and being laid off. How employees grow, or not, from these experiences and how employers could avoid any animosities will be explored with the theoretical lens mentioned in the following sections.

Since these experiences aren't often told or reflected upon and layoffs could be traumatizing events (Damion & Nneka, 2016; Herrmann, 2022; Phekno, 2018), autoethnography

is an appropriate research methodology to bring in self-reflection in a cultural context through storytelling to portray common experiences and encourage others to tell their own stories.

## **Significance of the Study**

### **Practitioner Perspective**

The findings of this study are intended to support employees and employers on how to engage and unleash motivation and set meaningful organizational goals to align personal and professional career development when undergoing a financial or cultural crisis. In addition to recognizing downsizing aspects before the layoffs happen, employees can learn how to develop career planning and support strategies for professional growth. Investing in education, continuous learning, being financially independent, getting in shape, building solid professional relationships, and being open-minded to changes could help layoff survivors adapt to the changing culture faster. We live in a world where changes can happen at any time. The more prepared we are, the better we handle ourselves and support others.

From the employers' perspective, this study's findings will address the need of organizational leaders to create work environments focused on employees' emotional needs rather than only processes or policies, especially when the culture is undergoing major transformations. This study will unveil the impact of a changing culture on the engagement and productivity of employees and how employers could align organizational goals with the employee's career development goals to unleash their intrinsic motivation.

Additionally, in terms of leadership strategies in times of organizational crisis, leaders and employers can benefit from this study's learnings and reflection about enhancing leadership strategies to review employee performance and provide feedback in a culture undergoing crisis.

### **Scholarly Perspective**

In terms of how attractive pay influences work values and behaviors in times of crisis, this research will contribute to the existing literature by exploring the competency needs required for efficient performance in times of crisis. As discussed earlier, existing literature and research on self-determination theory discuss how competency, autonomy, and relentlessness are key needs for optimal human development. Still, the literature does not discuss how these needs are met during emotional distress.

Similarly, there is literature about career advancement at the professional level. Still, this research will contribute to the knowledge about career development and the goal-setting theory of planning career goals and gaining leadership efficacy in times of uncertainty.

In the case of adapting or enhancing leadership style, this research will contribute to the existing literature by overcoming the gap in path-goal theory and related research on how leadership and subordinate relationships can significantly change in times of crisis and that leadership strategies for communication and engagement are to be reconsidered.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I considered the following theoretical lenses to explain the career development, performance, and motivation of the layoff survivors during the dramatically changing organizational culture:

- the effect of organizational environment on intrinsic motivation through self-determination
- action orientation influence on gaining leadership experience considering self-efficacy

- increased motivation and improved performance by setting achievable goals
- the impact of organizational environment on the leadership style.

### **Organizational Environment on Intrinsic Motivation through Self-Determination**

According to Deci and Ryan's (2011) self-determination theory, three psychological needs are essential for optimal development. Those are the need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. The extent of self-determination is the cognitive evaluation theory (CET) which specifies two relevant aspects of intrinsic motivation related to rewards and feedback. It is about the controlling and informing aspects that could pressure people to act in certain ways and convey competence and autonomy (p. 416). Given the layoff impact on my competence, autonomy, and relatedness, these theoretical aspects will be further analyzed and researched.

### **Action Orientation, Leadership Experience, and Self-Efficacy**

From a different perspective, goal setting significantly impacts individuals' and groups' motivation. Robbins (2018) emphasizes how the research proposed by Edwin Locke reveals the effect of goal specificity, feedback, and challenge on performance. Robbins (2018) writes, "Intentions to work toward a goal are considered a major source of work motivation" (p. 224). This theoretical lens was used to reflect on and analyze how organizational goals impacted my intrinsic motivation. Also, how feedback was provided influenced my future work attitude and behavior after the mass layoff.

### **Increased Motivation and Improved Performance**

Foster and Hall (1977) performed additional research to show how goal setting influences performance and self-esteem and that individuals tend to set higher goals when initial goals are accomplished. "Goals were related to effort, and performance was related to psychological success.

In turn, feelings of success were associated with increased self-esteem, which was linked with increased involvement” (Hall & Foster, 1977, p. 287). These findings led to Bandura’s social cognitive theory of self-efficacy. In the case of this proposed research, this theoretical framework was used to explain the relationships between my self-efficacy, my performance, and the company’s goals and their impact on my psychological mindset for success.

Furthermore, Miner (2005) outlines Victor Vroom’s expectancy theory on the anticipated satisfaction when the goal is accomplished and how these feelings highly depend on the presumed outcome. “Expectancy theory argues that the strength of our tendency to act a certain way depends on the strength of our expectation of a given outcome and its attractiveness” (Robbins, 2018, p. 232). Miner (2005) considers that goal setting theory and expectancy theory complement each other in how performance and involvement in rewards of achieving a goal. He writes, “Goal-setting theory is in full agreement, rather than conflict, with expectancy theory regarding the relationship of expectancy to performance” (Miner, 2005, p. 163). Thus, these complementary theoretical lenses will capture my behavior toward the outcome of the projects I led, contrasting my complex feelings around trust and insecurities after the mass layoff.

### **The Impact of Organizational Environment on the Leadership Styles**

According to House (1996), the path-goal theory intends to support the effectiveness of individuals in a position of authority behavior of complementing their roles in their environment and helping subordinates attain work goals. House considers that individuals in positions of authority are effective to the extent of the organizational effectiveness for the subordinates by providing sufficient clarifications for the work needed to be performed. That way subordinates

will experience intrinsic motivation, receive valent rewards, and successfully attain the work goal.

On the other hand, when the work environment is dangerous or stressful, “supportive leadership behavior will lead to increased subordinate effort and satisfaction by enhancing leader-subordinate relationships and self-confidence, lowering stress and anxiety, and compensating for unpleasant aspects of the work” (Downey, Sheridan, & Slocum, 1975; Fulk & Wendler, 1982; House, 1971; Stinson & Johnson, 1975).

### **Research Questions**

My autoethnographically analysis will investigate the following questions and issues:

- How did the mass organizational layoff impact my motivation, performance, career tilt, and personal transformation?
- What were the challenges I experienced due to the perceived lack of concern and support for my well-being during the organizational mass layoff that impacted my motivation and performance?
- How did the limitations of career advancement resulting from the downsizing process impact my sense of confidence and performance?
- How did the lack of effective leadership communication strategies impact my motivation and performance?

Related to the central research question, I will explain how the layoff impacted my career while the company downsized and how my professional development was affected as its goals shifted towards survival rather than expanding its business opportunities. Although my pay was

**Figure 2**

*Theoretical Framework*

Emerging Theme	Literature Outlines	Theory/ Theorists
The Effect of Organizational Environment on Intrinsic Motivation Through Self-Determination	Humans have evolved to be intrinsically driven and motivated and at the same time, geared to develop through integrative processes from a cultural organization perspective naturally. Employees' performance is mainly affected by the motivation related to their job activities (Deci & et al., 2017; Deci & Ryan, 2011).	Self-determination Theory – Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (2012)
Action Orientation Influence on Gaining Leadership Experience Considering Self-Efficacy	Self-efficacy by generating higher other goals after achieving initial goals increases self-esteem and is linked to increased involvement (Hall & Foster, 1977; Robinson, 2013).	Social Cognitive Theory – Albert Bandura (1977)
Increased Motivation and Improved Performance by Setting Achievable Goals	Performance is optimized when goals are difficult, specific, and measurable, given that challenging goals enhance performance due to increased intrinsic motivation. Thus, working towards a goal is considered a significant source of motivation (Deci et al.,2017; Locke & Latham, 2005; Kleingeld et al., 2011).	Goal-Setting Theory – Edwin Locke (1960)
The Impact of Organizational Environment on the Leadership Styles	Leadership style should adapt to employees' skills and needs, the goal being to increase their motivation and satisfaction to be productive and align their personal goals to the overall objectives of the group or organization (House & Mitchell, 2007; Vecchio et al., 2008; Li et al., 2020)	Path-goal Theory – Robert House (1971)

*Note.* The chart above outlines the main theoretical themes explored in this study.

competitive, it was not enough to unleash my intrinsic motivation and overall engagement with the projects I led. With this question, I will describe my strategies to cope with the lack of trustworthiness and transparency after the mass layoff and the implications on my performance and motivation.

The second research question describes the challenges and obstacles I encountered trying to adapt to the transformed culture after the mass layoff. To reflect on the losing trust in the leadership and provide details on the lack of trust of my peers and team members in me as a project leader. In this sense, to contribute to the research gap of the work values and behavior internalization of the changing culture.

About the third research question, I described and self-reflected on the lack of career advancement opportunities in an organization undergoing a major crisis such as a mass layoff. How the crisis impacted my career growth and the lack of coaching strategies for professional advancement. Although I have been dedicated, overperforming, and ready to advance, career advancement wasn't an opportunity anymore. This situation impacted my self-esteem and confidence in advancing to a leadership position, although I was prepared for the role at the personal and professional levels. This self-reflection was further analyzed through the lens of the goal-setting theory and self-efficacy theory to understand better how I would cope in this situation to support my motivation and productivity.

Concerning the last question, the aim is to describe ineffective leadership communication strategies, such as the performance review process, in the context of the changing organizational culture. The intent is to provide details on my performance review after the mass layoff related to the disorienting goals I had to follow, and the superficial feedback provided by my supervisor.

I will reflect on the performance review process through the lenses of the goal-setting theory providing insights into the role of coaching in promoting goal orientation research gap. How the lack of coaching and mentoring impacted my performance and motivation.

The diagram below shows how I will use each theoretical lens with the research gaps and the proposed research questions. The stories I will tell and the theoretical lens or lenses I will use to reflect on the research gaps. In each of the stories, I will cover motivational aspects to reflect on. Either it will be the performance review process or the new CEO joining the company. Each will show how my motivation, self-efficacy, and self-determination were impacted positively or negatively.

### **Definition of terms**

In the context of this research, the following terms apply.

**Organizational culture.** Organizational culture represents a pattern of beliefs, values, and behaviors that a group shares in an organizational context (Schein & Schein, 2016). Each group member inherits or learns these patterns; every newcomer embraces them and adapts to the formed culture. As the organizations grow, these patterns evolve or transform into related departmental or functional subcultures.

**Downsizing.** In business terms, downsizing is a reduction of an organization's workforce by jobs or areas of the business to improve efficiency and productivity. The purpose of downsizing is to increase profits and the value of stock options by decreasing overhead costs and eliminating duplication of efforts due to mergers or acquisitions (Dreilinger, 1994; Miller et al.,

**Figure 3**

*Research Design*

Problem Statement	Research Gap	Theoretical Lens/ Lenses	Research Question	Stories
Lack of concern and support for employees' well-being resulting from the mass organizational layoff	Lack of research on the topic of work values and behavior internalization in a dramatically changing culture	Self-determination theory	What were the challenges I experienced due to the perceived lack of concern and support for my well-being during the organizational mass layoff that impacted my motivation and performance?	My Career Tilt  The Curse of the High Pay  Steve is not here anymore.  The New Office
Limited career growth opportunities at the professional level for the layoff survivors	A gap in time on the topic of career advancement and opportunity at the professional level in times of organizational crisis	Goal-setting theory; Self-efficacy theory	How did the limitations of career advancement resulting from the downsizing process impact my sense of confidence and performance?	New Career Goals  La La Land, here we come!  The Transformation Onset  Outstanding does not give you job offers.
Poor leadership strategies for communication and engagement with the layoff survivors throughout the downsizing process	Lack of research on the topic of enhancing supportive leadership behavior to support commitment and dedication in a dramatically changing culture	Path-goal leadership theory	How did the lack of effective leadership communication strategies impact my motivation and performance?	The Deadly Feedback  La La Land, here we come!  My Career Tilt.

*Note.* The chart above outlines the stories explored in this study address each of the research gaps and questions.

2019; Robbins, 1999). Organizations perform downsizing by reducing the workforce, redesigning the work, or changing the company's culture and values.

**Mass Layoff.** Per the United States Department of Labor, a mass layoff occurs when an organization simultaneously lays off 50 or more employees or 33 percent of the regular employees. In the case of mass layoffs, reducing the workforce is strategically planned and can be a temporary suspension or a permanent termination of employees from their jobs. As part of the mass layoff process, organizations can provide their discharged employees with career counseling, unemployment insurance, information about education, and training opportunities.

**Layoff victims.** The term layoff victim describes an involuntary separation from work with no fault of the employee, initiated by the employer through downsizing. The layoff victims' employment termination or suspension is not related to their actual performance but rather due to the overall organization's performance.

**Layoff survivor syndrome.** Those left to stay with their organization after the downsizing are often called layoff survivors. The layoff survivor syndrome, also known as layoff survivor sickness or layoff survivor guilt, is experienced as guilt, fear, anger, and anxiety by the layoff survivors (Noer, 1993). Other related symptoms of the layoff survivors include job insecurities, perceptions of unfairness, or loss of confidence (Robbins, 1999, p. 32)

**Project management.** Project management is leading a team's work to achieve the agreed-upon project scope with ownership stakeholders. Project management involves planning and allocating appropriate resources to accomplish specific tasks for successful completion. Project management engages processes, procedures, and tools pertinent to the project scope.

**Project leader.** A project leader, also known as a project manager, is a professional in charge of planning and ensuring the successful delivery of the assigned project. The project

leader engages and keeps the team focused on the project goals and objectives and ensures alignment with the organization's leadership on the project deliverables.

**Career Tilt.** A career is a sequence of work roles in one's professional life, regardless of whether the roles are related to a particular or different profession. (Ashforth, 2012; Morrison & Holzbach, 1980). In this research, career tilt is a colloquial term referred to as a career descent caused by shifting in the professional direction due to professional or organizational change circumstances.

**Performance Review.** A performance review, also known as a performance appraisal or performance evaluation, is a formal assessment in which a manager evaluates an employee's performance, outlines strengths and areas of improvement, provides feedback, and sets goals for future performance. Usually, performance reviews take place periodically and follow a systematic process of an employee's job performance against the set goals.

## **Organization of the Study**

I covered the research in seven chapters regarding the dissertation paper outline. In Chapter I, *My Career Tilt*, I enact the journey from the day of the massive layoff to 1 day after my layoff a year later in terms of personal and professional transformation in the subculture of technology development written in an evocative narrative manner. In Chapter II, *Developing the Study*, I provide the introduction and context of the problem, research gaps, problem, and purpose statements, followed by the research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and the significance of the study. In Chapter III, *Literature Review*, I address a synthesis of the theoretical research and gaps related to goal setting, self-determination, self-efficacy, and leadership at the individual and group levels within transforming organizational culture contexts.

In Chapter IV, *Methodology*, I discuss the autoethnography research method and procedures in terms of the research design, the rationale for choosing this research type, data collection and data analysis techniques, and aspects of quality assurance. Chapter V, *A Project Leader in Transformation*, is a self-reflective approach to my memoirs during the transformation process, covering additional centered narratives on how I integrated into the new culture while determining the drive for my professional growth and how organizational leadership strategies impacted my performance. In Chapter VI, *My Reflection and Findings as a Project Leader*, I covered the analysis of the research questions that guide this study and findings of the self-reflection of my transformation and how I embraced changes given the trauma of the massive layoff and the other key events that followed. Chapter VII, *Concluding Thoughts*, illustrates my findings and outlines what others can learn and relate to when put in a downsizing situation at work.

### **Chapter III. Reviewing the Literature**

I wrote this chapter as a synthesis of literature in four main areas to support the purpose of this research: goal setting, self-determination, self-efficacy, and leadership supportiveness. In the beginning, I did a preamble on autoethnography as a research method to set the direction of the lenses used for this research approach.

The Reviewing the Literature section emphasizes the lack of knowledge about career advancement strategies at the professional level, goal-based motivation for groups in organizations, and the internalization of the work values and behavior related to attractive pay. Although we already know about the implications of goal setting and self-determination on career advancement, only limited studies have explored the implications of goal setting on professional career advancement or group goal setting in organizations that undergo dramatic transformations, such as a massive layoff.

#### **My Epistemological and Ontological Philosophical View**

Considering ontology is a philosophical belief system that addresses the nature of reality and our perception of the truth, there are two major systems of belief: realism and relativism (Burkholder, 2020; Leavy, 2017;). Realists believe there is only one truth based on observable facts, whereas relativists believe that knowledge is determined by contextual circumstances (Burkholder, 2020). Given these considerations, my ontological philosophical lenses to support this research are from a relativist perspective. I will look for the truth and the findings relative to presenting the reality from a personal perspective in the context of an organizational transformation.

On the other hand, epistemology is a philosophical belief system concerned with the nature of scientific knowledge, describing how research proceeds and what counts as knowledge (Burkholder, 2020; Leavy, 2017). In other words, epistemology defines our way of knowing the world. According to Burkholder (2020), knowledge can be generated in three ways: empirical, introspection, and intuition. Empirical knowledge is associated with an experimental way of gathering knowledge. In the case of intuition, we instead use our hunches to understand the world, but introspection is a “reflection on the experience of our own mind” (Burkholder, 2020). For this research, I used an introspective epistemological perspective to explore my career transformation as a project leader, given the context of an organizational transformation.

Further, the paradigm or philosophical worldview is a collection of facts and assumptions that guide our position in the knowledge-generation process (Burkholder, 2020; Leavy, 2017). Five broad philosophical worldviews guide us through our research process. These are pragmatism, positivism, constructivism, critical and transformative. Although each of these philosophical views could impact my perspective for this research and its purpose, the main philosophical lenses will be constructivist related. About the constructivist worldview, Creswell (2018) considers that the researcher will make sense of the meanings others have about the world by generating a pattern of meaning (p. 8). In addition to this consideration, Leavy (2017), acknowledges that researchers with constructivist worldview value people’s subjective interpretation and how they understand their experiences and circumstances (p. 13).

In conclusion, as a researcher, I articulated my paradigmatic, ontological, and epistemological position by providing a worldview perspective concerning this inquiry. Given the above philosophical worldview literature perspectives, how I generated knowledge for this

proposed research suits relativist-constructivist lenses, and a qualitative research method could generate meaningful knowledge in this context.

### **Autoethnography**

Although I will discuss autoethnography as a research method in Chapter IV, with the below literature review, I outline key elements and concepts gathered from different perspectives offered by autoethnography pioneers Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, and Andrew Herrmann. The intent is to build a solid background of how I used this methodology in different contexts and drive the rationale for choosing this method for this research proposal.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that uses storytelling to connect the researcher's personal experiences within a specific culture and examine those experiences through self-reflexivity (Johnson & Parry, 2022; Leavy, 2017). Ellis et al. (2011) outline the researcher's subjectivity in the interpretation based on the self-reflection approach. Herrmann (2022) also points out the three elements of autoethnography: *the Auto, the Ethno, and the Graphy*. The Auto refers to self-reflectiveness, vulnerability, and transparency while recognizing possible biases and shortcomings. The Ethno is observing and examining the culture in which the "auto" is embedded. Lastly, Graphy is about writing in a concrete dialogue, capturing emotion and self-consciousness (p. 128). Thus, writing using self-reflexiveness in an organizational cultural context is how autoethnography pertains to the purpose of this research. It is about self-reflecting by using storytelling in the context of a dramatic organizational culture change.

Autoethnography uses storytelling to invite readers to put themselves in the narrator's place. The dialogue is centered on moral choices about how to live rather than how to know (Bochner &

Ellis, 2016). In a similar train of thought, Ellis et al. (2011) discuss how autoethnography is a research method that combines autobiography and ethnography to reveal “epiphanies” that are made possible by identifying with a particular cultural context.

Although there is some criticism of autoethnography as a research method for being “insufficiently rigorous, theoretical, and analytical, and too aesthetic, emotional, and therapeutic” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 11), it does attempt to be rigorous enough by the inclusiveness of personal and social phenomena. Autoethnography brings to life traumatic topics others can relate to. It portrays life “where people care about each other, their/ our troubles and afflictions, and the topics we study” (Adams et al., 2022, p. 10). Autoethnography is a research method, which according to Gatta et al. (2019), “acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist” (p. 20)

Like other qualitative research methods, Adams et al. (2021) outline autoethnography characteristics as subjectivity, self-reflexivity, resonance, credibility, and contribution. According to Johnson and Parry (2015), subjectivity is a personal view of individuals that expresses their lived experiences in a certain cultural context. In the case of autoethnography, “the researcher is self-consciously in the construction of the narrative which constitutes the research” (Adams et al., 2021, p. 270). Engaging in ongoing critical reflection throughout the process is defined by Johnson and Parry (2015) as reflexivity when using qualitative research methods. In autoethnography, Adams et al. (2021) point out self-awareness introspection. Regarding credibility, there should be evidence of verisimilitude and trustworthiness where “the research process and reporting should be permeated by honesty” (Adams et al., 2021, p. 270). It

is about honesty bringing the reader to the reality of the story. Also, given the contribution characteristic, autoethnography extends existing knowledge but informs and inspires.

Given the organizational context of this proposed research, Herrmann (2020) outlines how organizational autoethnographers use their experience to comment on and empower the beliefs and practices of the organizational cultures or subcultures (p. 27) and also considers that the autoethnography approach allows the researcher to produce inventive understandings of the dynamics in the organizations. In the case of this research, I used memory recollection of the events that happened on the layoff day and after that. From this perspective, Sambrook and Doloriert (2012) recognize that autoethnography is often developed from the recollection that could be argued of less rigorous, incomplete “truth” or distorted over time. Thus, I plan to narrate the stories as an ongoing process of my autoethnography creation which, according to Ellis et al. (2011), is continuous through memoirs and storytelling of lived experiences.

Evocative autoethnography is a genre of autoethnography that focuses on “narrative presentations that open up conversations and evoke emotional responses” (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 445). Autoethnographers compose stories that combine social aspects of life and literature. The stories could evoke empathy and contribute to the social understanding of a certain cultural context (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). In the case of this research, the central focus is my trauma of the mass layoff in the organizational culture context and how others could relate to the experience.

## **Layoffs and their Emotional Impact on the Layoff Survivors**

Layoffs are more and more present in our lives. In recent years, many organizations have had to restructure how to run their business. Organizations downsize due to financial issues, mergers, or to manage their businesses more efficiently. Technology development had significant implications for the determinant factors of downsizing. The COVID-19 pandemic represented a major shift in the business environment, causing organizations to downsize and restructure.

Layoffs became a concerning societal phenomenon in the mid-90s, with a significant mass layoff in 1993 at IBM, where the company dismissed 60,000 employees. The same year, Sears cut 50,000 jobs (McGregor, 2015). Both mass layoffs occurred due to organizational restructuring caused by that year's economic recession. Recent layoffs impacted the technology industry with significant layoffs at Google, Amazon, Twitter, and Microsoft. According to the Wall Street Journal (2023), the technology industry's downsizing has been long overdue, given the aggressive hiring without a pertinent need for resources.

The recent literature covers aspects of management implications but rarely discusses how layoff survivors manage their feelings and emotions after the mass layoffs in a dramatically changing culture. Richter et al. (2018) experimented on 110 participants with four dismissal scenarios combining respect/ disrespect treatment and adequate/ inadequate explanation. Their findings were that respectful dismissal reduced feelings of anger, and discussion with the supervisor improved the perceived fairness of the process. A year later, Miller et al. (2020) performed a case study on nine employees, considered layoff survivors, who participated in semi-structured interviews. The central research question was, "How has the downsizing impacted employees' emotions, and how have those emotions impacted their learning in the

workspace?”. The findings discuss survivors' emotional struggles and how moral support impacts their relationship with their coworkers and align with Noer's (1993) “layoff survivor” syndrome, described as “having a reduced desire to take risks, a lowered commitment to the job, and a lack of spontaneity” (p. 13)

According to Cascio (1993), downsizing affects the remaining staff's morale and productivity. These feel unable to support the business effectively due to the lack of expertise or the emotional impact of the co-workers' layoffs. Staff reductions impact on the company's culture, generating distrust and a perceived lack of transparency. On a similar thought, Wang-Bae (2003) states that a significant consequence of downsizing is the adverse side effect on survivors' mental health and work attitudes related to job security and autonomy concerns. Throughout the layoff process, managers can ensure support for their remaining staff, but it is still under question, according to Skarlicki & Passell (2003), how to “attend to the emotional baggage of their employees.” (p.5)

The downsizing process impacts employees' values, some surfacing more than others. Employees show a shared empathy toward laid-off employees, and managers maintain the social aspects of the culture, showing not only empathy but recognition for the tenure and experience with the company (Miller, 2019). Fairness is another value that managers could leverage to mitigate negativeness toward the employer. According to Richter et al. (2018), showing fairness helps employees cope better with the stress generated by layoffs. Other than values, employees have aspirations, beliefs, and, most importantly, memories about the layoff's trauma, whether they were layoff victims or survivors (Cascio, 1993)

Those who stay with the company throughout the downsizing process experience the layoff survivor syndrome characterized by fear or anger (Noer, 1993). Still, layoff survivors work long hours in a changed environment. Thus, they become “narrow-minded, self-absorbed and risk-averse” (Cascio, 1993, p. 100). The longer they are with the company or the higher their rank, the more denial of the sickness symptoms. That is one of the reasons managers do not stress over these symptoms but rather believe in dealing with them. (Noer, 1998)

### **Organizational Changing Culture and the Emotional Response to Change**

According to Schein and Schein (2016), a culture retains its beliefs and values even when some organization members leave (p. 10). The basis of culture is hard to change because the remaining members of the organization still keep their meaning and predictability. On the contrary, Vince and Broussine (1996) consider that attachments of purpose and identity are formed based on the interactions between individuals and organizational processes, and each influences the other when change happens. Related to downsizing, Wang-Bae (2003) concludes that cultural and organizational changes may have an impact on the outcome of downsizing, but further research on the topic is needed.

