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Going from Breakdown to Breakthrough: Human Resource Professional's Perspective of Conflict in K-12 Public Education

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Going from Breakdown to Breakthrough: Human Resource Professional’s Perspective of Conflict Resolution in K-12 Public Education

A Dissertation by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

Going from Breakdown to Breakthrough: A Human Resource Professional’s Perspective of Conflict Resolution in K-12 Public Education

by Denise Eileen LaRue

This study was conducted independently, but in collaboration with a team of peer-researchers who came together to study the lived experience of exemplar leaders in diverse organizations as they transformed conflict to reach common ground. This study contributed to the collective work by looking at K-12 Human Resource Officers (HROs) as the population of interest. HROs are often at the center of resolving conflict, yet only a few emerge as exemplar leaders. These exemplar leaders were the target population situated in the phenomena under investigations. The team selected a qualitative phenomenological approach, in an attempt to uncover what strategies exemplar leaders used to transform conflict to find common ground using the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors: collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, ethics, processes, and problem-solving. Evidence showed that exemplar leaders tended to integrate these domains, rather than using them separately, for a more powerful impact in transforming conflict and finding common ground. Interviews, observations, and artifact data identified shared practices and behaviors to represent a more powerful repertoire of conflict transformational skills.
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PREFACE

As part of a thematic study conducted by 10 doctoral students, this qualitative investigation was designed from a phenomenological perspective with a focus on the essence of the lived experiences of professionals that successfully transformed conflict from breakdown to breakthrough. Human Resource Officers (HROs) were selected from various leaders in public and non-profit organizations as one such group of professionals thought to play a pivotal role in organizational conflicts. The research problem the team investigated focused on highly successful professionals to determine what strategies they used to transform conflict, find common ground, and achieve organizational goals. To ensure thematic consistency, the team co-created the purpose statement, central and sub research questions, definitions, interview questions, and study procedures. It was agreed upon by the team that for the purpose of increased validity, data collection method triangulation would include interviews, observations, and artifacts.
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The greatest challenge facing mankind in the 21st century is the danger of conflict between people and cultures (Ryn, 2003). It is impossible to watch television or pick up a newspaper today without realizing the world is becoming increasingly hostile. Many people live in fear due to the tension that exists between nations. For example, the meltdown of peace processes in the Middle East yielded a surge of war and violence, and tension continues to mount between Russia and the Ukraine. According to Search for Finding Common Ground (SFCG, n.d.), an international nonprofit organization, a startling 42 million people worldwide were forcibly uprooted from their homes annually due to conflict. Within their own borders, nations faced perils, such as the 2014 terrorist attacks in France, arising from unresolved ethnic and religious conflict.

Conflict with the United States (U.S.) includes gridlock in Congress, labor strife, union strikes, and civil unrest as protestors take to the streets in cities across the country. The U.S. faces conflict surrounding issues of immigration, racial discrimination, and bias related to religion, gender, and sexual orientation (SFCG, n.d.), which set unprecedented challenges for inextricably linked global economies. Just the cost of containing violence was estimated at 10% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which translated to $9.5 trillion (SFCG, n.d.).

Dramatic changes in the business world occurred worldwide as China, India, and other nations once considered peripheral became major stakeholders in the world market. Former Director General of the World Trade Organization, Pascal Lamy (2011), reported the “world economy has grown more in the past 75 years than in the previous 750 years” (p. 2). Lamy (2011) added that “over one-third of humanity now connects daily through
digital technology that did not even exist two decades ago” (p. 3). Inevitably, these changes reaped benefits and held serious ramifications that reverberated through political, social, environmental, and economic systems worldwide. To meet the demands of a global economy, businesses and other organizations need to make transformational changes in how they do business (Anderson & Ackerman-Anderson, 2010; Kouzakova, Ellmers, Harinck, & Scheepers, 2012; Lamy, 2011; Melchin & Picard, 2008; Pottruck, 2015; Winn, 2014). Often, these organizations found themselves unable to transcend conflict to make the changes needed to secure a competitive edge in diverse environments.

Many leaders faced conflict as they strove to move their organizations forward in a rapidly changing global economy with limited resources. Conflict arose with demands for change, and changes could be vehemently resisted resulting in different conflict. In fact, resistance accounted for the failure of 66% to 75% of all public and private change initiatives when leaders failed to account for conflict in their organizations due to resistant stakeholders (Kee & Newcomer, 2008). A primary reason for failure in transforming organizations was the way leaders engaged stakeholders. Stakeholders, defined as those involved in or affected by change in the organization, may not share the organization’s vision thus creating potential conflict (Kee & Newcomer, 2008; Kouzakova et al., 2012).

Much was written about how to handle conflict (Klein, Knight, Ziegert, Lim, & Saltz, 2011; Kotlyar, Karakowsky, & Ng, 2011), yet conflict still persists. Change efforts continued to fail despite efforts to train leaders as facilitators of change initiatives (Kee & Newcomer, 2008). Executives charged with upholding the vision and mission of their
organizations and delivering breakthrough results search for solutions to the conflicts barring progress (Anderson & Ackerman-Anderson, 2010; Pottruck, 2015). Human Resource Officers (HROs) were often in the center of dealing with conflict, serving a pivotal role with many different stakeholders. HROs as leaders and change agents played a major role in communicating with stakeholders (Ulrich, Allen, Brockbank, Younger, & Nyman, 2009). To successfully bridge the chasm from breakdown to breakthrough, it was imperative consider and acknowledge the value of diverse perspectives (Lamy, 2011). Hence, Lamy, (2011) called for leadership approaches that united people through the discovery of common ground.

To continue to grow organizations, successful leaders looked for common ground, developed allies, and built networks and coalitions because political effectiveness hinged on the capacity to sustain organizational needs while working with people who held divergent values, priorities, interests, and goals, especially in the face of conflict (White, Harvey, & Kemper, 2007). In this respect, the sustainability of an organization’s long term growth, according to Harvard Professor Dani Rodrik (2013), depended on its ability to develop both human capital and the institution. The high-stakes nature of transforming conflict would certainly seem to be the interface between the organization and its people that would support long term growth.

Kouzakova et al. (2012) indicated adversaries were more likely to find mutually acceptable solutions when they realized they had certain things in common. Leaders adept at finding common ground may hold the key to unlocking the conflict gridlocks that plague many of today’s diverse organizations (Cramton, 2002; Kecskes & Zhang, 2009; Kouzakova et al., 2011; Mey & Kecskes, 2008; Ryn, 2003).
Background

Globalization is changing the face of societies, cultures, economics, and politics, largely in response to advances in new technology (Lamy, 2011; Winn, 2014). Inevitably, such changes typically led to conflict. Conflict was defined as, “an expressed struggle between two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals” (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001, p. 41). This definition guided various experts to examine strategies intended to resolve conflict by examining the sources of conflict and individual or collective differences in behaviors thought to mitigate conflict (Kouzakova et al., 2012; Mayer, 2012). Intractable conflict emerged as tensions escalated within and between organizations whose interdependency was indissolubly intertwined (Barbieri, 1996; Edmund, 2010). Although interdependency can be the basis for building trust within organizations when parties acknowledge mutual need for one another, it also led to conflict within organizations when one party failed to uphold their end of the bargain (White et al., 2007).

In a seminal work, Bell and Hart (2002) outlined the sources of conflict as: style, perceptions, goals, pressure, policies, values, roles or positions, and resources. Conflict of style existed when people handled situations differently or their communication styles were not compatible. It could be something as mundane as one prefers emails whereas another prefers telephone conversations. According to Bell and Hart (2002), each person saw the world through his/her own eyes and the differences could be the source of conflict. Goals were yet another source of conflict; for example, one person could find something a priority when others did not. Conflicting pressures, usually involving urgent tasks, created tension and conflict. Additionally, sometimes the organization’s rules and
policies changed and conflict resulted when they were not communicated clearly to everyone (Bell & Hart, 2002). Competition over scarce resources was also a notorious source of conflict in every type of organization (White et al., 2007). Another source of conflict arose when work demands required something viewed as unethical or inconsistent with personal values or standards (Bell & Hart, 2002). Boundaries could be transgressed when someone performed tasks outside the normal role or by created conflict during a power struggle (Bell & Hart, 2002). Most of these sources of conflict could be successfully managed with the exception of value-laden conflict.

Values are deep-seated, intrinsically held convictions tied to self-identities. Value conflict received less attention in the literature. Research by Kouzakova et al. (2012) on value conflict suggested a closer look at perceived common ground in dealing with such conflicts. Sometimes people assumed others shared their beliefs or values and were disgruntled when the expectation of similarity was unfounded.

Later studies began to investigate conflict processes, which were described by researchers investigating how teams interacted regarding their differences (DeChurch, Mesmer-Magnus, & Doty, 2013). Common ground, with early roots in the negotiation literature as a problem-solving strategy, was one such conflict processes (Kelman, 2010; Mey & Kecskes, 2008). In Kelman’s (2010) view, finding common ground was reached by mutual concessions, and its success was dependent upon a shared vision of a better future for both parties. However, concessions could look more like compromise. Compromises were seldom the best solution because they failed to generate true buy-in. The supposition was that nobody got what they wanted, but everybody got something they could live with. Yet, according to S. Fisher (2011), there may be no genuine
compromise, especially if there was a difference in power and position among participants. Consequently, the literature called into question the behaviors of the parties involved because conflict was a dynamic process.

To further evaluate the dynamic processes, some researchers pursued a socio-cognitive approach that focuses on the relationship between speaker and listener. These interpersonal communications raised questions concerning contextual features such as whether mutual learning and knowledge resulted from the exchange. This had the potential to create conflict from miscommunication, language or cultural barriers, or the speaker’s intent. In this exchange, conflict erupted when there was a failure to come together, particularly when disagreements were based on values, history, culture, perceptions, and to a lesser extent, competing interests or agendas (Henning & Wan-Ching, 2012; Kouzakova et al., 2012; Senge, 1990; Yoon & Brown, 2014). Whereas competing interests or agendas caused conflict, they were easier to resolve (Spangler & Burgess, 2012). Value-laden conflicts on the other hand, escalated easily and were resistant to any attempt at resolution (Spangler & Burgess, 2012).

In addition to sources of conflict, specific attributes thought to contribute to the leader’s success in mitigating conflict were examined. Larick (2015) and White (2013) reported that individually, collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, ethics, problem-solving, and processes yielded considerable research. However, Larick (2015) and White (2013) offered a theoretical framework suggesting more information was needed about each of these and the role they played in transforming conflict. The following section examines each attribute individually along with some evidence showing the interconnections between the attributes.
The Six Behavioral Domains of Conflict Transformation

**Collaboration.** Harvey and Drolet (2004) forecasted a turbulent future with increasing conflicts. They posited that organizations that built their teams and people increased the likelihood they would maintain a competitive edge. Collaboration provided the means for this to happen. A collaborative organizational climate reflected beliefs held by its members that included goals and supporting processes, practices, policies, procedures, routines, and rewards (Pereira & Gomes, 2012; Weiss, 2011). Collaboration, unlike compromise, generated novel or innovative solutions that satisfied all parties (Anderson & Ackerman-Anderson, 2010).

When conflict arose in a collaborative environment, open dialogue contributed to dealing with the conflict appropriately (Anderson & Ackerman-Anderson, 2010). However, to participate in open dialogue participants needed to think and interact in a nonthreatening environment. The collaborative environment met the core participant needs of security, inclusion and connection, power, order and control, competence, justice, and fairness, which in turn were found to generate creative solutions, improve decision-making, and foster a more conducive work environment (Anderson & Ackerman-Anderson, 2010).

**Communication.** Communication in construction of common ground, according to Kecskes and Zhang (2009), was a dynamic process based on socio-cognitive factors. Through an examination of these socio-cognitive factors, Kecskes and Zhang (2009) attempted to reconcile the pragmatic and cognitive views of common ground in communication.
Kecskes and Zhang (2009) reported that assumed or core common ground encompassed generalized knowledge of cultural norms, beliefs, and values ascribed to a society, community, or nation. Emergent common ground was contingent on the situational context and shared experience. If, as Kecskes and Zhang (2009) claimed, communication was the interplay of intention and attention to construct common ground, it would be important to determine if successful leaders activated, sought, and created shared information to enhance interpersonal relations and transform conflict. Communication was essential in forming issues, framing perceptions, and engaging with the conflict (Chatman, Putnam, & Sondak, 1991).

**Emotional intelligence.** Emotional intelligence (EI) was defined as “the ability to accurately appraise and express emotions, in order to guide thinking and actions appropriate to successfully cope with the demands and pressures of the environment” (Harms & Crede, 2010, p. 6). Research exploring EI in the work place examined links to leadership style and consequences, and also to the ability to grasp other people’s perspectives (Alston, Dastoor, & Sosa-Fey, 2010; Bradberry & Greaves, 2009; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2013; Harms & Crede, 2010). Successful leaders found the ability to grasp others’ perspectives fruitful when searching for common ground to resolve conflict. More information is needed to determine if emotionally intelligent HROs, those with a broader set of people-focused skills, are able to move people from dissent to collaboration when negotiating a conflict because they could identify the problem and the emotional or relational factors surrounding the issue (Bradberry & Greaves, 2012; Guilmot & Vas, 2013; Harms & Crede, 2010; McKee, Boyatis, & Johnston, 2008, Wolf, 2011).
**Ethics.** Ethical leadership, as a behavioral domain, was found to reduce the politics in the workplace and had a positive effect on prosocial behavior thus contributing to transforming conflict (Judge & Piccolo, 2010; Kacmar, Andrews, Harris, & Tepper, 2012). For leaders and organizations to survive and thrive, it was essential to navigate hostile political waters. Ethical behavior manifested as making highly principled decisions even if they were unpopular or caused conflict (Howard & Korver, 2008; Parkes & Davis, 2015; White et al., 2007). In this instance, workplace conflict arose in organizations where ethics were at odds with protecting the bottom line or leaders ignored established rules or policies for their own self-interest (Kacmar et al., 2012). More information is needed to understand how leaders use ethical practices to transform conflict to achieve positive, breakthrough results.

**Problem-solving.** A problem represented a gap between what existed and what was desired (Schwarz, 2002). Therefore, the goal of problem-solving would be to close the gap through a systematic approach. In the absence of a systematic approach, premature solutions could be posited before group members thoroughly identified the problem or its causes. Decisions made on inadequate information or faulty logic could derail the group’s efforts to resolve the problem. Schwarz (2002) suggested groups most likely to resolve conflict effectively acknowledged conflict as a normative process. However, the process required people to feel safe expressing thoughts and feelings that could be tested against opposing opinions (Schwarz, 2002). In this scenario, groups understood the dynamics of the conflict, how it arose, what role they played in the conflict, and how to prevent unnecessary conflict (Schwarz, 2002). This systematic
approach to problem-solving shared common characteristics with the works of Kelman (2010) and Kecskes and Zhang (2009).

**Processes.** Schwarz (2002) offered a group effectiveness model that showed the connection between group processes such as problem-solving, decision-making, conflict management, communication, and boundary management, and how they related to the group context and structure. The first step toward transforming the organization, according to Schwarz (2002), was to have processes in place that supported the goals of the organization and its stakeholders. Crucial in this regard was a clearly articulated vision statement developed with input from stakeholders. In times of conflict, it served to reinforce the group’s mission. In addition, processes were put in place that established the norms of behavior and ways to deal with conflict, and the processes considered internal and external factors. HROs interested in aligning stakeholder goals and actions could find the Schwarz (2002) model applicable for decreasing conflict with the increased likelihood of establishing common ground. HROs are in a unique position to promote pro-organizational behavior.

**Human Resource Officers**

Ulrich et al. (2009) claimed, “The bar has been raised on human resources.” In response to an increasingly complex organizational environment, the role of HROs transformed. They serve as employee advocates and human capital developers. In addition, HROs were considered functional experts to ensure alignment of individual and organizational goals. Finally, HROs were leaders, integrating micro and macro changes. “At the micro level they facilitate meeting and planning sessions…At the macro level they facilitate large-scale system change” (Ulrich et al., 2009, p. 106). However, one of
the most difficult roles was serving as a link between management and employees, especially when vision and goals clashed over needs and methods to transform the work and the culture of an organization. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012.)

Conflict or the inability to find common ground to support an organization’s transformational change could negatively impact stakeholder relations, and consequently the organization’s ability to achieve its vision. Common ground was shown to have two integrated components, core common ground that assumes shared knowledge and emergent common ground that was based on interlocutor behaviors (Kecskes & Zhang 2009). Interlocutor behaviors were those characteristics of a conversation both formal and informal, such as vocabulary choice, inflections, and body language (Yoon & Brown, 2014). The literature thoroughly examined the types of conflict HROs would likely encounter, primarily conflict of interest and conflict of value. Conflict of interest was found to be amenable to negotiation and resolution. However, value conflict was more likely to escalate. Value conflict was found to produce less perception of common ground as people moved farther from finding similarities between themselves and their adversary. It was suggested that more empirical research was needed to clarify the processes used to seek, activate, and establish common ground (Kecskes & Zhang, 2009).

Statement of the Research Problem

Lamy (2011) identified globalization as a revolutionary force fueled by the rapid proliferation of new technology. The worldwide movement was the development of changing cultural, political, and economic relations among nations and was accelerating. The benefits of expanding global alliances were growing wealth, rapidly spreading technology, and a higher standard of living for millions of people in developing nations.
However, for many people it meant disrupting traditional ways of life often leading to conflict (Lamy, 2011).

Although business-driven globalization delivered enormous benefits, it was not without conflict (Lamy, 2011). Public and private enterprises must transform their organizations and achieve breakthrough results to survive and thrive in this highly competitive and often conflictual environment. Transforming conflict was defined as envisioning and responding to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduced violence, increased justice in direct interaction and social structures, and responded to real-life problems in human relationships (Lederach, 2003). This era of global expansion into diverse environments requires new skills and visionary leaders across all organizational positions to break through and transform conflict to achieve results.

New Skills for a New Age

Admittedly, the prospect of maintaining a competitive edge in diverse environments is not a new challenge. Researchers looked at companies doing business in diverse and complex environments (Thomas & Woodruff, 1997). However, Lamy (2011) stated, “the real challenge today is to change our way of thinking- not just our systems, institutions and policies” (p. 5). Old ways of thinking and communicating often created impediments to change and spawned conflict.

Lamy (2011) explained that to support real innovative change, efforts needed more cooperation and interaction between people and cultures with greater shared responsibility and interests to generate the most creative solutions and penetrate potential
gridlocks. These interactions and the conflict they often created needed to be addressed by leaders both within and between organizations (Lamy, 2011).

To address conflict, Hooper (2013) indicated the need to adopt a transformative approach to conflict that “moves through predictable phases, slowly transforming interpersonal relationships, social organizations, and, ultimately society itself” (p. 1). The value in this comprehensive approach was the potential to make purposeful, sustainable, and systemic changes in the way organizations functioned for the greater good.

To foster systemic change, Anderson & Ackerman-Anderson (2010) and Lamy (2012) agreed that as organizations become more complex, today’s marketplace demanded conscious change leadership to successfully guide transformational change. To meet marketplace demands, these leaders must possess a greater awareness of change. Anderson & Ackerman-Anderson (2010) described it as knowledge and use of a multidimensional approach to conscious change leadership that looked at both internal and external dynamics, and the interaction between them in an organization.

This approach was solution oriented, involved possibility thinking, and promoted a cooperative, rather than adversarial, mindset to work through conflict. Conflict in organizations, according to Anderson and Ackerman-Anderson (2010), was the result of leadership neglect to consciously “design and implement a change process that considers all of the internal and external dynamics at the individual, relationship, team, and organizational levels” (p. 4). Internal and external dynamics were exacerbated during massive change and contributed to the potential for major conflict.

Melchin and Picard (2008) suggested that transforming conflict involved insight, discovery, and the shift in feelings as people learned more about themselves and others.
Successful leaders guided teams and inspired individuals, understood the organization’s issues and opportunities, and negotiated with stakeholders to make trade-offs and provide people with differences a way to work together. This leadership orientation was necessary to help all parties find a solution that moved from narrow-minded, self-interest to shared interests in which the dignity and worth of all members was respected as they negotiated conflicts to find the best solution for the organization (Kouzakova et al., 2012; Shanker & Sayeed, 2012).

Anderson and Ackerman-Anderson (2010), Lamy (2011), and Kouzakova et al. (2012) pointed to the importance of leadership in transforming conflict and finding common ground. More information is needed about what successful leaders do to transform conflict and find common ground to achieve the breakthrough results that give them the competitive edge.

**The Role of Human Resource Officers in Organizational Conflict**

**The new demands on human resources.** The role of HROs changed in response to the demands of business to transform the way they work (Ulrich et al., 2009). These managers often functioned as a bridge between CEOs and employees; however, the role of the HRO expanded into four defined roles: employee champion, administrative expert, change agent, and strategic planner. As such, they took responsibility for ensuring that leader behaviors throughout the organization matched the organization’s strategy (Ulrich et al., 2009). For example, in K-12 education this would mean the board and leadership teams predetermined and communicated their plan in a manner that set the standards for the teams (Dannis & Woliver, 2016).
In the K-12 education setting, HROs operating under the direction of the superintendent played a key role in the organization’s culture, representing their district as a liaison to local, county, and state education departments. Therefore, HROs were often called upon to offer advice on policy-level positions that affected others’ lives. For example, HROs administer dismissal, suspension, resignation, and retirement procedures. In the process of administering these policies and procedures, conflict could arise. Proactive preparation to deal with labor issues required HROs to keep abreast of the materials, research, and studies related to collective bargaining. Because they typically dealt with labor negotiations, grievances, employee discipline, dismissal, and other forms of conflict situations, they needed advanced skills in transforming negative, damaging conflict to a more positive outcome. Although there were studies about negotiation strategies, bargaining approaches, conflict management techniques, and mediation, more research was needed to explore the phenomenon of HROs to transform conflict to reach common ground (Alagaraja, 2013; Kotlyar et al., 2011; Pereira & Gomes, 2012). The current study attempted to uncover the skill set needed to transform conflict and achieve breakthrough results.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover and describe how successful HROs established common ground and produced breakthrough results by utilizing the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors.

**Research Questions**

Research questions in quantitative or qualitative studies narrow the purpose statement to specific questions that researchers seek to answer. Researchers typically
state multiple research questions so that they can fully explore a topic. This study was
guided by one central research question and six sub-questions, one for each of the
domains.

Central Question

The central research question for the study was: What are the lived experiences of
successful HROs in establishing common ground and producing breakthrough results by
engaging in elements of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors?

Sub Questions

The sub-questions for the study were:

• Collaboration - How do successful HROs use collaboration to establish
  common ground and produce breakthrough results?

• Communication - How do successful HROs use communication to establish
  common ground and produce breakthrough results?

• Emotional Intelligence - What aspects of EI do successful HROs use to
  establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

• Ethics - How do successful HROs use ethics to establish common ground and
  produce breakthrough results?

• Problem-Solving - How do successful HROs use problem-solving strategies to
  establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

• Processes - What processes do successful HROs use to establish common
  ground and produce breakthrough results?
Significance of the Problem

The pace of change accelerated globally when it came to conflict despite efforts to manage or resolve it. Legislators, school boards, city councils, business leaders, and non-profits all endured the pain of gridlock in making meaningful decisions in times of conflict. Finding common ground could unlock the gridlock. The insights and strategies revealed by this research could assist leaders in all of these organizations with this prevailing problem.

Recently, the role of the HRO grew from an administrative position to a major executive role that could be instrumental in shaping organizational outcomes (Kates & Kesler, 2010; Klein et al., 2011; Long, Ismail, & Amin, 2013; Pereira & Gomes, 2012; Pottruck, 2015; Ulrich et al., 2009). HROs could use the results of this study to expand their own toolkits and strategically guide other leaders. This would assist them as they attempted to exert influence in delivering the organization’s vision.

The findings could also be used by Boards, CEOs, or other executives to develop training programs for management teams and labor leaders. Professional associations for HROs could also find these results useful in developing their certificate programs.

Definitions

The following terms were collaboratively defined by the team of 10 peer researchers involved in studying this topic from the vantage point of multiple leadership positions. These definitions explained the terms as used in these related studies.

Theoretical Definitions

Common ground. An interplay of intentions of people from different sociocultural backgrounds, differences, and cultures while finding a foundation of

Conflict transformation. To “envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increases justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships” (Lederach, 2003, p. 14).

Process. A method that includes a set of steps and activities that group members follow to perform tasks such as strategic planning or conflict resolution. The three levels of process included process design, process methods, and process tools. Any internal, external, or systemic pattern of behavior organized in a step-by-step order or action to achieve a goal, function, or product (Hamme, 2015; Schwarz, 2002).

Operational Definitions

Collaboration. The ability to involve others, in a mutually beneficial and accountable manner, which allows for achievement or acceptance of agreed upon goals (Hansen, 2013).

