How Exemplar Female Business Leaders Utilize the Six Domains of Conflict Transformation to Establish Common Ground and Produce Breakthrough Results: A Phenomenological Study

Alida Stanowicz

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.brandman.edu/edd_dissertations

Recommended Citation

https://digitalcommons.brandman.edu/edd_dissertations/122
How Exemplar Female Business Leaders Utilize the Six Domains of Conflict Transformation to Establish Common Ground and Produce Breakthrough Results: A Phenomenological Study

A Dissertation

by

Alida Stanowicz

Brandman University

Irvine, California

School of Education

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

March 2017

Committee in charge:

Patricia Clark-White, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Keith Larick, Ed.D., Committee Member

Jeffrey Lee, Ed.D., Committee Member
The dissertation of Alida Stanowicz is approved.

Patricia Clark-White, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Keith Larick, Ed.D., Committee Member

Jeffery Lee, Ed.D., Committee Member

Patricia Clark-White, Ed.D., Associate Dean

March 2017
How Exemplar Female Business Leaders Utilize the Six Domains of Conflict
Transformation to Establish Common Ground and Produce Breakthrough Results

Copyright © 2017

by Alida Stanowicz
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To those who say it takes a village, you are right! Here is mine. To Mom and Dad, words cannot adequately express how thankful I am to have your infinite love and encouragement, support, and patience; I am forever grateful. To Penny Skaff, you are the rainbow to my raincloud, and I could not have made it to the end of this journey without you. To Jorge Leal, your friendship and sense of humor has given me more than I can ever repay, thank you. To Team White, Ambra and Denise, I am thankful every day that we ended up on the same team; it was so inspiring to see you both pave the way for me and I am happy to call you friends, colleagues, and doctors! To my cohort mentor Dr. Tod Burnett, thank you for never letting me take the easy way out, and knowing that I would be able to make this dissertation journey, even when I doubted myself. To Dr. White, my dissertation chair, thank you for everything. For the belief that I was a fit for this thematic team, for holding me accountable to deadlines, and for shedding tears with me when my Grandma passed, but reminding me that she would want me to finish. We made it! To my dissertation committee, Dr. Lee and Dr. Larick, thank you for your feedback, grace, and encouragement, and for helping me make it to the end. To my Monday night study pals Debbie and Rick, thank you for keeping it fun but productive, and Sharon, you have helped me more than I can say, so endless thank yous for everything. To the 15 magnificent women who generously gave me time for interviews, I am so excited to share what you all taught me, to give back the way you gave to me, and to be able to keep your company; I could not ask for more.

To Anastasia, love you and miss you every day. I did it!
ABSTRACT

How Exemplar Female Business Leaders Utilize the Six Domains of Conflict Transformation to Establish Common Ground and Produce Breakthrough Results: A Phenomenological Study by Alida Stanowicz

The purpose of this thematic, qualitative phenomenological study was to discover and describe the lived experiences of exemplar female business leaders and their use of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors (collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, ethics, problem-solving, and process). It explored how the domains were utilized to achieve common ground to transform conflict and achieve breakthrough results. This study considered the experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of exemplar leaders by way of interviews, observations, and the collection of artifacts. The need to research and study these leaders to discover how they were able to transform conflict and the interplay of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors was both practical and significant as business leaders continue to face conflict and compete on a global platform. Female business leaders were selected for this study as women continue to rise in the ranks of their organizations and bring a unique perspective to conflict transformation. Findings from this study revealed that all six domains were used in combination when transforming conflict and establishing common ground. Further research should be widened to include female leaders across the country and a future study should be conducted that examines the difference in the male leader versus female leader approach to transforming conflict.
PREFACE

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover and describe how exemplar leaders establish common ground and produce breakthrough results by utilizing the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors. Nine peer researchers participated in this thematic research topic, with this study focused on the lived experiences of exemplar female business leaders. Darin Hand studied the lived experiences of exemplar city mayors. Chris Fuzie studied the lived experiences of exemplar law enforcement leaders. Karen Bolton studied the lived experiences of exemplar community college presidents. Denise LaRue studied the lived experiences of exemplar human resource officers. Jennifer Marzocca studied the lived experiences of exemplar non-profit executives. Monique Ouwinga studied the lived experiences of exemplar non-profit college presidents. Ambra Dodds-Main studied the lived experiences of exemplar K-12 superintendents. Tamarah Tilos studied the lived experiences of exemplar mental health executives. At the conclusion of this research, peer researcher Scott Dick will conduct a meta-qualitative analysis of the original nine studies.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women as Leaders</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for Breakthrough Results</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Ground</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Intelligence</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-Solving</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processes</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Research Problem</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose Statement</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Problem</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Study</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Conflict, Conflict Management, and Conflict Transformation</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Conflict</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Management</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Transformation</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six Domains of Conflict Transformation Behavior</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Intelligence</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-Solving</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Ground</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Leaders</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Stereotypes</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Leaders and Transformational Leadership</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose Statement</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentation</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of Data Collected</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection Procedures</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Coding Process</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS 74