In the case of downsizing, the behaviors of those who remain are dramatically changing due to emotions perceived throughout the layoff process. Emotions play an essential role in how the organizational culture changes in times of crisis (Myers et al., 2012). Toxic emotions such as anxiety or loneliness do not foster performance but could drive a lack of motivation and engagement. From a different perspective, Mujtaba and Senathip (2020) consider that organizations represent a form of social networking with other professionals. However, when downsizing happens, group members lose their social connections, and survivors and victims

experience negative emotions generated by the uncertainty of their future and fear of unemployment. On the other hand, if the layoff survivors consider the dismissal process unfair and identify themselves with the layoff victims, then “both survivors’ performance and their commitment to the organization are undermined.” (Myers et al., 2012, p. 77)

Developing on the toxic emotions of the layoff survivors, Frost and Robinson (1999) highlight the danger of rooted negative emotions due to organizational changes and the tendency to perpetuate these emotions among the staff. Myers et al. (2012) define this phenomenon as emotional contagiousness in a group where if some group members experience emotions, those around them are likely to share the same feelings. That is why managers, leadership, or other organization members voluntarily engage to shoulder these toxic emotions “to redirect people’s energies back to work.” (Frost and Robinson, 1999, p. 99). These individuals are often called toxic handlers. They usually listen, suggest solutions, show empathy and work behind the scenes to prevent toxic emotions. Meyers et al. (2012) outline a couple of ways middle managers address emotions of change by either displaying their emotions of frustration in the case of obstacles they encounter during downsizing or listening to their subordinates' needs after the downsizing.

People respond to organizational change differently, and according to Myers et al. (2012), there is a pattern in how they cope with their emotions similar to the five stages of grief researched by psychologist Kübler-Ross. It begins with denying the change and acting as if nothing has happened. Frustration and resentment are a form of anger where employees show their rage at the organizational change. Next, employees acknowledge the situation, some attempting to bargain. Mourning the things they have lost in the next stage of grieving. At last,

accepting the organizational change and preparing to move forward. In the case of an organizational change specifically related to the downsizing process, not all stages might be present during the grief process (Robinson, 2013), but most of them will.

Any organizational dysfunction has implications for its future (Frost & Robinson, 1999; Schein & Schein, 2016). People's emotions impact great ideas, commitment, and motivation, affecting organizational culture and productivity.

### **Self-Determination Impact on Individual's Motivation and Performance**

According to Deci and Ryan (2011), self-determination theory (SDT) starts with the assumption that humans are intrinsically motivated and naturally oriented toward integrative processes. However, they develop a need for learning that plays a central role over time “and are affected by social environments” (p. 416). Since self-determination theory has shown that social context and communication affect motivation and performance, social aspects could impact job satisfaction or learning patterns. From a different perspective, Deci et al. (2017) consider SDT a macro human motivation theory evolving from the impact of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors to how individuals are motivated at the work organizations.

Deci and Ryan (2012) outline three main psychological needs for optimal human development. These are needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Gagne and Deci (2005) mention that autonomy is somewhat related to intrinsically motivated behavior, but extrinsic motivation could trigger autonomous versus controlled behaviors (p. 334). Thus, activities that are not interesting require extrinsic motivation, and that behavior is externally motivated by being initiated and maintained through external contingencies to the person.

According to SDT, other than needing autonomy, people look for ways to attain competence and build connections and relationships with others. Each of these needs is important for unleashing motivation, but autonomy need is essential for reaching effective outcomes, and competency need is thus important for predicting performance (Robbins & Judge, 2018). Motivated employees do their best at their job, even if that involves competence, especially when autonomy and relatedness with others are present (Ryan and Deci, 2017). Additionally, according to Jiseon and Ki-Joon (2019), “basic needs satisfaction for autonomy, competence, and relatedness is a predictor of well-being” (p. 89)

### **The Effect of Autonomy, Competency, and Relatedness on Intrinsic Motivation**

Autonomous motivation is a type of intrinsic motivation concerning the willingness to learn something new for fun. People engage in learning or doing new things, either driven by an interest or the satisfaction of being immersed in the new activity (Di Domenico et al., 2022). In this sense, according to Deci and Ryan (2017), supporting autonomy is based on three main concepts: 1) the capacity to understand employees’ perspectives either through discussions or observations; 2) providing supportive and positive feedback rather than no or negative feedback. Related to providing feedback, Deci and Ryan (2000) stated that positive feedback enhances intrinsic motivation, whereas negative feedback somewhat undermines the intrinsic motivation of individuals ; 3) supports employees’ initiatives and participation in work-related issues. Considering these engagement concepts, perceptions of managerial support increase autonomous motivation and acceptance of new challenges in the workplace.

At the same time, autonomously motivated employees presented “less exhaustion, burnout, and ill-being.” (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 532). Additionally, Jiseon and Ki-Joon (2019)

state that the satisfaction of autonomy is attained when employees can behave and express themselves freely. In this sense, Deci & Ryan (1985) consider that intrinsically motivated behaviors are rooted in people's needs for competency and self-determination. On the other hand, a study by Deckop, Jurkiewicz, and Giacalone (2010) showed that materialism negatively impacts not only one's well-being but job satisfaction.

Deci and Ryan (2000) state that although autonomy and competence are the key influencers on intrinsic motivation, relatedness plays an important role in maintaining intrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci (2017) state that relatedness is when people feel cared for and feeling significant among others. In this sense, relatedness is somewhat present in social organization's context or social groups where people can show their belongingness through contribution or empathy.

### **Extrinsic Motivation, Amotivation, and Motivational Spillovers**

Extrinsic motivation relates to activities people do to obtain tangible rewards. It is also known as controlled or external motivation. If rewards are not provided, people lose motivation to pursue their goals. (Di Domenico et al., 2022). Ryan and Deci (2017) state that although tangible rewards are often perceived as controlling, they could support motivation and engagement if they do not prevent the satisfaction of the autonomy and competence needs. "Yet when used to control behavior, as is frequently the aim of performance-contingent rewards, they lead to less autonomous forms of extrinsic motivation, such as external regulation or introjection." (p. 532)

According to self-determination theory, amotivation refers to the lack of motivation or intention to act. In the case of amotivation, a person either does not value the outcome of his

actions or believes he is incapable of performing a specific activity (Di Domenico et al., 2022). At its other end, amotivation associated with feelings of incapacity implies the poorest performance one could engage in. According to Deci, Grolnick and Ryan (1995), amotivation fosters a lack of basic needs satisfaction suggesting a lack of competence and relatedness is associated with the poorest performance and mental health outcomes.

Motivational spillover is a phenomenon described by Gubler et al. (2016) as harming autonomous motivation when managers introduce extrinsic rewards. They researched the effect of providing rewards in an attendance program. They concluded that reward-motivated employees responded positively when receiving the reward by improving punctuality, but this only lasted for a short time after the reward was received. The extrinsic rewards are to be combined with some intrinsic motivational factors to have a long-lasting positive impact on one's motivation.

### **Emotions Impact Behavior and Intrinsic Motivation.**

According to Latham (2012), emotions are natural mental reactions that contain impulses to take action, such as fear or anger. "Emotions can be long lasting when the situation is long-lasting when a person's subconscious continues to make appraisals of a given event." (p. 254). Impactful events have emotional consequences not only on one's being but also in influencing one's behavior. Implicitly, emotional distress affects one's productivity and motivation. Implications of the negative emotions of the individuals propagate at the team level, impacting the group's productivity (Cole et al. 2008). According to Knight and Eisenkraft (2014), negative emotions are not always bad for performance if the cause of emotions is external or if the negative emotions occur only once.

Regarding emotional impact, according to Maslach et al. (2001), burnout is an actual psychological response to work-related stress, and it consists of emotional exhaustion and a reduced perception of personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion at the workplace directly affects intrinsic motivation, and motivation is directly associated with job performance, according to Halbesleben and Bowler (2007). On the other hand, Ryan & Deci (2000) note that intrinsically motivated employees show curiosity and willingness to learn new skills. In continuation, Shalley et al., 2004, state that those intrinsically motivated are open to risk-taking, persevering, and more creative. Thus, creativity and risk-taking are also impacted by burnout and strong emotions.

Social environments also influence aspects of competence and motivation, and a social environment focused on competence that fails to embrace relatedness will result in the impoverishment of the employees' well-being per Won-Moo et al. (2016). A social environment with excessive control and lack of relatedness will simultaneously result in the absence of initiative and responsibility and emotional distress (Ryan and Deci, 2000). They also highlighted social environments' role in autonomy, competency, and relatedness needs on autonomous motivation and positive health behavior outcomes.

### **Monetary Aspects and Tangible Rewards Impact on Intrinsic Motivation.**

In his book, Lawler (1971) proved that employees prefer good pay based on performance, and when the employee's pay is entirely dependent on performance, job performance and satisfaction are higher. According to his findings, pay is more important for those with high autonomy needs, and organizations should consider the perceived pay from an employee perspective. Pay dissatisfaction could generate a lack of motivation, decrease performance, and

increase turnover and absenteeism. On the other hand, Deci & Ryan (1985) consider that an employee perceives excessive extrinsic rewards, including high pay, offered to perform intrinsically valued work as “controlling” and undermining motivation and performance.

Discussing the high-performance pattern, Latham et al. (2002) state that one person’s performance increases when provided performance-contingent rewards and is highly related to improved job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Ryan et al. (1983) found that in an autonomy-supportive environment, when organizations offer monetary rewards, intrinsic motivation enhances being less relative to providing feedback. Additionally, Ryan and Deci (2017) state that performance incentives could disrupt relatedness and teamwork at the individual or group level if compensation is unreasonable according to the group members’ perception.

On a different spectrum than Deci and Ryan’s perspectives on the impact of rewards on intrinsic motivation, Cameron and Pierce (1994) conducted 96 experimental studies between 1971 and 1991 to conclude that rewards do not increase motivation as much as verbal praise does. They determined that if people are rewarded for activities or tasks they enjoy, they will be less motivated to engage in the activity when a reward is no longer happening. If provided unexpectedly, tangible rewards have no effect and do not impact the level of performance. Further, when people are offered tangible rewards regardless of their performance level, they spend less time on an activity or task once the reward is removed.

To address Cameron and Pierce's findings and critics, Deci et al. (1999), in a meta-analysis of 128 studies, examined the effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation. Their findings concluded that verbal rewards, similar to tangible rewards, could undermine intrinsic

motivation, considering that people can perceive these rewards as a way to gain approval rather than acknowledging their performance.

### **Goal Setting in an Organizational Context**

Edwin Locke and Gary Latham pioneered the goal-setting theory in the late 1970s. The first theoretical ideas related to goal setting appear in Locke's doctoral dissertation. Later, he worked with Latham to define the first draft of the theory. In this context, Robbins and Judge (2018) summarize the purpose of the goal-setting theory as "a theory stating that specific and difficult goals, with feedback, lead to higher performance" (p. 224). Locke's goal-setting theory focuses on the importance of goal specificity, opportunity, and feedback that increases work motivation. Goal setting isn't only related to the individual and the organizational level. Thus, the leadership sets performance targets for strategic organizational value (Greco & et al., 2020; Kleingeld, 2011; Xhavit & et al., 2018). Those objectives are, or should be, cascading from the divisional objectives to departmental objectives and down to the individual. How those objectives will align with each other in the case of an organizational crisis is underresearched at this point.

The reason I chose the goal-setting theory is twofold: 1) to reflect on my performance after the mass layoff from the perspective of the way the organization's goals were set and how those impacted my career with the organization and 2) at the personal level, how/ what I could have done better to set effective goals to advance my career at the professional level after the mass layout or even after my layoff.

In the case of downsizing, layoff survivors experience in the future career search a lack of commitment to their prospective employers and make career transitions more often, although

optimistic about their career before the downsizing (Cascio, 1993). They feel disillusioned and experience a lack of hope, and do not believe in permanent or safe jobs (Noer, 1998)

Further, I will review the goal-setting theory from four angles: goal specificity, feedback, group goals, and career goal setting.

### **Goal Specificity Impact on Productivity**

Goals should be as specific as possible to be achieved. Ambiguity could be detrimental to reaching the goal. On the same note, Hall & Foster (1977) emphasize that hard goals not only impact one's performance but can have a positive outcome on how individuals perform their job, being "linked with increased involvement." (p. 287). For that reason, Kleingeld et al. (2011), in their research about the effect of goal setting on group performance, referred to how specific difficult goals enhance individual performance by focusing attention on the end desired state. Similarly, at the organizational level, Xhavit et al. (2018) highlight the importance of clearly communicating the objectives and the specificity of the goals, resulting in increased employee satisfaction. Moreover, the specificity of the hard goals increases productivity and, according to Miner (2005), reduces boredom at work.

### **Feedback Enhances Competence and Self-determination**

According to Latham et al. (2002), setting goals partially depends on goal commitment, task complexity, and feedback. Feedback is thus determinant when setting goals at the organizational level to maintain employees' high performance. Additionally, Xhavit et al. (2018) consider that feedback is a continuous undertaking and vital to maintaining motivation, especially toward achieving higher goals. The sooner the feedback is provided, the faster behavior improvements can be assessed in goal setting. Kleingeld et al. (2011) state feedback is

important when monitoring goals. During this process, one can better assess whether a goal is specific enough or still attainable. Feedback will be provided on the spot and throughout the goal-setting process, which is irrelevant if provided at the end of the goal-setting cycle. From a different perspective, Deci et al. (2017) outline the impact of positive feedback that enhances experiences of competence and self-determination, fostering the employees' intrinsic motivation in that way.

Discussing the importance of commitment for effective goal setting, Locke and Latham (2005) state that when setting difficult goals, commitment has a significant role, and the way to generate goal commitment is through support and encouragement from leadership or a respected, influential person (p. 129)

In the case of short-term goals, also known as subgoals, the intent is to reframe complex goals into more attainable steps that allow constructive and timely feedback. This perspective aligns with Greco et al. (2020) findings that short-term goals support reframing long-term goals into smaller tasks and allow feedback and attainability of the long-term goals (p. 44).

### **The Effect of Specific Group Goals on One's Performance**

Clear and continuous communication positively impacts employees' productivity and group goal achievement. According to Islami et al. (2018), "each 1% increase in communication will predict an increase of employees' productivity by 24.8%." (p. 105). In their research on 172 employees from 13 companies operating in Kosovo, Islami et al. (2018) discuss the importance of the reward system and the positive impact on employees' productivity when setting clear and specific goals. Employees are looking for rewards on the group goals, not necessarily on personal goal setting. Additionally, Kleingeld et al. (2011) discuss the implications of group

goals on motivational mechanisms. “Group goals trigger unique motivational mechanisms such as planning, cooperation, morale-building communication, and collective efficacy.” (p. 1290). Their study showed that the effect of the specific group goals compared with nonspecific goals on group performance was significant and that specific difficult group goals yield higher group performance than specific easy group goals.

### **Career Goal Setting and Support for Career Mentoring**

Starting with Ashforth’s (2012) career definition as the number of sequence of roles occupied by an individual through the course of their life regardless of whether the roles are coupled or even similar, individuals tend to move from one role to another, trying to follow their desires and qualifications with available choices in their current field or alike fields. From a career goal setting, however, Greco et al. (2020) outline how individuals driven by intrinsic career goals seek to learn and improve, and “they aspire to gain knowledge through challenging work.” (p. 45). In contrast, those driven by extrinsic career goals, such as status or financial outcomes, relate to occupational prestige at the individual level.

Although career goals will change over time based on experience and feedback in accomplishing certain roles (Locke & Latham, 2002), mentoring plays an important role in one’s career growth. According to Greco et al. (2020), career mentioning, also known as career development support, “enhances protégé advancement in an organization or their career” (p. 42) through coaching, protection, or engaging in challenging assignments. The challenging work becomes part of the intrinsic motivation for career growth where individuals seek opportunities to learn and grow (Greco & et al., 2020, p. 45). Additionally, Ashforth (2012) suggests that

motivation geared toward role identification leads to role-relevant outcomes and implicitly improved performance.

### **The Drive of Self-Efficacy on Performance**

In the first unifying theory of behavioral change, Bandura (1977) states that persistency in activities is considered threatening but safe procedures, with experience, enhancement of self-efficacy, and less defensive behavior are seen. Considering this, Robbins and Judge (2018) review the self-efficacy theory and outline its meaning to explain that the more practice one applies effort to accomplish a task, the more capable one becomes, and his self-efficacy increases in the long term. In the model proposed in 1977, Bandura considers that expectations of personal efficacy come from four sources of information: “performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and psychological states” (p. 191). Performance accomplishment refers to how strongly efficacy is developed after repeated success while reducing the negative impact of occasional failures (p. 195). Robbins and Judge (2018) summarize the vicarious experience as when one becomes more confident when seeing someone accomplish a goal. Verbal persuasion increases confidence when we are told we have the skills to succeed.

From a goal-setting perspective, Bandura (1991) states that simply adopting a goal, regardless of whether it is easy or challenging, without appropriate feedback, has no lasting motivational impact. Even further, Phillips and Gully (1997), analyzing the effect on self-efficacy of learning goals versus performance goals, conclude that learning goal orientation presented a more positive effect on self-efficacy than performance goal orientation. “The results suggest that individuals with a higher learning goal orientation are more likely to have higher self-efficacy than individuals lower in learning goal orientation” (p. 797). Their research

concludes that a useful intervention to increase self-efficacy and performance is supporting individuals as they adopt higher learning and lower performance orientations.

Wolf et al. (2018), when analyzing the effect of self-efficacy on autonomous motivation, determine that highly efficacious individuals have a wider range of autonomous motivating goal options (p. 36). This finding aligns with Bandura's (1991) remark that capable people think that the higher the goals are set, "the more firmly committed they remain to them" (p. 258). Thus, self-efficacy is highly related to autonomous motivation, performance, and commitment.

Further, I will be discussing the sources people use to determine and support their levels of self-efficacy, starting with performance mastery, role-modeling, verbal persuasion, and emotive aspects mainly related to the challenges of exploring these sources in critical organizational situations.

### **Lack of Performance Mastery Implications on Self-efficacy**

When we gain significant job experience, we increase our self-efficacy through performance or enactive mastery. Once we successfully perform a task or job in the past, we show more confidence in doing that job in the future (Robbins & Judge, 2018). According to Heslin (1999), people attain enactive or performance mastery when successfully performing a portion of the tasks, especially if the tasks represent small and easy steps of a complicated task.

According to Bandura (1977), the success of accomplishing a task or job increases mastery expectations, similar to how repeated failures decrease mastery expectations. When strong efficacy is attained through continued success, "the negative impact of occasional failures is likely to be reduced" (p. 195). On the other hand, Mumtaz & Parahoo (2020) outline that

achieving performance mastery is impacted by the type of activity required to accomplish a task, the level of effort an individual engages, and the perseverance to overcome difficulties.

The lack of setting goals drives no change in effort, and those who do not set goals are outperformed by those who set challenging goals even when the last ones fail to achieve certain related to the goal. (Bandura, 1991). Occasional failures could be later surpassed by the determination which can strengthen self-motivated persistence and show positive effects of short-term failure on one's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977)

Bandura (1991) remarked that life without any challenges can be boring. People without aspirations and ways to evaluate their progress in achieving certain goals remain unmotivated and insecure about their self-efficacy. Bandura (1986) outlined self-directedness as an important source of increasing personal satisfaction and self-esteem. Successfully attaining goals develops a sense of personal efficacy, especially when goals are challenging (Bandura, 1991; Latham, 2012).

Wolf et al. (2018) consider that self-efficacy is our conscious belief in our ability to perform toward a certain goal. Additionally, Bandura (2000) states that to engage in activities successfully, goals must be explicit, indicating "the type and amount of effort needed to attain them" (p. 137). The effectiveness of goals depends on how far in the future they are projected. Although long-term goals provide a vision of what needs to be accomplished, they are too far to serve as present motivators. Instead, short-term sub-goals support motivation and guide effort. Progress builds efficacy and satisfaction, which in turn stimulates intrinsic motivation that keeps people engaged in related to the goal activities. On the same line of thought, Wood and Bandura (1989) consider that successful accomplishments strengthen self-efficacy, whereas failures

generate doubts. However, in this case, people experience only easy successes. They could be easily discouraged by failure, and to develop self-efficacy, they need to overcome obstacles by applying perseverant efforts (p. 364). Failures while attaining difficult goals increase self-efficacy more than accomplishing easy goals.

### **Role-modeling Effects on Self-efficacy during a Cultural Crisis**

Gaining confidence by seeing someone else perform a task is another source of self-efficacy development. That is called vicarious modeling or role modeling. Role modeling is effective when we observe people with similar characteristics as ours when performing activities we want to master. (Robbins & Judge, 2018). Role modeling supports us with ideas on performing tasks and increases our confidence when others successfully deliver on those tasks. (Heslin, 1999). With role modeling, we can also learn from the consequences or failures by observing those who experienced similar tasks. (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Wood & Bandura, 1989)

Perseverance is another aspect to take into account when developing self-efficacy. Those who persevere in the face of failures, learn from their mistakes and perceive obstacles as challenges are considered self-efficacious (Wood and Bandura, 1989). Accomplishments could be undermined by self-inefficacious thinking or by suspending efforts prematurely (p. 375). Bandura and Schunk (1981) consider that persistence drives success and that perceived self-efficacy is related to high-performance accomplishments and perseverance (p. 596). On the other hand, they consider that mastering challenges generates greater interest in a task than the self-perceived inefficacy to generate competent performances (p. 587)

Wood and Bandura (1989) remarked that social environments are not fixed entities, and one's self-efficacy is also adapting according to the environmental circumstances. In an organizational context, one's self-efficacy can influence group efficacy, and leadership behavior affects the well-being of team members and their self-efficacy (Loeb et al., 2016). According to Srinivasan and Jomon (2018), leaders who develop self-awareness and personal effectiveness can positively impact others "through clear and persuasive communication" (p. 37). Additionally, Wood and Bandura (1989) state that managers should be proficient in applying rules at the employee level to support the desired results achievement.

### **Competence Encouragement through Verbal Persuasion**

Another way to increase self-efficacy is verbal persuasion, which happens when someone encourages us that we have the skills and abilities to accomplish a task (Robbins & Judge, 2018; Heslin, 1999). Verbal persuasion can come from others around us or through self-positive talk (Bandura, 1986). Still, regardless of the source, verbal persuasion should be credible to increase self-efficacy and based on effort rather than inherent talent (Heslin, 1999).

According to Bandura (1977), verbal persuasion could influence human behavior by being easier and more convenient. People can change their behavior through suggestions that they can overcome struggles they had in the past. However, efficacy expectations through suggestions have much weaker results than those experiencing ways to accomplish goals. On the other hand, Heslin (1999) suggests that finding faults or criticism is destructive because it undermines one's motivation to explore and experiment (p. 56).

Another way to boost one's efficacy, according to Bandura (1991), is by supporting one's accomplishments, whereas "dwelling on failures can be discouraging and undermine one's sense

of efficacy” (p. 253). Modeling thinking skills like watching others verbalize their thoughts while they solve problems or hearing the rules while the action is implemented produces faster learning than only telling people how to solve the problems or what the rules are (Bandura, 2000, p. 135)

### **Emotional Arousal Impacts One’s Behavior and Performance**

We perform better when we are emotionally excited about working on a task. That’s called arousal, another source of increasing self-efficacy (Robbins & Judge, 2018). However, in situations like performing low-key tasks, arousal could hurt performance even though it increases self-efficacy. When performing tasks involving strength, people consider their fatigue a sign of weakness, modifying their self-beliefs about their efficacy. This way, they view their emotional arousal as a sign of vulnerability to poor performance (Wood and Bandura, 1989).

According to Srinivasan and Jomon (2018), those who experience anxiety or depression present a lower sense of efficacy and consequently have low self-esteem and negative thoughts about their achievements and personal development (p. 31). Similarly, those with higher self-efficacy pursue higher goals and are shy to take on challenging risks. On the other hand, Bandura (1977) states that those who encounter aversive experiences can impact their behavior toward fear and defensiveness. If they do not develop healthy coping mechanisms, they will rather experience emotional arousal and defensive behavior. Additionally, Srinivasan and Jomon (2018) outline that individuals who recover quickly from aversive experiences and commit to achieving their goals are more prone to increase their self-efficacy in the long term (p. 31)

Individuals support their behavior based on their self-efficacy beliefs, and how they act is related to their sense of efficacy Srinivasan and Jomon, (2018). At the same time, motivational

factors and the drive to accomplish a task influence one's self-efficacy and belief over personal competency (Bandura and Schunk, 1981)

### **Gaining Self-efficacy to Advance Career at the Professional Level**

According to Srinivasan and Jomon (2018), an employee's performance depends on the potential of that person with technical or managerial experience and the role in an organization. The employee's performance is inconsistent if the role does not allow the use of the skills or competencies, and the employee could feel frustrated and ineffective if the role does not offer the freedom for creativity (p. 33). Bandura (1986) stated that one's efficacy is a trait based on skills and the ability to perform effectively in achieving a goal. Bandura (1977) states that when people lack a sense of efficacy, they can give up trying to embrace a certain behavior or still give up trying even though they are assured of their capabilities if they perform in an unresponsive environment or are punished. Thus, a supportive environment and encouragement could influence their performance and self-efficacy.

Perceived self-efficacy, on the other hand, according to Bandura (2000), is a key determinant of one's career choice and development. A person with high perceived self-efficacy will be determined to fulfill educational requirements for career growth and be better prepared and engaged when challenging career pursuits arise (p. 127). On the other hand, Grosemans et al. (2020) specify that employees with higher education are often oriented towards performance rather than learning, mainly due to the competitive job market and job requirements. That could explain the performance approach orientation. Additionally, Duyar et al. (2015) consider that employees with a strong sense of self-efficacy are rather willing to take more risks, showing a higher innovative performance.

## **Leadership and Follower Goal Orientation**

According to House and Mitchell (2007), subordinates' performance is impacted by the leader's behavior only when the leader's behavior is "also related to subordinates' expectations that their effort would result in desired rewards" (p. 242). The path-goal theory explains the effects of leader behavior related to the subordinate's satisfaction, subordinates' acceptance of the leader, and the expectations of subordinates' effort to drive effective performance and provide rewards. According to House and Mitchell (2007), there are four types of leadership to support subordinates' expectations. Those are directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-orientated leadership.

House (1996) states that path-goal theory is "primarily a theory of task and person oriented supervisory behavior" (p. 325). The theory predicts that subordinates with satisfying jobs but unclear performance tasks will perceive directive leadership as satisfying for performance. Conversely, subordinates with dissatisfying jobs and ambiguous performance tasks will perceive directive leadership as controlling and dissatisfying (p. 330). Additionally, Farhan (2018) states that how leaders and subordinates interact can determine the subordinates' attitudes about learning and job engagement, which in turn can help leaders act on their expectations. The effectiveness of the leaders depends on their behavior and contributes to subordinates' satisfaction and performance (p. 14). From a different perspective, Safie and Koslowsky (1994) state that subordinates' participation in tactical decisions is more productive than having them in strategic decisions (p. 45)

At last, House and Mitchell (2007) consider two main propositions of the path-goal theory:

- The leader's behavior is acceptable and satisfying to subordinates as long as these can see an immediate source of satisfaction or a possible one in the future.
- The leader's behavior is motivational if it provides satisfaction to the subordinates' needs depended on effective performance and their behavior complements the subordinates needs of coaching, guidance, and rewards to perform effectively (p. 243)

### **Directive Leadership or Leader Directiveness**

One of the first leadership styles House and Mitchell (2007) propose is directive leadership. A directive leader plays an active role in solving problems and expects subordinates to follow their decisions. In this sense, Bass (2008) identifies two types of directive leaders:

1. A leader who makes decisions for subordinates without an explanation or without consulting or informing about his decisions.