Common ground. When all parties involved aspire to, and are willing to work toward, a new vision of the future together, one that meets everyone’s deep-seated concerns and values (Search for Common Ground, n.d.).

Communication. The transferring of meaning from sender to receiver, while overcoming noise and filters, so that the intended meaning is received by the intended recipient (Daft, 2012; Hellriegel & Slocum Jr., 2004; Maxwell, 2010; Schermerhorn, Osborn & Hunt, 2008; Stuart, 2012; Wyatt, 2014).
Conflict. Any cognitive (perceptual), emotional (feeling), and behavioral (action) dimension that differs from another cognitive (perceptual), emotional (feeling), and/or behavioral (action) dimension. This difference can be individual or collective (Kouzakova et al., 2012; Mayer, 2012).

Emotional intelligence. The self-awareness of one’s own emotions and motivations, and the ability to understand the emotions of others in social settings, which allows for management of behavior and relationships (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009; Hellriegel & Slocum Jr., 2004).

Ethics. Human beings making choices and behaving in a morally responsible way, given the values and morals of the culture (Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 2005).

Exemplar. Someone set apart from peers in a superior manner, suitable for use as an example to model behavior, principles, or intentions (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014).

Problem-solving. The act of choosing and implementing a solution to an identified problem or situation (Harvey, Bearley, & Corkrum, 1997).

Process. Any internal, external, or systemic pattern of behavior organized in a step-by-step order or action to achieve a goal, function, or end product.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to 15 HROs in California unified school districts with enrollments of 5,000 to 25,000 students.

Organization of the Study

This study is presented in five comprehensive chapters. Chapter I provided background and a brief overview of the research. The remainder of the study is organized
into four chapters, references, and appendices. Chapter II is a thorough review of what is known about conflict sources and conflict transformational behaviors, socio-cognitive approaches to conflict transformation, and the role of human resource professionals. Chapter III explains the phenomenological research design and methodology used in the study, including population, sample, and data gathering procedures, as well procedures used to analyze and safeguard the integrity of the study data. Chapter IV presents the data analysis and provides a discussion of the study findings. Chapter V is organized as a summary, findings, conclusions, and recommendations for further research and actions.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature review was conducted to provide historical background and a theoretical framework for exploring behaviors exhibited by exemplary California public school Human Resource Officers (HROs) with exceptional skills in finding common ground and transforming conflict. The review was organized into four parts. Part I includes the theoretical background of conflict as it related to organizational management. Part II defines common ground and discusses its importance in conflict resolution. Part III includes a review of the six domains of conflict transformational behaviors: collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, ethics, problem-solving, and processes. Each of the domains were reviewed individually and those reported in conjunction with another domain were acknowledged. Part IV includes roles of HROs and more specifically interaction between HROs and stakeholders in an attempt to uncover those behaviors likely to be instrumental in transforming the nature of conflict.

Theoretical Background

Conflict, and its consequences, appear in life daily, whether internationally as viewed on television, in communities, in the workplaces, or within the homes. Conflict was defined as, “an expressed struggle between two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals” (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001, p. 41). For HROs this meant mastering the art of supporting employees as well as the organization’s needs, as a strategic partner, change agent, and administrative expert (Ulrich et al., 2009). Although conflict theory was often
used to explain social change at the macro level, it also proved useful at the micro level with groups such as businesses, schools, and labor unions.

According to Deutsch, Coleman, and Marcus (2012), the field of conflict resolution emerged after WW II. Following social psychology theoretical ideas, an understanding of conflict processes and ways to manage conflict began to emerge. Research in the area of conflict gained momentum as people sought to understand and manage conflict at all contextual levels: interpersonal, intergroup, organizational, and international. In an attempt to determine the conceptual relationship between communication and conflict, an emphasis emerged on constructive conflict management from a communications perspective. This perspective examined communication, both verbal and nonverbal, as the medium to convey messages that expressed or managed conflict (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2006). Oetzel and Ting-Toomey (2006) explained that 1970s research on communication and conflict saw a prolific increase of studies about interpersonal communication within families and small group interactions, organizational conflict styles, and intercultural conflict, thus creating a conceptual and theoretical database that shaped the direction of future research. Drawing upon a socio-cognitive approach that provided the framework to understand the dynamic processes involved in conflict, some researchers focused on the interpersonal communications between speaker and listener. This approach elicited questions concerning contextual features that held the potential to create conflict, such as those arising from miscommunication, language, or cultural barriers related to the speaker’s intent. Further, it was noted that when disagreements were based on factors including values, history, culture, or perceptions, conflict was likely to surface (Henning & Wan-Ching, 2012; Kouzakova et al., 2011;
Influenced by common assumptions about the nature of conflict, research began to cluster under three categories: the subjective/objective basis, the normalcy of conflict, and the functional versus dysfunctional nature of conflict. In these instances, conflict was viewed as a social construct based on the individual’s perceptions or as a natural part of everyday life that could have positive or negative outcomes influenced by how it was handled (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2006).

By the 1980s, the dominant theory was the systems-interaction approach that linked conflict to growth and change (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2006). A pragmatic transactional model of conflict communication examined the relationship between adversaries where knowledge was co-constructed during the process of inquiry. As such, Mortensen (as cited by Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2006) investigated a transactional approach to conflict focused on three aspects, affect, intensity, and orientation, which were dependent on the perspective of the participants. A transactional approach to conflict examined the role affect played in conflict communication.

In a study looking at dyads, Sereno and Mortensen (as cited in Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2006) linked affective conflict to the ego involvement of the individuals with higher ego involvement less likely to reach agreement. Conflict intensity was another area of interest that made the distinction between conflict types from a misunderstanding or disagreement to outright hostility. Conflict communication in these exchanges were found to differ across processes, relationships, interventions, and outcomes (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey 2006). Orientation was also an aspect originally identified as conflict communication was receiver oriented; however, later investigations called into question
both subjective and objective receiver-oriented views of conflict communication in favor of new lines of inquiry (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey 2006).

The late 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of interdependence as a construct due to the work of Oetzel and Ting-Toomey (2001). Interdependence meant the individual parties needed one another to achieve their goals (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2006). However, interdependent parties faced difficulty reconciling their goals, especially when resources were limited and interference from others was perceived as an obstacle to achievement of those goals (Wilmot & Hocker, 2011).

Conflict theorists argued that conflict was a necessary impetus for change, acting as a release mechanism to express problems. As researchers began to look at functional versus dysfunctional conflict exchanges, support for collaboration and consensus emerged as a means of ameliorating conflict and its potential negative consequences. Collaboration, for the purpose of this research, was viewed as “the ability to involve others, in a mutually beneficial and accountable manner, which allows for achievement or acceptance of agreed upon goals” (Hansen, 2009, p. 147). In this manner, supporting a theory of gradual commonality, consensus was collaboratively co-created by building on stakeholders’ ideas during interactions (Amason, 1996; Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011; Haar Aarts & Verhoeven, 2014; Hansen, 2009; Ibarra & Hansen, 2013; Kelman, 2010).

Reconciling previous positions, current researchers found conflict and collaboration were not mutually exclusive. The term conflict carried negative connotation, yet according to Wilmot and Hocker (2001), if conflict was managed constructively, it had the potential for positive outcomes. Whereas “a collaborative leadership style, redefining success, involving others, and being accountable” (Hansen,
constructively managed conflict, a paradox was found to exist. On the one hand, conflict positively contributed to opportunities for personal growth, relational development, improved decision-making, and addressed problems (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001). On the other hand, conflict impaired the organization’s functioning, decreasing the likelihood decisions would be implemented (Amason, 1996; Wilmot & Hocker, 2001).

As earlier studies unearthed the counterintuitive notion that conflict could be functional and productive, researchers called into question the quest to simply find resolution strategies. If Amason (1996) was correct, rather than simply resolve conflict, it was of the utmost importance to HROs to investigate ways to ensure the implementation of organizational processes, decisions, and initiatives that resulted from genuine collaboration. Hence, Ulrich et al. (2009) proposed a synthesis of four HR practices that he termed the *flow of people, flow of performance management, flow of information, and flow of work* that operated in conjunction with one another and offered a transformative management approach. In support, researchers examined transformational approaches to conflict resolution (Hooper, 2013; Kecskes & Zhang, 2009).

**Conflict Transformation**

The purpose of conflict transformation was to reduce violence, increase justice, and respond to real-world social problems (Lederach, 2003). Conflict transformation referred to the process of constructive change that involved comprehensive, pro-active, long term, social justice-related measures and actions that deal with the social and political causes of conflict to promote change (Lederach, 2003).

The difference between conflict management and conflict transformation was more than semantics. The commitment in conflict transformation was to the process of
finding common ground, not advancing the position of one stakeholder over another (Fisher, 2011; Kouzakova et al., 2012). Conflict transformation sought to find agreement between parties, and in the process, shift the environment in which the conflict took place (Fisher, 2011). Fisher (2011) claimed that whereas,

Excellent work is already being done to help resolve conflict through mediation, negotiation, promoting dialogue, reaching agreements, and developing a research base around these areas, we are less keen to engage in, and less good at working on the transformation of these conflicts, working at a deeper level for significant change in attitudes, beliefs, values, relationships, culture and structure. (p. 11)

This lack of engagement was particularly true when an imbalance of power was present, despite the need to address conflict transformation (Fisher, 2011). Consequently, Fisher (2011) posed, “have we gone too quickly from an academic theory of conflict transformation to a practical, strategic framework without enough attention being paid to how processes can be led or sustained?” (p. 11). The current investigation on the dynamic processes used by HROs as they led their organizations through conflict attempted to shed light on Fisher’s query. HROs are in an integral position among various stakeholders to mobilize organizational alignment and facilitate change initiatives (Alagaraja, 2013; Long et al., 2013; Pereira & Gomes, 2012; Ulrich et al., 2009). In fact, Ebeling (as cited by Harvard Business Review, 2014) stated, “It is almost impossible to achieve sustainable success without an outstanding CHRO [Chief Human Resource Officer]” (p. 32).
Facilitated Conflict Transformation

To move organizations forward, Kelman (2010) suggested it was necessary to investigate micro-processes and macro-processes. Kelman (2010) indicated change in the conflicted system at large (macro-processes) was produced in response to changes in individuals (micro-processes). This illustrated the nature of conflict and the interactions of the parties embroiled in the conflict as a complex phenomenon with the potential to create gridlock within organizations. In intractable conflict situations such as value, history, and culture conflicts, Kelman (2014) suggested the use of facilitated, interactive problem-solving workshops, a role the HRO could fulfill.

The goal of the workshop, according to Kelman (2014), was to redefine and transform the relationship between adversaries through the use of a third-party facilitator. Kelman (2014) made the point that adversaries, as representatives of the macro conflict, provided the opportunity to learn about the group’s collective needs and fears. Jacobsen (1999) noted fear was the primary issue found to inhibit people from resolving conflict and working toward a common goal. The individual’s fears (micro-processes) and the impact they on the organization’s change efforts (macro-processes) was linked to feelings of loss, with people fearful of losing power and influence, losing autonomy, or feeling exploited, any of which could lead to resistance and conflict (Jacobsen, 1999). When organizations failed to take stakeholder’s fears into consideration, change efforts were unlikely to succeed (Anderson & Ackerman-Anderson, 2010).

HROs were touted by the industry, as “having moved away from a supportive, administrative function to becoming game changers” as the role gained importance in the industry (Filler, 2009, p. 30). HRO could be instrumental in transforming conflict
because of their knowledge that conflict arose from identifiable sources and because people were amenable to third-party intervention efforts to bring the conflict into the open (Bell & Hart, 2002; Kelman 2014).

Conflict theory and practices thought to mitigate conflict continued to impel researchers as interdependencies grew and conflict worldwide escalated. Research on conflict transformation, how parties found agreement, and how the process shifted the environment where conflict occurred sparked the recent interest in finding common ground (Shoemaker, Krupp & Howland, 2013; Thomas & Beckel, 2007).

**Common Ground**

According to Thomas and Beckel (2007), the term common ground was rarely heard prior to the 2006 U.S. presidential election when voters decried a government where partisan politics was more of an issue than the issues themselves, and little of consequence could be achieved. In the aftermath, paying heed to a dissatisfied electorate, common ground became the mantra of those engaging in political debates. Prior to this, Ryn (2003) offered the following insight, “there is an actual and potential for a shared, unifying humanity that affirms the value of diversity,” (p. 1), claiming that common ground was discovered through diversity not in spite of it. No amount of exposure living in and among diversity was sufficient. Rather, Ryn (2003) believed in a philosophical orientation of universality that espoused the importance of cultivating a common humanity while preserving what was distinctive to particular peoples, cultures, or individuals. However, to do so would require an emphasis on the moral and cultural dimensions that constituted a bond of shared humanity, called the preconditions of peace. Ryn (2003) claimed “a body of evidence exists to support persistent moral and cultural
patterns that suggest a unity of human experience” (p. 6). For example, historically across time and cultures, people of the world attempted to promote characteristics deemed noble while attempting to constrain those viewed as less than admirable to foster social cohesion. The challenge was to keep at bay the human propensity to dominate and exploit others, and to foster respect for the legitimate claims and attainments of others (Ryn, 2003).

Finding common ground was a conscientious approach that examined the interplay of intentions of people from different sociocultural backgrounds, fostering cooperation to work through conflict by generating solutions that valued differences and appealed to our commonalities (Horowitz, 2007; Jacobsen, 1999; Kecskes & Zhang, 2009; Ryn, 2003). Interest in how people established common ground was viewed through the framework of systems thinking. Whereas the socio-cognitive approach to activating, seeking, and creating common ground focused on the relationship between speaker and listener, systems thinking reflected the interaction of the system members and context with the expectation that outcomes were a product of complex interactions rather than intrinsic to the individuals (Boardman & Sauser, 2008; Dettmer, 2007; Henning & Wan-Ching, 2012; Kecskes & Zhang, 2009; Senge, 1990).

Kecskes and Zhang (2009) found common ground to be an integration of both cognitive and pragmatic components they termed core common ground and emergent common ground. They defined core common ground as shared knowledge and emergent common ground as that based on speaker and listener behaviors. They thought common ground was established through the communicative process. Interpersonal communication raised questions concerning contextual features such as learning and
knowledge exchange. In this exchange, when disagreements were based on values, history, culture, perceptions, and to a lesser extent competing interests or agendas, conflict arose when there was an inability to dynamically co-construct common ground (Dettmer, 2007; Henning & Wan-Ching, 2012; Kouzakova et al., 2011; Senge, 1990).

Whereas linguistic approaches were found to converge on the notion that language was a means of coordinating and integrating activity, differences were noted over the status of language and common ground (Jones, 2015). Kecskes and Zhang (2009) called for more empirical research to clarify the processes used to seek, activate, and establish common ground, whereas Cowley and Harvey (2015) believed language sciences should abandon the concept. In this context, how communication and conflict were perceived and negotiated was thought to influence successful resolution, more in keeping with compromise than common ground. Common ground thinking went deeper; it offered a way for people with differences to work together by facing issues head on, inviting all stakeholders to be represented, and deriving solutions that reflect shared understanding and interests (White et al., 2007). Common ground advocates claimed it worked not because people reached a compromise or agreement, but because they learned how to work together despite their differences (Jacobsen, 1999; Ryn, 2003).

To consider and value diverse perspectives, people must effectively bridge the chasm from breakdown to breakthrough. To accomplish this, Thomas and Beckel (2007) proposed five common ground governing principles:

- There needed to be agreement that a problem existed and goal(s) needed to be reached to alleviate the problem
- The problem contained elements of historic custom to both parties
• Consensus was more likely if fresh ideas were introduced to address the problem

• Common ground worked if the overarching authority (e.g., mediator) acknowledged and protected the ideals of both parties

• Do not attempt to dispute the issues if the previous four principles did not or could not apply

Thomas and Beckel (2007) proposed these principles in response to growing concerns with the way partisan politics negatively impacted the U.S. However, these principles held merit in other conflict contexts as well. For example, public education organizations facing conflict first identified that a problem existed and what outcomes were essential to alleviate the problem. Once the problem was identified, potential solutions to the problem were constructively co-created to contain elements essential to all parties.

If the success of common ground depended on those in leadership positions to create the conditions necessary to establish common ground, they needed the skills and resources to ensure mutual respect for the ideals of all stakeholders. Empirical evidence suggested power was often negatively associate with politics (White et al., 2007). Higher levels of perceived organizational politics were linked to lower morale and reduced commitment (Pfeffer, 2010). HROs, as they navigated between CEOs and various stakeholder groups, could be concerned with how they could lessen the impact of power differentials among competing stakeholder voices. In this light, the behavior of HROs could prove instrumental in meeting those governing principles as they engaged various stakeholder groups.
As previously noted, common ground research was anchored in the early negotiation literature as a problem-solving strategy that supported compromise. Many successful practices were garnered thanks to early research on mediation, negotiation, and conflict management, yet conflict still persisted. Conflict remained a dynamic process, consequently the literature called into question the behaviors of the parties involved.

As Fisher (2011) promulgated, transforming conflict and those leadership behaviors that sustained it became a topic deserving close examination. A constellation of behaviors, including collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, ethics, problem-solving, and processes, appeared to address conflict sources such as style, perceptions, goals, pressures, policies, values, roles, position, and resources (Bell & Hart, 2002; Godse & Thingujam, 2010; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; VanSant, 2006). These behavioral domains were reviewed in the literature. If conflict itself was treated as the problem adversaries shared, studying the behaviors of leaders could offer insights on how to unearth the causes of the conflict. Leadership behaviors may offer insight into how to collaboratively identify the source of the conflict and how to potentially reach a mutually respected solution (Kelman, 2014).

**Six Domains of Conflict Transformational Behaviors**

**Collaboration**

Harvey and Drolet (2004) forecasted a turbulent future. To meet the increasingly complex demands placed on organizations, HROs shifted from the traditional administrative function to a collaboration role (Ulrich et al., 2009). Hansen (2009) defined collaboration as the ability to involve others, in a mutually beneficial and
accountable manner, which allows for achievement or acceptance of agreed upon goals. This prompted experts in the field to suggest differentiation between collaboration, coordination, and cooperation (Bedwell, Wildman, Diaz-Granados, Salazar, Kramer, & Salas, 2012; O’Leary & Nidhi, 2012). For example, departments could coordinate and cooperate both inter- and intra-departmentally without truly engaging in collaborative enterprises that promoted acceptance of agreed upon goals. As previously mentioned, this could result in lack of buy-in and implementation.

The successful leader created a climate of collaboration. A collaborative organizational climate reflected beliefs held by its members that included goals and supporting processes, practices, policies, procedures, routines, and rewards (Pereira & Gomes, 2012). In this environment, collaboration, unlike compromise, generated novel or innovative solutions that satisfied all parties (Anderson, 2014). The expectation was that collaboration promoted a win-win situation preferable to conflict (Anderson, 2014). Yet, according to Hansen (2009), “collaboration rarely occurs naturally, and bad collaboration is worse than no collaboration” (p. 230). Common barriers to effective collaboration were stakeholder resistance, lack of information sharing, and complicated knowledge transfers. In these instances, resistant stakeholders withheld important information or distorted complicated information. Hansen (2009) believed barriers could be overcome with a disciplined approach to collaboration.

To develop a sense of organizational community, a motive must be provided for people to work together. Therefore, collaboration should be treated as a dynamic or emergent process capable of producing something superior to that which the individual could produce alone. This presented challenges when considering approaches to
stakeholder involvement that created collaborative knowledge and addressed potential conflict (Arenas, Sanchez, & Murphy, 2013; Fetterman, Rodriguez-Campos, Wanderman, & O’Sullivan, 2014; Jakubik, 2008; McKersie & Walton, 2015; O’Leary & Nidhi, 2012). As members of the organizational community, school district HROs could find themselves working interdependently with other managers or with a diverse network of groups each with its own way of operating. To grow and meet the challenges of their profession, capable HRO must transcend their prescribed role acting in favor of the organization while intertwining the interests of various stakeholder groups (Guilmot & Vas, 2013; O’Leary & Nidhi, 2012).

Creating community. Organizations that built their teams and people increased the likelihood they would maintain a competitive edge. The literature on creating community promoted leadership that built stakeholder involvement both internally (within the district) and externally (the wider community at larger) to provide such an edge (Ahillen, 2010). In a qualitative study, Ahillen (2010) noted significant emergent themes about the behaviors of superintendents linked to successful collaboration. In a framework to support superintendents building community, Ahillen (2010) acknowledged,

To do this work, superintendents must be “visible,” must “communicate” with all stakeholders, must be “collaborative,” allowing opportunities for dialogue, must invite others to have a voice in decision-making, and must “understand the change process” as they guide the district through cultural change. (p. 178)
In the current study, HRO served as assistant superintendents. Therefore, Ahillen’s (2010) results proved useful for the current study’s investigation of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors.

**Collaboration and conflict.** In an ideal collaborative work environment, when conflict arose it was treated as natural and managed accordingly. These organizations did not suppress conflict, where if left unchecked it festered, but rather brought it out into the open (Weiss, 2011). For example, research showed relationship conflict emerged when task conflict persisted unfettered (Pluut & Curseu, 2012). When conflict was addressed rather than hidden, open dialogue contributed to the organization by dealing with it appropriately (Anderson, 2014). However, to participate in open dialogue, participants needed to think and interact in a nonthreatening environment.

Trust was found to be a significant factor impacting collaborative dialogue. Intragroup trust was one factor found to increase the likelihood that task conflict would not devolve into relationship conflict (Curseu, Boros, & Oerlemans, 2012; Pluut & Curseu, 2012). This had major implications for HROs seeking to identify the problem and dialogue with stakeholders who had little or no understanding about the conflict. Support existed for the notion that HROs could moderate dysfunctional conflict into functional conflict (Mukhtar, Siengthai, & Ramzan, 2011). Dialogue provided the opportunity for stakeholders to examine different perspectives, identify commonalities, and create a shared body of knowledge that could be modeled by HROs (Weiss, 2011). Communication, thought to be the cornerstone of successful collaboration, could hold a key to establishing common ground and transforming conflict. Further support linking collaboration and communication found strong positive correlations between the
perceived success of collaborative efforts when examining two of the current study’s variables, *communication* and *process* (Marek, Brock, & Savia, 2014).

**Communication**

Communication and its role in conflict appeared in the literature more than 30 years ago and continues to be a critical area of investigation. (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2006). Communication was defined as the transferring of meaning from sender to receiver, while overcoming noise and filters, so that the intended meaning is received by the intended recipient. This led researchers to examine communication as an interaction or process, an interpretation of meaning, and as a dialectical relationship influenced by perceptions (Daft, 2012; Hellriegel & Slocum Jr., 2004; Maxwell, 2010; Pluut & Curseu, 2012; Schermerhorn et al., 2008; Stuart, 2012; Weingart, Behfar, Bendersky, Todorova, & Jehn, 2015; Wyatt, 2014). As such, early investigations treated communication as a structural variable, a process, and an interaction leading to the investigation of macro and micro processes (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2006). Later, a body of research evolved examining communication and conflict as dialectics and as specific context domains. Current contributions were situated in the context of labor management disputes and organizational conflict, both areas of interest to HROs.

HROs were in an ideal position to assist with information flow internally as well as externally (Ulrich et al., 2009). Transforming communication practices was essential to lead transformational change. A common mistake that led to conflict and caused change initiatives to fail was “not adequately engaging and communicating to stakeholders, especially early in the change process, relying too heavily on one-way top-down communication, [and] engaging stakeholders only after the design is complete”
(Anderson & Ackerman-Anderson, 2010, p. 2). Therefore, leadership communication competencies in conflict situation were an area of concern.

Oetzel and Ting-Toomey (2006) explained the following ideas, which appeared to be central in defining emotion:

(a) Emotions occur in reaction to stimuli that threaten to interrupt, impede, or enhance one’s goals; (b) affect is the most central component of emotional experience; (c) emotional reactions are usually accompanied by physiological changes; (d) cognition frames and helps people interpret emotional reactions; and (e) specific behavioral profiles or action tendencies are associated with various emotions. (p. 70)

Anderson and Ackerman-Anderson (2010) explained that “emotional transitions are natural, predictable, and manageable, and drops in performance are normal during these transitions” (p. 159). HROs faced with challenges to organizational change must be equipped to communicate effectively when dealing with stakeholder’s emotional reactions to the change.

Researchers agreed that communication could directly influence outcomes, mediate or moderate the effects of other variables, and shape the outcomes through structuring the conflict and determining the tactics negotiators used. For example, investigators found that when disputants shared concerns about underlying needs and priorities, they enhanced their chances of achieving joint gains thus establishing common ground (Olekalns & Weingart, 2000). Workplace change management was shown to be more successful when stakeholders communicated effectively (Campbell, Carmichael, & Naidoo, 2015).
One avenue of investigation that showed promise for transforming conflict and establishing common ground through effective communication was Kecskes and Zhang’s (2009) work on emergent and core common ground. Core common ground was the “macro socio-cultural information of a community that is accessible to all individuals in that community” (p. 349). In other words, that which could be considered common knowledge in a given community and was subject to change over time. Emergent common ground, on the other hand, was contingent upon situational contexts that varied based on interlocutor relationships and individual personal experiences.