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose Statement</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Data</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation and Analysis of Data</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results for the Central Research Question</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results for Sub-Questions</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration – Major Themes</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication – Major Themes</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Intelligence – Major Themes</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics – Major Themes</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-Solving – Major Themes</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process – Major Themes</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Findings</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS 123

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major Findings</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unexpected Findings</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Action</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Further Research</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding Remarks and Reflections</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

REFERENCES 138

APPENDICES 161
# LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Types and Durations of Observations.................................................................77

Table 2. Types of Artifacts Collected..................................................................................78

Table 3. Qualifying Criteria for Exemplar Female Business Leaders (EFBL)...............79

Table 4. Demographic Information for Study Participants..............................................80

Table 5. Types of Conflicts Identified by Exemplar Female Business Leaders..............82

Table 6. Collaboration Themes..........................................................................................86

Table 7. Communication Themes.....................................................................................91

Table 8. Emotional Intelligence Themes ..........................................................................96

Table 9. Ethics Themes.....................................................................................................102

Table 10. Problem-Solving Themes ................................................................................108

Table 11. Process Themes, Presented in Order of Most to Least References ............115
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Frequency of themes per domain. ................................................................. 84

Figure 2. Frequency of references per domain. ............................................................ 85
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Gridlock. It prevents motion whether it be forward or backward, often time rendering participants of an event so frustrated they give up or abandon their pursuit (Marren, 2012). It has been shown to cause anxiety, confusion, anger, and despair, and could dismantle progress that came before it. Gridlock is generally disliked and most try to avoid it as much as possible. In today’s landscape of government, commerce, educational system, business, and highway infrastructures, gridlock became a way of life (Marren, 2012).

An almost unavoidable bi-product of conflict, misinformation, disagreements, and egos, gridlock found its way into virtually every facet of decision-making occurring in the world today (Marren, 2012). Nationally, a divided House of Representatives found itself unable to compromise and work with the President of the United States, causing legislation to be delayed or even declined due strictly to opposing views. In local government, red-tape, regulatory compliance, funding, and feuding created gridlock so gripping that citizens were rendered incapable of influencing change despite the growing need for reform (Marren, 2012).

Conflict can escalate to the point of violence, with examples of conflict running rampant at home and abroad (Lewandowsky, Stritzke, Freund, Oberauer, & Krueger, 2013). In developing nations, countries riddled with protest and political unrest, and their bordering nations remain in conflict with one another. A refusal to compromise, the inability to communicate, and the driving need to be right outweighed any other form of resolution to the conflict plaguing such countries (Lewandowsky et al., 2013).
Conflict is ubiquitous and takes many forms. In the United States of America, conflict has arisen out of disagreements with court proceedings of controversial hearings, resulting in protesters taking to the streets in masses and businesses being boycotted over extreme differences of points of view (Ganson, 2014). Contemporary conflict management taught leaders to minimize conflict, work around it, and put it to rest; consequently, the conflict was never truly resolved and often came back more vehemently than before (Ganson, 2014).

Lencioni (2002) asserted that conflict was necessary as it (1) acted as a catalyst to build trust amongst individuals and (2) helped others view the perspective of another, which was a necessary skill for leaders. In today’s landscape, business rapidly evolves and grows more global as technology continues to advance. Conflict that took place just 10 short years ago was compounded by the addition of virtual teams, global competitors, and immediate access to most forms of information (Beheshtifar & Zare, 2013). The breakneck pace of business alone was cause enough for conflict, but the addition of the human aspect made for even more complex conflict to be present. Leaders in organizations must be nimble enough to anticipate the inevitable conflict and skilled enough to transform the conflict into workable and sustainable solutions for the business to thrive (Mayhew, 2014).