2. A leader who plays an active role and persuades their followers to accept them by offering rewards or may coerce or threaten them to gain acceptance (p. 460).

Additionally, House and Mitchell (2007) conclude that when tasks are ambiguous, or organizations' procedures are unclear, a directive leader supports the execution of the tasks by guiding subordinates. On the other hand, when tasks are clear to subordinates, a directive leader feels more like an impediment for subordinates (p. 248). House (1996) compared directive behavior with clarifying behavior, where the leader lets subordinates know the expectations, provides guidance, and clarifies policies and rules (p. 326). Further, Bass (2008) states the directive leader, unlike a participative leader, does not ask subordinates questions about the decisions they make but rather gives orders without consulting them (p. 460)

### **Supportive vs. Courageous Leadership**

Developing the path-goal leadership theory, House and Mitchell (2007) outline that supportive leadership positively affects subordinate satisfaction in stressful, frustrating, and dissatisfying work conditions (p. 249). In this sense, managers should be alert to the subordinates' needs in these stressful environments. Additionally, House (1996) asserted that supportive leadership increases "the net positive valences associated with goal-directed effort" (p. 327) and is expected to increase performance geared to a directed goal. On this idea, House and Mitchell (2007) state that subordinates are motivated by the leader's behavior to the point this behavior influences goal expectations and attractiveness (p. 241)

Related to the supportive leadership behavior, Noer (2009), in the context of a mass layoff, does a parallel with courageous leadership of having four main characteristics to support subordinates in times of organizational crisis:

1. The courage to stay positive – supporting subordinates with a positive perspective and working to find answers instead of being an angry or cynical leader.
2. The courage to support others – while downsizing subordinates struggle with fear and anxiety and they need leaders to focus on their insecurities first.
3. The courage to engage – although leaders feel fear too during the layoffs, they instead seek to solve their subordinates' problems first.
4. The courage to stand out – in uncertain times subordinates do not look or trust sophisticated speeches but rather seek for their leaders' efforts to make things better (p. 186)

### **Achievement-orientated vs. Participative Leadership**

According to House (1996), achievement-orientated leaders encourage performance and excellence for their employees by setting challenging goals, looking for improvements, and showing support when subordinates attain high performance. The achievement-oriented behavior influences subordinates “to strive for higher standards of performance and to have more confidence in their ability to meet challenging goals” (p. 327). On the other hand, later, House and Mitchell (2007) stated that subordinates who perform ambiguous tasks are positively influenced by the achievement orientation of the leader on their expectancy to effectively perform (p. 249)

Related to participative leaders, House (1996) considers that their behavior encourages subordinate influence on decision-making, such as consulting with subordinates and considering their opinions and suggestions (p. 327). According to Bass (2008), participative leaders aim to involve subordinates in the decision-making process, whereas the participative leader remains an equally active participant (p. 460). Additionally, Farhan (2018) states that participative leadership supports learning and encourages innovation and creativity where subordinates have new ideas and better solutions (p. 18). Furthermore, House and Mitchell (2007) identified four ways in which a participative leader could influence subordinates’ attitudes and behavior:

- By participating in the decision-making process, subordinates will learn the purpose of the decision made.
- Subordinates could set higher goals for themselves.
- Having autonomy should lead to increased performance and engagement.

- When involved in the decision-making process, subordinates feel part of the decision's purpose and intent (p. 250).

### **Transformational vs. Transactional Leadership**

According to Vecchio et al. (2008), transactional leadership implies that leaders use extrinsic rewards to exert influence. When refraining from using extrinsic rewards, the leadership encourages articulating a vision of high-performance expectations. That shows a positive relationship between transformational leadership and the outcomes of performance and satisfaction. Transformational leadership, on the other hand, according to Li et al. (2020), is defined as a leadership structure where leaders guide employees through motivation and inspiration to achieve the organizational vision. They inspire the subordinates to follow higher ideals (p. 2). However, Li's study couldn't establish causality between transformational leadership and intrinsic motivation, but it does suggest that transformational leadership is a relevant factor for unleashing intrinsic motivation. As a continuation, Kim et al. (2017) state that transformational leadership involves goal setting to inspire team members to follow a certain vision.

When discussing leadership, self-efficacy, or self-determination, Lin (2006) mentions that organizational rewards provide temporary incentives for knowledge-sharing. Still, compliance is temporary and wouldn't form any healthy employee knowledge-sharing behaviors. His study suggests that leaders should provide useful feedback to improve employee knowledge and self-efficacy (p. 145). Adding to these findings, Kim et al. (2017) highlight how managers could maximize the effectiveness of goal-focused leadership activities by being aware of their

followers' goal orientations. He also notes that managers should give their followers autonomy and ensure they engage them in goal-achievement processes.

Consistent with Katz and Kahn's (1978) definition of leadership, the role of the leader is to provide the necessary information and support subordinates' needs in the environment they perform. The goal is to align with the organizational objectives while obtaining and retaining subordinates' satisfaction and effective performance (House, 1996, p. 236).

The concept of a transformational leader was originally articulated by Burns (1978) and later extended by Bass (1985). These theorists conceived of a transformational leader as one who leads through charisma, inspiration, stimulation, and problem-solving and by attending to the needs of employees, whom they treat with individualized consideration. In contrast, transactional leaders use the more standard approaches of using contingent rewards, relying on norms and regulations, and focusing on the detection of problems instead of improvement and growth.

In the context of path-goal leadership theory, Bass (2008) notes that both transformational and transactional leaders can be directive or participative. The directive leader may reward their subordinates for their good performance, whereas the participative leaders may ask subordinates what needs to be done to achieve the established goals (p. 627). Bass (2008) also discusses the concept of delegation, which should not be confused with laissez-faire leadership. Delegation could apply to the four leadership styles, except for directive leadership, and implies the leader's responsibility to follow up if the subordinate accepted delegation and if the requested activities or tasks were executed (p. 461)

## **Chapter IV. Methodology**

### **Statement of the Rationale of the Overall Research**

The rationale for this study is to cover research gaps related to identifying career professional growth strategies in the context of organizational cultures impacted by downsizing. The lack of research on leadership strategies for engagement and communication with layoff survivors is another rationale for this study. The above-identified research gaps and encouraging others to tell their stories about the trauma of the layoffs call for this study, which will support the focus on continuous personal and professional improvement for the employees and the employer's involvement in setting meaningful goals for individuals, groups, and the organization as a global entity.

### **Research Design**

This research depicts my perspective and experience as a project leader in an organization undergoing significant transformations. It refers to my challenges adapting to the changing culture, the relationships I had built, and the different realities of how my coworkers and supervisors made me perceive the entire layoff experience.

I used an evocative autoethnography to bring the reader into the story of the mass layoff and the resulting trauma perceptions in a self-reflective manner. The honest and personal narrative unlocked my vulnerability to bring emotions and perspective to the reader who has not been through a similar experience or those who have been but can't share these perspectives for different reasons.

This study complements all three elements of autoethnography - Auto, Ethno, and Graphy - and represents a self-portrait in a technology organizational context with deep reflexivity of a pivotal moment for a leadership career.

Starting with the Auto aspect is about “disrupt unnecessary silences about uncomfortable issues and reveals stories that haven’t been told” (Adams et al., 2022, p. 3). This study covers stories written narratively about the self in a dramatically changing culture. People try to forget about the trauma of layoffs to move on with their career paths (Richter et al., 2016). The nondisclosure aspects are also a rationale for this type of story not being told.

As it relates to the Ethno component of “how personal experience is infused with cultural norms and expectations, and autoethnography engage in rigorous self-reflection – often referred to as “reflexivity” (Adams et al., 2022, p. 3), this study portrays an organizational culture transforming after the mass layoff. It is a crucial moment in the company’s culture moving forward when those who continue to stay will change their behaviors. Thus, the culture will be impacted too.

Finally, the Graphy component of autoethnography is about storytelling so the readers engage in the story and follow the events and emotions throughout. “Like life writers, autoethnographers use character development, dialogue, narrative voice and techniques of “showing” and “telling” to select, frame, organize, and represent experience” (Adams et al., 2022, p. 3). Although the central story presented does not have well-defined characters or deep dialogues, it is meant to be more observational and focus on the feelings and emotions around the event.

Autoethnography is a profound research method. Although it initially sounds easy and therapeutic, it instead brings up untold or unshared discussion topics (Adams et al., 2021; Ellis et al., 2011; Herrmann, 2022). In the corporate world and even academia, there are discussions about products, processes, or tools, but the minimal focus is on the people, their feelings, and their emotional needs. That is the beauty of autoethnography. It brings to life untold personal experiences in different contexts, in my case, an organizational culture, in a narrative voice.

### **The Setting, Participant Observation**

Although this research does not analyze a site per se, it describes an organizational culture perspective and its transformation from a friendly, family-orientated culture before the mass layoff to a culture oriented on performance, processes, and profitability. Schein and Schein (2016) identify the organizational culture lens as “the culture of a group can be defined as the accumulated shared learning of that group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration“ (p. 6), and this lens was used throughout this exploration.

In autoethnography, the researcher is a storyteller and an active participant heavily accustomed to the process of reflexivity. According to Burkholder (2020), the participant observer is “mitigating, balancing both of the roles, with the weight toward the participant role” (p. 95). Thus, my role as a researcher was from a participant observer perspective to not only analyze my experiences but also to relate my interpretation of the cultural context given the time, the place, and the setting of the mass layoff.

The time: Before the age of Covid.

The place: A city in the Bluebonnet state.

The setting: A fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) organization.

The subculture: A technological development subculture.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Given Johnson and Parry's (2015) autoethnography definition as "an exploration of the self, where one's own experiences and thoughts are data" (p. 134), the design of this research will have the "self" as the primary data source. Research tools included my memories, personal journals, emails, posters, recalled formal and informal communication, and a few pictures. These tools supported my recollection of experiences.

Using our "own sensory and emotional experiences as data" is known as reflexive research (Kara, 2020, p. 103). This type of reflexive research and the tools mentioned above will serve as the primary data collection instrument. The approach is intentional. Its purpose is to further support the data analysis process and the interpretation of the findings.

As it relates to the memories recollected throughout this research as the primary data source, it is important to highlight that although memories may differ, they are valid sources of information in the case of autoethnography, and "memories are not only important in autoethnography; they're a crucial part of most forms of research in the human sciences" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 232).

I used evocative writing, self-reflection, and introspection from the participant and the research observer's perspectives. Although other characters were pseudonymized given confidentiality limitations, the autoethnographic approach intended to develop new knowledge and purpose in promoting awareness of transformational organizational culture's impact on employees' emotional behavior and their involvement and performance while undergoing a cultural crisis such as a mass layoff.

## **Data Analysis Techniques**

In autoethnography, analyzing data is an ongoing event. Thus, my reflection as a researcher is present throughout the research process, highlighting the lived experiences through introspection and self-analysis. Considering the meaning of autoethnography is to “capture the how and why of social experiences along with what they are like to encourage us to be transformed and to transform the world around us” (Johnson & Parry, 2022, p. 151), there is an ongoing self-reflection process.

I used Saldana’s coding framework and applied the following coding strategies: In-Vivo coding, Verbal Exchange coding, Category coding, and Conceptual coding.

### **In-Vivo Coding**

Per Miles et al. (2019) and Burkholder (2020), in-vivo codes are words or short phrases to capture a participant’s language as a lived experience without deteriorating its meaning from the participant's perspective. In the case of this autoethnography, the in-vivo coding was performed by capturing my story language so as not to distort the emotional message of the trauma. Since my dataset mainly covered my stories, it was not large enough to require dedicated coding software to process and identify the codes. Thus, I used the eyeballing technique to find repetitive or meaningful words or short phrases in my stories that aligned with this proposed study's theoretical framework and research questions.

### **Verbal Exchange Coding**

According to Saldana (2021), verbal exchange coding pertains to autoethnography as “the verbatim transcript analysis and interpretation of the types of conversations and personal meanings of key moments in exchanges” (p. 206). Considering the evocative aspects of this

research, my stories were coded and further used in the analysis and the findings section. I captured the dialogue and any non-verbal cues in how I narrated and recalled my experience. Similarly, to the In-Vivo coding, I identified meaningful cues to support this research's framework.

### **Category Coding**

Further, category coding or “categorizing,” as defined by Leavy (2017), “the process of grouping similar or seemingly related codes together” (p. 152), will be considered. Categorizing the data collected provided a solid structure for interpretation and the research findings. Transformation into categories is, according to Saldana (2021), “progress toward major themes or concepts, and then into assertions or possibly a new theory” (p. 298). I analyzed and synthesized my story data to determine more significant categories of ideas that emerged and aligned with the theoretical framework and the identified research gaps.

### **Conceptual or Theoretical Coding**

Once categories and concepts were identified, they were analyzed and synthesized to discover larger themes. According to Saldana's (2021) coding model, “all categories and concepts now become systematically integrated around the central/ core category, the one that suggests a theoretical explanation of the phenomena.” (p. 314). The process involved comparing and contrasting themes for their common conceptual connections emphasizing organizational culture transformation's impact on employees' emotional well-being, involvement, and performance.

As mentioned above, the main data sources of this research were my memories, personal journals, emails, posters, and recalled formal and informal communication. Memory recollection

encompassed descriptive notes of my observations, dialogues, or portrait of the participants, but also reflective notes as detailed personal thoughts and feelings of the experiences and the events were considered.

### **Data Management**

The autoethnographic research process is iterative. It involves revisiting and rethinking the data. That involves systematical data collection, verification, analysis, and further reflection. The process systematically directs research efforts to the ultimate goal of sociocultural discovery. The iterative process is “writing, reading, rewriting and reading” (Adams et al., 2021, p. 55).

In autoethnography, the analysis process is “emergent and unpredictable” (Chang, 2008, p. 125). In the case of this research, data interpretation was focused on finding meanings beyond the data, and data management supported my data analysis and interpretation. The data management was supported in three different directions:

- inferring practical and theoretical assertions per Saldana (2016)
- framing my findings with theory per Chang (2008)
- making relevant connections with existing literature per Poulos (2021).

Although the intent is not to formulate a theory due to the limited observational data, I will look to infer assertions for practice, research, and theory. For instance, from the goal-setting theory, we know that setting goals partially depends on goal commitment, task complexity, and feedback. Latham et al. (2002) state that feedback is thus determinant when setting goals at the organizational level to maintain employees’ high performance. An area underresearched is the effects of inconsistent feedback or feedback provided on the edge of organizational downsizing.

How do the layoff survivors perceive that, and how their motivation and productivity are impacted?

Or what are the implications on one's leadership self-efficacy after the layoff? Layoff survivors caught on their career growth path could perceive a lack of confidence if opportunities for advancement are not offered. Similarly, what are the implications on one's commitment and motivation? How does gaining efficacy work or not in cultural crisis conditions?

The chosen theories guided my process of data organization, analysis, interpretation, and the structure of writing. As mentioned earlier, when elaborating on the conceptual framework intent, each of the chosen theories supported not only the structure of writing but also the way data was analyzed, and findings were generated. For instance, the performance review process after the mass layoff was analyzed through the lenses of goal-setting theory and the implications of providing or not relevant feedback.

Connections with the existing literature of my stories to the ongoing cultural and academic, and theoretical approach related to human life. I reflected on and analyzed the stories by connecting with existing literature on the topic and referring to human behavior and my values. My findings and self-reflection were compared with the existing literature, theory, or personal experiences.

## **Quality Assurance**

### **Statement of Credibility**

Although storytelling about traumatizing experiences can be rather therapeutical, the intent of exploring the career development phenomenon through autoethnography is to allow the reader to learn about a layoff experience from the angle of someone who had to continue

performing even after experiencing trauma. As a researcher, I acknowledge my vulnerability by revealing the strong emotions I felt throughout the layoff crisis. My intentional self-reflection will help employees and employers better understand and empathize with the crisis's impact on one's performance and involvement.

### **Verisimilitude – The effect of reality**

With an evocative autoethnography, the intent is to bring the reader to a reality that is emotionally impactful and captures the dialogue and intensity of how a layoff is perceived from different angles. Ellis et al. (2011) consider autoethnographers could attain that validity through verisimilitude. Verisimilitude in autoethnography is described by Ellis et al. (2011) as evoking in readers a feeling that the experience described in the story is believable and unleashes “a feeling that what has been represented could be true” (p. 10). Autoethnography goes further than events and emotions, but the writer's feeling of the experience “Connects readers to writers and provides continuity in their lives” (Ellis et al., p. 10). The literary writing style in the evocative autoethnography is to create the effect of reality, like life that others couldn't have been exposed to. Still, they could trespass as a reader. “Evocative autoethnography shares with fiction the desire to produce the effect of reality, verisimilitude, which seeks a likeness to life.” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 242)

### **Bias in Autoethnography**

Related to the researcher's bias, which is hard to avoid as a storyteller and participant observer in organizational culture, Herrmann (2022) states that “autoethnography is one of the few scholarship places where the researcher's voice is explicitly allowed” (p. 129). Additionally, I acknowledge my lens as a passionate workaholic, born and raised in Eastern European culture,

with a graduate education in the United States. My biases were thus anchored in my past, recognizing, and acknowledging them in how the stories were recollected, the data was analyzed, and the findings elaborated. Regarding this research purpose, I embrace my biases to contribute to the organizational culture and leadership knowledge.

### **My Autoethnography Sense**

I chose autoethnography as the research method because I believe this approach will allow readers to be inspired by my reflections on my experiences throughout the layoff. I also hope that others who have been through similar experiences will shift their mindset from victim to survivor and focus on their career improvement rather than resentment towards their former employers. Furthermore, I hope employers will create environments oriented toward people's emotions over products, processes, or policies.

### **Reflexive Bracketing**

Although reflexive bracketing pertains to phenomenology as a research method, I found it useful to leverage it, especially when analyzing my stories and formulating conclusions. I acknowledge that in this autoethnography, I was fully embedded in recollecting my memories and telling the stories. "Bracketing is intended to help us to identify our perspectives and to examine them, sometimes then knowingly shifting stance. This ongoing reflection on our own engagement with our collection and analysis of data is often referred to as reflexive, stressing one's looking back and inward in a self-aware manner. "(Fischer, 2009, p. 584). However, when analyzing the data, I became objective, trying to identify ways of outlining opportunities for improvement that others could leverage in similar situations. "Recognize bias through reflexivity and attempt to control its impact on data analysis or conclusions" (Burkholder, 2020, p. 222)

According to Ponterotto (2005), bracketing should not result in eliminating researcher values, with the understanding that removing value biases is a fallacy. From the story's beginning, I'm acknowledging my values at the personal and professional levels and taking ownership of my personal experience.

I have passionately told the stories as I recall them. Still, I also addressed some of the instances with former co-workers to avoid elaborating on what has happened from an emotional side that could have distorted the reality. "Balance passion and discipline, take subjectivity to the extreme, and discuss with others experiences to root out meanings completely" (Dorfler & Stierand, 2021, p. 786)

While telling the stories and reflecting on my experience, I was honest and determined to restate as far as I could remember what had happened, but when I analyzed them, outlining the findings and conclusions, I critically assessed and suspended any personal motive or values, such as denigrating others or the organization. The intent was to tell the story, allow others to relate to it, and bring awareness of the mass layoff impact on the employee's well-being and productivity. As per Sultan (2019), reflexive bracketing implies critical assessment and suspension of any personal motives or values to "negatively" influence the research analysis and findings (p. 18)

### **Mitigation of the Potential Limitations**

Most of this research's possible limitations are related to the method chosen. Autoethnography's criticism is mentioned in "Autoethnography" within the Literature Review chapter. The main limitations of this research were the dual role of the storyteller and researcher and the stories' recollection from memory due to limited data sources.

Being the storyteller and researcher simultaneously added complexity to the research process in writing and reflecting with a different mindset. As a storyteller, I deep dive into the memory recollection to impart the intensity of my perceptions of the prolonged layoff experience. As a researcher, I had to detach from the emotional side of the stories and conceptually codify and categorize the meanings and findings while aligning to the research questions and theoretical and proposed conceptual frameworks. That is a limitation I acknowledge of the possible juxtaposition of roles throughout the research process.

My autoethnography is highly based on memory recollection of the events. My access to factual data sources was limited. Due to confidentiality reasons, the organization, the characters, and the time when the layoff occurred are not mentioned, which could be a limitation to this research's credibility. From this perspective, I was committed to staying focused on outlining the intensity of the dialogue and events as clearly as I remember them.

Another way to mitigate the risk of juxtaposing roles was by bracketing my bias by acknowledging my personal and professional values and critically assessing and suspending any personal motives or values that will “negatively” impact the story characters or influence the research analysis and findings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As it relates to this research, a couple of ethical aspects were taken into consideration. Some ethical aspects refer to the purpose of this study, while others relate to using autoethnography as the research method. The focus was on possible concerns related to those mentioned in the study and/ or the organization's identity. Therefore, pseudonyms were used

throughout the study for any characters, and the company's name was not disclosed. Other ethical aspects were considered, such as procedural ethics, confidentiality, and credibility.

### **Procedural ethics**

Even though there are no study participants, I sought university approval for this research by submitting comprehensive details of this proposal for IRB approval. From an autoethnography perspective, I acknowledge the challenge of ethically introducing and presenting the participants. "Among the many challenges I encountered, figuring out how to ethically present participants was the hardest" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 140). In the case of this research, the central research subject for reflection was me. Any characters in my story represent my perception of their actions and feelings.

### **Confidentiality**

Another ethical concern to mitigate throughout this research process was disclosing sensitive information. From this perspective, I ensured that no data or information internal to the company was provided. I used pseudonyms for the characters to not generate any harm to those mentioned or to the company referred to in the study.

I would like to clarify that telling my story about the layoff doesn't have the intent to accuse the company or any of the formal employees or leadership of any actions detrimental to my career. It is a self-reflection on my behavior and what I could have done differently in the context of the layoff. Further, I masked any possible cues of the company's identity, and I used pseudonyms for the characters of my story. I intentionally positioned the company as a generic fast goods consumer company since I wanted to describe and analyze my feelings and experiences that impacted my career growth.

### **Credibility**

In terms of credibility, Le Roux (2017) considers that in the case of autoethnography, “there should be evidence of verisimilitude, plausibility, and trustworthiness in the research” (p. 204). From this perspective, starting with its purpose and the entire research process of storytelling, analysis, and reporting of the findings is probed with my honesty and trustworthiness. From the moment I engaged in this research, I was committed to staying honest in telling the stories about my traumatic experience. I have refrained from being judgmental of others but myself. I had a couple of emails and pictures that helped me with my memory recollection. I also contacted a former colleague to confirm some events that marked my perception of the mass layoff.

### **Contribution**

My intent with this research and its outline is to contribute to the body of knowledge about layoffs and their impact on employees' well-being, motivation, and productivity and how organizations can better avoid some of the trauma. In terms of research practices, the intent is to contribute to how autoethnography as a research method can be approached in terms of telling and engaging into outlining the reflection emotions and taking the reader to how that happened, but also on how data management can be performed in autoethnography using coding and connections with literature and theory to support and enhance rational for certain behaviors, in the case of this research the behavior of the layoff survivors or layoff victims.

## Chapter V. A Project Leader in Transformation

### The Deadly Feedback

It was before Thanksgiving when the performance review would take place almost every year. That year, the process started a little later. We would not talk about it as openly as we used to. I remember making jokes about how to get a five-point review, one should “walk on water,” or how silly it was that we should review ourselves first and then match what our manager thought about our work during the year.

The company implemented the performance review process several years before the mass layoff. Its main idea was to ensure employees are aligned with the company’s goals and perform to accomplish them. When HR started with this process, people were so frustrated. Managers and each of their subordinates at the beginning of the year set professional objectives for the upcoming year. People were questioning the process.

*How am I supposed to know what projects I will work on the entire year?*

That was a valid concern, considering that technology could change fast throughout the year. The other matter was about trust.

*Don't they trust us? Why do they want us to write down what you plan to work on?*

Every year, the process would improve. Managers will align each employee’s goals with the company’s objectives for that year or at least make them look that way.

However, those goals were only discussed when the performance review would occur at the year’s end. Shortly after that, those goals would wash out in everyone’s heads, and we were back to business as usual: fighting fires, maintaining systems, or engaging in ad-hoc initiatives. There were no reminders or indications about our beginning-of-the-year goals. How did we

know about our performance? We would guess or imply that we are doing well if the manager or another supervisor would smile or say thanks.

The year before the mass layoff, my department's objectives were ambitious. I thought they were doable, too. I didn't know back then that the company was facing financial issues. Our leaders' charm and positive attitude motivated us, and we believed we could accomplish them. My objectives that year were to complete the three projects I managed on time and on budget. One of them was touching a new technology, but I still believed we could do it. After the mass layoff, investment in technology wasn't a priority anymore. There was no interest or support for technology development but rather for the business's survival. After many team members were let go or left, I was confused. I knew we must finish the three projects, not because they were on the performance review papers but because I could understand the benefits they would bring to the business. We, or at least I, still had in my blood the drive of our leadership before the financial quake. With my low morale, I pushed as much as I could or knew how. Things moved but not at the speed expected. We had to implement a new technology that required time and intelligent and motivated people. For that, paying the vendors on time was critical. We also did not have enough smart people or money to pay the vendors. We were running in circles. I should have stood up and said something, but I feared losing my job. I was probably selfish and immature. I lacked experience in putting things in perspective and warning the leadership of the risks and possible failures. I kept quiet. That haunted me till later.

I was supposed to complete the performance review form and outline my accomplishments for that year. At least what I thought I had accomplished. The approach was subjective. I tried to stay positive and high-level. I did not want to get into what or why things

did not work. I should have, but not on a performance review paper. My boss, our IT director, and I meet every other week to discuss each project's status. Those meetings were always positive, and the feedback was encouraging. I thought I was doing the right thing or close to what I was supposed to. Without training or guidance, I developed a system to monitor and report on the projects assigned to me. I was happy about it. It kept the discussion going in those bi-weekly meetings, and my boss and the IT director could understand and review the projects' progress. I thought my performance was decent. Thus, when I had to write my performance review, I evaluated myself highly, not from arrogance but from confidence.