Emergent common ground was subjective to the individuals. It was here that Kecskes and Zhang’s (2009) work examining the interplay of intention and attention to construct common ground had the potential to benefit HROs. Kecskes and Zhang (2009) explained one way for parties to construct common ground was to seek information that facilitated communication and built mutual knowledge. In that respect, HROs were in a position to support stakeholder knowledge of interdependencies through what Kelman (2010) described initially as controlled communication. Although this method brought representatives of adversarial groups together in a confidential and unofficial setting under the guidance of a third party for the purpose of interactive problem solving, it held application for a variety of conflict situations. Communication was essential in forming issues, framing perceptions, and engaging in the conflict.

**Emotional Intelligence**

Emotional intelligence (EI) was defined in a variety of ways. For the purpose of this study, EI was viewed as the self-awareness of one’s own emotions and motivations, and the ability to understand the emotions of others in social settings, which allowed for
management of behavior and relationships (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009; Hellriegel & Slocum, 2004). The following elements were considered the fundamental components of EI: self-awareness, interpersonal sensitivity, motivation, emotional resilience, and conscientiousness. Since its inception with the pioneering work of Goleman (1995), EI was linked to positive outcomes in leadership behaviors and considered the strongest predictor of performance in the workplace, driving leadership and personal excellence (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009).

Research exploring EI in the workplace examined its links to leadership behaviors and organizational outcomes. In an investigation of HRO’s EI and leadership, higher levels of EI played a significant role in effective leadership (Alston et al., 2010). However, Harms and Crede (2010) cautioned EI assessment devices should be used to “encourage self-awareness and self-reflection in managers until better EI measures can be developed and validated [rather than] for management screening purposes” (p. 13). In turn, effective leadership showed evidence of higher team commitment to decisions and increased the likelihood those decisions would be effectively implemented (Pereira & Gomes, 2012). A high level of commonality was also found between EI, success, and transformational leadership (Alston et al., 2010; Bradberry & Greaves, 2012; Harms & Crede, 2010; Kotlyar et al., 2011).

Transformational leaders “change their followers’ attitudes, beliefs, and values to align them with the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the organization” (Alston et al., 2010, p. 1). However, to do so they first change themselves while bolstering their followers’ accomplishments and successes (Alston et al., 2010). This description of transformational leaders bodes well for HROs with their role is to align organizational goals while
maintaining their position as an employee advocate (Ulrich et al., 2009). HROs possessing the ability to accurately appraise and express emotions, and who used this information to guide their actions, were sought after by organizations (Harms & Crede, 2010).

Alston et al. (2010) called for future research that qualitatively investigated the concept of EI, particularly as it pertained to leadership in a variety of fields, including individual factors of EI with the greatest impact on leadership effectiveness. Successful leaders could find the ability to grasp others’ perspective fruitful when searching for common ground to resolve conflict.

**Ethics**

Leaders behaving unethically made the news, such as those in the banking industry responsible for the housing market crash due to subprime loans. They shook the faith in public institutions. School districts are public institutions people expect to operate on ethical principles beyond reproach. The actions of their leaders should withstand public scrutiny especially, when facing controversy (White et al., 2007). Yet, everyday people made decisions based on values that even within themselves could be conflicting, confusing, or ambiguous (White et al., 2007). Ethics was defined as human beings making choices and conducting behavior in a morally responsible way, given the values and morals of the culture (Strike et al., 2005). Ethics in organizational studies focused on the behaviors of leaders, examining factors such as values and personality as well as the impact of behavior on subordinates.

HROs are school district employees responsible for aligning organizational mission, vision, and goals with those of stakeholders. They likely find themselves facing
ethical dilemmas with political consequences (White et al., 2007) as they walk the line between upper management and stakeholder groups. In fact, White et al. (2007) stated, “These are the dreaded quagmires that often drive good people away from leadership roles.” (p. 89). On a positive note, HROs exhibited ethical leadership behaviors that reduced politics in the workplace and increased prosocial behavior in their organizations (Kacmar et al., 2012; Judge & Piccolo, 2010). Specifically, ethical leadership was associated with conscientiousness, emotional stability, agreeableness, power-sharing, and role clarification (Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011).

Ethically transforming conflict, rather than just resolving it, required a shift in thinking that led to genuine changes in practices (Anderson & Ackerman-Anderson, 2010, Lamy, 2011; Ulrich et al., 2009). Never before was this more evident than the recent addition of the term triple bottom line to the lexicon. First coined in 1997 by John Elkington, the triple bottom line referred to a three-part accountability system that included social and ecological performance indicators as well as financial, which was a paradigm shift from a focus solely on financial gains to considering the organization’s impact on society as a whole (Holliday, Schmidheiny, & Watts, n.d.). Extending the research on values-based organizations as contributing members of the community, a recent area of investigation referred to the triple bottom line (Dolan & Altman, 2012; Ulrich et al., 2009). These organizations now hold themselves accountable for “the extent to which they meet high social responsibility standards…woven around shared beliefs, values, and commitment to the community in which [they] operate” (Ulrich et al., 2009, p. 47). Dolan and Altman (2012) asserted that a value-based management approach required leadership willing to adopt a coaching role.
Similarly, in an effort to address negative aspects of top-down leadership, such as stakeholder resistance, Kee and Newcomer (2008) posited a “change-centric” model of leadership they termed transformational stewardship. Kee and Newcomer (2008) reported the transformational stewardship model offered a vision of leadership “that calls for leaders to balance the imperatives for change with important organizational and stakeholder values, while ensuring that the changes made are in the general public interest” (p. 5). Therefore, leaders were charged with managing core value interpretation and their basis for action on a personal as well as organizational level to build a culture that aligned values, mission, and vision (Dolan & Altman, 2012). The role of an HRO in a values-based model was to align organizational goals and values with those of stakeholders. Exemplary leaders must be capable of making highly principled decisions even if they were unpopular or caused conflict (Howard, & Korver, 2008, White et al., 2007).

Leaders monitored three types of organizational values, all of which could present obstacles as well as opportunities (Dolan & Altman, 2012). Economic-pragmatic values related to efficiency, performance, and discipline. HRO could monitoring this through activities such as planning, quality assurance, and accounting, to name a few. Ethical-social values were those beliefs as to how people and the organization should conduct themselves (Dolan & Altman, 2012). HROs would concern themselves with values such as integrity, respect, and loyalty through the lens of people practices such as how people move in, up, through, or out of the organization (Ulrich et al., 2009). Emotional-development values, according to Dolan and Altman (2012), created the impetus for
action. The values linked to emotional-development promoted intrinsic motivation, optimism, autonomy, and happiness.

To solidify a competitive edge and ensure the survival of the organization, Dolan and Altman (2012) believed leaders could not ignore the importance of values, noting, “The challenge of leaders is to retain effective mechanisms for monitoring results while stimulating the potential of each and every organizational member” (p. 2). Therefore, leaders involved in their organizations processes could solidify their organization’s edge.

**Problem-Solving**

Problem-solving was defined as the act of choosing and implementing a solution to an identified problem or situation (Harvey et al., 1997). HROs could support organization leaders promoting a systematic approach to problem-solving. One way HROs led the change was by modeling positive problem-solving behaviors so they became ingrained in the organizational culture (White et al., 2007). HROs were positioned closer to strategy development and understood how to “align the components of the organization to execute strategy and remove barriers so that members of the organization can make the right decisions and do their best work” (Kates & Kesler, 2010, p. 14).

Kates and Kesler (2010) proposed five elements for designing strategic organizations HROs could use to support leaders: (1) define the right problem; (2) use effective design frameworks that align organizational goals, and structures thus informing decisions; (3) involve the right people in the process; (4) tie talent and organizations together; and (5) implement the change. Otherwise, stakeholders lacked buy-in, strategies lacked clarity and people came with their own assumption, which led to conflict and
gridlock (Kates & Kesler, 2010). Therefore, decisions made on scant information or faulty assumptions undermined the group’s efforts and exacerbate the problem. Even so, “regardless of the quality of the decisions, teams that fail to effectively implement their decisions have accomplished nothing” (Kotlyar et al., 2011, p. 666). Implementing decisions to produce positive outcomes was linked to how change and conflict were managed (Givens, 2008).

School districts often addressed politically charged issues where the problem was complex and stakeholders were diverse. The context of the problem and what was happening within that context constituted organizational understanding. Therefore, to distinguish the problem at hand from other problems, it was critical to define the parameters and the purpose, which needed to be negotiated among various stakeholders (Kates & Kesler, 2010). To set potential parameters, it was essential to examine context: those processes, protocols, and the collective responsibility that impacted the outcome for highly effective schools (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2015).

Generating solution criteria in advance of considering the solution options was one aspect of problem-solving that was often overlooked. Structuring devices used to establish quantifiable indicants of the solution criteria were suggested (Harvey et al., 1997). This proved useful when the team set standards for criteria that were not obvious or already set by their districts. In as much as identifying the problem and criteria for solution constitutes a major component of problem solving, to alleviate conflict, leadership was another key feature that generated considerable research (Ahillen, 2010; Burke et al., 2006; Carmeli, Gelbard, & Reiter-Palmon, 2013; Long et al., 2012; McHenry & McCall, 2014). For example, successful superintendents set the stage upfront
by cultivating relationships district wide to acknowledge the contributions of all stakeholders (Ahillen, 2010).

Situated in the conflict literature, problem-solving was viewed through the lens of negotiation and communication (Kecskes & Zhang, 2009; Kouzakova et al., 2014). However, Kelman (2010) asserted conflict itself needed to be treated as the problem that parties shared. To move to action, groups must resolve conflict effectively. Research indicated groups that acknowledged conflict as a normative process were more likely to be successful (Schwarz, 2002). These organizations created environments where people felt safe having their thoughts and feelings held up to scrutiny (Schwarz, 2002). Group members understood the dynamics of the conflict. They could discern how it arose, what role they played in the conflict, and how to prevent unnecessary conflict (Schwarz, 2002). In this regard, HROs were in a unique position to implement strategic development, instituting conflict resolution as a core competency strategy organization wide (Alagaraja, 2012). In this systematic approach to problem-solving, Alagaraja (2012) claimed, “what emerged from implementing strategic human resource development is a profoundly transformed enterprise” (p. 92).

Similar to other researchers, Kelman (2010) considered conflict a normal aspect of relations, both within and between groups, which had the potential to be constructive or destructive. Although Kelman’s (2010) work concentrated on political adversaries, a micro process, he sought to change the culture of conflicting societies. Diverging from solely a contextual view of problem-solving, Kelman (2010) examined micro-processes and macro-processes. Supporting Alagaraja’s (2012) claim, Kelman (2010) determined changes in individuals (micro) provided an impetus for change in the conflicted system.
(macro) as a whole. To breakthrough conflict, it was necessary to transcend mutual distrust and arrive at a positive vision of a common future (Kelman, 2010), which was crucial for school districts thrust into the limelight with the pressures of high-stakes testing, accountability, and ever increasing demands (Ahillen, 2010).

**Process**

Ulrich et al. (2009) outlined processes as the *why, what, how,* and *who* parts of the action plans that moved organizations forward. Having processes in place supported the goals of the organization as well as those of its stakeholders were the first steps toward transforming the organization (Schwarz, 2002). A process was a method that included a set of steps and activities that group members followed to perform tasks.

As Schwarz (2002) illuminated the relationship among group processes, it became evident how group processes led to increased effectiveness. Schwarz (2002) explained, “Segmenting the group’s behavior into processes simply helps a facilitator and the group understand more clearly how the group is acting effectively or ineffectively” (p. 26). Group processes and structures were the areas in which facilitators could intervene so the group could examine and change its processes, structures, and contexts as the need emerged (Schwarz, 2002). The three levels of process were process design, process methods, and process tools (Hamme, 2015, Schwarz, 2002).

**Process design.** Ulrich et al. (2009) believed the process should start from the outside in, keeping the end in mind, thus making the outcomes as important in the design as the activities. In other words, placing less emphasis on what was done and more emphasis on what was delivered or the value created. Although other methods of process design exist, Ballantyne, Berret, and Wells (2011) agreed that planning in reverse was a
viable option, particularly when the components were integrated with opportunities for course correction as social, technological, or environmental factors changed. In this respect, organizations were responsive to the changes they would face in the future and could mitigate the impact.

This required stakeholders to understand the strategy and implications, as well as be agreement that it would produce the desired outcomes (Kate & Kesler, 2010). In this light, problem-solving, decision-making, communication, boundary management, and conflict management were consciously planned. Foremost, it was important to remember people were the most critical factor in an organization. People became comfortable with routines, and disruptions to an ingrained process led to emotional reactions (Anderson & Ackerman-Anderson, 2010; Ballantyne et al., 2011).

**Process methods.** Initially, the organization must build the case for change, define the outcomes, plan the required initiatives, engage stakeholders, and set milestones with activities and outcomes that measurably denote success or the need to redirect efforts (Anderson & Ackerman-Anderson, 2010; Samuel, 2006; Ulrich et al., 2009). Defining the case for change helped stakeholders understand why the change was necessary. Failure to make a compelling case for change could derail even the best strategic plan (Ballantyne et al., 2011).

At the onset, identifying key individuals and forming coalitions of stakeholders for support was crucial. Stakeholders play a significant role in identifying internal and external priorities that otherwise could be overlooked (Anderson & Ackerman-Anderson, 2010; Ballantyne et al., 2011). In addition, neglecting stakeholder concerns could lead to widespread problems. Therefore, it was critical to have a systematic process for problem-
solving. A systematic approach to problem-solving delineated the process the group agreed to use to identify the problem and its potential causes, where all members focused on the same step at the same time (Schwarz, 2002). Crucial in this process was considering the implications of group decisions both over time and on other systems throughout the organization (Schwarz, 2002).

Decision-making went beyond simply arriving at the best solution from among the choices; it involved deciding which stakeholders to involve in which decisions, the format in which the decisions would be made, and the criteria for a good decision (Schwarz, 2002). For example, decision-making during planning initiatives was an opportunity to evaluate the organization’s capabilities, which avoided conflicts that could result from inadequate resources. However, competing initiatives could become a source of conflict. Whether by consensus, majority vote, or another means, defining outcomes linked people to the outcome and developed an accountable organization (Samuel, 2006).

Lack of accountability led to an exodus of high performers, created conditions of entitlement, and resulted in low levels of individual responsibility (Samuel, 2006). Under these conditions, the group was not internally committed to the choices, which as previously discussed, affected the likelihood of implementation. However, leadership was linked to increasing commitment to decisions (Kotlyar et al., 2011). Effective processes increased the likelihood members would define the problem, weigh the options, and determine the solution in a manner members would agree and implement. Effective processes generated valid information as group members expressed their logic and sought to understand others’ reasoning in a manner that tested assumptions and inferences (Schwarz, 2002).
A process committed to addressing uncomfortable issues in a structured manner treated conflict as a natural aspect of group life (Schwarz, 2002). This approach supported previous research that suggested conflict served a necessary function. For example, when conflict was managed well, members learned to work together and generate novel solutions when they saw the issue through another’s perspective. One process to ensure conflict was managed well was to establish norms that were agreed upon (White et al., 2007). To further complicate the picture, groups used their processes to examine and intervene on any element of the process that impeded its effectiveness. Schwarz (2006) pointed to the benefits the leader could provide, such as helping the group obtain resources, managing boundaries with the organization at large, and managing conflict.

**Process tools.** Numerous books and programs exist providing tools to assist groups structure processes (Harvey et al., 1997). The authors provided a step-by-step guide to making informed, collaborative decisions in a user-friendly format. Particularly pertinent to the current study, the authors admonish leaders not to ignore toxicity. Controversy and conflict were not popular, but when avoided they festered. The authors claimed the tools worked, and with practice, could be incorporated into common usage in any organization. For example, when an organization sought to determine if something was a genuine need or a want, they could be faced with having to reduce and control the role of emotions and politics. To systematically address such a case, the authors provided a structuring device that set criteria standards and established measurable markers (Harvey et al., 1997). This analytical approach was used during collaboration to move beyond mundane or preconceived solutions.
Process facilitation. Kates and Kesler (2010) stated, “guiding a leader through a significant organization design project with the goal of building new capabilities may be some of the most important and complex work that a human resource professional can undertake” (p. 1). As such, HROs activities could include coaching, architecting, designing, delivering, and facilitating (Ulrich et al., 2009). For example, the role of the HRO in process design could focus on how to embed collaboration into the structure, processes, and policies that shaped the way the organization operated. HRO methods could include engaging stakeholders and utilizing appropriate tools such as structuring devices (Harvey et al., 1997; Ulrich et al., 2009).

A process that promoted pro-organizational behavior necessarily included accountability. Organizations that achieved accountability shifted focus from the process to outcomes (Samuel, 2006). Samuel (2006) proposed a six-step method designed as a practical way to create an accountable organization that performs at a higher level, enhances employee satisfaction, and achieves breakthrough results. The process steps were:

• Clear direction from executives who should lead and guide the organizational direction and the culture in response to external drivers
• Shared accountability with middle management who as change agents should guide the culture and operations to ensure effective linkages and the removal of unnecessary obstacles
• Personal accountability for all employees who should be dedicated to improving their relationship with others and their performance as it impacts stakeholders and the organization
• Shared accountability in departments, work units and project teams
• Accountable performance management
• Measurement, celebration and renewal (Samuel, 2006, p. 72)

**K-12 Human Resource Officers Role in Top Management**

K-12 human resource officers as top level management work closely with school district superintendents, the school board and site administrators. While human resource officers are responsible for personnel management, interviewing, hiring, training, disciplining, evaluating and addressing concerns or problems involving employees within the guidelines of fair employment laws, collective bargaining statutes and educator licensing rules, they also provide administrative leadership for projects assigned by the superintendent or designee. For example, human resource officers may be asked to develop, administer, monitor and coordinate assigned budgets or oversee recruiting and onboarding systems such as Talent Ed Perform or iVisions. Performing the essential day to day functions of their job may include conflict management and sensitive situations with staff, parents, and other stakeholders. Human resource officers serve as the district representative to various committees, special interest groups, and at public meetings. The position is demanding, workloads can be heavy, timelines short, and situations often arise that require immediate attention.

School district human resource officers are clamoring for strategies and best practices related to planning with the board, proposal development, negotiation models, communication campaigns during negotiations, and team building (Dannis & Woliver, 2016; Pereira & Gomes, 2012). They may be found revamping familiar operations, which can provoke fear as employees grapple with feelings of incompetency, or they may be
deciphering education code and translating the law into sound business practices. For example, HROs may be charged with the responsibility for interpreting state and federal regulations relating to special education to assure that districts are compliant, or they could be coordinating the ongoing revision of referral and evaluation procedures, including forms utilized to communicate with parents. HROs contend with topics of concern to various stakeholders, including those specific to classified or certificated personnel such as wages; hours of work; leaves and vacations; negotiation processes; grievances; union access rights; health and benefits; evaluations; personnel files; decisions regarding hiring, retention, retirement, transfers, and reassignments; and public complaints all fall under the HRO’s scope of work. The potential for conflict was inevitable. Yet, whatever the source of conflict, savvy HROs had protocols in place ahead of the need (Samuel, 2006).

HROs, as top level management, were in positions where removing obstacles could lead to conflict and guiding culture could erupt in value conflict. The role of the HRO transformed to better meet the need of businesses, many of which were embroiled in change processes (Ulrich et al., 2009). Similarly, school district HROs are undergoing transformation as the shift away from top down control “usher[s] in a new era in which the school system becomes the major agent of its own improvement” (Hargreaves, 2010, p. 4). In this respect, to be effective at all levels, it was the responsibility of system leaders to create the conditions for change and accountability in which there was a two-way and multi-way partnership among stakeholders that supported continuous improvement (Fullan & Hargreaves; Samuel, 2006). In as much as the HRO’s role
became increasingly more complex, more opportunity for conflict presented. Schwarz (2002) believed a thorough examination of processes could point to the right direction.

Ulrich et al. (2009) provided an in-depth look at the inner workings of HR. The authors provide a framework for examining process design, process methods, and process tools that transformed HR practices connected to the work, communication, people, and performance of an organization. Although they spoke of HR from a business perspective, their work applied to school HR as well. For example, Ulrich et al. (2009) might equate school sites as individual business units. If a district desired all sites to promote a similar culture, such as restorative justice, HR would align its practices to support that goal. The process included enrolling leaders that would champion that goal, create a shared need, develop a clear sense of the outcomes, mobilize commitment from stakeholders, make tough decisions to move the change forward, institutionalize the change by integrating it into the organization’s infrastructure, and track success (Ulrich et al., 2009). The work by Ulrich et al. (2009) proved instrumental for understanding the role HR played in the processes of an organization.

Similarly, Fullan’s (2015) work for systemic change specifically in educational organizations puts HR within the context currently under investigation, namely K-12 public education. Fullan and Hargreaves (2015) made the case for an all-systems-go approach that engaged the whole system in a cohesive effort where leadership “focuses on the right things and above all promotes collective capacity and ownership” (p. 13). HROs were expected to be a strategic partner that aligned HR practices with district strategies, helping the organization adapt to new conditions and develop human capital (Ulrich et al., 2009).
To answer the research question, “how do successful HROs establish common
ground and produce breakthrough results by utilizing the six domains of conflict
transformation behaviors,” it was imperative to understand the context and nature of the
HROs role. In response to an increasingly complex organizational environment, the role
of HROs transformed. HROs served as employee advocates and human capital
developers, and were considered functional experts to ensure alignment of individual and
organizational goals (Ulrich et al., 2009).

HROs were leaders, integrating micro and macro changes. “At the micro level
they facilitate meeting and planning sessions…At the macro level they facilitate large-
scale system change” (Ulrich et al., 2009, p. 106). However, one of the HROs most
difficult role was serving as a link between management and employees, especially when
vision and goals clashed over needs and methods to transform the work and culture of an
strategy and structure as to the content and process improved the organizations’ ability to
fulfill their obligations to stakeholders. To do so required processes that could “help
teachers, policymakers, and local communities rethink the beliefs, values, assumptions,
and cultures underlying schools’ industrial-era operating practices” (Hannay & Earl,
2012, p. 3).

**Gap in the Research**

The review of the literature provided new insight into an issue that plagued
mankind, conflict. For decades, researchers investigated conflict negotiation. Systems
theory provided a fresh approach to bridge theory and practice that brought a model for
understanding conflict transformation (Boardman & Sauser, 2008). Proponents claimed
systems thinking offered a holistic approach to addressing real world problems that fostered change to the systems encountered (Senge, 1990). As such, systems thinking linked the interaction of the system members and context. Pertinent to this study, researchers looked at the impact of HR practices and transformational leadership on organizational performance (Long et al., 2013). However, conflict transformation producing breakthrough results had yet to be investigated through the eyes of exemplar HROs. Although the leadership literature reported a relationship between HR and performance, no consensus was found for mechanisms that explained the connection (Givens, 2008; Pereira & Gomes, 2012).

As researchers produced information showing the importance of leadership behaviors thought to impact conflict resolution, interest in the fusion of leadership and conflict transformation gained momentum, particularly in the area of establishing common ground. In situations involving conflict, HR practices in the public university education system were shown to transform dysfunctional conflict into functional conflict (Mukhtar et al., 2011). However, similar research on HRO’s perspectives of conflict transformative behavior within the context of K-12 public educational systems was lacking. Fisher (2011) called for researchers to examine conflict transformation and the behaviors thought to sustain it. Preliminary investigations into transforming the nature of conflict looked at leadership behaviors thought to create an organization that promoted healthy conflict and shifting mindsets. Conflict transformation behaviors including collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, ethics, problem-solving, and process, have all been individually linked to conflict resolution.
As interest emerged in conflict and the organizational context in which it occurred, researchers examined aspects of collaboration such as building individual’s conflict competencies with practice and feedback, encouraging social relationships, and developing team effectiveness, in addition to creating an open environment for transparency of conflict (Kudonoo, Schroeder, & Boysen-Rotelli, 2012). From a socio-cognitive approach to conflict resolution, establishing common ground was determined through the interaction between speaker and listener (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2006). Through this lens, the domain of communication was examined and outcomes were a product of complex interactions. From this perspective common ground was explained as an integration of both cognitive and pragmatic components of core common ground and emergent common ground, in other words how parties interacted to reach mutual understanding regarding shared concerns (Boardman & Sauser, 2008; Dettmer, 2007; Henning & Wan-Ching, 2012; Kecskes & Zhang, 2009; Senge, 1990).