Increasingly, female leaders were taking the helm of organizations nationally and internationally. Their abilities to handle conflict well was essential to their continued success and the success of their organizations (Brandt & Laiho, 2013). Although it was suggested that female leaders approached management from a more humanistic lens as
compared to their male counterparts, more information was needed to determine if their approach to conflict produced desired outcomes (Prime, Carter, & Welbourne, 2009).

Today’s leaders continually search for new ways to manage conflict and to transform it into a more positive force for their organizations. Common ground was suggested as a strategy that could help to accomplish this conflict transformation. Finding common ground is the process by which leaders look for commonalities in the points of view of the conflicted parties, form solutions out of the best of both perspectives, and turn the conflict into a productive and sustainable change within the organization (Robson, Sinclair, Davidson-Hunt, & Diduck, 2013). This phenomenon of transcending the conflict to form a fortuitous outcome could likely transform business practices as well. The days of gridlock, indecision, animosity, and grievances could be dramatically mitigated if conflict could be transformed to produce breakthrough results rather than hurt feelings and a sense of winning by one and losing by another.

**Background**

Prevailing theories on conflict management suggested that conflict was a solitary event to be managed, contained, and put to rest (Wall & Callister, 1995). Conflict could be a force within business organizations that quietly existed until its presence became so overwhelming that it had to be dealt with for the business to survive and thrive. Labor disputes, union unrest, misinformation, mergers, acquisitions, downsizing, community complaints, agency regulation, budget cuts, and many more typical business practices led to conflict within an organization. However, the ability to transform conflict into sustainable and transformational change was needed more than ever as business continued to evolve (Leavy, 2013).
Conflict

Conflict is present in nearly every facet of business today, whether it be a small family-run business, a mid-sized company, or a large multi-national corporation. Conflict became entwined with business, challenging leaders to effectively manage conflict to keep it from derailing progress. Lencioni (2002) suggested that conflict was a necessary and vital part of organizational success and structure, and without which trust could not be established. As such, conflict served as a catalyst for change in an organization so long as it was handled appropriately. Although compromise was often considered the only solution to conflict, it implied that both parties lost some of what they consider important and often one position won a little more while another lost a little more, often times causing animosity and putting conflict at bay rather than resolving completely (Lencioni, 2002). “Conflict is often rooted in our perception of another’s actions and intentions. How we view and interpret the behavior of one another can determine our attitude toward the shaping and the resolution of a conflict” (Kouzakova, Ellemers, Harinck, & Scheepers, 2012, p. 9).

Conflict took on many characteristics, including physical violence, and though violent conflict was unlikely to be faced in boardrooms or around conference tables in most businesses, its presence could be felt (Edmund, 2010). In developing countries across the globe, conflict grew more and more violent in nature, rendering leaders and followers helpless. The inability to find commonalities, differing points of view, and a lack of respect for one another led to heightened tensions and growing conflict (Lewandowsky et al., 2013). Although it was suggested that conflict was needed in organizations, when it reached a level of violence, it was no longer productive nor
capable of bringing about change. Less dangerous, but equally as damaging to organizations, conflict that was never resolved also caused organizations to be stagnant and toxic. Although many current conflict management theories still maintained that compromise must be met to move past the conflict at hand (Ayoko, Ashkanasy, & Jehn, 2014), that solution did not mitigate the conflict that rages across our world.

Women as Leaders

Although conflict became a permanent fixture in organizations, women in leadership positions were yet to become commonplace. According to findings from the Pew Research Center on January 14, 2015, only 26 women served as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in Fortune 500 companies, which translated to 5.2% of available positions. Just 20 years ago, there was not a single woman CEO. Although women made their way into the boardroom with their male colleagues, women remained underrepresented in the leadership of most organizations. The growing number of women in leadership positions suggested that female leaders would be expected to effectively manage conflict more and more.