I emailed that form to my boss and the IT director on Friday. I was relieved I did it and felt good about my contribution. My optimism started to come back, and my motivation, too. I wanted to take on more projects. I was again optimistic about my position with the company. The layoff day was wearing off in my mind. By then, I learned more about the systems and the people who can support them.

We were working more with vendors and consultants this time. I liked to treat vendors and consultants as part of the team. I empathized with their needs, and anytime they had an issue, I tried to find ways to support them or at least ask how we could help. I did not like the idea,

*We pay these consultants a lot of money. They better do what we want.*

Most of the time, consultants and vendors are experts in their fields, and most are well-intended. My philosophy was to include them in our projects and emerge their expertise with our needs. But what often happens, as customers, is we expect these consultants to solve our problems without fully exposing them to things that do not work. The goal was to push them to do the work. I did that in ways they felt included and part of the project team. My bosses and

probably team members perceived that approach as too 'nice and friendly' and often blamed me for not being that assertive.

The other perspective was that we did not pay the consultants and vendors' work on time due to the financial crisis. That was inconvenient in keeping them engaged with our projects. Regardless of these scenarios, I continued to deliver and work with everyone on the team to perform toward the projects' objectives. The challenges were, too, when we had to work with multiple vendors, and each would rely on the other's work. That was like a sandwich effect, being in the middle, squeezed by the lack of communication between the vendors and the imperative requirements of the executives to finish the projects. As a project leader, I was responsible for ensuring that every party performed to the best of its ability to deliver the project outcomes successfully. I did that to the best I knew how.

Two weeks went by after I sent out my review form. I had almost forgotten about it, and Tuesday before Thanksgiving break, I received back via email the performance review form completed and signed by my boss and the IT Director. That was awkward because these forms are usually only addressed by the direct supervisor. At first, I was flattered that the IT Director provided his review that year. For each rubric, I received an evaluation review from both. My boss's comments were kind and gentle. As usual, she would talk about the great things I do and how I'm supporting the team. The IT director's comments were in the red, mainly very acid like he was a different person writing than the one I would have meetings with every other week. I could not understand, and I wondered why he never addressed his concerns in our meetings, or maybe he did, and I did not hear him. One remark that stood with me for a long time was the lack of assertiveness managing our vendors. Most of his comments pointed to my behaviors, but

no guidance on how I could improve. I sat at my desk, reading that review again and again. So demoralized I was. I had not realized there were areas I needed to work on. I wish I had known it earlier.

During Thanksgiving break that year, I could not stop thinking about the review's impact on my performance and well-being. Not only was I in shock, but I did not know what to do to improve. So, I decided to write him an email about what I could do to resolve these issues. In my naivety and lack of experience, I apologized for my lack of assertiveness and committed to improving my behavior. I also asked him if we could talk more about his review and that I look for guidance on improvement. I never heard back, but I also never called or confronted him.

At the end of these performance review forms, executives were supposed to list and discuss the upcoming year's objectives. That year's goals were vague and not measurable. It looked like they were written in a rush to list some goals. Back then, I did not realize the impact of superficiality and did not ask for clarifications as I should have. I was so caught up in the Director's remarks because they were unexpected, and I felt they were putting me in a bad light without a clear understanding of how to improve.

After Thanksgiving break, my boss set up a meeting to discuss my performance based on my review and their review comments. It would be an excellent opportunity to learn how to improve those areas the director mentioned in the review form. It was a call on Teams since we were in different locations.

Helen: Hello, my dear!

My boss greeted me.

Me: Hello, Helen!

Helen: Did you have a great Thanksgiving?

Me: Sure, I did!

I was lying to a degree. That Thanksgiving break was stressful, mainly because of the review. It harmed the peace I could have had for the holiday. That review triggered not only insecurities but the fear of losing my job. I did not know how to handle this situation at all.

Helen: Did you do something fun with your kids?

She asked.

Me: Yes, we watched a couple of movies.

Helen: That should have been fun.

We continued our friendly chat.

Helen: That is great! Richard cannot make it to this meeting. So, we will keep it short.

I immediately tuned out. All I could hear was,

*Richard can not make it. Are you serious?*

He came to every project status meeting but could not attend this one.

*So selfish, so cowardly.*

I said again to myself, but then I forced myself to listen to my boss's comments. At least she put an effort into addressing these comments with me.

Helen: As you know, we think greatly about your performance, and how you run our project review meeting is helpful for Richard and me. I do not know what I would do without you. You make my job so easy.

Me: I appreciate your words, Helen! I know you genuinely mean them. What do you think about Richard's remarks, however?

Helen: Yes, I noticed there are some areas of improvement from his perspective. He did that to a couple of others in the team. I suggest reaching out to him for more clarity.

Me: I did. I sent him an email, but he never got back to me.

Helen: I can understand. I would not worry about it that much. Richard had to write more than ten reviews that week.

I was getting anxious at this point. I felt I had the right to know more, not only made him think I was less assertive but how can I improve. With that review, I became insecure and concerned about my future with the company. Since it was the end of the year, we did not have our project meeting reviews, so my concerns stayed with me throughout the Christmas holidays.

The review came in January, after the holiday break. I have not heard anything from Richard. We've just restarted our bi-weekly project meetings. This time, I was more cautious about my behavior and how I presented the projects. Richard joined the first meeting of the year. He was in good spirits, and I meant to ask him about the review, but I stopped.

*Why would I go back to the past?*

I said to myself. I maintained professionalism in leading the projects, trying to improve my best, and understanding our partnerships with vendors and consultants. Richard and I never discussed that review, although he and I met often. We were cheerful in our meetings, like he admired my professionalism as if I had never read that year's review observations.

### **La La Land, here we come!**

It was summertime, and I had just returned from a short vacation with my family. I was at my desk catching up on the emails I had received when I was gone. My office was near a central technical hub that would mirror the technology we had in the stores. We had credit card devices, tablets, and, recently, digital menu boards. Executives and anyone in the office could stop by and see how the technology works. Our IT director will usually bring a prototype into that room before implementing something new or spend time with the executives showing the latest technology. I could hear his voice and was surprised to learn he was in the office. He would usually give heads up about his visits to the office. I did not know how to take his presence in the

office, but I kept calm and read my new emails. There was a lot to catch up on, so I soon forgot about his presence.

When I returned from lunch by noon, I saw Richard at my door.

Richard: Knock, knock! Welcome back! How was your vacation?

He stepped into my office, joyful.

Me: Hey! Hi, Richard!

Me: It was great. So lovely to see you. I did not know you would be in town these days.

I probably sounded bossy in my tone, but since I was alone in that office, I developed a need to know everything and be in control. Pretty unhealthy. It was a defense mechanism but also a sense of responsibility.

Richard: It was unplanned for me, too. We have new technology for the digital menu boards and wanted to test it in this office as well.

Me: That is fantastic news, Richard!

I was enthusiastic about the news. I was a believer in technology, and I loved to learn something new. I enjoyed the challenge and the journey of any new project. After figuring out how they work, I would connect with the existing systems. I would use those learnings for the new systems instead. During that time, digital menu boards were still considered a futuristic feature for our stores. I once heard someone saying,

*Why do we need digital menu boards with all the grease and heat in the stores?*

A legit concern indeed, but then there was the efficiency and easy maintenance of the technology that mainly our team could understand.

Richard: I am pleased with the boards and the new vendor who will maintain them.

Me: Who is going to lead the implementation of the boards in our stores?

I asked curiously.

Richard: A new project manager at headquarters will take care of this. He has some previous experience with these boards.

Me: Wow! That is great.

Although I was showing enthusiasm, I was shocked that a new project manager was at the headquarters to lead our brand projects. An unexplained fear started taking place in my mind, but I masked it as well as I could in front of the IT director. I could have confronted him and asked about that new project manager, but I kept quiet. I did not want to start a controversy with him or show my insecurities about my job.

Me: I am glad we have someone on our team with such experience.

I felt the threat to my job this time, but I brushed it fast from my brain. It was not the time or the place to show how I felt. I had to play nicely and show confidence.

Richard: Yes, that is great indeed. He will need your technical experience, however. I will ask Helen to introduce you to him. You know a lot about the central systems and how they integrate. So, please share with him your learnings.

Me: I would be happy to do that.

Richard: That is nice of you. And by the way, we will meet in Los Angeles in 2 weeks to kick off another favorite project of yours.

Me: Which one?

I asked excitedly about taking on another new project.

Richard: The new menus for delivery.

I started working on that project two months before the mass layoff day. I understood our team's needs well and already had an implementation strategy in mind. I was all excited and felt good about my future with the company again after so long.

*I can finally take my experience to the next level.*

I thought.

*Richard: Yes, I am sure your lead will help tremendously.*

He said, showing a smile and optimism on his face.

Richard: Book your flight and room. I will send you details of where we meet.

I was so excited. I could not wait for the travel details he sent right that afternoon. I booked everything that day itself. It was the first time I ever flew to Los Angeles. I knew I would not have time to go to the beach, but it still sounded like an exotic type of trip.

At one point, I asked him about the agenda of the meeting, but he said not to worry about it. There will be meetings, and I will receive formal invitations when they are sent out. I trusted the process and kept my excitement up for new projects.

Two weeks later, I landed in Los Angeles. It was hot and humid. I took an Uber from the airport. It was around 5 p.m., and there was so much traffic. The driver had a South American accent, and he was very friendly. Usually, I would not talk with the drivers because I enjoyed the trip, but this guy was stubborn in chatting with me. He said,

Driver: Everything happens for a reason, and you will find your reason on this trip.

*He is talking so much nonsense.*

I said to myself. Something in his words made me gloomy, and I thought more deeply about why I was on this trip.

He took me to the hotel where Richard had mentioned that all of us would stay. It was the Aloft Hotel. It was a new building, and the reception was pretty modern. I went up into my room. The furniture in that room was modern but of cheap quality. It was a high-ceiling room, and one wall showed its bricks. I felt cold, and something about that room made me feel different. I felt alone and like something that would change me for good was about to happen. I could not tell

where this feeling came from, but a sense of non-belongingness occurred in my mind. I asked myself,

*Why did Richard invite me here?*

I did not know who I was going to meet. I was not prepared for any of the meetings. I did not have any meetings on my calendar yet. I could have enjoyed myself, but I was confused and worried instead.

There was one of our stores nearby, but when I went there, I realized that it did not have any vegetarian food. So, I left. I wanted to walk around but did not know the area well, so I did not adventure out. I thought of calling Carol or Elisabeth to tell them I was in town, but I felt guilty. They were probably still looking for jobs, and I was there still having a job and doing their work instead. I saw then a Subway close to a Starbucks. It was a perfect combination for my lonely night. When I started cooling down, I saw Richard with a guy in line at Subway. I could not avoid them, although I wish I could have.

Richard: Here she is. When did you land?

Richard asked with his always charismatic kind of smile.

Me: I have just landed and got to my room. Now I am starving.

Richard: Nice. Perfect timing. Do you know Alex?

Me: No. I do not think we met.

Me: Hey Alex.

Richard: That is Valentina. She is our systems guru. You remember I told you about her.

Me: Nice to meet you, Alex.

I spoke. Slightly annoyed by Richard's exaggeration of my introduction.

Alex: Nice to meet you, too, Valentina!

The new guy, Alex, said to me.

Alex: It is a pleasure finally meeting you. People in our office brag about you.

Me: Thank you! I appreciate the compliment. I am trying my best to stay out of trouble.

I tried turning their excessive compliments into a joke.

Richard: Alex is our new data analyst at the corporate office. He will be helping with the delivery project. He will be in one of the meetings tomorrow. You can spend some time with him sharing your ideas about the project.

Me: Absolutely!

I said, but I did not know if I should be enthusiastic about this knowledge-sharing with the new guy.

I was at a stage in my career where I was looking for growth, and I knew that the step ahead meant coaching and mentoring others. I dreamed of having a team to work with and teaching them how the systems work so I could focus on managing the development of new systems. I liked sharing my knowledge and seeing others grow. I was craving that opportunity for career growth, but teaching this new guy how systems work did not seem right.

*Why did Richard not tell me earlier about this knowledge transfer? Why did I learn about it in a San Francisco Subway?*

Then I calmed down, and I thought I was overthinking.

*Just enjoy this trip and let it go.*

I told myself while starting a small chit-chat with Richard and the new guy, Alex. I decided to take my food to the room. I could not fake it too long around those guys. When I returned to my hotel room, that place seemed even colder. The Uber driver's words got louder:

*You will find your reason on this trip.*

It took me a while to fall asleep, but somehow, I did it.

The next day, I woke up early and went to the Starbucks I had discovered the night before. There was Alex already. He was talking on the phone, and I did not want to disturb him. I

waved at him and smiled. I noticed his voice got quieter when I entered, but I thought he did not want to make noise. I did not bother. I ordered my coffee and a vanilla biscuit. I sat down, trying to enjoy my Starbucks treat. While sitting, I hear Alex cheering me.

Alex: Good morning! Did you sleep well?

Me: Not really. This hotel's rooms have high ceilings, and it felt so cold. What about you?

Alex: Neither do I. It is not like home. I liked the room, but I miss my home bed.

Me: It makes sense.

I spoke.

Alex: I just got off the phone with Richard, and he said he wants to talk to you before our first meeting this morning.

Me: Sure thing!

I answered, but this time, concerned and contradicted.

My confidence was going down.

*Something is going on. What would Richard want to talk about?*

I wished Helen was with us on this trip, but she was not invited. I did not let my concerns and fear show on my face, so I continued to make small talk with Alex. We got an Uber together and reached the office in no time. I was glad. I could not fake the chats any longer. At the office entrance were Richard, the company's president, and two guys I had never seen before. I introduced myself and learned that the new guys were consultants in delivery systems. They were very young, smart-looking, and confident. The president of the company did not seem pleased with my presence there. At least, this is how I felt. Richard continued to be that agreeable, charismatic guy trying to facilitate the introduction and please his boss simultaneously. After the president greeted us, he left, and Richard called me and spoke.

Richard: Let's talk in my office.

I did not know he had an office at this location, too. It would not even matter. He sat at the desk and asked me to sit on one of the chairs in front of his desk. That office looked messy, like a storage room, and Richard noticed that I was uncomfortable with the disorder in that office. He smiled, too.

Richard: That is not my office. They let me stay here when I come to town. It was Tania's office, but now it is a storage room.

Me: That is good you have a place to work here, too.

I found myself saying, feeling uncomfortable.

Richard: I wanted to talk to you before the meetings today.

He started. His face and attitude changed. He became serious with a grip on his face.

Richard: You have been with the company for a long time. You know the systems well, and I wanted to ask if you are interested in working for the headquarters.

In my naivety back then, I felt relieved.

*He is not firing me.*

I thought. I took pride in his offer. I felt valued, but then I knew I could not move.

Me: I would love to. That would be a great opportunity, but my kids are still in school, and my parents recently moved with us. I can not make this move now.

Richard: Think about it and let me know. Working from the Bluebonnet city office long-term will be harder for you.

By then, I did not understand what he meant, and genuinely, I said.

Me: Do not worry. I will be here as long as you need me.

I did not have a clue what I committed to. I was just happy he did not fire me and that I still had work to do.

Richard: Okay. I can understand. Join these guys at the meetings today and tomorrow and share with them the systems knowledge you have. It will help with the project's success tremendously.

Me: I am so happy I can help.

I said again naively.

I left his office, relieved but at the same time anxious.

*What is my future with the company? How can I fit in? I must try my best.*

I encouraged myself.

We went to a location across the street where Richard booked a large conference room. He dropped me off there. In the room, I found Alex and the two consultants. There were some refreshments at the entrance, and they were all indulging in the goodies. They were waiting for Richard and I. Richard introduced me again, and then the consultants introduced each other. Alex took the lead in the meeting, and Richard left. I felt awkward because I usually led those meetings, but I said nothing and did not want others to feel uncomfortable. I had to blend in. We started talking about a strategy and how the new system works. The consultants would ask questions, and I started sharing my plan and how I thought we could tackle this project. I saw Alex in a corner taking notes, but I continued freely with my conversation with the consultants. I liked them. They were sharp and quickly understood what I was trying to say. We continued like this all morning. I enjoyed it, but I felt dragged out of power, too.

At lunch, we took a break, and Alex, this time, placed an order for Jimmy Johns sandwiches. We did not leave the building. I was craving a coffee after lunch but did not say anything. We restarted the meeting at about 1 p.m. local time. This time it was a conference call. On the call, there was the new project manager. I was happy to meet him virtually but also confused about why he led this meeting. While planning the work, I noticed that nothing had

been assigned to me, and all that I shared with the consultants became their work to do for the project. I was speechless.

*What the heck is going on?*

I said in my mind. I could not make a scene, and I kept quiet. I soon realized that it was a trap. Then, I thought they still needed me for the execution of the plan, but the consultants were also very sharp. I had a blur in my mind by now. They would ask me questions, and I would answer mechanically. I think I told them most of everything I knew. Slowly, towards the evening, I started feeling relieved.

*I do not need to be in control. It is good I shared my learning with them.*

At the end of the meeting, late in the evening, Richard came.

Richard: Have you guys finished the project already?

He was all enthusiastic.

Richard: Are you ready for some drinks?

Alex and the two consultants cheered up. You could tell they were tired but happy with what they had accomplished in the meetings. I was numb. I did not know how to feel. I did not feel part of the team anymore or wanted to be there. I wanted to run away. I realized how cheap I sold myself. At dinner, I kept quiet and transgressed in my world. I do not remember what I ate or drank. I remember Richard trying to engage me in the discussion, but I zoomed out and mechanically smiled.

The next day, meetings continued, but I was utterly detached this time. That is when I first started looking into becoming a certified project manager. I would nod in agreement when asked something or have to look into the issue. I wished I had had time to go to the beach.

## **The New Office**

When I first joined the company, I was given a tiny cubicle. It was probably the smallest in the building. There was just enough space to put in my computer and phone. There was no natural light. I smiled when my boss showed me that tiny cubicle. I was happy with my job from day 1. I was given so much freedom and trust. The job description was unclear, and I was pulled in different directions, but I enjoyed it because that was how I learned the systems and how they interrelate.

Later, when I gained more confidence, I requested an office. The main reason was that there was a customer relations team close to my cubicle. They were loud as they would constantly talk to the customers. At first, I thought I could learn something from hearing those discussions, but then it became distracting.

A couple of years later, the executive leadership decided to remodel the building, which is how they assigned me a new office. I took pride in it. It was not only a way to make me feel appreciated, but I could be more productive and inspired. Near that office was a place for our development type of technology. It was easy for me to go and check out the systems where we implemented new products or services. Team members from the other departments would come there to review the latest technology. It was a cool corner of the building, and they would call me most of the time if they wanted to check something out.

Besides my office and Tania's, only the technical room was on that side of the building. It was quiet. Sometimes, we would hear an old-fashioned typewriter from the legal department. After Tania left, the quiet got even more profound. It is a lot of guilt in that quiet corner of the building, at least on my side. I kept Tania's office door always closed. I subconsciously

pretended she was on a call and did not want to be disturbed. The time passed, and I got used to the quietness. I also learned to embrace being the only technical person in that office.

I liked my office. I had some personal items on one of the shelves, some books, and a few souvenirs from the company's conferences. The few people left in the office would stop by and chat about our technical projects. After the day of the mass layoff, I realized that my exposure to the new projects was limited, and I would find out about new technology in the stores from others other than my boss or Richard – our IT director.

A few months after the mass layoff, a new CEO joined the company. Our VP of marketing introduced him to me.

VP of marketing: She is the brain of our systems.

She excessively bragged about my knowledge.

VP of marketing: So, she is the one to contact when the systems in our stores are down.

The new CEO said in a severe tone.

CEO: We have a helpdesk team, but she is knowledgeable.

This new CEO, Mike, was charismatic but challenging at the same time. I think he had a big heart but wanted to show he was in control. Mike had a good sense of humor. He had original ideas for our brand products, sometimes too excessive and risky. From his perspective, anything out of the ordinary would attract customers' attention. He once had this idea to call one of our products the "dirty bitch". Nobody fought his eccentricity for some reason, and we launched the product with this name. A few weeks later, a district school representative reported the product as obscene and inappropriate. He smiled when he heard the complaint, but he agreed to change the product's name by removing the word "bitch".

Mike made many changes at the stores but at our office too. I thought he was ingenious and courageous at the same time. The structure and the frequency of our meetings changed. Some in a good way. Our meetings became shorter and on point. But he also started being not as transparent as we were used to before his arrival. With the previous leadership, all of us in the office knew everything and anything about new changes in the office or at the stores. With Mike, we would find out about some of the changes at the store way after the decision was made. Although he was exigent in his requests, I liked him because he was objective and fair. One day, I learned from my friend, Frank, that Mike does not like our office and is looking for a nicer location. We were at lunch, and he spoke.

Frank: You know that Mike is looking for another location for our office.

Me: What do you mean? What is wrong with our place?

Frank: We are not that many anyway, and the lease will expire soon. The board of directors does not want to invest in this office.

Me: But it is a great location.

I said, disappointed in Mike's decision.

Me: On the other hand ...

I continued with a sense of approval.

Me: He is right. Half of the offices are empty anyway.

Frank: It might take a while, but we will be out of here by the end of the year or sooner.

A couple of days later, I heard the rumor about the new office again, this time from our Marketing Director. Yet, there was still nothing official from Mike or any other executive. I did not bother asking more questions and let the news die, hoping it was just a rumor.

It was August when many of us would take summer vacations. Then, Mike made the official announcement at one of our monthly office town halls.

Mike: Most of you have been in this office for many years, but it is time for a refresher. We found an office with a modern look. When I first came into this office, I almost got lost, but it was so dark, and the painting and carpets were so out of fashion.

His comments were shocking to me. I thought he did not know what he was talking about. The previous CEO spent significant time and money remodeling our office 2 years ago. When Mike announced the move, he did not consult anyone else about the history of this office. I was not surprised by his ignorance and that he spoke without prior research on this topic. It was his leadership style. I honestly did not worry or even anticipate what the move into a new office could mean for my career and transformation.

I did not let this decision bother or influence me and my goals. By now, I had personal purposes other than work-related ones. Not only was I back in school studying for a master's degree, but I wanted to obtain the project management professional certification. So, at that time, I was studying hard for the exam and planning to take a few days off by the end of the month.

Our new office manager sent an email stating that we were supposed to pack all our belongings in one or two yellow boxes they would provide, leave them outside our office, and the moving team would transport them to the new office. They were moving so fast with this new office move, but it did not bother me much since I would be out of the office when the actual move happened.

The following Monday, I found two big yellow boxes in my office. I am unsure why they gave me two, but I did not mind. Instinctively, I put my personal belongings in one of the boxes and any work-related items in the other box. Since I was leaving on vacation, the office manager told me to take the boxes home because the new office was not ready when I returned, and they could get lost. I took them home the day before my vacation. I left them in my garage to bring

them back to the new office. I just dropped them there and forgot about them until Monday, when I was supposed to return to work.

In the meantime, I received an email that the new office is still not ready for us to move, and the old office is already out of the lease, so we could work from one of the nearest store locations of our house. Back then, nobody in the office was prepared or open to working from home. The following Monday, I brought my laptop to one of the stores close to my house, and I wrote to the office manager at which location I was stationed. I was requested to provide that location like someone would come and check to see if I was there. I sat there in the back of the store, working and observing the few customers who came and visited. I enjoyed that experience. I felt closer to the business and its vibe.

Luckily, while sitting there, the office manager announced that the new office was ready the next day. I felt relieved because while at the store, the workers felt pretty uncomfortable with my presence. They probably felt like someone was watching them and could get into trouble if I observed any issues. I minded my business anyway.

The next day I had to go to the new office which was located in a slightly different area than the previous one. I put the new location address on the GPS of my car. It was 5 min farther than our old office location.

*Not a big deal.*

I thought. I was supposed to bring my stuff there, but I do not know why I only took the yellow box with my professional belongings. I left the other yellow box with my stuff in my garage. I reached the new office and realized it is much smaller than our old one. The office

manager was at the entrance to guide us to our offices. I went in with my yellow box, and she spoke.

Office manager: Good morning! Good, you brought your box. Let me take you to your desk.

Me: Of course!

I answered optimistically.

The office's main entrance was tight, but on the left was a big, large, high-ceiling open room with maybe around twenty cubicles in the center and a couple of offices on the side. I walked behind the office manager, letting her guide me to my place. We passed the big open room, and she took me to a hallway from which I could see the breakroom. Right before the breakroom, there were three cubicles. The ceiling light was so bright, and you could see and hear all the noise from the breakroom. We stopped, and I heard the office manager.

Office manager: That is your cubicle. The one far left, or you can choose another one since you came early.

I was in shock. I softly said.

Me: Thank you!

I was carrying the yellow box and left it beside my new cubicle desk.

*All that work, and now I am back to square one in a tiny cubicle.*

I barely found the power to take some of the stuff out of the box. I did not want to be there anymore. I did not belong there. I felt I wasted my time and worth there; it was all gone now. I wanted to run away.

**Steve is not here anymore.**

After the mass layoff, those left to stay looked for ways to do their jobs short-handed. Most of us know how to work in different areas as an extension of our jobs. I do not think any of

us would have a clear job description. We were multi-skilled. We had a place we were experts in but capable and willing to work other unrelated to our job tasks too. Most of the work was remote with people from the corporate office or the other brands or vendors. We also had people who were experts in certain areas and with whom we rarely talked. We tried not to pull those people into our project work unless we needed their expertise.

A couple of months before the mass layoff, Richard organized a team building for the entire technology department from all offices (ironically!). The intent was to create a powerful team by increasing communication and bonds. At that time, I did not think Richard knew or had any idea about the mass layoff, and if he did, that team building could only strengthen our relationships as people, not only as co-workers.

I remembered that team building gathering about Steve. Steve was quiet, reserved, and fully remote, working from his home in New York. Helen introduced him to me at the team-building party. We had a lot in common, given our analytical background. I was also a big fan of New York, so he and I shared our experiences in the city.

Me: How come you work in New York?

I asked curiously.

Steve: I used to work for the previous owner; their headquarters were in New York. The accounting system is old, and I'm the only one who knows how it works.

Me: That makes sense.

Steve: I learned how to maintain the system and read the reports.

Me: It is excellent that we have you on our team.