Further, to reach mutual understanding during emotionally charged conflict, aspects of communication led investigators to examine emotional intelligence (EI). EI began to emerge as a significant factor in leadership effectiveness (Alston et al., 2010). Alston et al. (2010) noted a gap in the EI literature calling for qualitative inquiry of EI and leadership in a variety of fields, an area the current thematic study attempted to address. The link between finding common ground and the ability to understand the perspectives of others has been established (Alston et al, 2010). However, whether understanding the perspectives of others led to a willingness to act in a manner that genuinely transforms conflict led investigators to use a values-based model to examine the ethical behaviors of leaders in the workplace (Kacmar et al., 2012; Kee & Newcomer,
The impetus to act was examined by researchers such as Dolan and Altman (2012) who suggested organizational monitoring of people and processes including a systematic approach to problem solving was necessary to ensure an organization's edge (Harvey et al., 1997). The six domains of conflict transformative behaviors, collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, ethics, problem-solving, and process were each individually reported as instrumental in conflict resolution. Evidence exists that some of the domains overlap and are difficult to disentangle from one another as to their emphasis for conflict transformation.

After a thorough examination of the negotiation literature, the researcher was unable to find studies from the perspective of HROs in K-12 educational systems explaining how they moved their organizations from breakdowns to breakthroughs. Further, there was a gap in the literature that integrated concomitant leadership behaviors with the potential to find common ground and thus transform conflict to produce breakthrough results. This study provided a comprehensive look at the combined effect of those behaviors on establishing common ground as told through the stories of exemplar human resource officers working in K-12 public education settings.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Chapter I provided an introduction and brief background research about conflict, but showed few leaders were successful at transforming conflict into a productive state in which common ground was regularly achieved. This was the phenomenon at the heart of this study. Chapter II, the literature review, reported on the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors thought to influence transcending conflict, including collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, ethics, problem-solving, and process. Although each behavior was explored in other unrelated research, more information was needed to determine how exemplar leaders used these behavioral domains in conjunction with each other to provide the leader with a more powerful set of tools to use in transforming conflict and creating common ground.

Chapter III detailed the research design and methodology that frame this study. The chapter is laid out as follows: a review of the purpose statement and research questions as presented in Chapter I; a description of data collection and data analysis processes; a detailed explanation of interview techniques, sponsorship, and participant selection method; as well as a discussion of limitations to the study and the steps employed to increase validity and reliability. Additional information was provided about the researcher’s background to understand the personal perspective that influenced the data collection to answer the research questions.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover and describe how successful human resource officers (HROs) established common ground and produced breakthrough results by utilizing the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors.
Research Questions

This study was guided by one central research question and six sub-questions, one for each of the domains. The central research question for the study was: What are the lived experiences of successful HROs in establishing common ground and producing breakthrough results by engaging in elements of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors? The sub-questions for the study were:

- Collaboration - How do successful HROs use collaboration to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?
- Communication - How do successful HROs use communication to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?
- Emotional Intelligence - What aspects of EI do successful HROs use to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?
- Ethics - How do successful HROs use ethics to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?
- Problem-Solving - How do successful HROs use problem-solving strategies to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?
- Processes - What processes do successful HROs use to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

Research Design

The research design explains the specific plan the researcher used to answer the research questions in a way that generated the most credible conclusions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). This study enriched the body of knowledge by describing a complex phenomenon that gives direction to future research on conflict transformation. Whereas
quantitative research designs provide objectivity when measuring and describing phenomena, they were constrained when research problems were complex, such as the current study’s simultaneous consideration of multiple variables, or when examining the complexities of differences among individuals within the context of real life (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The work of McMillan & Schumacher (2010) guided this study’s use of a qualitative research design to systematically examine a constellation of conflict transformation behaviors. The authors explained qualitative research operates on the premise that “the world is complex, with few simple explanations for human behavior that explains the interaction of multiple factors” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 324). Therefore, the team of peer researchers agreed qualitative methodology best suited the complex phenomena under investigation. The team considered several qualitative design options.

**Methods**

After considering three qualitative methodologies (grounded theory, ethnography, and phenomenology), phenomenology emerged as the most appropriate for this study. Grounded theory, with a sociological perspective, used methods that took “the researcher into and close to the real world so that the results and findings are grounded in the empirical world” (Patton, 2002, p. 125). The process involved systematic comparative analysis grounded in fieldwork, with the focus on variables and the meaning associated with them to explain what was observed (Creswell, 2014). The thematic research team determined grounded theory was not the appropriate choice for this study as the team focus was on describing the behaviors of leaders from different fields at the top of their chosen professions. Although these exemplar leaders excelled in their careers, they likely
did not share similar patterns of behavior. Therefore, grounded theory was not the choice of the research team because it was not a descriptive method.

Closer to this study’s emphasis, ethnography focused on “learned patterns of actions, language, beliefs, rituals and ways of life, to provide insight into the culture” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 23). The current study shared characteristics of ethnography, for example, using participant’s natural setting when collecting interview and observational data over a period of time (Creswell, 2014). Ethnography would be used to study the lived experience of a group of people, in this case HROs. However, the current study was not interested in all HROs as a group of people, but rather the lived experience of those HROs in the context of exemplar leaders. Therefore, ethnography was discarded as it did not provide the best reflection of the researcher’s intent to describe the phenomena.

Rationale

Phenomenology, with roots in philosophy, was used “to determine the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomena for the individual or group” (Patton, 2002). To provide a rich description of the experiences of these exemplar leaders, the phenomenological approach was selected by the thematic team as the approach most suitable for understanding the phenomena under investigation (Patton, 2002). Given that many organizations face intractable conflict, the literature review indicated little was known about the lived experience of exemplar HROs who were consistently successful in transforming conflict.

The current phenomenological research acquired knowledge by examining the participants’ perceptions of their experience and attempting to discern if any
commonalities emerged (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006; Patten, 2012). Understanding how exemplary HROs in K-12 public education described their experiences during conflict, leading them to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results, could contribute to a clearer understanding of the phenomenon that exists among exemplar leaders likely to experience different cultures and environments.

This phenomenon warranted a method of investigation that “captures the true meaning of what occurred” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 346). Phenomenology offered a systematic way of conducting research that uncovered the lived experience of outstanding individuals through interviews, observations, and the collection of artifacts.

**Population**

Population was defined as, “a group of elements or cases, whether individuals, objects, or events, that conform to specific criteria and to which we intend to generalize the results of the research” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 129). As such, the population for this study was all HROs working in California school districts. The California state public school system is home to 6.24 million students in 1,028 districts with 58 county superintendents across 11 service regions. Each school district in this study has a superintendent and assistant superintendents. The study sampling frame consisted of exemplar California K-12 assistant superintendents of HR in districts of 5,000 to 25,000 students.

The study target population was assistant superintendents of HR identified as exemplar working in K-12 districts within an average daily attendance (ADA) of 5,000 to 25,000 students. In California, there are 343 unified school districts, 242 were K-12 districts with an ADA outside the selected range, and the remaining 182 were within the
selected ADA range (CalEdFacts, 2015). The rationale for setting the parameters for this study to districts of 5,000 to 25,000 ADA as the target population was that districts of this size were large enough to provide many serious conflict situations that called for transformation but were not so large that the conflict situations were exaggerated beyond what would be typical among California districts. In California, HROs in unified school districts meeting this configuration were identified through the California Department of Education, (CalEdFacts, 2015).

Sample

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) referred to the sample as “the group of subjects or participants from whom the data are collected” (p. 129). Selected from the target population of 182 districts, the study sample used purposive criterion sampling consisting of California school district HROs meeting the criteria as exemplar leaders identified through Association of California School Administrators (ACSA).

Patton’s work (2002) was reflected in this study’s use of purposeful sampling because the strength “lie[d] in selecting information-rich cases for study in-depth...to illuminate the questions under study” (p. 230). In this method, participants were selected based on criteria likely to identify exemplar individuals in the field of K-12 HR. This sampling method was deemed the most suitable since recognition by an organization of ones’ peers was a credible source for finding research participants (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006).

Sample Subject Selection Process

Once the researcher completed the Brandman University Institution Review Board (BUIRB) process, the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA)
provided the information needed to begin sampling the state and regional award winners. To be included on this list, participants had been recognized through ACSA based on their ability to meet ACSA criteria as follows: promote student success through stewardship and engaging the school community, ensure success through collaboration with stakeholders, model a personal code of ethics, and develop a professional leadership capacity that included understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context. The researcher was provided with a list and contact information for the award winning HROs of the year from 2010 through 2016 for state and regional winners. Contact was made with those winners meeting the study criteria of district size at the time of the award.

The participants met the criteria the team determined was indicative of exemplary performance. For example, the ACSA Human Resources Council annually presents a Negotiator of the Year award to exemplar HROs at both the state and regional level. The target sample of 15 HROs in this study were determined to be the best of the best based on the following criteria:

- Evidence of successful relationships with all stakeholders
- Evidence of breaking through conflict to achieve organizational success
- Five or more years of experience in the field
- Written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings
- Peer recognition as ACSA award winners
- Membership in associations of groups focused on their field
Instrumentation

The qualitative approach used the researcher as an instrument for data collection and analysis, involved field work, and was inductive and descriptive, which introduced the potential for biases (Patton, 2002; Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2007). As such, the researcher’s role necessitated extended contact with participants that required an understanding of the HR profession and a reflective understanding of the researcher’s own personal background that shaped the study. Creswell (2014) explained, “Experiences may cause researchers to lean toward certain themes, to actively look for evidence to support their position, and to create favorable or unfavorable conclusions about the site or participants” (p. 188). Patton (2002) suggested reflective screens through which the researcher should consider the participant based on culture, age, gender, class, social status, education, family, politics, language, and values, therefore the researcher could be mindful of those factors throughout the data collection process.

The researcher in this study was well-equipped to be reflective of how her own life experiences shaped her perspectives after completing an arduous two-year course of study in organizational leadership with a strong component of self-reflection as well as a career as an elementary educator where teaching practices required continual self-reflection. In addition, the researcher holds an administrative service credential, serves as designee principal, and mentors beginning teachers. The researcher followed McMillan and Schumacher’s (2010) suggestions and kept a field log and reflective journal to document fieldwork and provide a written record of decisions made during the emergent design. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) explained reflection was a rigorous process of self-scrutiny that established credibility since the researcher acknowledged she could not
be neutral, unbiased, or detached, but can question her own assumptions. With
subjectivity taken into account, the researcher contemplated and honed interpersonal
skills to more effectively conduct face-to-face fieldwork in a standard format (Patton,
2002). Therefore, the researcher learned to establish rapport and be skilled at prompting,
encouraging elaboration, keeping the interview on topic, and maintaining personal
objectivity and detachment to enhance credibility through the use of mock interview
practice sessions (Patton, 2002). In addition to being mindful throughout the interviewing
process, mock interview practice afforded the opportunity to gain critical feedback on the
interviewer’s performance.

To be familiar with the culture of HROs, it was necessary for the researcher to
read publications considered germane to the profession, follow some of their blogs, and
shadow HROs as they conducted their normal workday. Shadowing was a common
practice in the educational setting and therefore posed no undue stress to participants.
Beyond the scope of learning what HROs did during the course of their workday, the
researcher was unknown to the participants prior to this investigation.

To conduct this study, the researcher obtained the necessary approval from the
BUIRB, which is further explained in the data collection section. Interviews commenced
with greetings and introductions. Next, the recorded portion of the interview protocol
consisted of a brief overview of the study that outlined the study’s purpose and an
explanation of the Participants Bill of Rights, followed by a presentation and signing of
the BUIRB required informed consent form and consent to be audio taped. The recorded
interviews were transcribed for subsequent data coding using NVIVO software.
In addition to the researcher as an instrument, the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors provided a framework for coding qualitative data from interviews, observations, and examination of artifacts to understand the impact these domains had on achieving common ground (Larick, 2015; White, 2013). This framework linked scripted interview questions based on the literature review in an attempt to identify and describe how exemplar HROs established common ground and produced breakthrough results by utilizing the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) reported “techniques to ensure good qualitative questions include interview script critiques by experienced interviewers, interview guide field testing, and revision of final question phraseology” (p. 357). The research team developed scripted qualitative interview questions addressing each of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors to investigate exemplar leaders across diverse organizations (Appendix A).

In as much as the researcher was the instrument in the study, it was critical to consistently measure what she was supposed to measure to answer the research questions. Unlike quantitative research, no claim was made as to the generalizability of the findings (external validity). Instead, qualitative reliability “indicates that the researcher’s approach is consistent across different researchers and different projects” (Creswell, 2014, p. 201). Qualitative validity showed the researcher followed procedures to check for accuracy of the findings, for example, checking with participants after interviewing to verify or clarify statements, checking transcribing procedures, and enlisting others to code data to ensure inter-coder reliability.
Validity and Reliability

The quality of qualitative data depended primarily on systematic, rigorous, and skillful fieldwork to be considered valid and reliable. Creswell (2014) reported, “Validity does not carry the same connotations in qualitative research as it does in quantitative research; nor is it a companion of reliability (examining stability) or generalizability (the external validity of applying results to new settings, people, or samples)” (p. 201). Validity was defined by Creswell (2014) as, “do the items measure the content they were intended to measure” (p. 160) whereas “reliability refers to whether scores to items on an instrument are internally consistent, stable over time, and whether there was consistency in test administration and scoring” (p. 247).

Criterion validity refers to a quantitative methodology using surveys, structured observations, or structured interviews that reflected the use of a criterion, or well established measurement procedure, to create a new measurement procedure to assess the construct of interest and theoretically distinguish between groups. In qualitative research this is analogous to Lincoln and Guba’s (as cited in Patton, 2002) constructivist criteria of transferability where a “systematic process is systematically followed” (p. 546). The research team established criterion or predictive validity as a measure, which can be predicted to produce similar results. In this study, the essential criteria the thematic team had to determine was what qualified someone as an exemplar leader. For example, HROs winning ACSA Negotiator of the Year Awards were selected through well-established procedures expected to reflect a certain set of abilities. The thematic research team determined the exemplar participants must meet the following criteria:

- Evidence of successful relationships with all stakeholders
• Evidence of breaking through conflict to achieve organizational success

• Five or more years of experience in the field

• Written, published or presented at conferences or association meetings

• Recognized by their peers

• Membership in associations of groups focused on their field

Content validity was defined by Creswell (2014) as “the items measure the content they were intended to measure” (p. 160). The thematic dissertation team crafted a set of scripted participant interview questions (Appendix A) to establish content validity. The team discussed terminology, ambiguity, questions in which the interviewee could infer the desired response, placement of the questions in the interview sequence, and tone conducive to conversation rather than interrogative. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) claimed, “Qualitative validity design is the degree to which the interpretations and concepts have mutual meanings between participants and the researcher” (p. 340). Interview questions and sub-questions were designed to establish patterns based upon the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors: collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, ethics, problem-solving, and processes. The thematic research team bolstered credibility by collaboratively designing questions and follow-up questions under the guidance of the thematic dissertation team chairs/committees and all researchers on the team asked the same questions during the interviews.

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) defined reliability as “the extent to which the results of the study can be generalized to other subjects, conditions, or situations” (p. 487). It was possible for future researchers to replicate study procedures, but unlikely the
results would be the same. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) stated “because the [interview] experience is one that is common to the researcher and interviewees, data [were] drawn from both the researcher’s written record of his or her experience and records of the interviewees” (p. 383). Qualitative research sought to extend the findings rather than generalize the results (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). For others to understand and apply the findings to subsequent research, qualitative researchers must provide for a logical extension of knowledge based on authentic evidence, carefully reconstructed from the participants’ perceptions. To ensure extension of findings, the current study implemented the following design components: consideration of the researcher’s role, participant selection methods, data analysis strategies, and authentic narratives.

Threats to validity and reliability were often attributed to the instrument used to collect data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Therefore, the instrument must be administered in a standardized manner according to prescribed procedures to support that the findings were trustworthy, authentic, and credible from the viewpoint of the participant, the researcher, and the reader. This study actively incorporated strategies consisting of data code checking, field testing the interview process, and triangulation. Method triangulation consisted of conducting interviews and observations, and reviewing artifacts. For example, the researcher field tested the interview process and checked with participants to confirm accuracy. During observations, the researcher attempted to provide rich, detailed descriptions. In addition, the researcher remained cognizant throughout the fieldwork process of the personal bias brought to the study (Creswell, 2014). The entire process benefitted from concerted oversite by multiple dissertation
chairs and committee members, in addition to collaboration among the research team. The following presents strategies the qualitative researcher used to support the accuracy of findings.

**Inter-coder Reliability**

The researcher followed the steps outlined by McMillan and Schumacher (2010) to identify and refine codes. Initially, transcripts were read to get a sense of the whole, initial codes were generated from the data, comparisons were made for duplicate codes, provisional coding was tested and revised, and the coding system was continually refined as more data were collected, culminating in essential codes that were used to look for patterns in the lived experiences of exemplar HROs.

During the process of coding, Creswell (2014) reported that in addition to checking for transcript accuracy, it was important to be vigilant for a shift in the in meaning applied to the codes. To avoid this pitfall, the researcher followed Creswell’s suggestion to compare data with the codes and write memos about the codes and their definitions. In addition, cross-checking codes was utilized to support the reliability of the findings. An independent researcher evaluated the data coding to verify the categories made sense based on the data and that the data were appropriately arranged in a category system (Patton, 2002). In addition, steps were taken to ensure the selection of indices was based on characteristics of the variables at an acceptable level of reliability. Inter-coder reliability for this study was set by the thematic team at 80% accuracy on 10% of the data. To accomplish this, a pilot test of the codes was conducted on a small sample meeting the established level of agreement. Finally, full coding was conducted. Questionable data were presented to members of the thematic team of researchers for
discussion and consensus as to how and where to include it with decisions based on majority opinion (Lombard, Synder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002).

**Field Testing the Interview Process**

The goal of the research interview process was to maintain a neutral interview approach so the interviewer, “can enter into the other person’s perspective” (Patton, 2002, p. 340). First, to maintain consistency within the thematic dissertation process and ensure that interview questions were appropriate to address the research questions, the team developed scripted interview questions under the tutelage of faculty advisors (Appendix A). Next, the interview process was field tested. The test team consisted of an expert in the area of qualitative research interviews, a volunteer HRO, and the researcher. Feedback from test interviews ensured the researcher was maintaining a neutral tone to gather data reflecting the perspective of the sample population. Once the pilot test was successfully completed, the researcher submitted an application to the BUIRB. Once approved, the researcher contacted potential participants.

**Triangulation**

“Triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods” (Patton, 2002, p. 247). Data stability was indicated when the “researcher’s approach is consistent across different researchers and different projects” (Creswell, 2014, p. 201). In qualitative research, it was critical to convey the steps the researcher took to ensure accuracy and credibility of the findings. Therefore, it was extremely critical that the data collected were reliable. Internal reliability of the data was important because findings and the interpretations were based information the data provided. Internal reliability examined the stability of the data. Creswell (2014) outlined several qualitative reliability
procedures: checking transcript accuracy, making sure code definitions did not drift, checking for inter-coder agreement, documenting procedures, and actively using strategies that enhance the researcher’s ability to assess the accuracy of the findings.

The researcher attempted to ensure internal reliability of data using the strategy method triangulation to ensure data emerged from as many types and sources as possible. Methods triangulation is specific technique used to establish dependability and trustworthiness of the data. In methods triangulation, one type of participant, in this case HROs, provided the researcher with data from multiple sources, including interviews, observations, and artifacts (Patten, 2012). The researcher chose these three types of data sources to increase the quality of the data with the least amount of intrusion. For example, if a participant claimed to involve all stakeholders during problem-solving, multiple methods such as meeting minute artifacts that reflected substantial involvement increased the validity of the statement. The multi-method strategy was one of several strategies the researcher implemented to enhance validity.

Data Collection

According to Creswell (2014), “the data collection steps include setting the boundaries for the study, collecting information through unstructured or semi structured observations and interviews, documents, and visual materials, as well as establishing the protocol for recording information” (p. 189). The researcher was diligent in providing precise records and detailed descriptions of people and situations. Having data recording procedures and protocols in place structured the exchanges. The plan adopted a template for recording observational data that tracked the physical setting, accounting for the event
and researcher reflections (Creswell, 2014). The plan for interviews followed Creswell’s (2014) protocol including:

- A heading (date, place, interviewer, interviewee)
- Instructions for the interviewer to follow so that standard procedures were used from one interview to the next
- The questions (plus an icebreaker question), followed by sub-questions and a concluding question to direct the researcher to other potential interviewees
- Probes for the questions to follow-up and ask individuals to provide more detail or elaborate
- Space between questions to record responses [and allow respondent think]
- A final thank you statement to acknowledge the interviewees time
- Develop a log to record documents collected for analysis, whether source material was first or second hand accounts, and comments on the reliability and value of the data as a system that allows easy retrieval (p. 194)

The researcher availed herself to supports necessary to enhance validity, and was vigilant of the ethical considerations involved in conducting research of human participants. However, it was necessary to be mindful that errors could occur. Checking in with participants was one way to ascertain if data were accurate and checking the accuracy of transcribed data was another check point. The researcher followed McMillan and Schumacher’s (2010) procedures for transcribing data outlined as: large margins provided space for comments and coding; spaces were left between interview questions and participant responses; highlights were utilized to show headers, questions, different participants, and comments; and words were used to describe what occurred (e.g., pause,
phone call). A spot check of transcriptions was accomplished between thematic researchers who recorded, analyzed, and reported negative or discrepant data, modified patterns found in the data, or suggested alternative explanations.

**Types of Data**

Qualitative researchers sought data from the source to create a picture from the information gathered (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The current study attempted to paint such a picture from the experiences of exemplar HROs by conducting open-ended interviews and non-participant observations, and collecting artifact evidence such as printed materials or audio-visual materials to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2014).

**Interviews.** A standard feature of phenomenological research was the interview (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Qualitative interviews allowed the researcher into another person’s perspective under the assumption that it could be meaningful, knowable, and explicit (Patton, 2002). Interviews could take the form of informal conversations or use a guide where topics were set in advance. The technique determined to be more suitable for this thematic investigation was standardized, open-ended questions presented during semi-structured interviews.

Open-ended questions gathered explicit details surrounding behaviors, practices, experiences, attitudes, and perspectives. The thematic team followed McMillan and Schumacher’s (2010) advice, asking scripted questions designed to gather demographic information about the participant such as their age and gender, number of years employed in their field, and the number of years in their current position, as well as questions within
the framework of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors, seeking to shed light on their experiences (Appendix B).

The research questions in this study probed the types of transformative behaviors professionals indicated they used and under what circumstances. Interviews were conducted in a natural setting to reflect lived experience and offer participants a convenient, comfortable setting. The study was conducted primarily through one-on-one interviews. However, telephone interviews were included as necessary to widen the interviewee pool. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed with participant permission.

Field tests conducted prior to the investigation and revisions co-created by the research team confirmed the questions aligned with the research questions and purpose. The extensive literature review supported this methodology. For example, Fisher (2011) called for researchers to examine conflict transformation and those leadership behaviors thought to sustain it because there was a need to understand comprehensive transformation processes.

During the semi-structure interviews, which lasted an hour on average, the researcher acted as a facilitator, listening, observing, and asking probing questions of the participants to garner data addressing the research questions (Patton, 2002). The researcher sought to establish trust, maintain eye-contact, convey a genuine attitude, and through voice tone and cadence, actively listen to and connect with the participant (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Observations. To help the researcher obtain a richer understanding of the phenomena of exemplar leaders capable of transforming conflict, observations were
included when the opportunity was available, as noted in the field work log. The researcher used observations of HROs to garner data identifying their behaviors during conflict. Board meetings were open to the public and sometimes televised in K-12 education so access opportunities were readily available and informed consent was not necessary. It is impossible to thoroughly observe and document everything, so the researcher developed a salient features framework targeting the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors. Observation field notes included the who, what, where, when, how, and why as it related to what behaviors were repetitive and what behaviors were novel (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). No observations were conducted of non-public events.

**Examination of artifacts.** “Artifacts are tangible manifestations that describe people’s experience, knowledge, actions, and values” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 361). Artifacts include such items as meeting minutes, videos, and presentations when available. Archived documents provided a more comprehensive understanding of knowledge, context, and experiences HRO encountered. This documentation was available on school district web sites. Board meeting minutes fall under the public domain and were available, and many sites broadcast meetings as well. The researcher was able to explore two specific types of artifacts that led to further inquiry during subsequent interviews and observations: meeting documents and staff development training materials were collected. The value in examining training materials was to determine if there was evidence any of the six domains as topics the participants experienced as it was common for HRO training to include topics such as collaboration. Meeting agendas revealed if process methods and design were built in. Since it was
possible to discern evidence of planning from agenda’s, these items were considered justifiable data sources.

**Data Collection Procedures**

In this qualitative study, data collection occurred in the participant’s natural setting. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) outlined the phases of data collection as: planning, beginning data collection, basic data collection, closing data collection, and completion. Throughout the process, the researcher engaged in extensive fieldwork, employing data collection strategies to collect and store participant accounts of their experience. First, in the planning phase a team of 10 doctoral students worked with 3 university professors to develop a problem statement and initial research questions, pilot test interview questions, practice interviewing techniques, and serve as a resource for one another. Once scripted research questions were developed and field tested, researchers submitted their proposals to the BUIRB. After approval, the researchers scheduled interviews and observations, and collected artifact data.

Since this was a thematic dissertation, the type of setting and interviewees varied by study. The individual researchers determined the appropriate recruitment procedures for their organization of study. During the second phase, beginning data collection, the researcher established rapport and trust through email and telephone contact to schedule interviews and gain a sense of the participants.

During the third phase, basic data collection, the researcher began in earnest to gather data, keeping meticulous field notes to support verbatim recording, and tentative data analysis was initiated to determine early coding themes. Throughout both the second and third phase, as data were gathered and analyzed, themes emerged and the researcher
considered possible interpretations and verified codes with another coder to ensure validity. The fourth phase, closing data collection, occurred when the researcher completed the final interview. It was predetermined by the team that 15 participants represented an adequate number to provide a rich picture of the phenomena under examination. The fifth phase, completion, consisted of compiling the data from multiple sources into a coherent and meaningful presentation that synthesized the relationship of the parts (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

**Interviews.** Data from semi-structured interviews with 15 exemplar HROs employed in mid-sized California K-12 public school districts were collected. The data collection procedures for the interview involved multiple steps: creating and testing the interview questions, recruiting participants, the actual interview logistics and event, as well as data recording and post interview protocol.

Interviews were hour long events in which the researcher met with the interviewee at the interviewee’s convenience and selected site. Parties exchanged greetings and the interviewer thanked the participant. Prior to commencing the interview, the researcher reiterated the purpose of the study and the potential benefits it held for the field of HR and their organizations, such as the potential to create training programs. Participant rights were explained and presented in the form of a Participant’s Bill of Rights (Appendix C). The researcher obtained the participant’s consent on the required informed consent form (Appendix D). As interviews proceeded, emerging themes were investigated and documented in a field log. Since questions were open-ended, it was critical to avoid leading the participant. To be effective with this procedure, prior to interviewing actual subjects, the researcher participated in mock interviews under the
supervision of a qualified observer who critiqued the researchers’ facilitation of the interview process.

To further affirm the researcher was gathering valid data, the participants were asked to review the researcher’s synthesis of the interview to clarify or augment the researcher’s representations; all comments were recorded in the field work journal (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). At the conclusion of the interview, participants were asked to contribute artifacts they felt exemplified some of the topics discussed. In addition, participants were given the criteria for inclusion and asked to consider colleagues they considered exemplar meeting the study criteria requirements. Participants were asked to send a scripted letter to those they referred asking for permission to be contacted by the researcher. Participants were thanked for their time.

**Recruitment.** Through an investigation of ACSA award recipient archives, the researcher contacted potential participants, which in turn generated new leads. Each year ACSA recognized members who significantly contributed to their profession. This method generated names and contact information for several exemplar HROs. In addition, a sponsor was enlisted to allow further access to exemplary HROs.

**Sponsor recruitment.** A sponsor was acquired through the thematic dissertation researcher’s network of doctoral program professors. The sponsor, Dr. Patricia Clark-White, a former school district superintendent and Brandman University Associate Dean, was engaged to vouch for the researcher as a means of seeking participants. The sponsor composed a scripted letter to send potential interviewees detailing the nature of the study and the time commitment (Appendix E).
Potential participants who agreed to be contacted were sent an email (Appendix F) from the researcher to schedule an initial contact, explain the purpose of the research, and gain participant’s informed consent. Once a participant responded to the email, a follow-up telephone call was made to thank them for agreeing to participate and schedule the interview. Those who declined contact were sent an email thanking them for considering the proposal. Participants were provided a profile of the attributes or particular traits sought to assist the researcher in compiling a list of prospective interviewees.

**Letters.** The researcher was assisted by her dissertation chair and a committee member to generate the initial pool of contacts through their network of colleagues and the ACSA organization. The researcher sent an introductory letter (Appendix F) to those identified, explaining the nature of the study, why it was important, the criteria for inclusion, and asking for help to identify HROs meeting the criteria. A follow-up letter of thanks was sent to all who provided assistance.

**Timeframe of the study.** The study received approval from the BUIRB in November, 2015. Immediately thereafter, a research interview schedule was created to allow the researcher to accommodate participants at their convenience and arrange release time for the researcher from her place of employment. To create the schedule, previously identified HROs were contacted via email to schedule an appointment for an extended period of uninterrupted access to the participant. Participants were expecting to be contacted, since the researcher arranged for a sponsor to send an introduction letter on the researcher’s behalf. Based on recommendations from McMillan and Schumacher (2010), an hour was set as a realistic timeframe to conduct a phenomenological interview.
As expected, some interviews had to be rescheduled due to unforeseen circumstances. The research commenced during December, 2015 and culminated in January, 2016. Data collection and transcription were completed within the same timeframe, followed by coding of the data and review as data became available.

**Observations.** Observations had the advantage of not being limited to what the participant could recall since behaviors were recorded as they occurred naturally (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Observation protocols followed the steps for conducting observations in McMillan and Schumacher (2010), which included site selection, identification the observer’s role, entry into the site, and a general observation of the field; the process also commenced building rapport and familiarity with the organization and collecting preliminary data, adjusting the observer role, identifying more specific observations, focusing on targeted observation, and exiting the field.

Prior to the observation, the researcher outlined field note categories for each of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors because it was difficult “to conduct [observations] reliably for complex behaviors” (Millan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 209). The observations were conducted at school board meetings open to the public and commercially televised so informed consent was not necessary. Once the observation was complete, field notes that recorded what was seen and heard, including observer reflections on what transpired, were considered data and thus subjected to analysis. Additional notes were compiled immediately after leaving the site and reflective records tentatively identified interpretations and researcher questions. For example, the researcher noted her perception of the level of conflict intensity. The researcher was
proficient as a nonparticipant observer having served almost two decades as a public school educator engaged in observations of teachers and students.

**Artifact collection.** McMillan and Schumacher (2010) identified five strategies for collecting and analyzing artifacts: locating the artifacts, identifying the artifacts, analyzing the artifacts, critiquing the artifacts, and interpreting the meaning of the artifacts. Locating the artifacts began by requesting them from participants and downloading them from district websites. Documents were all available in the public domain, such as flyers representing training opportunities and professional development handouts presented during trainings. Documents were downloaded, printed, and catalogued with a brief description of who generated it and the purpose of the document. Not all documents available were of equal value; therefore, the researcher made judgements regarding the meaning of the document and its utility in illuminating the research questions. Corroborating the artifacts, interviews, and observation data served as method triangulation to enhance research validity (Patton, 2002).

**Data Analysis**

The previous section provided information on how the trustworthiness of the data was established. The next section explains the methods used to analyze data, as well as a rationale for the method selected. As Creswell (2014) suggested, data analysis was conducted on two levels blending general steps with specific research strategy steps to conduct “analysis of significant statements, the generation of meaning units, and the development of what Moustakas (1994) called an essence description” (p. 196).

Using data gathered from interviews, observations, and artifacts to examine the lived experience of exemplar HROs, the data analysis steps outlined by Creswell (2014)
were followed: data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection, noting points for potential inclusion in the final report; data were aggregated into a small number of themes; and NVIVO software assisted with coding data.

The researcher sought to identify if there was alignment between what HROs said about their experiences during conflict situations with what was observed in practice, as well as documented in meeting minutes. Of equal importance, discrepancies were included in the analysis. Triangulation of methods was considered by the thematic team as an essential component to strengthen the study (Patton, 2002).

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) reported qualitative analysis was an iterative, inductive process in which organizing the data into workable units was a crucial element. The basic ideas for organizing data were generated from the problem statement, the research questions and sub-questions, the interview script, the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors as theme categories, the researcher, and the data collected, which were then coded as themes emerged. For example, it was expected that emerging themes in conflict situations would focus on how the HRO handled resistors, naysayers or adversaries, in other words, who was involved in the situation. Conflict intensity, the what, was another theme expected to emerge. For example, Lederach (2003) suggested complexity was a theme likely to emerge when conflict was protracted. This type of data led to coding in more than one of the predetermined six domains.

The ultimate goal in qualitative research was to discover patterns in the data that allowed the researcher to make sense of what happened and derive valid general statements about relationships among the categories (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Reading the interviews in their entirety provided the gist or a general sense of what the
interview was about. The researcher attempted to discern if any underlying meaning was conveyed through the comments in the field notes. As topics common across interviews emerged, the segment topics were descriptively identified and assigned a preliminary abbreviation. The types of codes used included setting/context, participant perspectives about their roles, participant perspectives of others, activity, events, strategies, relationships, and social structures.

Setting and context described the specific situation in which the research was conduct. For example, the participant may convey the situation arose due to an organizational mandate. Participant perspectives included the way participants communicated their ideas about specific aspects of the situation. For example, HROs would be expected to mention their role as an intermediary between upper management and employees. Participants’ thinking about others included the words they used to describe others and their roles. An example of this would be if they described a resistor as someone who lacked all of the facts as opposed to as always being difficult. Processes included words or phrases the participant used to represent sequences of events or change over time. This code was considered crucial to the investigation of conflict transformation. Activity depicted regularly occurring behavior. For example, HROs were expected to talk about their daily job requirements. Conversely, events would be those activities that occurred infrequently or were novel. Relationships and social structures were how the participant interacted with others in dyads, coalitions, and large and small groups. Strategies included how the participant accomplished things, such as what techniques, tactics, or skills were used. This code was considered essential to the investigation and as to the whether the six domains were expressed by exemplar HROs.
Limitations

Qualitative research provides rich data useful for examining complex phenomena; however, it holds limitations. Limitations, according to Roberts (2010), were those areas the researcher generally had no control over that could negatively affect the ability to generalize findings. Qualitative researchers could study additional cases and generalize findings to new cases, according to Creswell (2003). Therefore, it was imperative for the researcher to anticipate and address criticisms by being open and clear as to the limitations of the study (Patton, 2002).

Phenomenological research occurs in a natural setting; therefore, this study was not readily replicable. Whereas the naturalistic setting was said to be more experimentally valid, some question the ecological validity of the one-to-one encounter with the researcher. In addition, participants interviewed were asked to recall conflicts in their workplace and to provide detailed accounts of outcomes based on recall of the experience over time. It can be argued a participant’s memory of the event and willingness to share all pertinent information were limitations.

This study expected to capture the interplay between conflict transformation behaviors; however, the interview protocol asked participants think about, discuss, and replay past conflict experiences linked to individual behavioral domains. So, it was strength that the theme was chosen in advance eliminating non-relevant material and used open-ended questions for elaboration and clarity, but it could also limit the responses participants offered. To date, research largely ignored the concomitant relationship between behavioral domains.
The following limitations of the study should also be considered when interpreting the results: time, researcher as the instrument, sampling technique, data analysis, and geography.

**Time**

Conducting qualitative research is time-consuming. The research timeline added considerable constraints. The researcher was cleared through BUIRB to proceed with data collection during the month of November resulting in an attempt to schedule interviews throughout the holiday season. Participants were not always available to dedicate the full recommended hour to an interview and some participants were interrupted due to job demands.

**Instrument**

This qualitative study used the researcher as the instrument. Although precautions were taken to limit researcher bias and the research was trained on good qualitative interview techniques, the researcher acknowledged that in an inductive, iterative process, some degree of subjectivity was inherent. Furthermore, entry into the field was subject to availability through the networking system, where participants recommended additional colleagues who meet the study criteria. The researcher had no working relationship with any of the participants and building rapport was limited by time constraints and geography.

**Sample Size**

Qualitative research gave rise to specific sampling limitations according to Patton (2002), including limitations in the situations that were sampled, limitations from the time period during which observations occurred, and limitations based on selectivity in
the people who were sampled. The thematic research team established a sample size of 15 participants was sufficient to obtain adequate phenomenological data after considering factors such as the demanding schedules of exemplar participants.

**Replication**

Exemplar HROs were assumed to be unique individuals so findings cannot be extrapolated to the general population. It was also possible that participants did not disclose or recall all relevant information.

**Geography**

The study delimited candidates to the counties located in central and southern California. Access was intentionally limited to participants that could be reached within a two-hour commute of the researcher. However, some meetings and observations were conducting via telephone and skype to broaden the candidate pool when it became evident that award winning HROs contacted through ACSA were spread beyond a reasonable driving distance. Although this broadened the candidate pool, it limited the use of face-to-face interviewing that would allow the researcher to build a relationship with the interviewee and could be expected to provide a richer picture of the participant’s experience.

**Summary**

This phenomenological study as part of a thematic dissertation and explored the lived experiences of exemplar California K-12 school district HROs as they established common ground, transformed conflict, and achieved breakthrough results for their organizations. The chapter provided a review of the purpose statement and research questions previously presented in Chapter I. Additionally, the research design and
methodology used in this study were presented in a detailed description of data collection and data analysis processes, with an explanation of interview techniques, participant selection method, the steps employed to increase validity and reliability, and limitations to the study. To understand the researcher’s personal perspective that influenced the data collection, additional information was also provided on the researcher’s background in the field of education.

A qualitative, phenomenological research design was used to garner rich, descriptive information on the experiences of exemplar HROs through the use of scripted interview questions designed by a team of researchers to look at the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors. Data were collected and analyzed on behaviors thought to influence transforming conflict: collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, ethics, process, and problem solving. Data collection and analysis procedures were explained, as were threats to reliability and validity. Steps the researcher took to ensure the methodology supported credibility and trustworthiness of the findings were thoroughly outlined.

Chapter IV provides a brief overview of the chapter categories, including the purpose, research questions, methodology, data collection procedures, and population and sample. The remainder of the chapter presents a detailed report of the research findings. Chapter V offers a brief summary of the purpose statement, research questions, methods, population, and sample. The chapter culminates with a summary of key findings, implications for action, and recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

To discover and describe the lived experiences of exemplar Human Resource Officers (HROs), this qualitative phenomenological study was conducted based on the framework of the six domains of conflict transformative behaviors thought to contribute to finding common ground and achieving breakthrough results in the organization. This chapter begins with a restatement of the purpose statement and research questions, along with a summary of the research methods, data collection procedures, population, sample and target sample, and participant demographic. Next, an analysis of the data is presented. Finally, the chapter culminates with a summary of the findings.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover and describe how successful HROs established common ground and produced breakthrough results by utilizing the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors.

Research Questions

This study was guided by one central research question and six sub-questions, one for each of the domains. The central research question for the study was: What are the lived experiences of successful HROs in establishing common ground and producing breakthrough results by engaging in elements of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors?

The sub-questions for the study were:

- Collaboration - How do successful HROs use collaboration to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?
• Communication - How do successful HROs use communication to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

• Emotional Intelligence (EI) - What aspects of EI do successful HROs use to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

• Ethics - How do successful HROs use ethics to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

• Problem-Solving - How do successful HROs use problem-solving strategies to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

• Processes - What processes do successful HROs use to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

**Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures**

As a qualitative phenomenological study, personal interviews using scripted questions were conducted with 15 current or former California K-12 public school HROs. Operating on the assumption that human behavior lacked simple explanations when considering the complexities of the interaction of multiple factors, interviews, observations, and artifact reviews were conducted to explore how exemplar HROs utilized the six domains of conflict transformative behaviors. The primary data source was anecdotal data derived from scripted interview questions which were digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded.

**Interview Data Collection**

Interview data collection questions, derived from the six domains of conflict transformative behavior, focused on experiences or behaviors, opinions and values, feelings, knowledge, and sensory perceptions, in addition to the participant’s background
or demographic information. The scripted interview questions for this study were
developed by the thematic dissertation team to uncover and describe the experiences of
exemplar leaders. All participants were asked the same standardized set of scripted
questions and sub-questions based on the six domains of conflict transformative
behaviors: collaboration, communication, EI, ethics, problem-solving, and process
(Appendix A). Additional follow up questions were asked based on participants’
responses. Each interview was audio-recorded while the researcher took notes of key
words, phrases, and body language. Soon after each interview was conducted, the audio
recordings were transcribed and once all interviews concluded, the transcripts were coded
for emergent themes. Audio recordings were instrumental in the transcription of
interviews in a format that allowed the researcher to upload them into the data coding
software NVIVO. In keeping with Brandman University Institutional Review Board
(BUIRB) requirements, participant identities were kept confidential with each participant
was identified as HRO1, HRO 2, HRO 3, etc.

Observation Data Collection

At the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked if opportunities were
available to observe them during the course of their workday to gather additional data on
specific behaviors. Observations were conducted in the public domain to avoid the
necessity of gathering informed consent. Some invitations to observe board meetings
were extended, although focus groups, committee meetings, and stakeholder groups were
also options. The researcher attended some board meetings with participants who were
now superintendents when it became evident HROs were not generally presenting at
board meetings. In addition, board meetings were scheduled monthly, so given the
researcher’s time constraints, it was not feasible to observe all participants. The researcher also attended a district sponsored event open to all stakeholders which was followed by a question and answer session orchestrated by the study participant. For events the researcher attended, field notes were recorded as a non-participant observer. The researcher attended two public board meetings, a negotiators symposium, and a question and answer session presented to stakeholders following a screening of the documentary *Most Likely to Succeed*. Field notes were transferred into document form, coded for emergent themes, and uploaded into NVIVO software for data coding.

**Artifact Data Collection**

Artifact data collection consisted of materials provided to the researcher by the participant’s secretary or through a search of databases in the public domain, primarily school district websites. Websites provided access to mission and vision statements, meeting agendas, newsletters, communications to stakeholders, negotiated contract information, and audio and video recordings. Artifacts were entered into the NVIVO database for coding to discern emergent themes.

**Population**

The population for this study was all HROs working in California school districts. The California state public school system has 1,028 districts with each school district having a superintendent and assistant superintendents. The study sampling frame consisted of exemplar California K-12 assistant superintendents of HR in districts of 5,000 to 25,000 students. The study target population was assistant superintendents of HR working in K-12 districts within an average daily attendance (ADA) of 5,000 to 25,000 students identified as Association of California Schools Administrators (ACSA)
award winners. In California, there are 343 unified school districts, with 242 being K-12 districts within those 182 were midsized districts, listed as not among the largest or smallest in the state (Cal Ed Facts, 2015). The rationale for setting the parameters for this study to districts of 5,000 to 25,000 ADA as the target population was because districts of this size were large enough to provide many serious conflict situations that would call for transformation, but were small enough that the conflict situations were not exaggerated beyond what would be typical among California districts. In California, HROs in unified school districts meeting this configuration were identified through the California Department of Education website, (Cal Ed Facts, 2015).

Sample

The sample was those participants selected from the target population. The participants for this study were selected from the target population of HROs meeting the study criteria for exemplar HRO leaders working in California’s 182 mid-sized school districts. To be considered an exemplar leader, was determined the HRO needed to display or demonstrate at least five of the following six criteria:

- Evidence of successful relationships with all stakeholders
- Evidence of breaking through conflict to achieve organizational success
- Five or more years of experience in the field
- Written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings
- Peer recognition as ACSA award winners
- Membership in associations of groups focused on their field

The researcher enrolled the first 15 award-winning HROs meeting the study parameters who responded to e-mails and telephone requests to participate. The 15
participants were HROs employed in mid-sized California school districts of 5,000 to 25,000 ADA, and identified as exemplar through the ACSA.

**Demographic Data**

The study participants all moved up the ranks to HRO via “the teacher ladder,” and they all met or exceeded this study’s criteria as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Qualifying Criteria for Exemplar Human Resource Officers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HRO #</th>
<th>Evidence of successful relationships with stakeholders</th>
<th>Evidence of resolving conflict to achieve organizational success</th>
<th>A minimum of five years of experience in the profession</th>
<th>Articles (A), papers (P), or materials written (W), published (PL), or presented at conferences or association meetings (PR)</th>
<th>Peer Recognition as ACSA award winners</th>
<th>Membership in professional associations in their field such as the ACSA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PL</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PL</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PL</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PL</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PR</td>
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<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PL</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PL</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PL</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants all had five or more years of experience with the majority still serving in the HRO capacity; however, three were now school district superintendents. In the course of their duties, all participants had written/published or presented at conferences or association meetings. In addition, all of the participants had been recognized by their peers as ACSA award winners either at the state or regional levels.

The exemplar HROs in this study consisted of eight male and seven female participants. All participants were former classroom teachers and served as school administrators. Table 2 shows the demographic data of the population sample included in the study. The mean for years of experience was 15.8 and the average number of years spent in the field of education was 29.7. The age range for the exemplar HROs was 41-65 years old, and the education level for exemplar HROs was equal with seven doctorates and seven masters degrees, and one participant holding a bachelor’s degree. The most common path to HR was via the teacher track, then as a school administrator.
Table 2

Demographics for Human Resource Officers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HRO #</th>
<th>Years as HRO</th>
<th>Years in Education</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>No. of Districts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>41-65</td>
<td>Ed. D</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>41-65</td>
<td>Ed. D</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>41-65</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>41-65</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>41-65</td>
<td>Ed. D</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41-65</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>41-65</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>41-65</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>41-65</td>
<td>Ed. D</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>65+</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>41-65</td>
<td>Ed. D</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>41-65</td>
<td>Ed. D</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>41-65</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>41-65</td>
<td>Ed. S</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>41-65</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Presented in this chapter are findings that emerged through personal interviews using scripted interview questions, observations, and artifacts to triangulate anecdotal accounts of the lived experiences of exemplar HROs. The study’s central and sub research questions were the basis used to report the findings.

Interview Process and Procedures

Data collection commenced with identifying and contacting California state and regional ACSA award winning HROs employed in mid-sized school districts. The ACSA website maintains an archival list of previous state winners and e-mails were sent to ACSA regional offices to gather archival data on the regional winners. The researcher sent an introductory letter from her sponsor, Dr. Patricia Clark-White, to 7 state winners.
and 15 regional winners. In addition, three participants were contacted face-to-face during the 2016 ACSA negotiators symposium and consented to participate. Participants were chosen from this list based on their willingness to share their stories. Interviews were scheduled based on the participant’s availability. Prior to the meeting, participants were provided copies of the required study documents through e-mail (informed consent, research participant bill of rights, participant demographic form, and audio recording release form); prior to the interview, these documents were presented for signatures so the participants had an opportunity to ask questions prior to being collected by the researcher.

Interviews began with greetings, introductions, and an explanation of the participants bill of rights, followed by a presentation and signing of the BUIRB required informed consent form and consent to be audiotaped form. Participants were assured of confidentiality and that they would be identified as HRO 1, HRO 2, and so forth. Next, the recorded portion of the interview protocol consisted of a brief overview of the study that outlined the its purpose. Participants were asked scripted interview questions during a private, audio-recorded session generally lasting about an hour. One participant declined to be recorded and her answers were meticulously transcribed by the researcher during the interview. Questions posed during the interview focused on the six domains of conflict transformative behaviors.

**Observation Process and Procedures**

Patton explained, “To understand fully the complexity of many situations, direct participation and observation of the phenomenon of interest may be the best research method” (Patton, 2002, p. 23). To that end, upon conclusion of the interviews participants
were asked to be observed when interacting with stakeholder groups in public settings. However, when asked about board meetings, one HRO explained, “I very rarely talk at those things. Most of what I do is informal with various groups I need to talk to and some of them are right down the hall.” Most of the available venues were evening board meetings that were scheduled once a month. Time did not permit the researcher to attend one per participant. Therefore, the opportunity to see these leaders engaging in the six domains of conflict transformative behaviors during times where it would be possible to observe common ground being established or breakthrough results occurring within the public domain was minimal. Table 3 presents the observation session types and duration.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observation Type</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District Board Meetings</td>
<td>6 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACSA Negotiators Symposium</td>
<td>5 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District-Sponsored Community Event</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the two board meetings, negotiators symposium, and question and answer session after a community event, observation field records were meticulously kept and transcribed for coding.

Collection of Artifacts

“Artifacts are tangible manifestations that describe people’s experience, knowledge, actions, and values” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 361). It was possible to collect artifacts from each of the participants, usually provided by their secretaries or obtained through the public domain such as artifacts posted on websites.
Table 4 presents the types of artifacts collected. Meeting agendas, reports, newsletters, staff bulletins, community meeting reports, and vision and mission statements were readily accessible public documents. As mentioned in the previous chapter, not all documents available were of equal value; therefore, the researcher made selections regarding the document’s utility in answering the research questions.

Table 4

**Types of Artifacts Collected**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artifact Type</th>
<th>Number of Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent communication</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple stakeholder messages</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper articles</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website communique</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee communique</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To administrative staff</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board policy documents</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission statements</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation memorandum</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symposium materials (PowerPoints, flyers, agenda)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACSA regional meeting minutes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Inter-coder Reliability**

“Inter-coder reliability is the widely used term for the extent to which independent coders evaluate a characteristic of a message or artifact and reach the same conclusion” (Lombard et al., 2004, p. 2). Qualitative studies are inherently susceptible to researcher biases because the researcher is the instrument used to gather data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). To strengthen the study reliability, one strategy used to alleviate researcher bias and to minimize the possibility of coding errors was to subject the data to coding by more than one person. In this study, another peer-researcher was given 2 of the 15 transcribed interviews (13.3%) and the data coded by the primary researcher. The
thematic team set the agreement standard at 90% as the optimal, and 80% as acceptable agreement between coders. Agreement results between the two coders was at the 90% level, thus meeting the goal the team set.