Steve: Yes, I am happy too. I'm trying to learn about the new systems but do not get pulled into the new projects. Whenever they initiate a new project, they keep forgetting about me.

Me: Hmm. Is that because you work remotely, you think?

Steve: Most likely.

He said in agreement but also with concern on his face.

I did not understand his concern back then. Richard and Helen also valued good people with technical and analytical expertise. So, it would only make sense to have Steve on our team, even if remote. Before the age of COVID-19, working from home was rare, and it would be acceptable for exceptional situations or employees with unique skills, such as Steve. Steve was friendly and approachable and had a great working relationship with Helen. She would talk highly about him in our project meetings and when she introduced him to me that night.

Helen: Steve is our accounting guru. You and he are the brains of our system. I do not know what we would do without you both.

Helen introduced Steve, flattering both of us. It was her style. She genuinely cared for people. Her introduction helped us ease each other's behavior. We let our egos down, which is how we opened, discussing our passions and work. That is how I found out more about Steve's area of expertise. I could understand it well because of our analytical background and vocabulary. I was fascinated and learned a couple of tricks talking to him that night.

Time passed, and I forgot about Steve. For some reason, we did not interact much. That could have been because the system he knew so well had been replaced soon after the mass layoff. In all the craziness of the mass layoff day, or even after, I still forgot about Steve. We were more concerned with those we worked with daily. Those were the gaps we had to fill, and we, the left to stay, were so emotionally dragged and focused on using our energy constructively.

One day, as we were developing a new product, we landed on the complexity of how our systems integrate. The vendors, consultants, and developers did not know how to tackle that issue. But then I suddenly remembered Steve and the knowledge he shared with me at the team building party. At that moment, I realized I did not know his last name. We never talked after that party, and I could not remember hearing his name when Helen introduced us.

*Let me reach out to Helen.*

I thought.

*She should have his email address or phone number.*

I called her right when I realized the need to talk to Steve.

Me: Hello, Helen!

Steve: Hello, my dear! How can I help you?

Helen picked up the phone fast, and she would always have this kind of friendly approach to make one feel comfortable to open up.

Me: I do need your help. Do you remember you introduced me to this guy Steve at our team building party? He had a good knowledge of our accounting systems.

Helen: I almost forgot about our team building gathering. What a blast! I am so happy we had that party, so you guys got to know each other.

Me: Yes, you are right. It was a great time!

Helen: What kind of knowledge do you need from Steve?

She asked in curiosity, but also lingering the discussion.

Me: One of our reporting systems shows some errors. It looks like it is coming from the accounting data. I thought since Steve has that kind of knowledge, maybe he could assist.

Helen: Understood. We decided to implement a new accounting system a couple of months ago.

Me: Aha! I can understand.

I said, slightly discouraged by the lack of transparency.

Helen: Richard brought a new vendor for that implementation, and they did a great job. I led that project, and the transition to the new system went smoothly. Thank God!

Helen always liked to show optimism when new systems were implemented.

Me: I am sure Steve made a significant contribution to this transition.

Helen: Yes, he did. He had fantastic knowledge and work ethic. He shared with us the previous system's logic, which helped tremendously.

*Such a nice guy.*

I thought—such ethical work behavior.

Helen: A couple of weeks ago, Richard had to let Steve go under the pressure of downsizing.

Helen continued. This time, she felt guilty and hesitant to share the news with me.

Helen: We could not afford to keep him in his New York office. With the new system, we needed someone here in the office. The consultant helped us hire a junior analyst for the new system maintenance.

*Smart move.*

I said to myself.

*Much cheaper probably than keeping Steve in the role.*

Me: So, what happened to Steve?

I asked, slightly disturbed by the news.

Helen: Richard is helping him find another job for one of our consultants. He is an intelligent guy who will learn fast any new system, an accounting one.

Me: I am sure he is. I hope he had some warning and time to prepare for this separation.

I found myself saying, like fighting for his rights.

Suddenly, I could relate to Steve's situation and realized my separation from the company was imminent. Since the mass layout, I have been isolated. I would find out about new systems being implemented at the last minute. I was struggling to stay in touch with the latest news, not because I did not want to know but because neither Richard nor Helen would keep me informed. At one point, I thought they did not understand the impact of this lack of transparency on my motivation and productivity, but soon, I realized it was well thought out. They did not know me to panic and leave sooner than they were ready for me to share my knowledge with those at the corporate office. Their goal was to run the operational business from the corporate office only. I could not blame them, but I felt they did not consider people's lives, previous experiences, or careers.

*What can I do? I can not fight the systems and their business decisions.*

I was learning to take my life into my own hands and consider other job opportunities. I could no longer be loyal to the company, Helen, or Richard. I wish I had Steve's phone number, but then I thought.

*What difference would that make?*

He might have moved on with his career already, and why he would talk to him to tell me the obvious

*Watch out! The sword is coming your way, too. Move out as soon as you can.*

### **The Curse of the High Pay**

With so many insecurities around me, I realized I had to look for another job. I have not performed a job search since I joined the company. Before the mass layoffs, I was happy and did not bother to look for a job elsewhere. I also received a promotion and a significant raise two years into my role. Things were optimistic back then, and the company was performing well. My salary was adjusted accordingly, and we received a bonus based on the company's performance every year. There was no reason for me to search for a new job. I was happy not only financially, but I grew professionally in certain areas. I was always busy and involved in systems development, and although there were intense situations and crises, I learned to manage them successfully.

After the mass layoff, I became insecure, and with everyone leaving, I feared my turn would be next. The trip to Los Angeles was probably the most intense situation that triggered my job search. The chat with Richard and how the new delivery system implementation was approached made it clear that my future with the company will end soon. Although my pay was

high at that time, that was not enough to overcome the tension and uncertainty of losing my job. My family and friends would encourage me to be paid well and let go of any frustrations, but that was not enough to keep me engaged and motivated.

When I returned disappointed from Los Angeles, I opened my resume, which I used to apply for my current role. At first, I took pride in my growth with the company, but then I was disappointed I could not take my career to the next level there. I left behind any frustrations and spoke.

*Let's try this. There should be something out there for you.*

Since I was not in the job market for a while, I did not know where to start. I had a few sites to search for jobs, but I was unsure if they were current or legit.

Although hesitant, I contacted Jack, the recruiter who brought me to the company initially. He and Richard knew each other, and the risk could have been that he could mention Richard about my job search. At this point, it did not matter much to me. I could not have been loyal to the company, Richard, or my team. My future career and my family's financials were in jeopardy.

Me: Hey Jack! Here is Valentina. We worked together a couple of years ago when you placed me at our company. I hope you remember me.

Jack: Hey Valentina! Of course, I do remember you. Our client was so happy with your performance and pleased we brought you on board. How are things with you?

I was in my car when I made this call. It was during my lunch break. It was summer and so hot outside. I had to turn on the car and have the AC on high.

Me: Things are good. I am struggling with the heat outside. I hope you are doing well too.

Jack: Yes, I am. How is Richard doing?

Me: Richard is fine. We just met in Los Angeles the other week. We had a blast.

I forced myself to sound positive and not disclose my fears or the company's situation.

Jack: That's great to hear. How can I help you?

He asked like he wanted to go to the point of our discussion.

Me: I was wondering if you could help me with a job search. I want to take my career to the next level and thought you could help.

Jack: I can understand. That makes sense now with the experience you have. Can you stop by my office next week to discuss this?

Me: Absolutely!

I was excited, and suddenly, I felt optimistic about my future.

That week went by fast, and nothing bothered me about how things were communicated or not to me. I would continue to accidentally find out about new systems that were or will be implemented soon or co-workers from the other brand or corporate office not being there anymore. Still, I was less and less sensitive to these findings. I dreamed of finding that new job with a friendly culture where I could fit in and bring over the experience, I gained during all these years. Every night, I would come home and work on my resume. I was planning to have it ready and take it with me when I meet with Jack next week.

Our meeting day came, and I drove to Jack's office during lunchtime. Since we last worked together, Jack was promoted, and he was now the company president. I found that out when searching for the location of his office, which was very near to our office. When I reached his office, his assistant told me to make myself comfortable and that Jack would see me shortly. I was not nervous at all. Jack was approachable, and I was also confident in my skills and experience.

Jack: Here she is!

Jack shouts, coming from a side hallway. He had a lot of energy, and he was always that enthusiastic. It was not me but his nature to greet people.

Me: Hi Jack! It was nice seeing you after so long.

Jack: You bet. It has been almost six years. Time flies.

While discussing their new office location, he took me to a large conference room with a big table in the center and glass windows. There was so much resemblance with our conference room. I sat down facing the big windows, and he went across the table on the opposite side.

Me: That is a nice office. Spacious.

I said while looking for the folder with my resume in it.

Me: Here is my resume. I thought it would help with our discussion.

Jack: I am glad you have it. I meant to tell you to bring one.

Looks nice!

He said, taking a glance at my resume.

Jack: What are your career goals now?

Me: I am looking into a leadership role in project management or business analytics.

Jack: That is great you have the expertise and exposure to these fields. Both are in high demand.

But you see.

He continues in a different tone, like he is trying to sell me something.

Jack: Our company is now focused more on developers' search and IT executives. I have not come across any project management roles lately. But I will keep you in mind if we do.

My hopes went down. I could not understand why he would ask me to come to their office if they could not work with me.

Jack: I was unsure which direction you were looking in your job search, but project management is a good starting point for you. There is one in town with the same business profile as yours. Jack: Have you tried to talk to them?

Me: No, I have not. Do you have any connections there?

Jack: Yes. I can put you in touch with the HR director. She is a lovely lady. I am sure she will like you.

My hopes were back. This time, I was being more cautious about what to hope for.

*This job search is not going to be easy.*

I told myself.

Me: That is a fantastic help! I appreciate it.

Jack: Absolutely! I am glad to help candidates like you.

Jack: How is your work now? I have not heard from Richard in a while.

Me: Work is good, busy as you know. Richard is busy, too.

Me: He was always in search of developers.

Jack: We have outsourced a lot lately, which is probably why he did not contact you.

Me: That makes sense.

Jack continued in approval.

Me: Would you mind not mentioning to him that we met?

I found myself saying to Jack.

Jack: No worries! I can perfectly understand. We keep these discussions private between our candidates and their current employers. It is our policy.

Me: That is nice!

I said with relief at the possible consequences of Richard or Helen learning I was searching for a new job.

Me: Okay. I will contact the HR director, and we can keep in touch after that.

Jack: Sounds like a plan!

We chatted a little about project management, and then I left and went back to work. I was so disappointed this time, trying to find ways to save my job. I feared being jobless. I thought of ways to ask for more work or to reposition myself. That was when I had the idea to ask to work for the brand instead of for the corporate office. I thought to do that alone and bypass Richard or Helen. I started being desperate at this point. I did not know what to do or who to ask for help. I knew I would get killed there but did not know where or how to escape. Quitting was not an option for me. I quit once when I was young and had terrible remorse after that. I promised myself I would never quit but rather try all my options before I got fired.

Jack texted me that evening the HR director's phone number. Before I called her, I had researched their brand's website to see if they were searching for any jobs. That is how I found they were looking for a project manager. My hopes and excitement came back.

*This is a perfect match job for my experience.*

I thought. I could not wait to talk to that lady the next day. That night, I started preparing myself to talk about the areas I had experience in and how they related to the role they were looking for.

The next day, around lunch, I got in the car and called the HR Director. Her name was Lucy. I was confident again. I knew my worth and liked talking about my job and experience. So I was not nervous at all.

Me: Hello! Is this Lucy?

I asked politely.

Lucy: Yes, this is her.

She had a friendly and approachable voice.

Me: Hi! My name is Valentina Rada, and I have your number from Jack. He recommended I talk to you about any project manager openings at your company.

Lucy: Sure! I know, Jack. He is a great guy. I am glad you called. We have a project manager opening if you are interested.

Me: Absolutely! I noticed that on your website.

Lucy: That is nice. Just upload your latest resume, and we will look at it.

Lucy: How many years of experience do you have?

Me: I have been with our company for six years and liaised between our technology department and the other brand areas for our systems development and implementation.

Lucy: Beautiful!

She said, sounding optimistic.

Lucy: Yes, we are seeking someone with systems implementation experience who thinks strategically simultaneously.

I appreciated that insight. I could use it later on when talking about my experience.

Lucy: Let me put you in touch with the hiring manager. He is our development team director. But before I do that, do you have time for a prescreening interview with me this week?

Me: Absolutely!

Lucy: Okay. That sounds good. Text me when you upload your resume, and we can coordinate a day and time to talk over the phone this week.

Me: I can come to your office if you want me to.

Lucy: No, no worries! That will be a phone screening interview. We do that with all our candidates.

Me: Understood!

That evening, I uploaded my resume and texted her. We agreed to talk in 2 days. I chose to speak at 5:30 p.m., so I could be home and talk freely and without any distractions. Lucy agreed, and she mentioned she would call me then. The closer it got to the day I spoke to her, I got a little nervous, but then I had to remind myself of my experience and that I had to show confidence. That night, the phone rang from a different number than Lucy's. I answered after two rings.

Lucy: Hi Valentina! Is this a good time to talk?

Me: Of course. Hi Lucy!

Lucy: Hi there! I have reviewed your resume. Impressive! It looks like you gained a lot of experience in a short time.

Me: Thank you! I tried my best.

Lucy: It also looks like you play different roles in your current job.

Me: Yes, I did that. I am trying to support our team as much as I can.

Lucy: That is nice of you!

She asked me how I handle project deliverables, change, and crises. I answered the best I could and was happy with my answers. I was confident and knew well how to address different project-related situations. I talked from experience. Then she asked

Lucy: Why are you looking to leave the company? You know the systems well and are a great asset to your company.

I paused for a second. I am not a good liar, and I have not thought she would ask that question.

Me: I am looking for a career growth opportunity, and your company is a great fit for my future.

I found myself saying. That was half of the truth. The other half was that I feared losing my job and felt that my job was in jeopardy. One cannot share these thoughts with a recruiter, and one should not.

Lucy: I can understand. It sounds like you could fit our company's culture and role well. Let me present your resume to our hiring manager and provide him with my feedback based on our discussion.

Me: That sounds great!

A few days later, Lucy called me to schedule an interview with the hiring manager beginning the following week. Things were moving fast. She told me I would interview some of his team members, which sounded promising. My confidence was again up. Over the weekend, I thought of some project experiences to share with the hiring manager and his team. We had many successes with our projects, and I took pride in being part of those teams. The HR Director seemed to like me, too, so I did not worry much about the interview. I kept up my confidence, although I understood how important that interview could be for my future career.

While driving to the interview, I assessed the commute from my house to their office. The traffic was not bad, and the distance was acceptable. I was excited and full of hope. A dreadful thought came to me.

*What if he does not like me?*

I had to do my best to convince this guy I was a great fit for his team and that my experience could only add value to the team. Caught in my thoughts, I did not realize when I

reached their office. I parked in a visitor's spot as Lucy guided me to do. They had a big building with glass windows. I went down to the main entrance of the building, and there, a guard, after asking for my driver's license, told me to sit down and wait for Lucy to pick me up. The waiting room had many historical pictures of the brand events. Suddenly, I experienced a feeling of belongingness, or at least I thought I did. A few minutes later, Lucy came to pick me up.

Lucy: Here you are. Good afternoon!

She said, excited to see me there.

Me: Hi Lucy!

I shook her hands professionally.

Me: It is nice to meet you.

Lucy: Likewise! I hope you found the office quickly.

Me: Yes, I did.

I nodded.

Lucy: Perfect. Let me take you down to Charles's office. They are in a separate location since his team is expanding.

That sounded promising to join a growing team. I already started making connections of how I could help the team grow and thought of all the systems at our brand we could not develop anymore because we did not have enough resources, including human resources.

I followed Lucy to a building utterly detached from the main building. The inside looked like a barn with many cubicles in the center and a working station on the side of a long conference room. There were no windows, and the cubicles were separated by glass. I noticed a couple of team members working and chatting at a big desk. A blonde guy, probably my age or younger, approached us.

Hiring manager: Hi Lucy! I assume she is Valentina.

He spoke. His voice was soft and not as imposing or charismatic as Richard's or the other leaders I knew from our company. He seemed shy, but I think he was introverted instead. Not very excited to be around people. I became anxious about these possible changes I would have to experience if I joined the company.

Lucy: Yes! This is her.

Hiring manager: Nice to meet you!

I said, pushing my hand to shake his. He was hesitant and not excited about my exuberance or Lucy's. I realized I had to pivot my behavior quickly.

Lucy: This is Charles. He is our Development Director, and you will be interviewing him and his team today. I will leave you in his hands.

Lucy introduced Charles and quickly left the detached building.

While walking down the room, Charles introduced me to this pregnant young girl, mentioning that she recently joined his team but was due soon. She was a project coordinator. She was shy, too, but she had a genuine smile. She was pretty and glowing, as any pregnant woman would be. She did not seem that confident, but it looked like she was willing to learn. We did not chat much with her and went further down to the table with the bid desk where the other team members were working. They were all young and chatty. They were pointing to some paperwork on that big, long desk. That looked awkward to me for a development team. It reminded me of construction engineers when they discuss their construction plans. Charles introduced me to them, and he briefly introduced each of them. We went then to a conference room that was rather long and wide with some benches. I sat on one side, and Charles sat on the other side.

Charles: We do a lot of discovery work for our online ordering application.

Me: That is great to hear. What kind of discovery?

Charles: We want first to understand our customers' behavior and how and why they buy our products.

I have not thought about that before. We did not have those discussions for our brand when we developed the online ordering system. We were more concerned with the development and technical aspects of that integration. Although that discovery made sense, I could not understand how it would pertain to system development. I listened to Michael explain the process, and I felt awkward. And all the experiences I had prepared to share did not make sense in this context. I had to come up with something on the spot.

Me: This journey of the customer makes sense. How are you planning to incorporate it into the application development process?

I found myself saying, trying to understand where I could fit.

Charles: We need a product owner and a scrum master to support the development process.

Charles continued.

At that time, I was unfamiliar with these roles and many other agile project management terminologies Charles used during our conversation. I was lost and did not know how to bring the discussion close to my area of expertise.

Charles: We use a lot of traditional project management strategies in our product development. That is how we launched it to the customers in nine months.

Charles was not impressed with my comments. I have probably sounded too confident.

Charles: It sounds like you are more technical than we need for our projects here. I am the one who runs the technical aspects, and we would prefer someone as a scrum master for this role.

Me: I am sure I can support that role, too.

I said again, full of confidence.

Charles: I am sure you could.

We continued chatting about his discovery strategies, and I shared my experience and challenges in developing the app. We kept the discussion high-level and realized no synergy existed between our experiences or needs. We ended up politely. He took me to the exit door. We shook hands again, and I left. I was so disappointed. I could not believe the experience, but I tried to stay positive. I called Lucy later and told her how excited I was about the company and role. I bragged about Charles and that I felt I was a good fit. I was desperate. At the end of the discussion, she asked how much my current salary was. I promptly answered with my number figure. She said nothing back but told me she would discuss it with Charles and get back to me once she heard more.

I have never heard back from them. I tried calling Lucy, but she did not answer. After a few weeks, I received an email saying Charles was still seeking the right candidate. I was disappointed. By this time, things got more complicated at our place—a lot of work, miscommunication, and my fear of being fired at any point. One day, Jack called me.

Jack: Hey Valentina! How are things?

Me: I am doing well but busy, as you know. How about you?

Jack: Checking on you. How did your meeting with Lucy go?

Me: Not that good. I mean, Lucy is a nice lady. She helped me a lot, but their hiring manager did not like me that much.

Jack: I heard they are looking for entry-level positions.

Jack: How much did you ask?

Me: They never asked. Lucy asked me how much I currently make.

I shared that with Lucy and Jack.

Jack: Hmm. That is pay for a leadership position. You should probably start looking for those roles instead.

Me: That is what I thought I did.

Jack: You may also want to become a certified project manager to support your experience.

Me: You are right.

I said, disappointed about the hiring process.

This experience only added to my need for transformation. I realized I had to do something about how I presented myself to these organizations during the interviews. I had to reinvent myself by better understanding the job market and the organizational cultures for the jobs I applied for.

**“Outstanding does not give you job offers.”**

It has been two months since the mass layoff. Emotionally speaking, I was dragging. A sense of guilt and cowardice would be in my mind, impacting my well-being at work and home. I was pushing myself to perform, but I felt lonely and empty. Something was missing, and I could not find ways to overcome that sense of filling in the empty space. I was working on a project that would impact the other brand. Before the mass layoff, there was Carol and Elisabeth to talk to and bounce off ideas. Now, I was lost. I had to build relationships with the other brand operations from a distance. I did not have much insight into them, and I was not in the same office so that we could communicate. I was blind to their behavior. I could not figure out whom I could rely on for some support for building these relations. Richard was knowledgeable and sometimes provided insights, but he was busy most of the time.

Elisabeth and I had a similar mindset in building relationships and keeping these project stakeholders engaged. She and I would talk often and strategize our communication with the operations crew. They were busy most of the time and instead occupied with operational tasks. We at the corporate office were supposed to send out clear and concise communication when any

changes occur to the systems. That was another area Elisabeth, and I were good at, and we worked great as a team.

I remember our first contact was a conflict. I was trying to reach out to brand operations and had a few insights, but I would demand information. Elisabeth was new, and I already had a couple of years of tenure with the company. She sent me an intricate email explaining that the operations were not involved in that project and would not know how to answer my questions. I raised my eyebrows as I read the email. She was articulate and made good points. I decided to call her instead of writing back with an email. That would have generated much more confusion. I am glad I did so. In time, I understood Elisabeth's intentions and rationale better. She was not defensive but objective in explaining her points. That is when I understood how bright she was and how close she was to the operations team from the other brand. I knew she and I could work well together. I agreed with most of her points and asked her to support me with this communication. She agreed, and ever since, she and I consulted on most of the implementation of the project when it was about the impact on that brand's operations.

I was excited to meet her at the team-building meeting. It was the first time we met in person. She was more agreeable than in our phone discussions. We chatted about our kids and had a couple of drinks. We kept the relationship at the professional level for the most part.

One night, I contacted her after extorting the day's work. I do not know what I was hoping to hear or learn, but guilt and loneliness made me reach out. I was sitting at home on my sofa watching TV. It was around 9 p.m., and I texted her.

Me: Hey girl! How are you doing? How is everything?

The text went through, but I heard nothing back. I thought she might be busy or maybe sleeping. I continued watching TV, but I was not paying attention to it. I do not even remember what I was watching. I checked my phone a couple of times to see if she answered. I thought maybe she did not want to hear about me. I tried calling her right after the mass layoff, but she did not respond. I thought she might be too upset to talk to anyone back then.

After a couple of good minutes, I heard my phone buzzing. I was nervous but excited at the same time. She texted back.

Elisabeth: Hey Valentina! How are you? I am good.

I was happy to hear from her and to sense her positive tone in her text.

Me: I was thinking of you these days.

My text and her text came at the same time.

Elisabeth: I got an official offer today. I am waiting for a start date.

Me: That is what I wanted to hear.

I texted back in huge relief.

She is doing well.

I thought to myself.

Elisabeth: How are you doing with all those projects?

She asked.

Me: Better not ask. It is crazy and just the beginning.

I did not want to talk about myself and my situation. I wanted to make sure she was okay.

Me: I was talking to Helen the other day. And from all the people who left. You are the one I miss the most. I wish we could bring you back.

I contacted Helen a few days ago asking for ways to communicate with the operations team at the other brand. We both regretted that we could not leverage Elisabeth's support anymore. At one point, I even asked Helen if we could bring some of the people back, and she said that is something Richard is considering. I believe Elisabeth could have been a great asset for us if we could bring her back.

Elisabeth: Sadly, I am not sure I would go back.

Me: I can understand.

Elisabeth: But I miss you guys like crazy, too. I am so happy we got to meet in February. I really want to move on and find a better place.

I found myself saying. I was tired and could not find my place, but I was trapped on the other hand in the job.

Elisabeth: That meeting was a great experience and made the team much better. Then, look at what happened. How about you? Are you looking?

Me: Yeap

I was looking for another job, but that was not my priority. I still believed in my work values and that I could make a difference.

Elisabeth: I am sure with your experience you will get something quickly and for more money.

Me: I do not have time to breathe.

I confessed, feeling smoother with every day that passed by.

Elisabeth: I got a project management boot camp, and it is incredible.

Me: That is great!

Elisabeth: I plan to take the PMP exam in July.

Me: What does not kill you makes you stronger.

I said, realizing that people will come back from this experience stronger.

Elisabeth: That is right!

Me: I am sure you are doing great but do not burn out. Easier said than done. I cannot imagine how much work you have. I do not even have time to complain.

Elisabeth: I heard they chose me because my projects were basically done, which is false. I have just been given two new projects. Who knows why they chose me?

Elisabeth started confessing, and I was glad she talked about how she felt. It was part of her healing.

Elisabeth: What is annoying is that people kept saying do not be worried because you are great. But outstanding does not get you job offers. The whole resume, applying, and 2-3 interviews are very time-consuming and crazy when you have the stress of unemployment, too.

Me: I hear you. It is not easy.

I did not understand back then what she was going through.

Elisabeth: Keep your chin up. And good luck with your projects. Let me know if you need anything.

Me: Sure! I am waiting to hear from you that you moved up! You have a great work ethic, and you will be fine soon.

I was happy with our discussion. I was unsure if Elisabeth wanted to show the positive side of the story, but her remark of outstanding does not give you job offers stayed with me long after that, mainly throughout my job search. I was in denial, hoping I did not have to endure all this. At that point, I probably thought I would never get fired. Not only did I think I was irreplaceable, but there were some tasks in maintaining the systems I only knew how to handle. I did not know if I wanted to be in this mess of guilt and uncertainty for long.

The idea of becoming a certified project manager started growing, along with the fear of losing my job.

## **New Career Goals**

Time passed, and I found myself in a new office hidden in a far-away cubicle, unnoticed and isolated after the good years spent with the company. It was hard for me to accept the

situation. It became so surreal, but it was a new reality. Most of my power work has been shifted to the corporate office. I would be contacted only when there were issues, and they needed my assistance. Some knowledge transfer happened while we were in Los Angeles with the consultants and some of the new team members. I did not even realize what was happening until after the meetings ended. That is when I knew I had to reinvent myself and professionally reborn and transform. I had to figure out something new to do for the company.