**Results for the Central Research Question**

The central research question examined the lived experiences of exemplar leaders in the field of HR in establishing common ground and producing breakthrough results by engaging in elements of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors. The participants had all moved into HR via the “teacher ladder,” with three who went on to become superintendents. The researcher inquired of each participant, “Through the lens of HR, can you share a time when you were faced with conflict in your organization and were able to find common ground to breakthrough conflict?” All 15 participants were able to relate a time conflict was avoided, reduced, or overcome to produce breakthrough results by using aspects of the six domains of conflict transformative behaviors. Each participant identified two primary areas of conflict that were handled by HR, labor negotiations and employee discipline.

**Conflict Types and Topics**

The team of peer-researchers defined conflict as any cognitive (perceptual), emotional (feeling), and behavioral (action) dimension that differed from another cognitive (perceptual), emotional (feeling), and/or behavioral (action) dimension; this difference could be individual or collective (Kouzakova et al., 2012; Mayer, 2012). Conflict can be found at the micro level specific to individuals or groups, or at the macro level engaging the whole system. The HROs as organizational leaders were responsible for integrating changes whether they were addressing conflict at the micro level,
facilitating meeting and planning sessions, or handling employee disciplinary issues, or at
the macro level as they facilitated large-scale system change such as collective bargaining
issues. All 15 HROs participating in this study reported having to address the following
two types of conflict: labor negotiations being a primary macro level source of conflict,
and employee discipline issues being the primary source of micro level conflict. In fact,
two of the participants were embroiled in labor negotiations with teacher unions during
the time of the interview and were currently experiencing conflict in their organizations.

When the interviews were transcribed and coded, two main sources of conflict
were identified and predominant themes emerged as to how HROs used conflict
transformative behaviors to find common ground and achieve breakthrough results. The
emerging themes were examined through the lens of the six domains of conflict
transformative behaviors (collaboration, communication, EI, ethics, problem-solving, and
processes) with noticeable overlap between individual domains. After a careful analysis
of the responses, several emergent themes were uncovered in each of the domains as
HROs reported that to transform conflict and produce breakthrough results, their first
order of business was to intentionally build trusting relationships with diverse
stakeholders so as to involve them in problem-solving and decision-making by utilizing
processes and protocols, along with their people skills, to work through conflict.
Intentional involvement was evident with comments such as, “stakeholders understand
we are willing to move forward in a manner to where we not only acknowledge what we
think and what we believe, but we’re also going to acknowledge what other people think
and what they believe.”
Results for Sub-Questions

Themes emerged during the coding process within each of the individual six domains of conflict transformation behaviors (collaboration, communication, EI, ethics, problem-solving, and process). The 23 themes were associated with how HROs engaged in those conflict transformative behaviors in an effort to find common ground and produce breakthrough results (Figure 1).

![Themes Per Domain](image)

*Figure 1.* Number of major themes identified for each domain.

Five themes emerged under the ethics domain, whereas the collaboration, EI, and problem-solving domains each had four themes identified. This was followed by the domains of communication and process with three themes each. The higher number of themes per domain did not necessarily equate with the highest number of references from
participants. Ethics with 5 themes had 138 references; however, collaboration, with 4 themes, had the highest number of references with 153. Communication with 3 themes had 124 reference, EI had 4 themes and 118 references, process had 3 themes and 109 references, problem-solving had 4 themes and 94 references, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Number of references per domain.

Of the six conflict transformation domains, communication represented 17% of the references, collaboration represented 21%, EI 16%, ethics 18%, problems-solving 13%, and process represented 15% of the total references. HRO’s collaborative behaviors stood out among the domains having the largest percentage of the references (21%). The six domains are discussed in the following section along with findings specific to each.

Major Themes Related to Collaboration

The theoretical definition of common ground as provided by the peer-research team was an interplay of intentions of people from different sociocultural backgrounds,
differences, and cultures while finding a foundation of common interest or comprehension (Horowitz, 2007; Jacobsen, 1999; Kecskes & Zhang, 2009; Moore, 2013; Snowe, 2013; Tan & Manca, 2013). The operational definition for common ground was defined by the peer-research team as when all parties involved aspired to, and were willing to work toward, a new vision of the future together, one that met everyone’s deep-seated concerns and values (Search for Common Ground, n.d.). This study revealed exemplar HROs frequently referenced collaborative behaviors to create or foster an organizational climate of collaboration to work through conflict and find common ground.

Collaboration was defined by the peer-research team as the ability to involve others, in a mutually beneficial and accountable manner, which allowed for achievement or acceptance of agreed upon goals (Hansen, 2009). Participants were asked to share stories about using collaboration to find common ground and achieve breakthrough results, which they felt could assist other leaders dealing with organizational conflict. The behavioral domain collaboration was reported by all 15 participants with a total of 153 references within 4 emergent themes: establishing the primacy of relationship building to the success of finding common ground, intentionally involving all stakeholders in the decision-making process, institutionalizing a collaborative organizational culture by incorporating an interest-based, and transforming conflict by creating a cultural environment where common ground could occur. Table 5 presents the four collaboration themes followed by a discussion of each theme.
Table 5

*How exemplar Human Resource Officers use Collaboration*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th>Sources of Theme</th>
<th>References of Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establishing the primacy of relationship building to the success of finding</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>common ground</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentionally involving all stakeholders in the decision-making process</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutionalizing a collaborative organizational culture by incorporating</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an interest-based approach</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transforming conflict by creating a cultural environment where common ground</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>could occur</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Sources include transcribed interviews, observations, and artifacts.

All participants interviewed claimed that to create an environment where common ground could occur, collaboration was a key element. For example, one participant stated, “Any more in an organization, you cannot work in isolation. In order to enact meaningful change, I believe the power in any organization is in relationships and inspiring others to act. So collaboration is a central part of that.” In fact, creating a collaborative cultural environment where common ground could occur was so highly desirable, the organization publicly embedded it in their processes as evidenced by the following excerpt from a district-disseminated communication artifact:

Following Board approval, the Superintendent shall maintain a current district organization chart, which designates lines of primary responsibility and the relationships between all district positions. Lines of responsibility shall in no way prevent staff members at all levels from collaborating, communicating, and cooperating to develop the best possible programs and provide efficient service.
Furthermore, the researcher observed that collaboration, communication, and cooperation encompassed diverse stakeholder groups. For example, during the question and answer panel that was observed, the panel consisted of teacher representatives from various grade levels each of whom was invited to share their perspectives on the district’s efforts to provide students with the skills necessary to compete in the 21st century. Three of the panelists felt the district was moving in the right direction; however, two panelists felt that teaching to the test was still a component for fundamental skills. The HRO conducting the panel discussion posed questions and encouraged stakeholders to express opinions. From the distance the researcher was sitting, panelists appeared comfortable expressing divergent opinions.

Establishing the primacy of relationship building to the success of finding common ground. Interviews, observations, and artifacts made 50 references across 19 sources as to the importance of building trusting relationships with diverse stakeholders. Participants indicated the difficulty establishing common ground when relationships were fractured. Typically cited causes of mistrust were historically adversarial relations such as lack of follow through on prior agreements, decisions made arbitrarily or shrouded in secrecy, and disregarding alternate viewpoints. One participant speaking of employees stated, “People don’t like it when they feel like it’s been done to them,” as opposed to with them. In agreement, another participant emphatically stated, “I don’t like it, you wouldn’t like it, and they don’t like it.” For example, one district currently undergoing some heated labor negotiations was observed during a board meeting. In a show of solidarity among union members, a standing room crowd of teachers gathered clad in matching red shirts, and when their spokesperson addressed the board in a brief statement
he announced, “We are here with you, not against you.” The HRO stated the teachers wanted to show their commitment to staying connected and maintaining the relationship with the organization. At that same board meeting, another disgruntled employee presented facts that the district had violated their fair hiring practices. The board directed the superintendent to investigate the claim, publically displaying equal consideration for their relationships with employees whether it was with an individual’s concern or a system-wide issue.

**Intentionally involving all stakeholders in the decision-making process.**

Specifically seeking to find out what aspects of collaboration participants viewed as important to convey to other leaders, intentionally involving stakeholders in the decision-making process emerged as a theme when 15 sources made 45 references to the need to be as proactive as possible by “bringing everyone to the table” and “trying to have a balance of people.” In the process of intentionally bringing people together, it was suggested to conduct both formal and informal meetings and follow-up. Some HROs reported the need for large informational meetings, “where everybody is hearing the same message” then following-up with meetings with various stakeholders or groups.

Participants stressed that to avert or alleviate conflict, they needed to give people advanced notification when something was coming down the pike because people generally did not like surprises. In addition to the meeting format of stakeholder involvement (large versus intimate, formal versus informal), all participants spoke to why there was a need to involve everyone with a stake in the issue. One participant gave this example of why stakeholder involvement was critical:
Just think, one of the errors that we make constantly in administration is we make these decisions, have some input, and are absent in doing our homework, which is bad enough, but then we implement them without asking people, “Hey, this is what I came up with. Do you think it’s going to fly?” It’s just one of those things. I think a lot of times a peer will define a problem or create a solution, and we’ll go way down the road in developing where we want to go. Then we let people know; we expect them to be with us and we get where? Back here at the starting gate because they haven’t been down the process. They haven’t been involved. So I think a lot of good ideas fail. A lot of ideas fail not because they weren’t good ideas, a lot of good ideas fail because we didn’t go through the process and define it. I’m a big fan of doing homework.

An additional participant gave an example of successful movement when stakeholders were involved. The HRO, new to the district, was attempting to roll out a new technology plan and said, “I wanted to grow a grass roots effort coming from the bottom, not the top down, meaning the emotional side as well as the intellectual side of teachers and leaders.” So the HRO went to five technology-savvy teachers and asked them to find ten more and those ten to find ten more and so on and so on. She reported, “by the end of the year, we had about 250 teachers who were really excited and participated in trainings voluntarily.”

Intentional involvement of stakeholders was promoted by all participants when discussing the use of collaboration and the impact it had on breaking through conflict. In this light, one HRO from a rapidly growing district shared:
I mean, we had everybody engaged and involved, and I’m not just talking about my teachers and those folks and my administration. It was everybody from my lead custodian to my cooks in the cafeteria to everybody who was a part of the organization.

The HROs firmly believed potential conflict was reduced when everybody was engaged and involved in the process.

**Institutionalizing a collaborative organizational culture by incorporating an interest-based approach.** Not all HROs adhered to the notion that the Interest-Based Bargaining (IBB) approach was in and of itself adequate. Three HROs posited a hybrid model where some issues were interest-based others were presented in a positional fashion with negotiators going back and forth between groups. The researcher noted IBB was a different approach than interest-based as a collaboration tool. Interest-based collaboration was evident along a continuum of practices with some HROs advocating for an IBB model with fidelity when just beginning the process. In the IBB process, bargaining negotiations were first conducted through practice sessions with a facilitator who redirected when people resorted to being positional. Team members were taught specifically how to interact in a collaborative, solution-oriented manner. In this type of negotiation, everything was conducted out in the open with behavioral norms and expectations in place. Conversely, positional bargaining, indicated as more adversarial, was conducted with parties in separate rooms and lawyers or negotiators from both sides going back and forth between parties. Although three participants said positional bargaining had a place in negotiations, nobody wanted to go back to the old adversarial stance.
Instead, some participants adopted a hybrid model with one participant stating the facilitator no was longer needed; another district new to the process spoke of their efforts at finding the right highly skilled facilitator which took time. Participants spoke of interest-based as a collaborative tool in which their goal was to transform the way conflict was treated within the organizational culture. An example of one HRO with a mindset to change the culture of her organization explained her process as: “We then grew that—my mission again was not to have negotiation but have it transform the organization.” Her team developed what she felt was a mastery of the interest-based skills. Then she approached the associations about making it more widespread so it could be an interest-based model or interest-based approach rather than IBB. Once they agreed she described:

I worked with the facilitator and wrote a 15-hour curriculum on things that were most applicable in our daily work. So not necessarily negotiation, but how do you follow an interest-based model as a principal working with your staff or with your staff working with your principal?

She invited the site representatives and all of the teacher representatives as well as all the administrators on the campus. Everyone committed to 16 hours of training and had input.

A final point reiterated by all participants was collaboration took time. The participants all referred to the need to establish respectful relationships with stakeholders by including them in the decision-making process in an authentic, collaborative environment where communication was bidirectional and conflict was treated as a natural occurrence in the process of moving the organization forward.
Transforming conflict by creating a cultural environment where common ground could occur. All of the HROs intentionally cultivated an environment where common ground could occur by (1) establishing trusting relationships with stakeholders, (2) holding meetings among stakeholders formally and informally regularly to promote meaningful dialogue, and (3) discussing issues from thoughtfully considered positions based on facts and data rather than emotions. However, HRO 10 indicated that peoples’ perspectives sometimes were the available data and it then became critical to determine what was really at the heart of the matter.

All HROs indicated they identified the issue or need, did their homework regarding what was known about the issue, attempted to involve those people concerned, and shifted the focus from the problem to the potential solutions. One HRO explained how she sought out and established a trusting and collaborative relationship with the teacher’s union after learning the district had a history of adversarial relationships with the union. Another HRO recalled, “You need to meaningfully engage people, and so the best way to do that is through smaller groups and you need to really strategically orchestrate that.” The common thread in the HRO statements was the emphasis on intentionally creating a collaborative environment where stakeholders could work through conflict. After collaboration, communication was the next highest referenced domain with 17%.

Themes Related to Communication

Communication was defined by the peer research team as the transferring of meaning from sender to receiver, while overcoming noise and filters, so that the intended meaning was received by the intended recipient (Daft, 2012; Hellriegel & Slocum, 2004;
Maxwell, 2010; Schermerhorn et al., 2008; Stuart, 2012; Wyatt, 2014). When asked about stories involving the use of communication to find common ground, the HROs were unanimous in their declarations that successfully breaking through conflict required clear, effective, transparent communication. All 15 participants addressed the need for communicating with diverse stakeholder groups with an emphasis on the message conveyed and from the standpoint of listening to each other with respect. The act of intentionally ensuring communication was received and understood by stakeholders was referenced 60 times among the participants. Table 6 presents an overview of the three major themes followed by a more detailed discussion of each theme.

Table 6

How Exemplar Human Resource Officers use Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th># Sources of Theme</th>
<th># References of Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intentionally ensuring communication was received and understood by diverse stakeholders</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening and being responsive to stakeholders</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making it a priority to be transparent, approachable, and accessible to all stakeholders</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Sources include transcribed interviews, observations, and artifacts.*

**Intentionally ensuring communication was received and understood by diverse stakeholders.** Intentionally ensuring communication was received and understood by diverse stakeholders was cited by HROs as an integral part of their workday. Exemplar HROs emphasized consistent and regular communications, including asking questions in different ways to verify what they heard what was meant, and vice versa. In fact, almost all HROs (94%) claimed to test their messages before they sent them out to ensure the intent was clear, and said that on occasion, they would find that
the message was not received as intended. Sometimes it was merely a matter of semantics whereas other times the misinterpretation was a lack of consideration for the audiences. For example, one HRO stated he composed a message that for parents, so he gave it to a staff member who was also a parent in that district and asked, “What do you get from this?” only to find he was off the mark from what he intended to convey. Sometimes miscommunication created confusion, other times chaos, and still other times it created conflict. One HRO recounted an email that went out about some cookies that escalated into such a major ordeal it came to be known as “the cookie incident.” That incident involved misinterpretation resulting in hurt feelings; however, the implications could have much more serious consequences when the miscommunication was between an administrator and a subordinate.

In the following example of communication that created conflict, HRO 9 suggested that,

Sometimes there’s conflicts about what does this contract language mean? What does it mean by ‘professional day?’ You can leave at the end of your professional day. So there’s conflict that the principal thinks that the teacher’s leaving work too early. Well, what are the common agreements? Have we communicated about those? I think that the contract is too often we agree upon it, and we put it aside, and we don’t educate our members–both members, meaning the union members and the principals on what does this mean.

Effective communication was the most referenced theme (60) in the data, and listening to all stakeholders and acknowledging their intrinsic right to be heard from their
own perspective was referenced 46 times through interviews, observations, and artifact data. For example, artifacts were collected calling on stakeholders to let their voices be heard at Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) meetings, and observations at board meetings and a question and answer session provided data supporting participant assertions that they actively sought stakeholder input.

**Listening and being responsive to stakeholders.** Listening and being responsive to stakeholders benefited both the organization and the stakeholders. As one participant acknowledged:

I don’t want to presume and limit your response because I really want to hear and we have changed directions different times depending on the perspective that we’ve heard and I get that and understand it, then bring it to my executive cabinet and get different feedback.

Listening and being heard from one’s own perspective was referenced 46 times. Listening was cited as key, and as one participant put it, “communication is 100%; it is owning what you’re hearing, as well as what you’re saying.” He furthered, “To me, that doesn’t necessarily resolve the problem, but at least you’ve narrowed it down to what the issue is. It’s not a lack of clarity or a lack of understanding.” The participant noted, “You may have a fundamental disagreement or you may actually find that you don’t.” For this HRO, the most important part of communication was the listening part because and needing to hear other’s perspectives of the issue. He reported, “it may or may not work, and then see if we can find that common ground…by genuinely engaging in that conversation from understanding where they’re coming from.”
Another HRO made the point, “listening requires being responsive, because once you know about something, you own it, you can’t plead ignorance.” She felt that if someone brought an issue to HR, it was because it was important to them, so the least she could do was take the time to hear them out and then follow through. However, HROs were in a unique position and as one participant recounted:

So many times I’ll listen to the employee and get their side of the story, and then I need to go and very carefully work with the manager and try to get them to see where the employee’s coming from and without insulting them that I’m taking sides with the employee over management and vice versa. So there’s that tightrope that you walk because you try to see from both perspectives.

**Making it a priority to be transparent, approachable, and accessible to all stakeholders.** Making it a priority to be transparent, approachable, and accessible to all stakeholders was so important in one district that their HRO reported, “I want people to know this is not called the district office. We intentionally call it the [support center] and we support. That’s what we do. That is our job, to support.” He believed what people thought had a huge impact and related to transparency as well.

Communicating with stakeholders in a manner that was transparent and where staff were approachable and available was referenced 18 times as being a proactive, upfront way to reduce or avoid conflict. One HRO reasoned:

Well, I think you’re out there. You’re in it. You know, you’re visible. You’re part of it. You don’t just say “here’s what it is, go do it.” You go to the meetings. You go to the follow-up. You get in classrooms. So you see.
Another HRO described what being visible during conflict meant to her. She reported, “I was available well into the evening and on the weekend through that whole process of laying people off, in my office holding office hours. Any teacher, any classified employee, any employee could come and meet with me.” Her doors were open and she told people, “Come and look through the file, make sure my information is correct, ask me anything you want to ask me.” She commented, “They often didn’t like the answer that I had, but they had someone they could talk to.” She believed the problem was often times when faced with crisis, people hid and avoided it. She believed she needed to share it all, even if it might be an uncomfortable conversation, which she indicated it often times was, in an effort to maintain transparency.

An HRO referred to his organization as a teaching and learning organization, where the adults were learning too and those not listening were not learning. He reflected,

We have great communication and we get things done. We don’t have labor strife. We’ll have unhappy people, as in any organization, especially one this size, but we don’t have strife. We’re not at odds. We are not bickering over little things. I think that says a lot.

An important aspect to finding common ground, according to that participant, was always listening and being aware, and he reported, “the big one for me is empathy.” Communicating from a position of mutual respect and empathy was discussed by all participants. The following section on the domain of EI further explores those findings.

**Themes Related to Emotional Intelligence**

EI was defined by the peer research team as the self-awareness of one’s own emotions and motivations, and the ability to understand the emotions of others in social
settings, which allowed for management of behavior and relationships (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009; Hellriegel & Slocum, 2004). Participants were asked to share stories of times when EI helped them find common ground and achieve breakthrough results. Three participants hesitated and asked the researcher to define EI and the definition agreed upon by the team of peer researchers was shared. The domain garnered 118 references across the 4 EI themes identified. The first theme described the participants’ self-awareness (38 references), the second theme described how they model those behaviors (27 references), the third theme described how they consciously attempted to understand the perspective of others (29 references), and the last theme described how participants sought sustainable solutions by digging deeper into the issues or situations (24 references). Table 7 presents the overview of the four major EI themes and is followed by a more detailed discussion of each theme.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Exemplar Human Resource Officers use Emotional Intelligence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting the humanity in HR by being vulnerable, admitting mistakes, and being in touch with personal motives, values, and temperament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consciously avoiding egocentrism by seeking to genuinely understand others perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling the characteristics necessary to work through conflict with respect, dignity, and empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being keenly aware that situations could rarely be taken at face value</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Sources include transcribed interviews, observations, and artifacts.*

Putting the humanity in HR by being vulnerable, admitting mistakes, and being in touch with personal motives, values, and temperament. Participants
discussed their own self-awareness in 38 references to being vulnerable, admitting mistakes, and reflecting on personal motives, values, and temperament when seeking to breakthrough conflict.

Participants indicated they made mistakes and accepted responsibility so as to not undermine their credibility. One participant openly stated he admitted mistake, saying, “I have absolutely no problem ever publicly apologizing for a decision that I made wrong. Now granted, I can’t do that too often. Always making the wrong decision is a problem.” He added, “you have to be open to being vulnerable; after all we’re all human.” Pointing to a rather heated negotiation encounter where a member of his team got too loud, one HRO shared, “Although I agreed with his view, I acknowledged the manner in which it was handled was not the way we wanted to conduct negotiations.” He went on to say, “So for me, I don’t really prefer negotiations because of the game playing that’s often done.” He cited his role at that point was to be the level-headed, calm one and to acknowledge the fact that “we were frustrated and we were loud, and we apologized for that and recognized that it was not conducive for us furthering the conversation at that point.”

When those things happened another HRO said, “While you certainly can do your best at it, there are people that really get under your skin sometimes.” At times like those, HROs must make conscious decisions to remain calm, remain professional, and take charge of the situation. Besides being vulnerable and admitting mistakes, HROs reflected on their own motives and values.

According to the participants, one reflect on his or her own motives and values. When one HRO felt the district values did not align with his, it got to a point where he said, “Okay. Well, now it’s time for me to make my next career move and leave.” All
participants agreed there were points they could be flexible on such as different ways to
do a task, but not when it came to their core values. Each participant felt that it was
necessary to model the characteristics necessary to work through conflict from a position
of respect, dignity, and empathy for all those involved.

**Consciously avoiding egocentrism by seeking to genuinely understand**
others’ perspectives. Emotionally intelligent HROs presented as self-aware, modeled
conflict-resolving behaviors, and attempted to genuinely understand the perspective of
others. There were 29 references to avoiding egocentrism. All participants considered
themselves cognizant that other people had interests that were important to them, either
individually or as a group, which they could not walk away from just because
management was insistent. Participants commented that the old adage, “It’s my way or
the highway” did not work well. All participants expressed being able to “put themselves
in someone else’s shoes.” One HRO said she thought of herself first as an employee so
she related well with them. She tied that to her childhood memories of the somber mood
in her home when her mother got laid off. Participants expressed genuine concern for
others while sharing their own personal stories with comments like, “Every single person
is dealing with issues, every single person has their own emotions and perspective.”
There was a consensus that their job held a great deal of personal responsibility because
this was people’s lives and their livelihood. Participants acknowledged it was emotional
because they realized it affected them, their families, and their security. One HRO said,
“Without being thoughtful of that, people [HROs] find themselves in a mess.”

**Modeling the characteristics necessary to work through conflict with respect,**
dignity, and empathy. Participants referenced setting the example of handling conflict
from a position of mutual respect, dignity and empathy 27 times. All participants stated they would take control of a situation that was spiraling and keep it calm. One HRO who considered herself as somewhat stoic commented that in HR it was possible to come up the ranks as far as knowing education code and laws, but the gap between good to great was one who understood the “with it” factor. HROs began modeling across conflict situations, a commitment that could be felt, as they moved organizations forward instead of talking about “us versus them” or “I want, I want” situations. Rather, they talked about collective interests, the end goal, what both parties wanted, and how they worked collaboratively to meet the interests of all parties involved.

One form of conflict HROs regularly handled was labor negotiations with unions. As one HRO said, “You may not ever agree, but if you can model how you can disagree, it doesn’t have to play out ugly. You can take the highroad, always be honest, and always be respectful…who can argue with that.” HROs indicated they represented the face of reason, modeling behaviors more likely to lead to conflict resolution. Just as individuals come with their own set of circumstances, HROs referred to the notion that situations were complex as well. Taking situations at face value could be equally misleading.