I did not know who to ask about my opportunities with the company. I was too afraid not to give them ideas of me being idle and searching for new jobs. I lacked the maturity and experience to discuss my job and career future openly. That discussion should have happened at my performance review meeting, but Richard and Helen hid behind the process and the words in a paper. I also did not know how to approach this discussion with them. We lacked transparency in our discussions. I was afraid of losing my job now, and they were probably concerned about not losing me before I did a knowledge transfer with the new team members at the corporate office.

In my job search and talking to Elisabeth, I learned how to lead projects differently and more efficiently. It was an open mind. Along the way, I developed my strategies and learned about different project management methodologies I could invoke depending on the project's scope. I wanted to try something new and implement these new strategies in our company. That is how I decided to become a certified project manager. I started learning about the materials required to prepare for the exam and the application I had to complete to qualify. I asked Richard if I could use his references for this application. He showed excitement for the endeavor and encouraged me to become a certified project manager.

Richard: We could all benefit from your learnings and become smarter at managing our projects, and that is good for your long-term career, too.

He said in agreement with my request. I felt I had his support, which made me somewhat optimistic about my future with the company.

I enjoyed working for the company, and it was hard to leave. I felt I belonged to that culture and had to try everything to stay there and support the team to the best of my ability. Finding new and improved ways of doing things was my strategy. I was committed to learning more about project management and having a more strategic approach to managing our projects. I learned about roadmaps as a holistic view of the project's portfolio. I also learned about defining its scope and the importance of the agreed project deliverables. I started writing down each of these strategies.

I decided to put together a presentation of how we could run the projects in a portfolio hub and share those ideas with Richard when he is in town next time. I was excited about my learning and how I could support the dynamic of implementing technology for the entire corporation. Based on the company's new objectives, I would have to consider moving to the corporate office to execute my plan. I could not make that move, considering my family also had to move. My kids were too young for the move. We recently bought a house, and life was good in the city of Bluebonnet state. I was still hoping I could work remotely for them or thought.

*What if I make this plan work at the brand level only?*

So, I shifted my presentation and approach to tackling the technology project management process for our brand.

One morning, that cubicle corner I sat in was loud, and I felt smothered. I could not concentrate. There were so many distractions, and that corner was so small and congested. The

guy sitting close to my desk was loudly chatting with some co-workers. Then they brought some snacks and ate there. I could not take it anymore. I had to do something about my job there, but my well-being too. My job search was not going well, mainly because I was focused on saving my current job. I could not wait anymore for someone to save me. I opened my strategic presentation about managing projects at the brand level, walked through it, and spoke.

*I have to share my ideas with the leadership here. I have to take this risk.*

I was nervous and mad that I had no one to guide or support me in this decision. I was all by myself.

I went to the restroom, looked in the mirror, and encouraged myself, saying,

*You must do it! There is no other way. Take the risk!*

I returned to my desk, printed the presentation, and went to the hallway. I knew I needed some allies. That entire strategy required some support from others in the company. I first stopped by our VP of marketing. He was new. He came from a different town as a consultant, and when the previous VP left, the new CEO assigned him as an interim. He was intelligent but not as influential as our previous VP of marketing. It was my first time pitching the idea, and I thought to start with him first. His office was at the end of the hallway. It had windows, and his door was always open.

Me: Hey Michael! How are things? Do you have a minute?

Michael: Sure thing!

He was always ready to listen to people, or at least he would make himself available.

Me: I am trying to support the brand for our technology development initiatives.

Michael: We have, indeed, significant technological changes.

And he mentioned a couple of our projects.

Michael: A couple of them do not work that well. It might be because we are short-handed. I do not know.

Me: Yes, you are right. Many projects, a few people. That could result in issues.

I said, somehow excited. Michael pointed out the issue I was trying to resolve with my proposed strategy.

Me: But on the other hand, if we strategize how we manage these projects, we can be more efficient.

I continued, excited to share my ideas with him.

Michael: I am sure we could.

He spoke.

I put the deck I had just printed on his desk and started showing him how and the benefits of having a central hub for our projects. I showed him the importance of a roadmap and ways to prioritize our brand initiatives.

Michael: That is what I am talking about.

He got excited throughout my presentation.

Michael: That is the type of mindset we need here. This holistic view would also support my team with the upcoming marketing initiatives.

Me: That is doable. I have seen it at other companies and am studying it for my certification.

Michael: I love it!

He said enthusiastically, showing the roadmap concept in the presentation.

Michael: I highly encourage you to talk to Mike about it. You have my support. I think your recommendation pertains to technology and the entire company's initiatives.

Me: I appreciate your support. I will discuss this with Mike, too.

I left Michael's office with my presentation on the paper. I was optimistic. I decided not to waste time and talk to our CEO as well. Instead of returning to my desk, I went to the CEO's

office. His office was at the front side of the building, but one could not see his desk from the hallway. You had to put your head down to see if he was there or if the lights were turned on.

Me: Hi Mike!

I said, getting my head down in his office.

Mike: Hi there!

He answered, moving his body away from his computer and looking towards me.

Mike: How can I help you?

Me: Yes!

I found myself saying.

Me: Do you have some time to talk? I have some improvement thoughts to share with you.

Mike: Yes, sure! Come on in.

Me: You know we have had many technology projects lately, and I thought we could be more efficient if we monitor them at the portfolio level instead.

I showed him the slides I had put together and walked him through my strategy.

Mike: That is very well done and thoughtful.

He said at the end of my pitch after he made a couple of remarks and suggestions throughout my presentation.

Mike: As you know, the company is struggling, and I am working on the operations side. We have a lot of issues to fix. Your strategy is mindful but not our priority now. Talk to Richard. He can better guide you. I can see your perspective working for the operations at one point.

His words stunned me, but I knew I had to fight for my future with the company.

Me: I can understand. You see, Richard wants me to move to San Francisco. I cannot afford this move. My kids are too young, and we recently bought a house here. I am trying to find ways to support our brand and bring my knowledge and learnings to it.

Mike: I appreciate that. You are a valuable employee and have done a lot for the company. Let me talk to Richard when he comes to town.

That was probably the last time we ever talked. I was happy with my strategy. I knew he liked it and would support it if the circumstances differed.

I went back to my desk feeling accomplished. I was happy I stepped out of my role and tried something different, but slightly disappointed that my plan would not work in the short run. I decided to write Richard about my ideas, but then I thought writing an email could be misinterpreted. I sent him a quick email that I would like to discuss some areas of improvement in how we manage our projects moving forward next time he is in town. He replied that he looked forward to our discussion.

The following week, Richard came to town. We accidentally met in the hallway the day he arrived. It was late in the afternoon.

Me: Hey Richard! Nice seeing you.

Richard: Hey! Likewise.

Richard: Let's talk tomorrow about your project management suggestions. We have a leadership meeting tonight with Mike and our board of directors. It is going to be a long meeting.

Me: No worries! Tomorrow is fine.

I said in agreement.

I left the office late that night, and I noticed Richard discussing with the Chief Financial Officer of the group. She was a pretty, classy blonde lady. She was intelligent and influential. I admired her way of carrying herself. She would ask a lot of questions at the meetings I attended. There were clarifying and supporting questions. She wanted to ensure she understood what was happening and that the team was on the right track.

That night she was temporarily sitting in one of the vacant cubicles. Richard was standing up by that cubicle, chatting with her. Richard reported to her and would consult with her on most of his decisions. I thought that it was intelligent and wise of him to do so. While passing by, I overheard pieces of their discussion.

*It would help if you communicated with her; we could not afford her position in this office.*

I could not hear what Richard replied. I did not make any connections with my future. That was not the first time I overheard this type of discussion. Once the HR director was on the phone. He was shouting to I do not know who.

*You are paying him too much. You have to fix this.*

So, I minded my business and went home.

The next day, at around 11 a.m., Richard came by my desk and asked.

Richard: Do you have a minute to talk?

I thought we were going to talk about my plans and did not worry at all. He took me to a side of the building I had not been to before. I did not even know whose offices were there. I thought maybe Richard had a temporary office there. So, I followed him without thinking of questioning where we were going. We stopped at an office, and the HR director was there. He asked me to sit down. They started by bragging about my experience with the company and my accomplishments. My boss then continued that, unfortunately, they must eliminate my position. They could not afford my role in this office, and since I could not move to the corporate office, they had to eliminate my position.

I was in shock. I could not believe it was happening, but somehow subconsciously, I knew that it would happen someday. There were so many signs around for so long, but you are never prepared till it really happens to you. Somehow, I felt relieved and free. I felt like I was getting out of prison. I was left with the new career goals I promised to accomplish elsewhere. I had to start from scratch again by proving my skills and building trust. I left confident but so disappointed I could not take my career to the next level in a place I have invested so much and truly enjoyed working for. It was a mixture of sadness, anger, fear but also hope.

### **The Transformation Onset**

The day I was let go, I felt numb. I could not talk and did not want to think of anything. When this happens, some people are mad at their former employers, and maybe at themselves. I was not angry or upset with anyone. I knew I had tried my best to survive in a culture drastically changing. To a degree, I was happy it was over. I could not have lasted longer than that. The company took care of their financial obligations for an employee with my experience. They paid me a reasonable severance, which made my transition easier. It took away from the financial pressure. However, that did not cover the layoff impact's emotional side. I do not think anyone could help with a complete transition. Since the day of the mass layoff, I learned how to cope with surviving and accepting that my layoff day could happen at any point. I should have probably invested more time searching for another job, but I was busy, attached, and probably too comfortable.

When Richard and the HR director brought me into that office and told me my position was eliminated, the biggest concern was the impact on my future career. During that process, I have asked probably three times.

Me: Is this going to impact me on my other jobs?

At one point, the HR director said.

HR director: We are going to get in touch with a recruiting company. They are going to help you in your job search. We will pay for it.

Richard smiled compassionately, and he continued.

Richard: Do not worry about it. I will provide recommendations for your job search.

And he did that for every job I asked for his recommendations.

I do not know if they put me in touch with the recruiting company because I looked desperate or because it was part of their process. However, that recruiting company was helpful in my job search. They guided me in building my resume according to the latest market standards and taught me some techniques to look for jobs. I contacted the company for three months as part of the agreement. They did not place me in a particular position. I do not think they understood my skills, nor did I. It took a while to figure out where I stood and how to present myself in front of other employers.

After the layoff day, I realized I had a lot of time, so I started organizing my time efficiently. Since I kept postponing or finding excuses to exercise before the layoff, I prioritized going to the gym daily. Every morning, I would go to the gym early like I had to go to work. I shifted the habit of the daily commute to work to going to the gym. I would push myself hard every morning like it was a sort of punishment. While driving to the gym, thoughts about what I could have done better would come to mind. Every single time, I would block them.

*You need to move forward.*

I would tell myself.

*You have to focus on your future, not your past. That is the past, and it is over. There is nothing you can do.*

I felt like crying so many times. I was angry but did not want to let my feelings out. I thought conserving all that anger would help me in my job search. I do not know if I was right or wrong, but I did not like or want to cry over my situation. I kept my chin up and my back straight. I learned that when I was a child. I remember falling a lot as a kid, but I would not cry or whine about my pain when I knew it was my fault. I took this layoff as my fault for the most part. However, while writing these stories, I realized I did my best. The best one could do in these circumstances.

Getting in shape was one of my significant transformation strengths, and it all started with my layoff day. Although going to the gym at first was more of a relief from the pain, it shortly became part of my daily behavior. Every morning, I would leave the house like I used to do when I went to work. I did not want to break that routine of getting up early in the morning and engaging in an activity. I would spend around 2 hours at the gym every morning. That is how I discovered yoga. The meditation during the session was a mental and physical relief. Thoughts of frustration and anger kept coming to my mind for a few weeks. I forced myself not to let them get over me. Slowly, they went away, and positive energy would build every day. I got excited about my physical performance. Jogging became another routine. Since then, I have improved my physical strength and kept the habit of exercising daily until today.

After returning from the gym, I would look and apply for new jobs. The recruiting consultant has been a great help in the job search and the emotional side. Discussions with him were encouraging and positive.

*Remember.*

He would say.

*You have great skills and a lot of experience. Finding the right job for you is a matter of time.*

At first, I was optimistic, mainly because I had received good money in the severance package, so I did not have to worry too much about my finances. I also thought I would find a job quickly and move on fast. Things did not go as smoothly. I was looking for a higher position now with higher pay. One day a recruiter said.

*You have to understand that every ten thousand dollars more you ask, it would increase your job search by at least two to three months.*

At first, I was pretty confident in my skills and experience and thought she exaggerated. However, the entire job search proved that she was right. I wanted to stay at my pay level, and I have agreed to work as a consultant, being paid hourly and figuring out all the other benefits on my own. I started enjoying it because I would not get attached to any organization, group, or culture. I was transforming into an insensitive type of professional. I would give my best, but I would not get emotionally attached to anyone or any place. It was a subconscious defense of not being rejected.

On the day of my layoff, I had a small amount of savings in the bank. I have just paid my student loan and mortgage. Luckily, I was debt-free, but my savings were the lowest ever. I was unhappy because now I had to worry about the financial side of staying home. That is when I decided to cut down my expenses and determined to save the severance money the company paid. I had to find a quick source of income until I got a real job. I jumped into a remote type of work with a former employer. They paid me little, but the job only took a few hours weekly. I

learned at that time to watch what I spend the money on. I looked at prices and analyzed every considerable expense I had to make to see if it was worth it. Ever since I learned to bargain for house services and save a significant amount of what I earn, that was another side of the transformation the layoff triggered.

In my job search, I learned the importance of project management certification. At first, I thought it was a way to make employees marketable, but the more I was in contact with employers and recruiters, the more I understood the need for this certification on the market. I reached out to Elisabeth the following week after my layoff.

Me: Hi Elisabeth! How are you doing? Is this a good time to talk?

Elisabeth: Hey, Valentina! I'm doing good. What about you?

Me: I have been better. Last week, Richard decided to eliminate my position from our office. He wanted me to move to the headquarters.

Elisabeth: Such a bummer!

She spoke.

Me: I saw that coming long ago, but I could do nothing.

Elisabeth: You will find something in no time. You have a lot of experience.

Me: I wish I had been more serious about the job search.

Elisabeth: I can understand. It is time-consuming.

Me: I will figure out something.

I tried changing the subject as I did not want to sound like a complainer.

Me: I noticed that you recently got your project management certification. That is impressive. Congrats!

Elisabeth: Thank you!

She said.

Elisabeth: I am glad I did it. I learned a lot. I feel I missed it so much not doing it earlier. The Project Management Institute provides certified project managers with various useful tools. You will be amazed.

Me: I am also surprised that neither Helen nor Richard asked us to take this certification. Our lives and how we implemented projects would have been much more manageable.

She continued. Visibly excited by her learnings.

Me: That is exciting! I want to learn from your journey.

Elisabeth and I stayed in touch for a while. She shared the materials she used to study and ways to proceed with the exam application. She and I would exchange ideas of how we could have applied specific learnings in our projects. That was another moment when we wished we were still with our former employer. Elisabeth will also encourage me in my job search too.

Studying for the certification occupied much of my time during the day. I took it seriously, and I started seeing its applicability. I obtained my certification a month later. Recruiters were excited about it, too. For the first consultant job, I accepted that certification was highly relevant. It was a governmental project manager role and part of the hiring requirements. It was a perfect place to explore and experience my learnings from my previous role and the certification training. That time spent studying paid out. Half a year later, I decided to study for another certification, which was easier to attain but much more valuable on the job market. I have kept myself current with project management tools out on the market. It is part of my professional development that I could share with others and support technology development efficiently.

At the same time, I became more confident in my skills and experience. After accepting the consultant job for the governmental institution and being financially stable, I decided I could afford to start working on my Ph.D. degree. I was nervous at the beginning of this journey. I was unsure if I could meet the program's demands, but it was part of my growth objectives. The intent was to become a much more knowledgeable leader. That was a dream born after the mass layoff. Back then, I believed that higher education would bring light to how I carried myself in

my leadership role. With that knowledge, I thought I could overcome politics at work and adapt to the changing culture.

The mass layoff and my layoff significantly impacted my personal transformation. I learned to survive, get better, and improve my behaviors. Luckily, I have grown a lot from this experience. It is said that.

*What does not kill you makes you stronger.*

I had to live and learn this through my own story and transformation.

## **Chapter VI. My Learnings and Findings as a Project Leader**

My story starts with the Fall quiet morning when the massive layoff happened and captures in detail my observations and feelings throughout this experience, which were deep and hard to restate then. The experience was traumatizing from a professional perspective and significantly affected my personal life. It triggered many changes in my behavior, some that I acknowledge were intentional and some that I subconsciously embraced. It was a vast transformation event in my life that I have not yet fully recovered from. It impacted me emotionally, physically, and financially.

When I decided to write about this experience, I knew I would expose myself and be vulnerable. I still have concerns about being vulnerable or judged when discussing this experience. People will judge regardless, but I am morally committed to evoking this story from how I have felt and perceived it. From a therapeutical perspective, I also think sharing this story and experience with the world could bring closure to this traumatizing experience and that others could relate to and learn from. I must admit that when I started thinking about this topic for my autoethnography, I became emotional and hesitant. So far, I feel good about it, although I had moments when I choked up, bringing back memories.

Luckily, I have grown a lot after this experience in all aspects of being emotionally much stronger by being more assertive. I'm in great physical shape and found another job earning more than I used to. However, many people didn't take this experience well and got depressed. It took them a lot of time and energy to recover. Some still have issues coming back. The learning I want to share with the world is the importance of investing in education, being a continuous learner, saving money, getting in shape, building solid professional relationships, and being

open-minded to changes. We live in a world where changes can happen anytime, but the more prepared we are, the better we handle ourselves and support others.

Considering this study's research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and extensive research on the layoffs phenomenon and motivational and leadership strategies, I have identified six conceptual themes to support the purpose of this research. I have elaborated on each of them in the below sections.

In the following sections of this chapter, I have provided quotations from my chapters I and V stories to support my coding strategy elaborated in the Methodology chapter. These feelings and experiences are the ones that stood out to reinforce the rationale for categories identified under each theme. I have determined each category based on three to four codes to support each category. For each theme identified, I have provided a structure of coding strategy called "Coding Matrix" that shows the theme's name, its categories, and the codes identified for each category.

### **My Perceived Lack of Well-Being Support for the Layoff Survivors**

To address the first sub-research question, I described my perspective and personal beliefs below regarding my integration into the organizational culture before and after the mass layoff. To focus on answering this question and addressing the first problem gap of this research, I have identified this first salient theme as the impact of the work environment on the layoff survivor's well-being, motivation, and performance.

#### **Table 1**

*My well-being challenges as a layoff survivor*

Category	Codes
Emotional distress	Fear Anger

	Guilt
	Loneliness
Burnout consequences	Withdrawal Tendency to isolate My inability to integrate with the team
Grief	Denial Resentment Acknowledgement Depression Acceptance
Perceived lack of leadership supportiveness	Lack of transparency Lack of interest Lack of trust

*Note.* This coding matrix shows the identified categories and codes to support this theme.

In my professional career, I have worked for different organizational cultures and performed well in those friendly, family-orientated ones. Although an introvert, I enjoyed my co-workers' vibes, openness, and the leadership's transparency. Organizations with a history of supportive work environments provided me with growth opportunities and invested in my success professionally and personally. Their caring approach motivated me to perform and improve business processes. I felt secure and optimistic about my future and was determined to give my best in return. At the time of the mass layoff, I did not consider this organizational culture's impact on my performance and productivity. Reflecting upon this experience made me conscious of attachment and preference for such organizations.

### **Emotional Distress**

I faced significant emotional distress on the day of the mass layoff, mainly due to the lack of warning or preparation for this unfortunate event. I was exposed to the signs of the mass layoff only the day of. The red folder carried by the human resources director, the unknown face, the presence of the guard, people missing from their desks, and the sudden quietness of the place

are just a few of the traumatizing aspects that triggered my emotional sorrows. The emotions I encountered were a blend of fear, anxiety, anger, insecurity, and guilt. With every day passing after the mass layoff day, combined with the lack of communication, these emotions intensified, impacting my productivity and well-being. These toxic emotions and my perceptions of unfairness triggered detachment and lower involvement.

“I went back to my office. This time, I felt so empty, disillusioned, and confused. I was sitting there, lost, and disoriented. I looked outside, absent, like something was getting pulled from who I was.” (Shrinking on the verge)

Since this was a traumatic event, given the intensity of my emotions during the mass layoff day and after that, there were significant changes in my behavior, too. It started with losing trust in the leadership and feeling smothered and lonely. These toxic feelings impacted my intrinsic motivation, significantly affecting my drive for competency and relentlessness. Guilt took place for a while as I thought my co-workers would not have lost their jobs if I had only known how to do things in my area. But my area of expertise was wide, and besides, I wanted to prove to myself, or I thought I did, that I am a knowledgeable and dedicated employee.

“It has been two months since the mass layoff. Emotionally speaking, I was dragging. A sense of guilt and cowardice would be in my mind, impacting my well-being at work and home. I was pushing myself to perform, but I felt lonely and empty. Something was missing, and I could not find ways to overcome that sense of filling in the space. I was working on a project that would impact the other brand. Before the mass layoff, there was Carol and Elisabeth to talk to and bounce off ideas. Now, I was lost.” (Outstanding does not give you job offers.)

### **Burnout Consequences**

Throughout the layoff process, I struggled with burnout consequences, trying to respond to the stress and the emotional exhaustion of the layoff process. Signs of burnout included but were not limited to my sense of withdrawal during the Los Angeles trip, the tendency to isolate from the consultants and the new team at the corporate office, and my inability to integrate with

that team. Consequently, the stress and the overall burnout negatively impacted my job performance and productivity.

The Los Angeles trip took place a few months after the mass layoff. My emotional state was already at its peak. I was already tired of fighting to keep my job. I was exhausted when the consultants pulled most of the information, they needed from me. I experienced a sense of non-belongingness and a state of trying to escape from a place with people I could not connect with anymore.

Although I tried to deny it, the withdrawal feelings and actions were heavily present in my behavior after the mass layoff. My enthusiasm was sometimes diminishing because of the perceived unfairness of the entire layoff process, but many times without intention. I was dragged out of energy to perform, and often, I would pretend that everything was fine and that I could do the same work as I used to before the mass layoff. The fact that I did not have the trust to share my feelings with anyone in the company only made me more detached and less engaged with the work I had to do.

### **Grief**

Self-reflection has led me to discover how my experience during the entire downsizing process aligns perfectly with the five phases of grief, as presented by psychologist Kubler-Ross. It started with the denial phase of me walking around the hallway, hoping it was just a coincidence of the empty offices. Witnessing my co-worker's forced departure from the company marked the resentment phase. Calling my boss and discussing with the Marketing Director for clarification is the beginning of my acknowledgment of the mass layoff, followed by the depression phase, probably the longest. Signs of depression are present mainly right after the

mass layoff day. Although I accepted what was happening in different stages – such as Steve’s departure or my collaboration with the consultants at the Los Angeles office, the culminating acceptance point was when the company let me go.

I experienced denial for a short time. I knew from the morning something was going on. The closed doors and empty cubicles were just clues to the restructuring, but I hoped it was just a coincidence. Even though there was a guard in the building, I was still in denial that so many people would be fired that day.

On the other hand, signs of depression started on the day of the mass layoff when I experienced feelings of being tired and overwhelmed. My mind was shifting into a depressed state without acknowledging it. I lost my appetite and wanted to distance myself from that place. Although I found ways to cope with these signs of depression, every day of uncertainty intensified it. Driving around to clear my thoughts was one coping mechanism to fight depression, which did not always work as expected.

“I left his office worn out with my head down, overwhelmed, and tired at the same time. I went down to my car. I did not want to sit somewhere to eat. I was by myself. I went to a restaurant nearby and ordered a soup and salad drive thru. I turned on the music and blanked out my thoughts. I used to do that when I felt overwhelmed. Then, I drove, not sure for how long in the surroundings.” (Integrity at stake)

At last, after my layoff, I have experienced the acceptance of the downsizing and let myself free of remorse and the pressure of seeing others leave, the guilt of being left, and my struggle for survival to save a job that would not reward me anymore. Reaching acceptance of the entire layoff process gave me the freedom to think about finding a job that could better fit my experience and needs.

“I reached home around 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon. I never watch TV during the day, but that afternoon, that’s all I did. I don’t remember what I watched. I was paralyzed. I wasn’t upset, not angry, not even afraid. Suddenly, I experienced a feeling of freedom. I was free. I told myself I could not let this get me down and promised never to look back. It was my time to reinvent myself! I got up and planned for the days to come.” (The Recovery)

### **Perceived Lack of Leadership Supportiveness**

Reflecting on the mass layoff day, I could observe a significant shift in the way leadership would communicate with us, predominately related to the lack of transparency. Not only were doors now closed or empty cubicles, but the information was also not open and honest anymore. Leaders were now hiding behind closed doors, offering minimal information or directions. Their hesitance to be transparent with us made me feel insecure and lost. Throughout the entire downsizing process, I felt the need to express my feelings and to be listened to. I could not find that kind of support, but I did not know if I could ask for it. I was able many times to compare leadership’s behavior before and after the mass layoff without clearly asking for help. I did ask my supervisor and one other leader about what had happened, but I did not let out my insecure feelings. I was afraid of being perceived as weak and insecure.

“I walked by the leadership room across from the office entrance. That room had big glass windows, and we could always see who was there. That is how we knew, or thought we knew, about project meetings or other leadership staff. That morning, three people were in the room: the president of the company, the Operations Director, and our VP of Marketing. Usually, these meetings have pretty slides on the big screen about the business progress or upcoming initiatives, but this time, these guys were looking at a list in front of them. They were preoccupied with writing on that list.” (The hallway downlight)

Although one of my supervisors informally acted as a toxic handler, showing empathy for the layoff process and the emotions I was experiencing, I still perceived a lack of supportiveness and guidance for a faster recovery. Reflecting on the experience, I realized that my manager’s

behavior was not intentional but relatively uninformed. Middle managers were unprepared to handle this avalanche of emotions of those who stayed with the organization. Sensations of tiredness and emptiness and feeling smoother were only a few signs of dealing with mild depression at the workplace. The lack of an open space to discuss or be heard only intensified the symptoms of insecurity, anxiety, and confusion.

### **My Work Values and Behavior Internalization in Times of Cultural Crisis**

To answer the first research sub-question and reflect on the first research gap, I have identified the salient theme of how attractive pay could impact work values and productivity. I reflected below on my work values and how my high pay affected my performance after the mass layoff.

**Table 2**

*My work values and behavior internalization in times of cultural crisis*

Category	Codes
My work values	Integrity Teamwork Respect for others
Highly motivated if well paid?	Committed to doing my best High performance Paycheck was not enough to motivate
My behavior changes	Submissiveness Stopped sharing Stopped communicating

*Note.* This coding matrix shows the identified categories and codes to support this theme.

#### **My Work Values**

Since starting my career, I have been committed to doing my best at work. I followed integrity as the highest standard of the work performed. I was transparent with my coworkers and the leadership and kept my promises when delivering the results. I was open and honest about

the challenges if I could not do the work for various reasons. I felt it was fair for others to know soon enough what could be done and what not. That is how I gained the trust of my peers. I offered solutions and quickly embraced guidance for a successful outcome. Probably, the most relevant experience proving my integrity was when I had to share my knowledge with the external consultants knowing that would periclitate my future with the company. I did it anyway because I believed that was the right thing to do. Even before the mass layoff, sharing knowledge and performing to the highest standards was challenging, but I have embarked on this commitment following integrity as a personal and professional value.

“Although most initiatives had tight timelines, I learned the systems and how others performed in their positions. Mostly, I figured out ways to excel in these conditions and produce results promptly and efficiently.” (A not-so-quiet ordinary day)

I was a team player, respecting my peers’ needs and challenges. Although I believed in being rewarded based on merits, I stayed open-minded when other peers struggled to deliver. At the same time, I enjoyed a high paycheck after working hard. I was a productive and high-performer employee mostly because I enjoyed my work, but I also got satisfaction from the tangible rewards such as praise, promotions, and high pay. On top of this, I was a stronger believer in teamwork and integrating efforts for the best of the company and the projects we were assigned to deliver. I have many times almost gotten in trouble with the leadership taking the side of the vendors for not executing on time or quality. I did that because it was not always their fault but ours for not communicating efficiently. That behavior aligned with my values of integrity, teamwork, and respect for others.

### **Are We Highly Motivated If Well Paid?**

I had attractive and competitive pay when the mass layoff happened. That made my stay and transition from the organization even harder. Although I knew I had to find another job soon, I had a tough time finding one that would pay me as much as I used to earn. The organization paid me higher than a similar position in the Bluebonnet state. When well paid, I became comfortable and not motivated to search for another job, but instead, I looked for ways to keep my job within the organization.

On the other hand, my job search while employed was not encouraging, as for a good while, I did not know how to position myself. I was attached to the culture, the brand, and its systems. I have invested significant effort and time in learning how they work and interrelate that leaving the company was not a viable option for me. I tried reinventing myself to continue working for the company, not for the pay but for my dedication and attachment.

“I enjoyed working for the company, and leaving was hard. I felt I belonged to that culture and had to try everything to stay there and support the team to the best of my ability. Finding new and improved ways of doing things was my strategy. I was committed to learning more about project management and having a more strategic approach to managing our projects.” (New career goals)

It is a common belief that if organizations pay their employees well, they will effectively deliver, stay committed, and be productive. I believed the same many times before the mass layoff. I thought that as long as I got that paycheck, what else could bother me at work? Unfortunately, the mass layoff experience proved that I was superficial. I realized how important other factors are in maintaining well-being and motivation to be engaged to work and productive. I discovered that job stability significantly impacted my engagement with the employer.

Thinking of being fired and losing my job was not only a distraction from my current job but one that I could not overcome only with the paycheck at the end of the week.

“After the mass layoff, I became insecure, and with everyone leaving, I feared my turn would be next. The trip to Los Angeles was the most intense situation that triggered my job search. The chat with Richard and how the new delivery system implementation was approached made it clear that my future with the company will end soon. Although, at that time, my pay was high, that was not enough to overcome the tension and the uncertainty of losing my job. My family and friends would encourage me that I’m paid well and to let go of any frustrations, but for me, that was not enough to keep me engaged and motivated.” (The curse of the high pay)

### **Negative Emotions Changed My Behavior**

After the mass layoff, I tried to stand by my work values as much as possible, but fear, the most negative emotion I have encountered, changed my behavior. During the Los Angeles trip, when I was supposed to share my knowledge with the team, I felt betrayed, and towards the end of the journey, I completely detached and stopped sharing my knowledge as I would have done before. This behavior was against my work integrity value. Submissiveness became part of my behavior, where I would quietly disengage and could not find the strength to complain or disclose my feelings of fear and insecurities. The situation of having to share my knowledge with my replacements at the corporate office impacted me psychologically and physically. I noticed eating behavior changes from either not eating or eating without control as ways to cope with organizational and cultural changes.

“Alex and the two consultants cheered up. You could tell they were tired but happy with what they had accomplished in the meetings. I was numb. I did not know how to feel. I did not feel part of the team anymore or wanted to be there. I wanted to run away. I realized how cheap I sold myself. At dinner, I kept quiet and transgressed in my world. I do not remember what I ate or drank. I remember Richard trying to engage me in the discussion, but I zoomed out and mechanically smiled.” (La La Land, here we come!)

I could notice changes in my behavior on the day of the mass layoff. When I had to discuss with one of our consultants because of emotional distress, my enthusiasm dropped. I was fighting with my mindset of dropping the ball. Although I could have been excited and relieved that the company did not fire me, guilt and fear overtook me. I would struggle with negative thoughts of unfairness over the entire downsizing process. My compassion and empathy for those fired became more prominent and powerful, significantly impacting my behavior, starting with the mass layoff day. Although professional values surfaced in my behavior, internal struggles harmed my well-being. If I could have openly addressed my concerns and fears, my changes in behavior and negative thoughts could have been prevented.

“Usually, I would be enthusiastic about learning more about the processes, seeing our development’s progress, and sharing the good news with our team. This time I did not feel any excitement.

*Who cares if this works or not anymore?*

I suddenly felt withdrawal and indifference but forced myself not to show it. Then, I thought.

*You must do your best no matter what happens. It is your job!*

I grew up with professional integrity and respect for others and their work. But these feelings of indifference and “doing the right thing” started fighting each other. It is like the bad guy and the good guy argued. Although I did not like the person I was becoming, there was not much I could do to improve things—at least not on that day.” (Integrity at stake)

### **Career growth limitations for the layoff survivors**

To address the second sub-question of this research and reflect on the second real-life gap I have identified the below salient theme where I analyzed and reflected on my career growth opportunities before and after the mass layoff.

#### **Table 3**

*Career growth limitations for the layoff survivors*

Category	Codes
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Optimism about my future before the mass layoff	My optimism about my future with the company My professional growth before the mass layoff Disregarded the company's financial struggles
Impact on my leadership efficacy	Performance mastery Role-modeling Verbal persuasion Emotional arousal
My professional failure	Confusion My job search was a fiasco Shift in pursuing my career advancement

*Note.* This coding matrix shows the identified categories and codes to support this theme.

### **Optimism about My Future with the Company Before the Mass Layoff**

At the beginning of my career, I focused on performing and following integrity and teamwork. I was not concerned about growing and moving up on the organizational ladder. Later, I was promoted a couple of times due to my performance. While reflecting on my experience, I recall my optimism about my future with the company. This optimism kept me motivated and productive. At the same time, I was looking to step into a leadership role, and right before the mass layoff day, I could see the possibility of growth. Right before the mass layoff day, I was confident about my potential and opportunities for growth with the company. I was all equipped and willing to step into a leadership role. My optimism was backed up by hard work, experience, and learning to manage and lead projects from a product technology perspective.

“I was optimistic about my career with the company. I had just returned to school, and my boss agreed to support my education. I was dreaming of how to take the learnings from school and apply them for the business’s good. I also dreamed about getting promoted and growing my career with the company. *“How could I miss that?”* I said to myself. I was confident in my seniority with the company and how well I knew the systems, and learning about how to administer a business could only support my career growth.” (The hallway downlight)

At the same time, I mainly assessed my performance for this growth possibility and ignored the company's financial struggles, which were not publicized. Since the former leadership was transparent with the entire team, expectations were that the new leadership would follow the same pattern of being open with us. At least, that is what I thought and expected. Unfortunately, things changed, but I was in denial that the company struggles and mindlessly believed not only about my growth with the company but the company's growth. Disregarding the company's financial struggles impacted my perspective on the company's future. That was one reason the mass layoff day took me by surprise.

### **Impact on my Leadership Efficacy**

As a layoff survivor, the organization's sudden shift to reduce personnel significantly affected my performance and professional transformation in the years to come. My leadership self-efficacy was affected considerably, or I thought it was. Due to the mass layoff and how the organization's goals shifted, my engagement and performance in a leadership role diminished. My role became more tactical than strategic as the core business decisions moved to the corporate headquarters. However, now reflecting on the experience from the distance of the emotional aspects, I realize that I could have still performed leadership tasks and challenged myself to overcome the crisis at the personal and organizational levels. The lack of role models to increase my confidence in being a leader was only related to the fact that the leaders I could model were at the corporate office. Still, I could have started a mentorship relationship that could have supported my leadership efficacy.

Regarding verbal persuasion, the lack of encouragement from my supervisors and the fear of losing my job impacted my leadership efficacy. In this regard, while reflecting on my

experience, I identified a miscommunication on my side of clarifying my intentions to step into a leadership role with my supervisors. Further, concerning the emotional arousal aspects, my excitement about being in a leadership role diminished starting with the day of the mass layoff. Fear and anxiety took over. I could have done a better job staying relevant and not having the mass layoff situation impact my personal growth goals.

“I was at a stage in my career where I was looking for growth, and I knew that the step ahead meant coaching and mentoring others. I dreamed of having a team to work with and teaching them how the systems work so I could focus on managing the development of new systems. I liked sharing my knowledge and seeing others grow. I was craving that opportunity for career growth.” (La La Land, here we come!)

Overall, the mass layoff impacted my confidence in taking on a leadership role. I shifted my mindset into a survival mode rather than a growth mode. In turn, this struggle impacted my motivation and productivity. At one point, as described in my stories, I decided to take action on how I could best support the team in a different role. However, my initiative did not have the expected outcome due to a lack of coaching, mentoring, and support. That is where my leadership self-efficacy was significantly hurt. I could not honestly evaluate if the failure was because of my strategy or the organizational situation focused on the business survival mode.

“I went back to my desk feeling accomplished. I was happy I stepped out of my role and tried something different, but slightly disappointed that my plan would not work in the short run. I decided to write Richard about my ideas, but then I thought writing an email could be misinterpreted. I sent him a quick email that I would like to discuss some areas of improvement in how we manage our projects moving forward next time he is in town. He replied that he looked forward to our discussion.” (New career goals)

### **My Professional Failure**

Throughout the entire process of career growth, confusion was a common nominator of my failure. I did not know how to position myself in the job search, and that was because of my focus on finding a job, fearing I would lose the existing one rather than focus on my career

aspirations. The job search and my attempt to grow within the company were a fiasco. I was determined to save my job till the end of it, and I'm glad I tried everything I could about it. Although the outcome was deplorable, I have learned from how I handled it. Later, I also learned that my attempt came at the worst time for the organization when more personnel restructuring was in plans.

Probably, the most favorable outcome of my failure was the determination to invest my time and effort into becoming a certified project manager. Without realizing it, I shifted my career growth potential from what I could have grown within the organization to career advancement at the professional level. Although, at first, the shift in pursuing my career advancement elsewhere and becoming an expert in project management was hard and felt unfair, it had positive consequences on my development as a project leader in the long term. It took years to understand the impact. This self-reflection and research on self-efficacy concepts only validated how I could have best handled the situation after the mass layoff.

### **Discouraging Leadership Behavior Influencing My Motivation and Performance**

Discussing and reflecting on the performance review process after the mass layoff answered the last research question. The identified salient theme uncovers the third research gap concerning the lack of supportive leadership behavior to enhance commitment and motivation.

**Table 4**

*Discouraging leadership behavior influencing my motivation and performance*

Category	Codes
Lack of clarity of the performance review process	Unclear outcomes Lack of performance measurement tools Ambiguity of the performance review process
Poor feedback in the performance review process	Inconsistent feedback Poor feedback impacted my behavior

	Lack of on-the-spot feedback
My lack of commitment to the performance review process	My hesitancy to ask for feedback Feeling demoralized My insecurities grew

*Note.* This coding matrix shows the identified categories and codes to support this theme.

### **Lack of Clarity of the Performance Review Process**

Performance reviews are familiar processes to evaluate and align corporate goals in organizations. Our company's HR and leadership introduced this process a few years before the mass layoff. The process and its outcome were unclear for most employees from the beginning. Although the intent of such a process became clear to me many years after leaving the company, at that time, I only followed the required steps in the process without having a good understanding of the importance of setting goals at the beginning of the year. The lack of clarity on the process and the intended outcome was detrimental to employee engagement in projects or other company initiatives. The inconsistency and ambiguity of the process and the goals set at the beginning of the year also negatively impacted the employees' motivation and performance, which the leadership could only have monitored and measured after the second year of the process implementation.

“Goals were only discussed when the performance review would occur at the year's end. Shortly after that, those goals would wash out in everyone's heads, and we were back to business as usual: fighting fires, maintaining systems, or engaging in ad-hoc initiatives. There were no reminders or indications about our beginning-of-the-year goals. How did we know about our performance? We would guess or imply that we are doing well if the manager or another supervisor would smile or say thanks.” (The deadly feedback)

The set goals were not only ambiguous and vague but there not measurable. We have not set due dates or a clear purpose. After the mass layoff, the goals were not even realistic, given the uncertainty of the company's future. Due to the financial crisis, project goals and objectives were

not attainable, but we would not discuss these aspects as we did not want to influence our vendors. We, predominantly the leadership, wanted to keep on the light and pretend we had goals to attain, but we were not transparent to each other. There was a symptomatic lack of communication up-down and down-up. We were all afraid of telling the truth consequences.

### **Poor Feedback in the Performance Review Process**

In my case, the last performance review and how my supervisor gave me feedback were detrimental to my motivation. The feedback was inconsistent with how my supervisor approached me in our regular discussions, and it took me by surprise. With feedback provided on a piece of paper sent by email, I only became confused about how I was supposed, or how my supervisor expected me to act and deliver on my job. My supervisor's hesitation to discuss the unfavorable feedback during the performance review process impacted my motivation and ability to identify improvement areas. A reminder of the expected outcomes throughout the year and on-the-spot feedback would have supported my performance, motivation, and skills improvement. Before the performance review, my bosses never told me there were areas of improvement I should consider. Their unfavorable feedback came to my surprise on that review paper form. It was a big disconnect between their joy and positivity on our calls or meetings and how they described the areas of improvement on the review paper. Their approach confused me, and I was unsure if that was their way to signal my upcoming dismissal or if they were concerned about my performance.

“At first, I was flattered that the IT Director provided his review that year. For each rubric, I received an evaluation review from both. My boss's comments were kind and gentle. As usual, she would talk about the great things I do and how I'm supporting the team. The IT Director's comments were in red, mainly very acid, like he was a different person writing than the one I would have meetings with every other week. I could not understand, and I wondered

why he never addressed his concerns in our meetings, or maybe he did, and I did not hear him. One remark that stood with me for a long time was “*the lack of assertiveness managing our vendors.*” Most of his comments pointed to my behaviors, but no guidance on how I could improve. I sat at my desk, reading that review again and again. So demoralized I was. I had not realized there were areas I needed to work on. I wish I had known it earlier.” (The deadly feedback)

Additionally, given the mass layoff circumstances, my supervisor's feedback only intensified my fear and anxiety of losing my job. At that time, I felt insecure that I could have been fired because of a lack of performance. Insecurity triggered fear and negative emotions that significantly marked my behavior after that performance review.

### **My Lack of Commitment to the Performance Review Process**

On the other hand, my hesitancy in asking for proper feedback was too detrimental to how I communicated with my supervisor. My behavior betrayed a lack of confidence and assertiveness in approaching critical issues and performing against common goals for the team and the organization. I discovered this weakness only after reflecting on this event. Due to the emotional distress of the mass layoff, this insight and area of opportunity for improvement of my behavior had minimal chances to occur back then without outside support from my supervisors. The other aspect missing from the performance review that year was the lack of reiterating the challenges concerning the goals, thus impacting my engagement and commitment to deliver on those goals. My lack of commitment was unintentional due to the limited understanding of the performance review process and its expected outcomes and the emotional distress and fear of losing my job.

“The review came in January, after the holiday break. I have not heard anything from Richard. We’ve just restarted our bi-weekly project meetings. This time I was more cautious about my behavior and how I presented the projects. Richard joined the first meeting of the year. He was in good spirits, and I meant to ask him about the review, but I stopped. “*Why would I go back in the past?*” I said to myself. I maintained my professionalism in leading the projects,

trying to improve my best, and understanding our partnerships with vendors and consultants. Richard and I never discussed that review, although he and I met often. We were cheerful in our meetings like he admired my professionalism and as if I had never read that year's review observations." (The deadly feedback)

Overall, that year's performance review process was a fiasco from my perspective, impacting my motivation, performance, and well-being. The lack of clarity on the upcoming projects' goals and, in general, the company's objectives for that year was detrimental to most of the layoff survivors, showing or betraying the lack of future direction for the company. Given these circumstances, commitment to delivering against those goals was minimal. The challenges or task complexity of the goals was difficult to assess, considering the lack of perspective in the long term. Personally, how my supervisor provided feedback had implications for my motivation, self-evaluation, and, consequently, my self-esteem and self-efficacy. I became insecure about my ability to communicate with vendors or if my managerial skills were appropriate to the projects assigned to me. The fact that my supervisor was nice and friendly in our discussions and acid when providing written feedback was confusing and demotivating.

### **Ineffective Communication Leadership Strategies Impacting My Commitment and Productivity**

Related to the last question of this research and aligned with the last problem statement, I have identified the below salient theme and reflected on it as follows.

**Table 5**

*Ineffective communication leadership strategies impacting my commitment and productivity*

Category	Codes
Trust in leadership before the mass layoff	Family orientated culture Transparency Supportiveness

Unreliable leadership message after the mass layoff	Unsuccessful town halls Fear of losing us sooner than needed Leadership avoidance
Lack of leadership strategic functions	Recognizing subordinates' needs Providing coaching and direction Helping subordinates clarify expectations Reducing frustrating barriers

*Note.* This coding matrix shows the identified categories and codes to support this theme.

### **Trust in Leadership Before the Mass Layoff**

Throughout my career, I put a lot of trust in the executive leadership of the companies I worked for. Their way of communicating with the employees impacted my performance and engagement. Knowing we have strong leadership overseeing the business, I felt free of worries. When I started my job, I had interviews with the executives and felt good about how they communicated with each other during the interview process. Before the mass layoff, we had town halls every month, and the leadership back then would share with us the company's financial health and high-level overviews of what employees should know to stay committed and motivated. We celebrated birthdays, anniversaries, and other brand-related events. The idea of "family" was well embedded in the company's culture, and the leadership team made a significant effort to make us feel like part of a family.

"I walked by the leadership room across from the office entrance. That room had big glass windows, and we could always see who was there. That is how we knew, or thought we knew, about project meetings or other leadership staff. That morning, three people were in the room: the president of the company, the Operations Director, and our VP of Marketing. Usually, these meetings had pretty slides on the big screen about the business progress or upcoming initiatives, but this time these guys were looking at a list in front of them. They were preoccupied with writing on that list." (The hallway downlight)

We looked up to the leadership team and trusted they would be open and honest with us about anything. Although there were significant changes in the leadership team a couple of months before the mass layoff, I did not make any connections with what was about to happen. The main reason was that I expected the same openness and transparency from the new leaders. The frequency of the town halls changed, and speech was evasive and broad. I often identified a lack of transparency on how the newly formed leadership team communicated with us.

### **Unreliable Leadership Message after the Mass Layoff**

After the mass layoff day, the leadership tried an unsuccessful town hall meeting, keeping the traditions, but the message sounded untrustworthy. It was the classic message that we had to let go of great people to save our business. The way the president carried that meeting and the message were distant and cold. He left after that town hall without talking to anyone. It was a forced gathering because he knew he had to talk to those who were left to stay and assure them that everything would work for all of us. Probably, he knew it was too soon for people to trust him and the message. It is hard to say what would have helped us to stay optimistic those days.

Later on, although one of my managers had better and more insights about the restructuring plans, he communicated with me an eluded warning of my position being eliminated in the recent future. He could have helped me if he had been more direct and open and provided me with a plan to exit the company by offering his support where needed. His message was confusing and misleading, making me believe my job was not in jeopardy and I have not seriously started looking for a new job. Now, reflecting on what happened, they probably feared losing me sooner than needed.

### **Lack of Leadership Strategic Functions**

On the day of the mass layoff, I had to ask my supervisors to clarify what was happening. The leadership was unprepared or lacked a communication plan with the layoff survivors. They probably had not anticipated the avalanche of bitterness from those who left to stay. My direct supervisor showed support and tried to stay positive in her communication style. Although she sympathized with my emotional state, she was also unsure about the company's future and how our jobs would align with the restructured team. The leadership hesitation and lack of transparency intensified the uncertainty and impacted my motivation and engagement. On the other hand, supportive leadership alleviated some of the adverse effects of the lack of transparency on the day of mass layoffs and afterward. In this sense, caring leadership behavior positively contributed to the layoff survivors' well-being and commitment to stay with the company and work through the cultural crisis.

One of my biggest fears was losing my job. However, my supervisors recognized that as a primary source of my concern, they had not provided coaching or direction to support my well-being and job security. On the other hand, I also did not ask for help but complied with the insecurity. Due to the lack of open communication, my frustration increased and impacted how I did my job after the mass layoff.

### **The Mass Layoff Impact on My Career Tilt, and Personal Transformation**

Regarding the central question of this research, I will reflect on the three main areas below to support my learnings and share with others my experience of personal transformation and how I managed to overcome feelings of repression toward my former employer but, most

notably, how I grew out from this experience and leverage the intense emotions into personal and professional growth.

**Table 6**

*The mass layoff impact on my career tilt, and personal transformation*

Category	Codes
Impact on my integrity and other professional values	Professional values Lack of trust Coping with my feelings of insecurity
Career tilt	Concerns about my layoff in my future career Lack of understanding of how to position myself in the job search Reinventing my future career
Personal Transformation	Getting in shape Financial status Investing in education

*Note.* This coding matrix shows the identified categories and codes to support this theme.

### **Impact on my Integrity and Other Professional Values**

After the mass layoff, I was tempted to relinquish my personal and professional values due to emotional distress and insecurity. Integrity, teamwork, and respect for others were and continue to be the professional values I use to guide myself and perform around others at work. The integrity of doing the right thing regardless of the circumstances is probably the value I rely on the most, even today. I believe in teamwork, and I consider myself a team player. I consider that working efficiently as a team pertains to a group of people who collaborate and openly communicate with each other. Respect for others comes from the values I grew up with. My family taught me to respect work and to respect others regardless of their origins or beliefs. I carried respect for others as a professional value as well. Unfortunately, right after the mass

layoff, I often felt like giving up on my values due to frustration and a strong feeling of unfairness. Luckily, I developed my professionalism after many years of experience where I had significant times of uncertainty to solidify my ethical values. With this experience and the belief in my work values, I could continue acting with professionalism in these times of uncertainty.

“Usually, I would be enthusiastic about learning more about the processes, seeing our development’s progress, and sharing the good news with our team. This time I did not feel any excitement. *“Who cares if this works or not anymore?”* I suddenly felt withdrawal and indifference but forced myself not to show it. Then, I thought, *“You must do your best no matter what happens. It is your job!”* I grew up with professional integrity, values, and respect for others and their work. But these two feelings of indifference and “doing the right thing” started fighting with each other. It is like the bad guy and the good guy argued. Although I did not like the person I was becoming, there was not much I could do to improve things—at least not on that day.” (Integrity at stake)

However, over time, the lack of trust in the company and its leadership intensified, and my fear of losing my job made me pivot my behavior toward professional growth unrelated to the company’s objectives but rather a growth I could leverage elsewhere or with the company. I started investing my time and money in education. I used this divergence to cope with the stress and anxieties of possible separation from the company. I constructively used those feelings of fear to develop new skills and improve my managerial knowledge.

“After that mass layoff day, I started detaching myself from the company, and the people left there. My trust was zero, and I was focusing heavily on my education. As time passed, I was emotionally detached and couldn’t see any future in the company that was once a friendly environment.” (The transformation onset)

The lack of professional growth opportunities impacted my self-efficacy and its aspects of emotional arousal. Nothing was exciting to look for in my career future with the company. Returning to school was a way to improve my skills and see how I could hope to grow within the company or elsewhere. At the same time, learning about how businesses are administrated and

led was an eye-opener to the company's current situation and why and how downsizing happens. Going to school also helped me deal with my emotions, occasionally increasing my confidence and diminishing my fear of being jobless. From my perspective, education supports my chances of being employable.

### **Career Tilt**

After my layoff a year later, my career unexpectedly declined. It took me a while to find out what career path to follow. My professional connections outside of my job were limited, and at first, I did not know where to start in my job search. The emotional blur was intense, and although I had time to reflect on my future, it took an effort to recover. The company put me in touch with a recruiting specialist who helped me with basic job search tasks. It was my responsibility and my insights into what career I wanted to follow. Because I have been involved in different business areas at my current job, I found it challenging to determine what I could do next.

I continued to focus on my education and took seriously my engagement to become a certified project manager. In the meantime, I tried applying for a couple of executive roles in business analytics – one of which was close to fructify. A couple of months after my layoff, I was approached by one of my former supervisors and offered a part-time consultant job. That helped me reposition myself in my job search and supported me financially. Even like that, the intensity of losing a job I loved and had invested myself in was hard to overcome quickly.

In my case, professional growth outside the company became difficult mainly because I would relate my experience and often confuse or disregard cultural aspects of the organizations I would interview for. Unfortunately, I was trapped in my memories and behaviors working for

that friendly, family-oriented culture with supportive leaders who encouraged my development. It took a while in my job search to learn and be able to investigate the organizations I was applying for on their culture and needs besides what has been posted in the job description listing.

### **Personal Transformation**

I learned from this experience to focus on what I can control, and it is in my hands to make it happen. My career is indeed important, but I could invest in other areas and be successful. Losing a job could be traumatizing, but learning how to refocus the energy on a personal transformation is not only a way to cope with the pain but a personal goal. As outlined below, I focused my energy on sports, finances, and education right after my layoff.

Right after my layoff day, I focused my energy on exercising and identifying a routine to follow every day. That routine helped me physically and mentally to recover from the job loss. It kept my mind and spirit positive and significantly impacted my self-esteem and confidence that I can overcome the pain of losing my job and focus on what I can do in the future rather than feeling remorse for my former employer or my supervisors.