**Being keenly aware that situations could rarely be taken at face value.** During the course of interviewing, participants made 35 references to situations where it was necessary to unearth root causes to generate sustainable solutions to conflict. In labor negotiations it ranged from dealing with people who were purposely being obstructionists, such as getting through a front line of representatives only to discover the members were already asking for what the district was offering. Whatever the conflict situation, all participants indicated fact finding was their number one criteria. However,
13 participants elaborated that sometimes the issue presented was not the actual issue. Participants said sometimes they had to have patience and keep digging to discover the cause of the conflict. One participant stated:

I think you have to believe in your heart that people have the right interest until they prove otherwise, because we can be jaded and that goes nowhere; so keep in mind we are all part of the same organization just with different interests.

Another participant advocated the need to go deeper into root causes with stakeholders, explaining, “They’ll nod their head and say everything’s good, but you’ll see that things just won’t move along. It will fall apart for various reasons. Whatever the case may be.” She continued, “Really, if that’s the case, there’s something else that’s probably deeper, a deeper issue than just what appears to be on the surface.” Participants indicated in these conflict situations, their job was to figure out what was really causing the problem and then, as one HRO described it, “they have to look at what’s the extent of the problem and determine if the problem is in the embryotic stage or is it so deeply rooted that they’ve got to use a variety of different strategies.” Participants suggested when working with complex kinds of issues or those deep seated kinds of problems, the approach they took was to try to identify the root cause, find those who could be engaged and involved in helping resolve the issue, and then looking at the sustainability of those solutions over a period of time. Emotionally intelligent HROs recognized situations were complex, people had their own perspectives of the situation, and those perspectives and behaviors also played a role in how the conflicted situation played out.
Major Themes Related to Ethics

Ethics was defined by the peer research team as human beings making choices and conducting behavior in a morally responsible way, given the values and morals of the culture (Ciulla, 1995; Strike et al., 2005). A total of 138 references to ethics were coded from the 30 interview and artifact sources. Five themes emerged as participants described themselves as ethical people and discussed holding and modeling highly ethical decision-making principles based on doing what was right for everyone. Additional themes included understanding the ethical implications and potential consequences of decision-making, being willing to take a stand even if it was unpopular, and being as transparent as possible. Participants shared stories of ethical dilemmas in conflict situations they faced in their careers. Table 8 presents the five themes related to ethics.

Table 8

How Exemplar Human Resource Officers Relate Ethics to Establishing Common Ground

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th># Sources of Theme</th>
<th># References of Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the ethical implications and potential consequences of decision-making</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling highly ethical decision-making principles based on doing what was right for everyone</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considering ethics as a defining factor for a person</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being willing to take a stand even if it was unpopular or controversial</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making it a priority to be transparent, approachable, and accessible to all stakeholders</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Sources include transcribed interviews, observations, and artifacts.

Understanding the ethical implications and potential consequences of decision-making. An interesting comment on ethics in decision-making from one participant was, “use it with care because a lot of people will determine what right is and
what wrong is and then blast you with, ‘this is what ed. code says, this is what the law says.’” She explained, “Adversaries will throw away empathy and care and humanity and professionalism to be right.” For example, if the situation was, “this is what the law says, or this is what’s moral, usually it’s more like this is what’s legal. They mix those up. So you have to use that with care.” The HRO reported it was important to do what was right even if it meant standing along.

Modeling highly ethical decision-making principles based on doing what was right for everyone. Fifteen sources referenced ethical decision-making based on doing what was right for everyone 35 times. All participants reported they considered themselves to be ethical and made ethically prudent decisions. HRO 10 indicated:

I’m always ethical. So anytime when I use ethics, it’s not like it’s a tool.

Honesty isn’t the best policy. It’s not a policy. It’s a way of life. But I understand in this context, it’s being intentional about being ethical.

Intentionally being ethical was important to participants because their behavior was held up to public scrutiny so they avoid anything that could be misconstrued as unethical. As one HRO indicated, “We get attacked a lot. Anybody does in public education. But when it’s attacking your integrity and it’s completely unfounded, that’s one of the hardest things.” For example, one HRO recused himself from the hiring process when his wife was one of the applicants to avoid any appearance of favoritism.

Considering ethics as a defining factor for a person. Participants noted that ethics was the lens through which they made decisions. Participants identified themselves as ethical people with values they would not compromise, some whom attributed this to their parents and upbringing as children. When asked about recommendations to other
leaders concerning ethics in finding common ground, one participant said, “A big part of ethics goes towards emotional intelligence. It is the humility.” He explained, “I had parents that raised me very, very strongly of what’s right, what’s wrong, how you treat people, those types of things.” Further, he added, “In a wildly political environment where right and wrong can be relative or can be secondary to agendas or to the momentum or the politics that are going on, it is bringing yourself back to that kind of grounding.” Participants concurred that ethics was one of the filters always looked through when working with people.

**Being willing to take a stand even if it was unpopular or controversial.** A story related by one of the participants involved making an ethical decision even though it cost the district a large sum of money. One of the options, although legal, would deny retirees a benefit which they had reasonably expected. The HRO stated, “In terms of finding a common ground, the common ground is where we started in that we believed we had an understanding.” The HRO recounted, “The challenge was to find a way to recommit to what that common understanding was.” He pointed out, “There were options available to us that would have saved the organization money, millions of dollars, but it was inconsistent with what we believed we had promised people.” This example, was one of several where ethical people did not allow the bottom line to dictate their course of action. Sometimes, as one participant put it, “you have to stand on an island, but even if you are out there alone, do what is right.”

**Making it a priority to be transparent, approachable, and accessible to all stakeholders.** Ethics was integrally linked to communication with people. When asked about the most important aspects of communication, all participants reported as a leader
of an organization, the most important aspects of communication were listening, honesty, and transparency. Participants stated the importance of being straight forward and honest; otherwise people felt betrayed by not knowing the whole picture. All participants reiterated the need to operate with a high level of integrity, honesty, and transparency. One HRO claimed, “those are the words we throw around a lot as leaders, and those have great, deep meaning to them.” She explained that giving only part of the story was compromising and a disservice to the audience. Every participant stated, “Do what is right.” A common thread in the participants’ stories was when people were treated fairly with openness, honesty, and follow through, then trust was established.

**Themes Related to Problem-Solving**

Problem-solving was defined by the peer research team as the act of choosing and implementing a solution to an identified problem or situation (Harvey et al., 1997). The domain of problem-solving was referenced 94 times across 4 themes. Participants indicated problem-solving was a big part of their jobs. When faced with a problem, HROs tried to discover the cause of the issue, identify the parties involved, and work with stakeholders to generate sustainable solutions. Table 9 presents the problem-solving domain themes, followed by a more detailed description of the themes.
Table 9

*How Exemplar HROs use Problem-Solving to Establish Common Ground*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th># Sources of Theme</th>
<th># References of Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recognizing and considering potential solutions generated by all of those involved</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking to identify diverse parties to an issue and their interests</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-solving when issues were multifaceted</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being willing to try novel ideas and course correct as needed</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Sources include transcribed interviews, observations, and artifacts.

**Recognizing and considering potential solutions generated by all of those involved.** Participants made 48 references to the importance of recognizing and considering potential solutions generated by stakeholders as a means to increase the likelihood of achieving more sustainable outcomes. Two HROs recalled when new to a position, it was important to get things done. One participant said, “You just want to solve the problem, no matter what; you want to analyze the environment around you because you have the end goal in mind. I’ve learned that patience is a virtue.” Like the other participants, he now acknowledged diversity in problem-solving. He recommended HROs look at problems from different perspectives, and added:

> Although you might not have the right people on the bus, it’s still good to mix it up because you get some infusion of energy and creativity, and so it’s not the same group doing the same things all the time.

**Seeking to identify diverse parties to an issue and their interests.** Participants referenced the need to actively identify stakeholders with an interest in the problem even though things could get complicated 27 times. Developing a shared vision was one of the
outcomes when diverse parties contributed their interests. One HRO explained why this was the case, noting, “If you have five, six, seven people in a room, and everyone’s trying to solve a problem from their own perspective, we’re going to be there a while.” The important thing he believed was, “If you can get a shared perspective or shared vision of what you’re trying to accomplish, people can invest in what you’re trying to do rather than protect what they hold dear to their hearts.” In doing so, the focus shifted to solutions rather than on individual opinions.

Participants also acknowledged that, as management, they were no longer in the trenches. Even though they were out there and visible, a noteworthy point brought up by several of the HROs was that bringing different people and different perspectives, those outside the school district, might see things differently. Most HROs had not worked at a school site for several years. They admitted they were not seeing all the action that they would at the sites. Instead, they had to rely on site administrators, teacher leaders, and diverse stakeholders living it day-to-day to keep them apprised of the issues. To effectively solve problems, one participant said, “I think you have to [involve others], in order to get to the roots.”

**Problem-solving when issues were multifaceted.** Seven of the participants made references to problem-solving when issues were multifaceted and root causes were not readily forthcoming. It required emotionally intelligent leaders to recognize people may not be aware of the real reason for a problem or may be deliberately misrepresenting an issue. Recognizing root causes was a step in the right direction, but participants indicated unraveling the issue was their next concern. HROs indicated some of the most difficult issues were the “he said, she said” disputes between employees. The HROs reported
using investigative techniques they learned at the ACSA personnel academy. One participant outlined the steps he took when an employee accused a coworker of sexual harassment. The HRO said he felt there was more going on than what met the eye. So following protocol, he took statements and went a step further by going to the facility at that time of day to see if others would have been present. He claimed, after a lot of careful digging, he uncovered a reciprocal relationship where both parties were equally culpable, but one party felt compelled to accuse the other party for personal reasons. The participants all commented on the need to separate facts from emotions, with one highlighting the importance to “cross every t and dot every i because you are responsible for decisions that impact that person’s livelihood.”

**Being willing to try novel ideas and course correct as needed.** Being willing to try novel ideas was referenced by eight participants. It was included in the study after two participants shared stories where novel ideas worked into a memorandum of understanding. There was evidence that a process existed to try novel ideas when problem-solving, but not all HROs utilized this approach or did not mention it during the interview. In these instances, something was agreed upon by the parties outside of the contract. Trying something new on a pilot basis meant there were term limits and the idea could be reevaluated. This form of bargaining got stakeholders to try something new without putting it in the bargaining agreement because, although it could be renegotiated later, it was harder to change and people were less inclined to move forward with it. One HRO supporting the idea said,

“I’m always in search for something new and I think that when we talk about the backbone of good leaders, I think good leaders are people who
are always on the hunt for something. But you won’t ever find something new if you got a very narrow perspective on things. So being open-minded and willing to listen to others and trying new things are all a part of it.

Other participants addressed the need to listen to other people’s perspectives to generate ideas and a willingness to act on them, but two participants articulated how that actually got done.

One HRO spoke of negotiating a 7.5-hour workday that would have resulted in a raise for one group of stakeholders, but teachers who performed after-hour duties on an hourly basis would have been negatively impacted. Another HRO shared a story of a dilemma of hiring a speech and language pathologist as there was a shortage throughout the industry. He explained how they approached the union leadership, explained the difficulty, and purposed to increase pay and provide signing bonus for speech and language pathologists. This idea would ordinarily be an anathema to unions who would like to see all of their members treated the same. The participant related his success in finding common ground to the benefits of “eliciting the experience of the members of their team and the consequence to them as teachers when speech therapists are not fully incorporated into our organization.” An agreement was reached that supported the organization’s mission and vision through empathy and keeping the best interest of kids in mind.

**Major Themes Related to Processes**

Process was defined by the peer research team as a method that included a set of steps and activities that group members followed to perform tasks such as strategic planning or conflict resolution. The three levels of process included process design,
process methods, and process tools (Hamme, 2015; Schwarz, 2002). Processes were referenced 109 times across 3 themes. Table 10 presents an overview of the three themes followed by a more detailed discussion of each theme.

Table 10

*How exemplar Human Resource Officers use Process to Establish Common Ground*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th># Sources of Theme</th>
<th># References of Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establishing and/or utilizing processes and protocols</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to facilitate effective organizational operations,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing, communicating, reinforcing or enforcing</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organizational expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing and communicating legal parameters to diverse</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stakeholders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Sources include transcribed interviews, observations, and artifacts.

HR, according to the participants, is a people business. One longtime HRO referred to as a go-to person among HROs, explained,

Often times in HR, the structure lends itself to conflict because of the collective bargaining, dealing with employee discipline, and those layoffs; so sometimes we’re on the negative end of things. Considering that, processes and protocols did not just appear out of nowhere. When you’re putting those procedures and processes in place, something came up that instigated it. When you’re changing [a process], it’s because something happened that showed you had a problem here and you go back and fix it. You have two choices, you can fix it or ignore it and it will happen again.

**Establishing and/or utilizing processes and protocols to facilitate effective organizational operations.** Establishing and/or utilizing processes and protocols developed to facilitate effective organizational operations, with the understanding they
were evolving over time, was referenced 67 times in artifacts and interviews. One artifact clearly conveyed a district’s expectation that policies should be developed in collaboration with stakeholders as follows, “The Governing Board believes that its personnel policies must be developed through the cooperation and participation of the employee organizations, the administrative staff, and the Board in an atmosphere of mutual faith and good will.” The districts depended on their human capital, so as HRO 15 put it, “we are doing everything we can to help our employees be successful. Processes and protocols are one way to optimize employee success and support the organization’s goals.”

Participants had varied experiences with HR processes, citing employment in districts with minimal processes in place leading to a chaotic work environment to those that were rigidly controlled without exceptions. The consensus among HROs was that processes and protocol policies were essential tools, serving as a default setting for how to handle many conflict situations or circumvent conflicts. One specific example a HRO cited was fair hiring practices based on a merit system as a method of personnel management designed to promote equitable access to positions. However, a process may also be useful to depersonalize a conflict situation, as another HRO pointed out:

We can’t just say, “Well, here’s our process and the process said, ‘No.’ and that’s it.” It was the process that said no, but under the circumstances, how can we find a good decision that isn’t so controlled by the routine that we deny ourselves the opportunity to hire someone who’s able to relate to the kids that he’s serving, and we had not opened up the door to every other person because we had a set of facts that were linked to this
particular case. That’s sort of the reasoning that I’d go through when we would make an exception to the process.

Interview transcriptions showed participants recounting exceptions to processes or where they had to look harder at processes to find ways to “do what was right.” This was reiterated by the HRO who recused himself when his wife was a candidate, an HRO who spoke of meticulous attention to every step when an employee was accused of an egregious act, and another who stood up for retirees who had valid reasons to believe they were entitled to a specific benefit and were later told they were not.

**Establishing, communicating, reinforcing, or enforcing organizational expectations.** Establishing, communicating, reinforcing, or enforcing organizational expectations was referenced 31 times across the interviews, observations, and artifacts. One participant said HR was a bridge between services, the educational laws, and the school sites. Another participant said, “People who are strong enough to collaborate, communicate, articulate, professionally debate, those are the ones who endure. Without collaboration, you have people who are hurt and one person who will win. That doesn’t help in our organization.” As organizations move into the 21st century, one process gaining momentum was the ability to communicate electronically. One HRO called it the email monster and another said it was a great way to disseminate information, but not a good way to address conflict because it lacked the personal touch. However, artifacts gathered from district websites indicated that it was used for both. Labor negotiations were played out via electronic dissemination.

The following artifact was an example of a district’s intent as electronic distribution became a primary process for communicating organizational expectations to
a large number of stakeholders. In this example, the artifact showed the intent to use a new system and explained the merits by comparing and contrasting it to the method currently in place:

Our organization is leveraging the Internet to enhance governance and provide a basis for better communication with the public. The new eGovernance initiative will replace the old method of compiling, printing, binding and distributing a limited number of paper meeting documents with electronic distribution. By making meeting agendas and supporting documents available on the Internet, we will be able to distribute documents associated with a meeting more quickly and efficiently.

**Knowing and communicating legal parameters.** School districts as public entities are governed by an extensive body of legal parameters. As public school administrators, all participants were in agreement that one of their primary roles as an HRO was to know and communicate the legal parameters of the education code and state federal mandates to diverse stakeholders. Artifacts such as websites, board meeting minutes, and agendas were further evidence of the intent to communicate to diverse stakeholders all mandates. As one HRO conveyed, “You may not agree with it, but you have to follow it. So you have to know how to interpret it.” In her view, a strong HR administrator knew how to interpret the contract, noting “Then you help educate the people with whom you work, both the union side and the management side.” She believed this was an area HROs were often lacking, claiming contracts were put aside and people were not educated about them. She also discussed informal agreements about things, but with serious issues they looked at the laws and regulations that governed that
issue. Another HRO speculated, “I think HR administrators don’t want to get sued, so we’re going to look at what can we legally do.” Knowledge of the legalities involved in being a school district HRO was likened to being an Internal Revenue Service Officer, there was a lot to know and it was constantly evolving.

Participants were unanimous in acknowledging the role processes played in finding common ground. One participant indicated, “processes don’t just pop up out of nowhere, something happened to let you know, ‘hey we need a process’ here or this is just going to keep happening.” Participants reported it was necessary to develop processes in a collaborative environment with the people expected to implement them, and to revisit those processes over time if the goal was to support systemic, sustainable change. One participant commented:

To me, those systems are the ones that get retained because the other ones that are done by fear, by force, or because I’m the boss and I told you so, they don’t become a system, they are just a Band-Aid. The moment you leave, those things are gone and that’s not good because then you have to start over.

Further, the inefficiency of starting over was reiterated by another participant. He commented on how it took a lot of time, effort, and money to hire people, so it did not make sense to lose them because of bad practices and procedures. Instead, he explained “it makes more sense to have nice tight policies, or procedures that create an environment that minimizes the chance for people to fail and optimizes the chance for people to succeed.” From an organizational standpoint, utilizing processes just made sense.

Processes facilitated common ground by attempting to establish shared understandings of
how business was conducted. Processes for establishing, communicating, reinforcing, or enforcing organizational expectations was presented across the six domains as proactive measures to transform conflict.

The HROs who participated in this study concomitantly used all six of the conflict transformative behaviors.

**Key Findings Related to the Six Domains**

HROs who successfully found common ground, transformed conflict, and produced breakthrough results engaged in the following affiliated behaviors:

1. HROs collaborated by establishing the primacy of relationship building to the success of finding common ground
2. HROs collaborated by intentionally involving all stakeholders in every aspect of the decision-making process
3. HROs institutionalized a collaborative organizational culture by establishing or supporting an interest-based approach
4. HROs intentionally ensured communications were received and understood by diverse stakeholders
5. HROs communicated by actively listening to all stakeholders and acknowledging their intrinsic right to be heard from their own perspective
6. HROs displayed EI by bringing humanity into the workplace by being vulnerable, admitting mistakes, and being in touch with their personal motives, values, and temperament
7. HROs displayed and modeled highly ethical decision-making principles based on doing what was right for everybody
8. HROs understood the ethical implications and potential consequences of decision-making and were willing to take a stand even if it was unpopular

9. HROs considered ethics to be an intrinsic part of people

10. HROs problem-solved by recognizing and considering potential solutions generated by all of those involved

11. HROs established and/or utilized processes and protocols developed to facilitate effective organizational operations

The researcher determined key finding to be any theme exemplar HROs referenced 30 or more times. Each domain produced one or more key findings: collaboration and ethics produced three key findings, communication had two key findings, and EI, problem-solving, and process each had one key finding.

**Summary**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover and describe how exemplar HROs established common ground and produced breakthrough results by utilizing the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors. This chapter presented the data summarizing the major themes for the research questions. The data were derived from interviews with 15 exemplar HROs working in California K-12 school districts, 13 hours of observations of participants, and a review of 15 artifacts. The data were coded, synthesized, and revealed several emergent themes across the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors. The analysis identified the lived experiences of the HROs and the specific behaviors they used to proactively transform or resolve conflict as they attempted to find common ground and produce breakthrough results by using collaboration, communication, EI, ethics, problem-solving, and processes.
Chapter V presents a final summary of the study, including major findings, unexpected findings, and conclusions. The chapter includes implications for action, recommendations for further research, and concluding remarks and reflections of the researcher.
CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover and describe how exemplar human resource officers (HROs) established common ground and produced breakthrough results by utilizing the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors. The six domains studied were collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence (EI), ethics, problem-solving, and process. The research questions utilized for this study included the central question and six sub-questions, one for each of the six domains. The central question was, “What are the lived experiences of exemplar HROs in establishing common ground and producing breakthrough results by engaging in elements of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors?” The sub-questions were:

- Collaboration - How do successful HROs use collaboration to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?
- Communication - How do successful HROs use communication to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?
- Emotional Intelligence - What aspects of EI do successful HROs use to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?
- Ethics - How do successful HROs use ethics to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?
- Problem-Solving - How do successful HROs use problem-solving strategies to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?
- Processes - What processes do successful HROs use to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?
The research method used in this study was a qualitative, phenomenological study that consisted of interviews using scripted questions asked of Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) award winning HROs. In addition, artifacts collected and observations made were used to triangulate the anecdotal information. The data were transcribed and entered into NVIVO, and then analyzed for emerging themes. The population for this study was exemplar state of California K-12 HROs, from which the target population was identified as exemplar HROs working in K-12 school districts with an average daily attendance (ADA) of 5,000–25,000 students.

The sample obtained was 15 HROs working in California K-12 school districts with an ADA of 5,000–25,000 students and who are considered exemplar leaders. To be considered an exemplar leader, the HRO must have displayed or demonstrated at least five of the following criteria:

- Evidence of successful relationships with all stakeholders
- Evidence of breaking through conflict to achieve organizational success
- Five or more years of experience in the field
- Written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings
- Recognized by their peers
- Membership in associations of groups focused on their field

**Major Findings**

A summary of the key findings discovered and presented in Chapter IV are presented with respect to the central research question and sub-questions. The HROs who participated in this study concomitantly used all six of the conflict transformative behaviors. The key findings included in this section were derived from themes exemplar
HROs referenced 30 or more times. All domains had one or more major findings: collaboration and ethics produced three key findings, communication and process had two key findings, and EI and problem-solving had one key finding each. HROs who successfully found common ground, transformed conflict, and produced breakthrough results were inclined to engage in the following affiliated behaviors:

1. HROs collaborated by establishing the primacy of relationship building to the success of finding common ground, which represented 32% of the collaboration domain responses.
2. HROs collaborated by intentionally involving all stakeholders in every aspect of the decision-making process, which represented 30% of the collaboration domain responses.
3. HROs institutionalized a collaborative organizational culture by establishing or supporting an interest-based approach, which represented 28% of the collaboration domain responses.
4. HROs intentionally ensured communications were received and understood by diverse stakeholders, which represented 48% of the communication domain responses.
5. HROs communicated by actively listening to all stakeholders and acknowledging their intrinsic right for their perspective to be heard, which represented 37% of the communication domain responses.
6. HROs displayed EI by bringing humanity into the workplace by being vulnerable, admitting mistakes, and being in touch
with their personal motives, values, and temperament, which represented 32% of the EI domain responses.

7. HROs displayed and modeled highly ethical decision-making principles based on doing what was right for everybody, which represented 26% of the ethics domain responses.

8. HROs understood the ethical implications and potential consequences of decision-making and were willing to take a stand even if it was unpopular, which represented 25% of the ethics domain responses.

9. HROs considered ethics to be a defining characteristic of a person, which represented 25% of the ethics domain responses.

10. HROs problem-solved by recognizing and considering potential solutions generated by all of those involved that would lead to more sustainable outcomes, which represented 51% of the problem-solving domain responses.

11. HROs established and/or utilized processes and protocols developed to facilitate effective organizational operations, which represented 62% of the process domain response.

An important discovery in this study regarding the behaviors of successful HROs as they described their lived experiences through the lens of the six domains of conflict transformative behaviors to reach common ground and work through conflict was the interrelated fashion in which the behaviors operated. The results clearly showed evidence
that behaviors in all six domains were actively used by exemplar HROs, and that none of them operated solely in isolation. For example, there appeared to be an integration of ethical consideration in communicating with transparency to build trusting relationships when collaborating with stakeholders.

Primarily, exemplar HROs used collaboration to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results, as represented by the highest number of responses for all domains (21%). In analyzing the data from the research sub-question regarding collaboration, the results yielded four specific collaboration behaviors used by the HROs: they built trusting relationships, involved stakeholders in decision-making, supported an interest-based approach, and were intentional about communicating for understanding.

Communication was another important aspect exemplar HROs used to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results, which represented 17% of the data. In analyzing the data from the research sub-question regarding communication, the results showed two primary communication behaviors used by the exemplar HROs. First, they were intentional in their use and understanding of the communication process by selecting the appropriate communication method to meaningfully engage and reciprocally involve all stakeholders. Second, communications were considered a responsibility to both listen and speak for understanding. All exemplar HROs emphasized the practice of continually asking questions to gain a clear understanding of another’s intended meaning in a conversation so as to avoid conflicts caused by misunderstandings. Most, but not all, exemplar HROs tested their messages with diverse stakeholders to ensure their meaning was clear before disseminating them to the larger group of stakeholders. Exemplar HROs used these contextual features of communication because they attempted to understand
the different perspectives others brought to the table. Exemplar HROs also used EI in their communication to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results.

HROs displayed self-awareness, putting the humanity in HR by being vulnerable, admitting mistakes, and being in touch with their personal motives, values, and temperament in times of conflict. To be effective as an exemplary HRO meant being self-aware of one’s personal emotional reactions during times of conflict. Exemplar HROs used self-management to control personal emotional responses during times of conflict by being cognizant of their own “hot buttons.” They would readily question their own motives, admit when they made mistakes, and step back to reflect on their role in how a situation played out. In this regard, being emotionally intelligent served to enhance their credibility in times of conflict as did their reputation for making ethical decisions.

Ethics, to exemplar HROs was not a tool they used in conflict situations; it was their personal moral lens through which they filtered decision-making. In analyzing the data from the research sub-question regarding ethics, the results produced five specific ethics-related behaviors displayed by the HROs. The importance of displaying and modeling ethical decision-making principles was emphatically expressed by all exemplar HROs. As public school employees, all HROs were aware their behavior was held up to public scrutiny, so holding and displaying their personal ethics required them to make certain their words and actions were always above reproach. The exemplar HROs were willing to take a stand, even an unpopular one, in conflict situations because they understood responsible decision-making had ethical implications and consequences. Each one indicated it was important to do what was right even in an environment where it might seem like a secondary consideration to the politics of the situation. The behavior
they displayed was to stop, step back, and to gauge their decisions through the ethical lens of what was the right thing to do for everyone involved in the problem.

The overwhelming consensus from the exemplar HROs was problem-solving was a huge part of their jobs. In analyzing the data from the research sub-question regarding problem-solving, the results yielded a primary problem-solving behavior displayed by the exemplar HROs. The HROs acted as the bridge between administration, departments, and sites, so they frequently had to get input generated by all of those with a stake in the issue to find creative solutions. For example, exemplar HROs displayed an understanding of the bigger picture regarding the interrelatedness of various branches of the organization such as how the availability of substitute teachers affected the planning of professional development opportunities for teachers. Exemplar HROs engaged in creative problem-solving because they knew they did not have all the answers, and they had successful experiences collaborating with others. In collaboration with various stakeholders to solve problems in conflict situations, exemplar HROs used processes to solve problems, establish common ground, and produce breakthrough results.

School districts are labor intensive institutions, and the field of HR grew from a primarily clerical field to a highly respected upper management position where HROs were personnel managers and strategic partners in the organization’s functioning. In analyzing the data from the research sub-question regarding process, the results produced two specific process-related behaviors displayed by the exemplar HROs. They had to establish, communicate, reinforce, or enforce their organizations’ expectations in a clear, transparent, and equitable manner. Being able to work through conflict by effectively
using the processes available to them helped exemplar HROs find common ground and produce breakthrough results.

**Unexpected Findings**

The concepts that emerged from the data that were not anticipated in preparation for the study were unexpected findings. Several major surprises came out of this study once interviews with exemplar HROs were conducted. The concepts and data reported in this section related to the research questions on the behaviors of HROs, but need further research to validate or confirm the findings.

Collaboration in the work environment was considered an effective practice that reduced conflict by bringing together diverse stakeholders leading to innovative solutions to complex problems. It was an unexpected finding when exemplar HROs discussed an interest-based approach versus interest-based bargaining. The interest-based approach was viewed as a collaborative mindset used to transform conflict and also as a means to pervasively change the culture of the organization. Interest-based bargaining, on the other hand, was a facilitated interest-based process thought to negate the detrimental exchanges historically experienced with positional-based negotiations. Evidence existed that third-party facilitation brought an unbiased eye to the conflict and could play an important role in finding common ground. It was beyond the scope of the current study to differentiate where the participants saw themselves or their organizations on the interest-based spectrum other than it was uncovered as an aspect of collaboration. A vital aspect of successful collaboration involved communication.

Evidence existed that formal and informal communication among diverse stakeholders increased the likelihood of building trust, a key aspect of collaboration. The
concept of transparency was not an expected finding in the way exemplar HROs used it as a conflict transformation behavior. It was expected to be an aspect of communication, important for gathering factual information; however, it was also inextricably linked to ethics. All of the exemplar HROs cited the need for transparency when contending with conflict in an effort to convey trust, honesty, openness, and fairness. Moreover, ethics was viewed as human beings making choices and behaving in a morally responsible way, as well as an internalized aspect defining a person. It appeared ethics was so integrated in all six of the domains that it did not stand alone as a single contributing domain.

**Conclusions**

Based on the findings of this study, several conclusions were drawn regarding how exemplar HROs established common ground and produced breakthrough results by utilizing the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors (collaboration, communication, EI, ethics, problem-solving, and process) to transform conflict and find common ground. The following conclusions were drawn based on the data and findings.

**Conclusion 1:** It was concluded that HROs who blend all six conflict transformation behaviors were more successful in transforming conflict and achieving breakthrough results with stakeholders regardless of complexity, type, or context of the conflict involved.

1. All 15 exemplar HROs produced evidence of the use of all six conflict transformational behaviors to work through various conflict situations.

2. All 15 exemplar HROs experienced conflict transformation and were able to describe their use of each of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors as it related to a particular conflict situation.
3. All 15 exemplar HROs adjusted their use of the conflict transformation behaviors based on the demands and context of a particular.

The above evidence showed exemplar HROs used all six of the conflict transformation behaviors to find common ground during times of conflict.

**Conclusion 2:** It was concluded that HROs who utilized effective collaboration skills were more likely to create the conditions where common ground could occur. It was further concluded that HROs who deliberately built positive relationships with diverse stakeholders over time were more likely to transform conflict situations when they arose. As the literature suggested, the behavior of successful HROs went beyond their prescribed role to intertwine the interests of the organization and stakeholder groups as they built a sense of organizational community (Ahillen, 2010; Guilmot & Vas, 2013; O’Leary & Nidhi, 2012).

Exemplar HROs consistently and overwhelmingly used collaboration with stakeholders to transform conflict and find common ground. Supporting data for this conclusion were:

1. All 15 exemplar HROs intentionally maintained a focus on developing or supporting relationships with diverse stakeholders to work through different types, complexities, and contexts of conflicts through collaboration.
2. All 15 of the exemplar HROs understood the need to collaboratively include diverse stakeholders as a part of the decision-making process to find common ground and achieve breakthrough results.
3. All 15 institutionalized a collaborative organizational culture with various aspects of an interest-based approach.
4. Exemplar HROs referenced collaboration more than any other conflict transformation behavior as being essential in finding common ground and achieving breakthrough results during conflict situations.

Based on the above evidence, exemplar HROs utilized collaboration as a vital step in finding common ground during conflict.

**Conclusion 3:** Lending further support to Oetzel and Ting-Toomey’s (2006) discussion of conflict communication, it was concluded that HROs who were skillful in the art of listening for understanding and communicating with clarity and transparency were more likely to reach common ground when in conflict with stakeholders.

Supporting data for this conclusion were:

1. Exemplar HROs consistently used communication and the communication process, and engaged in dialogue to ensure diverse stakeholders working through different conflicts were heard from their own perspectives. Exemplar HROs continually sought to clarify and understand the others’ perspective through active and responsive listening.

2. Exemplar HROs understood the need to ensure disseminated communications were appropriate to the audience, and received and understood as intended. Exemplar HROs referenced the need to be clear, forthright, and transparent in communications 60 times.

Based on the above evidence, exemplar HROs utilized communication and communication processes as a critical tool to transform conflict.

**Conclusion 4:** It was concluded that emotionally intelligent HROs who were aware of their motives, values, and temperament, as well as those of their partners in
conflict, were more likely to create the conditions where breakthrough results and common ground could occur. Research suggested those with the ability to identify the problem and the emotional or relational factors surrounding the issue were more likely to move people from dissent to collaboration when negotiating a conflict (Bradberry & Greaves, 2012; Guilmot & Vas, 2013; Harms & Crede, 2010; McKee et al., 2008; Wolf, 2011). Supporting data for this conclusion were:

1. All 15 exemplar HROs reported being emotionally intelligent by showing they were in touch with their emotions and idiosyncrasies. They willingly admitted when they made mistakes, knew what their shortcomings were, and kept their personal emotions in check, especially during conflict situations.

2. All 15 exemplar HROs effectively used their EI self-awareness and social-awareness when working through conflicts by making a genuine effort to understand the perspectives of others. Exemplar HROs understood that conflict situations were emotional for all stakeholders.

3. Emotionally intelligent exemplar HROs were keenly aware that conflict often had deeper levels and patience was required to unearth the levels to generate sustainable solution.

4. Exemplar HROs modeled the emotionally intelligent characteristics necessary to work through conflict from a position of respect, dignity, and empathy for those involved. By being aware of and modeling, exemplar HROs described being able to manage their own emotions and emotional responses of others during times of conflict.
**Conclusion 5:** It was concluded HROs who maintained an ethical climate and stood by their morals and values, as well as those of their organizations, were more likely to be respected in times of conflict. Ethical leaders made highly principled decisions when facing conflict, which reduced the politics in the workplace, had a positive effect on prosocial behavior, and contributed to transforming conflict because people knew who they were and what to expect (Judge & Piccolo, 2010; Howard & Korver, 2008; Kacmar et al., 2012; Parkes & Davis, 2015; White et al., 2007). Supporting data for this conclusion were:

1. All 15 exemplar HROs consistently exhibited and maintained an ethical climate within the organization and communicated those values with stakeholders to prevent conflict or work through different types of conflict situations.

2. Exemplar HROs participating in the study understood the ethical implications and potential consequences of decision-making and were willing to take a stand even if it was unpopular. Ethical HROs described ethics as a decision-making filter through which they attempted to do what was right for everyone involved in the conflict.

**Conclusion 6:** It was concluded that HROs who involved stakeholders in finding creative solutions to problems were more likely to achieve breakthrough results during conflict. In the conflict literature, problem-solving was viewed through the lens of negotiation and communication with successful groups acknowledging conflict as a normative process where stakeholders felt safe expressing their thoughts and feelings
(Kecskes & Zhang, 2009; Kouzakova et al., 2014; Schwarz, 2002). Supporting data for this conclusion were:

1. Exemplar HROs actively identified and engaged all of the stakeholders with an interest in the issue.
2. Exemplar HROs listened and considered the ideas of others.
3. Exemplar HROs actively sought and tried novel solutions to conflict.

**Conclusion 7:** It was concluded that HROs who established and used processes and protocols, such as interest-based bargaining, fair hiring practices, and employee evaluation protocols, were more likely to transform conflict and find common ground. A process, the why, what, how, and who parts of the action plans, moved organizations forward through a method that included a set of steps and activities that group members followed to perform tasks (Ulrich et al., 2009). Having processes in place supporting the goals of the organization as well as those of its stakeholders was the first step toward transforming the organization (Schwarz, 2002). Supporting data for this conclusion were:

1. Exemplar HROs utilized or established processes to facilitate effective organizational operations with the understanding these processes evolved over time.
2. Exemplar HROs recognized the value of and responsibility to communicate, reinforce, or enforce organizational expectations through the effective use of processes.

**Conclusion 8:** It was concluded that HROs understood the importance of conveying their identity as an ethical person who behaved in a transparent manner when engaging stakeholders to transform conflict and produce breakthrough results. When
facing controversy, the actions of leaders should withstand public scrutiny as they work to align the attitudes, beliefs, and values of stakeholders and the organization (Alston et al., 2010; White et al., 2007). Supporting data for this conclusion were:

1. Exemplar HROs understood the ethical implications and potential consequences of decision-making.
2. Exemplar HROs modeled highly ethical decision-making principals based on doing what was right for everyone.
3. Exemplar HROs considered ethical behavior to reflect the fabric of who they were as a person.

**Implications for Action**

The role of the HRO grew from a personnel management position to a major executive role in some districts, which place them as a strategic partner in shaping organizational outcomes. Therefore, these implications were designed to answer the question, “So, what?” As such, implications for action derived from this study could influence the actions of HROs, board members and policymakers, administrators, and consultants, as well as professional development programs designed to prepare HROs to be change agents responsible for assisting in positive school reform.

**Implication for Action 1: Collaboration**

Districts should provide funds for HROs, school leaders, labor leaders, and stakeholders to participate in a co-facilitated, statewide interest-based bargaining training, such as the one offered by California Teachers Association, to develop their human capital into strategic partners. Collaboration would be enhanced through:
• Training on how to communicate with stakeholders to build relationships and establish trust with labor partners, and how to re-establish trust with labor partners after an impasse.

• Adopting and utilizing the methodologies of interest-based bargaining and interest-based approaches to collaborate, problem-solve, and facilitate conflict-prone processes like collective bargaining.

• Continually assessing collaboration effectiveness using tools such as the Collaboration Assessment Tool.

**Implication for Action 2: Communication**

Districts should address the problem of insufficient or ineffective communication and poor listening skills, which can escalate conflict, through ongoing interpersonal communication training as a strategic management tool to proactively address conflict. When communications break down, utilize a neutral third-party facilitator to provide training and help shift conflict communication from a focus on problems to a focus on solutions. Districts should provide or update electronic access to mass communication mediums such as e-governance to increase stakeholder access.

**Implication for Action 3: Emotional Intelligence**

Training should be provided that strengthens HROs’ self-awareness and self-management, such as The Happiness Advantage Orange Frog Public workshop sponsored by the School Superintendents American Association of School Administrators. Coaching, facilitation, and feedback should be provided that increases self-awareness and social-awareness in collaborative contexts, such as interest-based bargaining teams.
Implication for Action 4: Ethics

HROs should develop their own written code of ethics and a statement of their values to be used with their district values when conflict presents dilemmas of conscience.

Implication for Action 5: Problem-Solving

A considerable amount of a HRO time was spent “putting out fires,” because disputes could escalate if left to fester. Seeking strategies that yield sustainable results led to the following suggested actions:

- Districts should provide teachers with information as to what HR departments can do to assist them in conflict situations.
- Districts should provide training in comprehensive collaboration strategies that bring people and resources together, reduce duplication of efforts, and lead to more innovative solutions to complex issues.

Implication for Action 6: Processes

An organization’s processes and practices are dictated by the rules and structures that professionals operate within. In the formal process of labor negotiations, the topics within the scope of bargaining were those mandatory topics that required HROs to decipher the education code and translate the law into sound bargaining practices with a thorough understanding of employees’ union representation and protected activities. This administrative function led to actions to maintain and protect compliance, but could be extended to include strategic partnerships including:

- Districts can proactively develop strategic partnerships with all departments to collaborate, communicate, and problem-solve, and create processes to
facilitate the organization’s functioning.

The aforementioned actions, if implemented, have the potential to transform the HRO and profession, as well as the organization, into strategic partners through the behaviors shown in this study. The findings presented in this study linked the concomitant use of the six conflict transformational behaviors to HRO’s abilities to establish common ground, transform conflict, and produce breakthrough results.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Based on the research study and findings, further research should be conducted in the development of common ground and conflict transformation. Recommendations for further research include:

1. The current study focused on exemplar HROs in mid-size districts. Further research in the same six domains of conflict transformational behaviors could be expanded to include larger school districts expected to experience higher levels of conflict.

2. This study focused on exemplar HROs and how they used the six conflict transformation behaviors as part of a thematic study of exemplar leaders across eight other fields. A study should be conducted to explore commonalities and differences in the findings across all nine studies.

3. Additional research focusing on factors that build trust for conflict transformation is suggested. In particular, the role of transparency as a conflict transformative behavior in establishing credibility as an ethical leader to find common ground is recommended.
4. Additional research focusing on the intersection of ethics, identity, and transparency should be explored to determine their role as factors in trust-building during conflict situations.

5. Studies should be conducted that focus on HROs and the role of transparency in the workplace.

6. Further research should be conducted investigating how the six domains of communication, collaboration, EI, ethics, problem-solving, and processes work at a deeper level for significant changes in attitudes, beliefs, values, and relationships that impact the organization’s culture.

7. Additional research is recommended regarding how to build common ground into processes and systems across educational settings through the systematic use of an interest-based approach.

**Concluding Remarks and Reflections**

After devoting a considerable amount of time and resources to the research experience, concluding remarks and reflections allow the researcher to share personal insights garnered from the experience. As a teacher leader aspiring to climb “the teacher ladder,” it quickly became evident during the research process why that was such an important step. Few teachers, myself included, understand the role of their district’s HRO beyond personnel management. Through meeting these extraordinary people, I came to realize they were all still teachers and employees at heart. They had not “crossed over to the dark side” as administrators; they brought the light with them. Their compassion and empathy were genuine and their humility equally so. After discovering they received on-the-job training after the fact, unlike teachers who go through extensive training before
ever setting foot in a classroom, they hit the ground running, bringing with them the knowledge that HR is first a people profession. The position, intricately woven in a bureaucracy, just happens to lend itself to conflict. Each of them brought humanity to HR, they admitted when they made mistakes, accepted that they did not have all the answers, and looked at their profession as more of a calling as they made every effort to always do what was right for everyone concerned. These exemplar HROs expressed pride in being able to terminate or discipline an employee leaving that person’s dignity intact. All of them did their best to turn unpleasant but necessary situations into the best possible outcome for all concerned. After this experience, I will never face a job interview with the same trepidation. The people across the table are just that, people.
REFERENCES


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APPENDICES

Appendix A - Interview Protocol

The following questions were developed as part of a thematic dissertation. The team agrees the questions seek to support a phenomenological approach to the experiences of exemplary professions with a minimal potential for adverse stress placed upon participants.

**Collaboration**

1. Can you share a story about a time when you used “collaboration” as a leader in your organization to find common ground and achieve breakthrough results to reduce or avoid conflict?

2. As a leader in the organization, what was the most important aspect of “collaboration” that helped you in finding common ground?

3. What recommendations would you make to other leaders in order to effectively use communication to help them find common ground and achieve breakthrough results?

**Communication**

1. Can you share a story about a time when you used “communication” as a leader in your organization, to find common ground and achieve breakthrough results to reduce or avoid conflict?

2. As a leader in the organization, what was the most important aspect of “communication” that helped you in finding common ground?
3. What recommendations would you make to other leaders in order to effectively use communication to help them find common ground and achieve breakthrough results?

Ethics
1. Can you share a story about a time when you used “ethics” as a leader in your organization, to find common ground and achieve breakthrough results to reduce or avoid conflict?
2. As a leader in the organization, what was the most important aspect of “ethics” that helped you in finding common ground?
3. What recommendations would you make to other leaders in order to effectively use ethics to help them find common ground and achieve breakthrough results?

Emotional Intelligence
1. Can you share a story about a time when you used “emotional intelligence” as a leader in your organization to find common ground and achieve breakthrough results to reduce or avoid conflict?
2. As a leader in the organization, what was the most important aspect of “emotional intelligence” that helped you in finding common ground?
3. What recommendations would you make to other leaders in order to effectively use “emotional intelligence” to help them find common ground and achieve breakthrough results?

Problem Solving
1. Can you share a story about a time when you used “problem solving” as a leader in your organization to find common ground and achieve breakthrough results to reduce or avoid conflict?

2. As the organizational leader, what was the most important aspect of “problem solving” that helped you in finding common ground?

3. What recommendations would you make to other leaders in order to effectively use problem solving to help them find common ground and achieve breakthrough results?

**Process**

1. Can you share a story about a time when you used “process” as a leader in your organization to find common ground and achieve breakthrough results to reduce or avoid conflict?

2. As a leader in the organization, what was the most important aspect of “process” that helped you in finding common ground?

3. What recommendations would you make to other leaders in order to effectively use process to help them find common ground and achieve breakthrough results?
APPENDIX B - Participant Demographic Information

Please answer the following questions:

1. What is your current position in the organization?
   __________________________________________

2. How long have you been serving in a leadership role within your organization?
   __________________________________________

3. How long have you been in education?
   __________________________________________

4. Please indicate which best describes your age category:
   21-25____ 65+__________
   26-40____ 75+ __________
   41-65______

5. Please indicate your highest area of educational attainment and in what area of study:
   High School: ____________ Area(s) of Study:
   __________________________________________

   Bachelors: ____________ Areas (s) of Study:
   __________________________________________

   Masters: ____________ Area(s) of Study:
   __________________________________________

   Doctorate: ____________ Area(s) of Study:
   __________________________________________

6. How many different school districts have you worked in?
   __________________________________________

   178
Appendix C – Participant Bill of Rights

Participant Bill of Rights

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Research Participant’s Bill of Rights

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

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

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

Brandman University IRB  Adopted  November 2013
Appendix D – Informed Consent

Informed Consent Sample

INFORMATION ABOUT: A qualitative study to discover and describe common ground strategies used by exemplar Human Resource Officers to consistently transform and resolve conflict as they attempt to further the goals of their organizations.

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY 16355 LAGUNA CANYON ROAD IRVINE, CA 92618

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Denise LaRue

PURPOSE OF STUDY: The purpose of this phenomenological study is to discover and describe how the lived experiences of the exemplar Human Resource Officers, through their own stories, in their own contexts and environments established common ground, and produced breakthrough results to reduce or avoid conflict by utilizing the 6 domains of conflict transformation behaviors. Through the combined efforts of the peer researchers in this thematic study, the outcomes may yield new and exciting information that can be duplicated by future researchers and ultimately generalized to the larger population.

This study will fill in the gap in the research regarding the use of the 6 common ground domains. While there is a substantial amount of literature regarding common ground, the 6 domains of Common Ground (ethics, emotional intelligence, communication, collaboration, process and problem-solving), Human Resources, and conflict independently, there is a gap in the literature about how these different domains may be being used by exemplar leaders to find breakthrough results. A very significant gap in the literature exists about how exemplar Human Resource Officers would use the six domains of common ground to achieve breakthrough results and transform conflict.

By participating in this study I agree to participate in a private one-on-one interview. The one-on-one interview will last between 30 – 60 minutes and will be conducted in person and audio recorded. Completion of the one-on-one interview will take place January 7th 2016,
I understand that:

a) There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research. I understand that the Investigator will protect my confidentiality by keeping the identifying codes and research materials in a locked safe that is available only to the researcher. I understand the audio recordings WILL NOT be used by the researcher beyond the use as stated in initial scope of this research.

b) The possible benefit of this study to me is that my input may help add to the research regarding the use of common ground strategies by human resource officers. The findings will be available to me at the conclusion of the study and will provide the results of the available data and summary and recommendations. I understand that I will not be compensated for my participation.

c) Any questions I have concerning my participation in this study will be answered Denise LaRue, she can be reached by e-mail at laru4401@mail.brandman.edu or by phone at (909) 286-9156.

d) My participation in this research study is voluntary. I may decide to not participate in the study and I can withdraw at any time. I can also decide not to answer particular questions during the interview if I so choose. I understand that I may refuse to participate or may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the Investigator may stop the study at any time.

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

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

____________________________
Participant Signature

____________________________
Date Signed

____________________________
Researcher Signature
Denise LaRue

____________________________
Date Signed
Appendix E - Introductory E-mail Sample

Denise LaRue  
4021 Corona Ave.  
Norco, Ca. 92860  
laru4401@mail.brandman.edu  
(909) 286-9156

Date

Dear [Sponsor],

I am the Doctoral researcher Dr. White spoke to you about. First, let me express my sincerest appreciation to you for agreeing to help me reach out to exemplary Human Resource Officers through your network of colleagues. I would like to set up a time when you are available for a telephone call regarding the next steps. If possible can you e-mail at the above address and let me know when it would be convenient to spend about ten or fifteen minutes with you over the telephone?

Once again, thank you for your efforts to assist me in making a valuable contribution to the study of conflict transformation.

Sincerely,

Denise LaRue
Dear Human Resource Officer:

I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Department at Brandman University, and am conducting a study on how Human Resource Officers transform conflict within their organizations. Yours is a unique position in your organization’s hierarchy so I am asking your assistance by participating in the study through an interview, possible observations, or providing artifacts such as memos, meeting minutes or other such items which we can discuss when we meet. Interviews can range in length but it would be expected to take a minimum of an hour of your time. The meeting will be set up at a time convenient for you.

If you agree to participate in an interview you may be assured that it will be completely confidential. With your consent, the interview would be recorded, however, to ensure privacy no names are attached to recording, notes or other items from the interview. All information will remain in locked files accessible only to the researchers. No employer, supervisor, agency or anyone not directly associated with the study will have access to the information. You will be free to stop the interview, discussion, or observation and withdraw from the study at any time. Further, you may be assured that the researchers are not in any way affiliated with your administration, its employees, or stakeholder agencies.

The research director, Dr. Patricia White can be contacted at pwhite@brandman.edu and I can be contacted at the above telephone number or email address, to answer any questions you may have. Your participation would be greatly valued.

Sincerely,

Denise LaRue
## Synthesis Matrix

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