“Getting in shape was one of my significant transformation strengths, and it all started with my layoff day. Although going to the gym at first was more of a relief from the pain, it shortly became part of my daily behavior. Every morning I would leave the house like I used to do when I went to work. I did not want to break that routine of getting up early in the morning and engaging in an activity. I would spend around 2 hours at the gym every morning. That is how I discovered yoga. The meditation during the session was a mental and physical relief. Thoughts of frustration and anger kept coming to my mind for a few weeks. I forced myself not to let them get over me. Slowly they went away, and positive energy would build every day. I got excited about my physical performance. Jogging became another forte routine. Since then, I have improved my physical strength and kept the habit of exercising daily until today.” (The transformation onset)

Another area I focused on after my layoff was related to my financial status and habits. I learned to be frugal with my expenses and save more money. That way, if I were in a job search for too long, I would be financially stable, not panic, and not have to take loans. This financially stable state helped me search for a job I could grow and be a good fit for my skills and knowledge.

“On the day of my layoff, I had a small amount of savings in the bank. I have just paid my student loan and mortgage. Luckily, I was debt free, but my savings were the lowest ever. I was unhappy because now I had to worry about the financial side of staying home. That is when I decided to cut down my expenses and determined to save the severance money the company paid. I had to find a quick source of income until I got a real job. I jumped into a remote type of work with a former employer. They paid me little, but the job only took a few hours weekly. I learned at that time to watch what I spend the money on. I looked at prices and analyzed every considerable expense I had to make to see if it was worth it. Ever since, I learned to bargain for house services and save a significant amount of what I earn. That was another side of the transformation the layoff triggered.” (The transformation onset)

Investing time and effort in education was another area I learned to focus on after my layoff. I often wondered what my future would be without investing in my education. My project management certifications and master's degrees opened many doors for me and offered me opportunities in top companies in the Bluebonnet state. Since the layoff, I have had the chance to work for a government institution, a financial services institution, and a media giant. For each of the roles in these organizations, I have applied the experience I gained with my former employers, what I have learned, been trained in school, and earned my project management certificates.

“Studying for the certification occupied much of my time during the day. I took it seriously, and I started seeing its applicability. I obtained my certification a month later. Recruiters were excited about it too. For the first consultant job, I accepted that certification was highly relevant. It was a governmental project manager role and part of the hiring requirements. It was a perfect place to explore and experience my learnings from my previous role and the certification training. That time spent studying paid out. Half a year later, I decided to study for

another certification, which was easier to attain but much more valuable on the job market. I have kept myself current with project management tools out on the market. It is part of my professional development that I could share with others and support technology development efficiently.” (The transformation onset)

Overall, I overcame this crisis and grew out of it. I learned from the way I handled the situation and applied those learnings at my next jobs. My transformation was probably the most dramatic one in a positive way due to my focus on what I could do better and what was in my control to change. I learned to focus on my growth rather than blaming the professional failure on my former employer.

## **Chapter VII. My Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations**

### **Create a Supportive Organizational Culture in Times of the Downsizing**

I faced intense emotions during the mass layoff experience that day and the days after. When going through the process of downsizing, I was hoping for the leadership's awareness of the significant emotional distress on the day of the mass layoff. Feelings like fear, anxiety, insecurity, and guilt are what I have experienced. They significantly impacted how I perceived the entire process of downsizing and its consequences on my well-being and others. These thoughts align with Noer (2009) insights about mass layoffs: "those who remain in hierarchical organizations lay off share feelings of anger, fear, anxiety, and distrust. These feelings are powerful when the organizations have been nurturing and have captured the spirit of employees. Employees have these feelings regardless of employment level" (p. 11)

Through this experience, I learned that employees are not fixed assets. They are human beings with emotions and personal values. Although restructuring is required in times of financial crisis, employers should acknowledge the detrimental influence of emotional distress on employees' behavior. "Emotions are integrally related to intrinsic motivation. The emotion of interest plays an important role in intrinsically motivated behavior in that people naturally approach activities that interest them. Emotions of enjoyment and excitement accompanying the experiences of competence and autonomy represent the rewards for intrinsically motivated behavior." (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 60).

On the contrary, emotions like fear or anxiety, highly present for the layoff survivors, impact their drive for competency and autonomy and implicitly their intrinsically motivated behavior. Additionally, employees perceive the organizational social aspects as impacting job

satisfaction and learning patterns; the more support and autonomy employees have, the higher their well-being. “Employees who experienced more autonomy support from managers also reported more satisfaction of their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and in turn had higher performance evaluations, higher wellbeing, and lower ill-being” (Deci & Ryan, 2011, p. 432)

From a different perspective, emotions play an essential role in how the organizational culture changes in times of crisis. In the case of the organization, I worked for, the changes were dramatic from a friendly and family-orientated culture before the mass layoff to a culture dominated by fear and insecurities. My performance dropped in this context mainly because my emotional state was undermined, and we have less openly discussed how I felt. “Emotions in organizational transitions matter not only regarding employee well-being but also because they affect behavior dramatically. Feelings of despair or fear are unlikely to foster cooperation or effective work, but feelings of compassion or enthusiasm may do... A successful restructuring not only involves getting the right people with the right capabilities in the right roles, but also entails establishing commitment and morale, which are underpinned, or can be undermined, by emotions.” (Myers et al., 2012, p. 63)

Any organizational dysfunction affects how people communicate, and the layoffs' consequences significantly impact those left to stay with the company and the culture. Although aspects of the culture try to stay embedded after the mass layoff, fear, and insecurities make those who remain change their behavior and implicitly their perspectives on the culture. “When companies go bankrupt or are taken over by a turnaround manager, the cultural DNA can be destroyed, and a new organization can be launched.” (Schein & Schein, 2016, p.9). From this

perspective, right after the mass layoff, I felt like working for a different company. The new leadership did not show concerns about the impact of the layoffs on the company's culture; at that point, this did not seem to be a priority.

Throughout the layoff process, acknowledge layoff survivors may face the five stages of grief (denial, resentment, acknowledgment, depression, and acceptance), and each employee transitions from one stage differently. In my case, I experienced each of these stages without acknowledging them at that time. The lack of support in each of these stages made me feel more vulnerable and less engaged in my performance. "In the context of this 'progression through stages,' conveys that different employees may currently be experiencing different emotional reactions (which is particularly helpful for managers to recognize since they may have known about impending change well in advance of their staff and have had time to adapt to it while their members of staff are still struggling)" (Myers et al., 2012, p. 74)

Outlining a plan of overcoming but, most importantly, communicating with their employees before the mass layoff. How to let go of the layoff victims and continue engaging and motivating layoff survivors. Listening and showing empathy, especially with the layoff survivors after the mass layoff, should support employees' transition through the crisis. Toxic emotions are contagious, and having toxic handlers to help the employees is therapeutic and positively influences the layoff survivors' well-being. According to Myers et al. (2012), toxic handlers are "staff at all organizational levels who support and protect colleagues who are suffering emotionally, for example, during organizational change, and so prevent the development of toxic emotions." (p. 79). It is also helpful to coach middle managers or others in the organizations on

how to discuss the layoff context. “Toxic handlers voluntarily shoulder the sadness and the anger that are endemic to organizational life” (Frost & Robinson, 1999, p. 98)

### **Does Competitive Pay Support Productivity and Work Values?**

When I started my career with the company, my motivation and engagement were not only reward-driven. I was productive and a high performer because I enjoyed my work. I felt a sense of belongingness with the company and was determined to do my best. I was in the middle of my career and had enough experience to perform at high standards. It was what I wanted to do, and there were always opportunities to explore and do something new. I learned a lot, and I felt appreciated. That meant more than the paycheck at the end of the week. “For many individuals, work not only represents a source of income for survival; it is also a form of self-realization and personal satisfaction. People search for careers that have meaning and that provide not only money but also a sense of purpose and fulfillment.” (Deci & Ryan, 2017, p. 532)

On the other hand, if I weren't to be competitively paid, my focus would most likely be on the paycheck rather than my performance. I have experienced this scenario with other employers where I lost my motivation to do my best because I was not paid as much as I thought I should. Pay and rewards are important for employees to satisfy their basic needs and perceive their work value in the job market. “External motivation is another type of controlled motivation. It refers to activities people do to obtain external rewards or avoid punishments. Such behaviors are dependent upon external contingencies; when the contingencies are removed, people lose their motivation to persist (e.g., an individual makes sure to pay their bills on time because they

expect their spouse to be angry with them if they do not; when the spouse is not present, they are not concerned with their bills).” (Domenico et al., 2022, p. 3)

Employers and the leadership should acknowledge the layoff survivors' struggle, even if well paid. The employees left to stay after mass layoffs encountered emotions like the fear of losing their job, guilt, and overwhelmedness, which employers should consider addressing shortly after these mass layoffs. Assuming that remaining and getting paid is enough to keep these employees productive and motivated will only worsen their well-being and hurt the organization in the long run. My organization believed that employees would deliver, stay committed and be productive if well-paid. “Although tangible rewards (e.g., pay) can undermine intrinsic and autonomous extrinsic motivation because the rewards are often experienced as controlling, pay and rewards may also support motivation and engagement if they are structured to not thwart satisfaction of the autonomy and competence needs.” (Deci & Ryan, 2017, p. 532)

Additionally, employers should consider pay based on performance to increase their employees' motivation. Since the mass layoff, I have worked more than before but also felt a disconnect between my job, responsibilities, and pay. Due to insecurities and guilt, I did not perceive my pay as a motivational factor but rather as controlling where the company paid me to stay as long as they needed me there and not because of my performance or contribution. “As long as pay is valued and as long as employees accurately perceive the connection between pay and performance, actually tying pay more closely to performance should lead to a stronger motivation to perform effectively” (Lawler, 1981, p. 118)

Although well paid, I still struggled to stay committed to my work values due to the negative emotions that impacted my behavior. Employers should acknowledge this mindset shift

even to the most committed and devoted employees. Feelings of unfairness and guilt can significantly impact the employees' behavior. "Emotions can be long lasting when the situation is long-lasting, when a person's subconscious continues to make appraisals of a given event, or when an individual is consciously brooding over an issue." (Latham, 2012, p. 254). In the case of mass layoffs, emotional impact has consequences on employees' behavior sooner than expected. Some can be excited and happy that they were not let go, but at one point, each layoff survivor would experience guilt or fear of losing the job. "An event usually has emotional consequences that, in turn, influence behavior. This influence is relatively immediate." (Latham, 2012, p. 255)

### **Career and Personal Growth in Times of Downsizing**

Another area significantly impacted by the mass layoff was my career. By career, I'm considering Ashforth's (2012) definition as "the total sequence of work roles occupied during one's life course regardless of whether the roles are tightly coupled or even similar" (p. 225). I have been growing with the company since the beginning and have invested in its business development. My fast exposure and high-standard deliverables made me optimistic about my future. My dedication and professionalism paid out, and I was expecting the same right before the mass layoff day. Perspectives changed dramatically after that day, given that the plans were to develop technology personnel at the headquarters, not in our office. Since I could not reallocate to the corporate office, I have experienced frustration and uncertainty that negatively impacted my performance.

I have thought that career growth is less likely for layoff survivors. After reviewing the literature on the topic, I realized that would have been possible with the right mindset and outside support. My performance was good, but it dropped after the mass layoff. Emotions

impacted my behavior, and the lack of mentoring or coaching also negatively affected my career growth. I could have asked about my direct supervisor for career mentoring or development that “enhances protégé advancement in an organization or their career.” (Greco & et al., 2020, p. 42). There was a lot to learn from her, and she could have introduced and promoted me to the upper leadership. “This type of mentoring is representative of a serial socialization tactic wherein mentors, acting as experienced members of the profession, provide newcomers with clear guidelines and structure that helps them to organize and make sense of their new role” (Greco & et al. 2020, p. 42) I was confused instead and emotionally overwhelmed. “What people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave” (Bandura, 1986, p. 25). From this perspective, I’m learning that layoff survivors should have control over their feelings and pursue, or try to, career growth after the mass layoff. The support is probably not the same, but we could still leverage the learning of being better leaders, use personal verbal persuasion, and engage with other leaders in mentoring. The lack of title or pay should not affect our self-esteem or efficacy. After reflecting on my story and reading literature on self-efficacy, I have learned that I missed opportunities and put myself in misery mainly because of emotional distress.

On the other hand, I did not have a clear career growth plan before or after the mass layoff. I was looking and hoping growth would happen, but I did not identify steps to follow or better assess what I could do next. “Success in goal attainments builds a sense of personal efficacy. Without aspirations and evaluative involvement in activities, people remain unmotivated, bored, uncertain about their capabilities, and dependent upon momentary external stimulation for their satisfaction. Life without any elements of challenge can be rather dull.

However, internalization of dysfunctional standards of self-evaluation can serve as a source of chronic misery.” (Bandura, 1991, p. 273)

My leadership self-efficacy was impacted mainly due to the lack of performance mastery, missing role models, limited verbal persuasion, and the slightest emotional arousal. As elaborated below, each of these self-efficacy concepts was missing or unfavorable for my growth in a leadership role after the mass layoff.

Due to downsizing and shifting the technical roles to the corporate office, I had to deal with and manage mainly tactical issues rather than support with technology strategic planning. I haven't had the opportunity to experience, or even fail, in the decision-making process, coaching, or forming a team. “Self-efficacy (SE) beliefs influenced the types of activity people chose to engage in, the level of effort they put in, and their perseverance in the face of difficulties” (Mumtaz & Parahoo, 2000, p. 704). Not only did I not have the opportunity to act as a leader, but there was no feedback or commitment to support my efficacy. Reflecting on this experience, layoff survivors should consider taking the risk of performing at a higher level, plan that growth, and ask for honest feedback. “High self-efficacy is theorized to buffer the impact of negative feedback on specific efficacy beliefs, maintaining commitment and thus preventing doubts.” (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p. 37)

Furthermore, I lacked role models to increase my confidence as a leader. I have not looked up for role models or ask for mentorship. That could have been a great way to learn from their actions or mistakes. “Seeing that the actions of others produce good results increases the likelihood that observers will behave in a similar way” (Bandura, 1986, p. 284). I also lacked the maturity to communicate my drive and purpose for growth. Due to the disturbing emotions and

personal insecurities, I could not influence others to pursue career growth, and when I tried, it was not the right time and place for such a leadership role. “Personal effectiveness is also the ability of an individual to positively impact others through clear and persuasive communication.” (Srinivasan & Jomom, 2018, p. 37)

Regarding the verbal persuasion to support my leadership efficacy, there was minimal encouragement that I could engage in a leadership role. I did not believe in it after the mass layoff as the fear of losing my job took over my optimism for possible growth with the company. “People who are persuaded verbally that they possess the capabilities to master given tasks are likely to mobilize greater sustained effort than if they harbor self-doubts and dwell on personal deficiencies when difficulties arise” (Bandura, 1986, p. 400). Looking back at this experience, I have already learned from my mistake of not trying harder to express my interest in the job I believe aligns with my experience and knowledge. “People are led, through suggestion, into believing they can cope successfully with what has overwhelmed them in the past. Efficacy expectations induced in this manner are also likely to be weaker than those arising from one's own accomplishments because they do not provide an authentic experiential base for them. In the face of distressing threats and a long history of failure in coping with them, whatever mastery expectations are induced by suggestion can be readily extinguished by disconfirming experiences.” (Bandura, 1977, p. 198)

Instead, fear and anxiety took over the excitement of a possible promotion. I could not be optimistic anymore, and the lack of emotional arousal was an important factor in not being able to develop leadership efficacy. “Aversive experiences, either of a personal or vicarious sort, create expectations of injurious effects that can activate both fear and defensive behavior. Being

coeffects, there is no fixed relationship between autonomic arousal and actions. Until effective coping behaviors are achieved, perceived threats produce high emotional arousal and various defensive maneuvers” (Bandura, 1977, p. 209). I also lacked motivation due to uncertainty, given that I have been exposed to situations with the danger of being fired more often than in promising instances. I found it difficult to identify ways to promote myself even more to keep my job. “Perceived self-efficacy was accompanied by high-performance attainments and perseverance under conditions in which such a relationship would be expected to obtain” (Bandura & Schunk, 1981, p. 596)

### **Supportive Leadership Behavior and its Role on My Performance**

Organizations use performance reviews or performance appraisals to evaluate employees on their assigned work based on the company’s objectives. “Performance is what we need from employees if organizations are to achieve their business objectives” (Rudman, 2003, p.7). The intent is not only for evaluation purposes but also to set goals and guide employees toward business objectives in a certain period. Performance reviews occur yearly, twice a year, or quarterly, depending on the company’s perspective of aligning and monitoring goals and objectives.

When the mass layoff started, the company already had a performance review process in place. That started a few years before the mass layoff. Although the intent aligned with the review’s purpose of having employees work against the company’s goals, how the process was executed was unclear for most employees, including myself. My case had a detrimental impact on my motivation due to the lack of clarity, inconsistent feedback, lack of commitment, and

missing the challenge and task alignment with each goal. For my conclusions on this topic, I used the goal-setting theory as a theoretical framework to support my reflection.

The performance review process and its intent were unclear to most employees, including myself. The lack of clarity on the goals was detrimental to my engagement. The goals for the year were vague and missing ways or guidance to execute them. I'm learning now that I should have asked for more clarity, but I have not. I thought I could determine the steps needed to accomplish the goals. My approach proved inefficient and detrimental to my motivation.

Although I achieved most of the goals, the way I approached them was insufficient, according to my manager's perspective. "Motivation and performance are higher when individuals are set specific goals when goals are difficult but accepted, and when there is feedback on performance. Participation in goal setting is important as a means of getting agreement to setting higher goals. Difficult goals must be agreed upon and their achievement reinforced by guidance and advice" (Islami et al., 2018, p. 95)

Additionally, my supervisor's hesitation in discussing the unfavorable performance generated confusion on my side. Although we were in contact often, I learned about his concerns through the performance review process. It would have helped with my performance if this was on-the-spot feedback discussed earlier in the year. Feedback is continuous and vital to maintain motivation, especially toward achieving higher goals. Even after the performance review, we have not discussed his feedback in detail and ways for how I could improve. "feedback or knowledge of results is a second moderator of the goal-performance relationship because goals regulate performance far better when feedback is present than when it is absent. Feedback lets people decide if more effort or a different strategy is needed to attain their goal. When

performance feedback is withheld, goal setting is ineffective for increasing performance” (Locke & Latham, 2017, p. 7)

I was hesitant to ask for proper feedback, which betrayed a lack of confidence and fear of losing my job. My commitment to work and pursue future goals has deteriorated. At the same time, my confidence in reaching the new objectives has been negatively impacted. Lack of commitment is probably the most disadvantageous attitude toward achieving goals. If offered support and guidance, commitment can be positively impacted, and supervisors should leverage these tools during the performance review and throughout their engagement with their employees. “Commitment is especially important when goals are difficult. Commitment is highest when people have confidence in reaching their goal and believe the goal to be important and appropriate. There are numerous ways to generate commitment, assignment, and supportiveness by a respected leader” (Locke & Latham, 2005, p. 129)

In the case of my performance that year, goals were difficult to assess and perform against, given the lack of perspective in the long term. The entire performance review process impacted my self-esteem and engagement with the company. I became insecure and lacked confidence in working towards my goals. Although I have not talked openly about the way I felt, there were consequences in the long term on my performance and self-efficacy. “Goals were related to effort, and performance was related to psychological success. In turn, feelings of success were associated with increased self-esteem, which was linked with increased involvement. Further, the more involved the participants were, the more committed they became to challenging future goals, thus completing the cycle.” (Hall & Foster, 1977, p. 287)

### **Leadership Strategies for Communication and Engagement with the Layoff Survivors**

My perception about the leadership strategies for communication and engagement with the layoff survivors after the mass layoff was that they lacked a drive for motivation. Before the mass layoff, I trusted the leadership and how they communicated with us. There were town halls, birthdays, and a family-orientated culture that the leadership inoculated. After the mass layoff, the new leadership tried a town hall, but the message did not sound honest and trustworthy. Leadership and middle managers did not have a clear plan to communicate with the layoff survivors and keep them motivated and engaged.

To support my reflection and conclusions on this topic, I have used the lens of path-goal leadership theory, according to which “the leader’s behavior is acceptable and satisfying to subordinates to the extent that the subordinates see such behavior as either an immediate source of satisfaction or as instrumental to future satisfaction” (House & Mitchell, 2007, p. 243). Further, I will reflect on recognizing subordinates' needs, coaching, clarifying expectations, and removing barriers from a leadership engagement perspective.

One of my biggest fears was losing my job. After this experience, it would have helped to support my motivation if my supervisors were trying to recognize this need for safety and stability and acted toward it. It was hard to assess if they had not recognized the need or could not commit due to the organization’s future uncertainties. “Recognizing and/or arousing subordinates’ needs for outcomes over which the leader has some control” (House & Mitchell, 2007, p. 244)

The lack of coaching or direction to support the attainment of the assigned goals and work was another aspect that impacted my performance. I felt abandoned and had to find ways to

perform independently. Since the goal was to shift effort and resources to the main office or outsource, my supervisors had allocated minimal effort to guide or mentor me. “Leader behaviors that facilitate work consist of planning, scheduling, and organizing work; personally coordinating the work of subordinates; providing mentoring, developmental experiences, guidance, coaching, counseling, and feedback to assist subordinates in developing the knowledge and skills required to meet expectancies and performance standards” (House, 1996, p. 339)

On the other hand, due to my lack of experience, I did not ask for help when needed. I have not stepped out to clarify my needs and expectations. The lack of structure in the upcoming work and my involvement generated frustration and impacted my productivity. “The followers’ productivity is enhanced if the leader provides needed structure to clarify means and ends if they are missing or unclear to the followers” (Bass, 2008, p. 805). Due to the lack of open communication, my supervisors were not always aware of my fears or obstacles I faced in performing, and removing the frustrating barriers was missing. “The role of the leader is to facilitate the development of subordinates or remove obstacles to their effective performance.” (House, 1996, p. 340)

In mass layoffs, leadership supportiveness is important for the followers' sense of job performance and motivation, but leadership courage is equally important. When in a leadership role, facing fear and uncertainty for myself and the entire team. Act and talk with the same heart of courageousness. “Courageous leadership is not about Naivete or false bravado. It involves feeling fear, anxiety, and uncertainty; facing it; and moving forward” (Noer, 2009, p. 186)

## **Recommendations**

Given my experience, self-reflection, and learning preponderantly after the mass layoff and my departure from the company, organizations, layoff survivors, and layoff victims can learn and get inspired. Although this experience was traumatic for me professionally and personally, I learned how to handle myself in a crisis. Telling and sharing the stories with others makes me vulnerable. There are learnings others who went or will possibly go through similar situations can learn.

In the case of the organizations and their leadership, it will help to have a downsizing plan and process that all employees know. This plan will support a smoother downsizing transition, but it will also provide transparency of this type of situation possibly coming in the future. That way, employees are prepared and not surprised by the events but somewhat knowledgeable and ready to face the changes. Right after the mass layoff, support not only the layoff victims but also the survivors. Identify a toxic handler role or roles and make layoff survivors aware they can vent with these toxic handlers. In this sense, layoff survivors will have the opportunity to express their fears and concerns freely, ask questions, and find guidance while discussing the uncertainty of the situation.

Downsizing organizations and their leaders should acknowledge that competitive pay is insufficient to support productivity. The need for job security is equally important. Layoff survivors crave to ensure their job is secure in the future and that they will not be on the next elimination job list. Finding the right balance between the paycheck and the intrinsic motivators each employee looks for. Identify those motivators and support them regardless of the company's future uncertainties. Continue supporting layoff survivors with relevant feedback and coaching.

Even though their position would be eliminated soon, they adequately support their knowledge and work. Provide feedback and coaching addressing the gaps and possible need for improvement, even when professional growth is not likely. That way, those employees can use that efficacy in their future jobs.

On the other hand, layoff survivors can learn that career growth can still happen after mass layoffs even though companies could struggle financially. It is important to have a career growth plan and act accordingly. Finding a mentor and asking for feedback will support this endeavor and build confidence and self-efficacy. Continue engaging in the organizational goals and perform without fearing being let go. Stay open, ask questions about the company's future, and support where needed. Continue to follow professional values as before the mass layoffs. Stay committed to the company even though the future might be short. Acting this way builds experience and confidence in their capacity to handle work in stressful situations.

In the case of the layoff victims, my learning was probably as intense as being a layoff survivor. Although my reflection as a layoff victim was tangentially covered in this research, what I learned and want to share with other layoff victims is that career growth continues and is based on the experience gained with the company before or after downsizing. Setting career goals could be a continuation or the beginning of new opportunities after the layoff. Instead of acting like a victim, shift to a learner's mindset and see the opportunities for personal growth by investing in education, health, or other hobbies that support well-being.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In this study, I self-reflect on my behavior as a project leader in an organizational culture undergoing significant transformations. I explored motivational best practices for

personal and professional transformation in a changing environment. Using autoethnography, I could bring to life an untold personal experience that others could relate to, and I hope that my story and the way I have approached my reflection is a valuable source of inspiration for you, my colleagues, but also for employees going through similar experiences and organizations experiencing or anticipating downsizing.

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## Appendices

## Appendix A



April 21, 2023

PI: Ms. Valentina Rada

Protocol title: A SELF-EXPLORATION OF A PROJECT LEADER'S CAREER TILT, TRANSFORMATION, AND MOTIVATIONAL CHALLENGES IN THE FACE OF A MASS ORGANIZATIONAL LAYOFF

Project link: <https://uiw.forms.ethicalreviewmanager.com/Project/Index/5666>

Hello,

Your project described above has been reviewed and found not TO meet the federal regulatory requirements for human subjects research based on the following criteria:

- There will be no interaction or intervention with living human subjects (except the researcher), including individuals featured in the autobiographical experiences or individuals who provide data to answer the research questions;
- The project will not use documents, data, or recorded material that includes information about other individuals; and
- Study results are not designed to be generalized or contribute broadly to knowledge or theory in a field of study.

Keep this document with your project records as your "**Not Regulated Research Determination**" letter. Please use IRB number 2023-1285-NRR when inquiring about or referencing this determination. Should you determine at any point you wish to add additional elements to the project, please contact us before initiating those components as they may impact this determination.

Please contact us with any questions or for information regarding the IRB or the review process.

Sincerely,

Office of Research and Graduate Studies  
Research Compliance  
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IRB #: 00005059 / FWA #: 00009201