Women faced unique barriers in their attempts to reach the top of an organization (Hearn & Parkin, 1986) and the existence of the “glass ceiling” still impeded the advancement of women into leadership positions within organizations (Cook & Glass, 2014). A common impression was that women were not tough enough to handle the conflict that emerged within and outside the organization. Though challenged on their rise to the uppermost level of organizations, in many cases female leaders displayed the characteristics necessary to be recognized as transformational leaders (Cheung & Halpern, 2010), and faced conflict, overcame it, and transformed it.
“Gender issues in leadership has been widely explored in research” (Odetunde, 2013, p. 5327), revealing inconsistent findings on whether there were differences in how male and female leaders approached conflict management (Odetunde, 2013). Male leaders simply had more exposure to managing conflict given they held senior management positions far longer than women (Toh & Leonardelli, 2012). Employee perceptions of conflict management suggested that women leaders were viewed as more compassionate, collaborative, and supportive compared to their male counterparts (Prime et al., 2009); however, it was unknown whether that was a strength or weakness in managing conflict. More information is needed to determine how exemplar women in executive roles transform conflict to obtain breakthrough results in their businesses.

**Need for Breakthrough Results**

Conflict resolution, as described above, could lead to organizational change on the short-term, but to produce sustainable change and breakthrough results, new strategies for transforming conflict were truly needed. Sustainable change came about when conflict was resolved in a manner that produced innovation and cooperation across departments and resources, mitigated tension and strife, reduced gridlock, and sought to create a risk-tolerant environment (Dignath, Kiesel, & Eder, 2014). Much like a renewable resource, breakthrough results continued to thrive long after the originators left the organization as implementation of policies and procedures evolved with the organizations’ needs (Leavy, 2013).

Breakthrough results allowed businesses to reach new heights and find success not attained before. An example of this innovation and success was highlighted in the consistent and industry-leading standards set in place by Honda Motor Company. The
Chief Executive Officer responded to conflict by altering the way the company manufactured its parts and integrated in-house engineers at each factory location, thus boosting sales and allowing the company to respond to sales and industry trends (Rothfeder, 2014). Internal conflicts, industry pressures, and declining sales all indicated that change was necessary. According to Leavy (2013), as a result of conflict transformation and common ground orientation, breakthrough results differed from the status quo in that they:

- turn the sources of differentiation into routines, behaviors and activity systems that everyone in the organization can understand and follow, and its power is strikingly illustrated in cases of head-to-head competitors and the stark divergence in performance over time between those that adopted a repeatable approach. (p. 22)

**Common Ground**

Common ground “provides a way for people with differences to work together” (Jacobsen, 1999, p. 78), and encourages mutually beneficial results to all parties involved. Contrary to negotiations and compromise, common ground incorporated the ideas and agendas of all to produce results that left all feeling as though they had equal representation in the end results. “Diversity of values and of normative assumptions among management researchers is critical to policy relevance. Competing values give rise to the multiple interests that lie at the heart of most policy debates and contribute to policy innovations” (Kochan, Guillen, Hunter, & O’Mahony, 2009, p. 3).

Although not specific to business settings, common ground and the need to establish it gained traction as an approach to mediation, arbitration, labor hearings, and
public policy formation (Wardlow Lane, 2007). Common ground crossed boundaries to include all perspectives in finding resolution to conflict and further pressed participants to be innovative in developing long-term solutions to current issues (Jacobsen, 1999). Common ground lent itself to the collaboration process and was able to build relationships among those who faced the same conflict from differing perspectives.

The notion of finding common ground to transform conflict had not fully been explored in current research, yet the need to put differences aside to focus on issues at hand was increasingly important as business expanded both inside and outside of the United States (Robson et al., 2013). Organizations continued to find themselves competing globally, creating conflict that was more complex and dynamic than what preceded it. More information is needed to determine if common ground is likely to act as the fitting alternative to traditional conflict management practices used in business today. Further, it is important to know what behaviors are utilized to transform conflict. The literature suggested that the ability to establish common ground could be predicated on leaders exhibiting transformational behaviors that included collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, ethics, problem-solving, and processes.

Collaboration

Collaboration and cooperation were treated as synonymous in many cases, and both suggested that multiple parties and points of view merged together to form harmonious results (Coleman & Ferguson, 2014). Collaboration during a conflict ensured that several vantage points were considered while developing the most appropriate resolution. Collaboration increased the likelihood of breakthrough results
being achieved and sustained as a result of mediating conflict (Coleman & Ferguson, 2014).

Collaboration in the context of establishing common ground was not fully explored, yet its role in conflict management and problem-solving suggested that more examination was warranted. Collaboration challenged others to work collectively toward a solution and helped solidify relationships among participants (Dibble, 2010). The cooperative nature of collaboration aligned with the concept of establishing common ground and utilized common goals and communication to ensure satisfactory results (Mayhew, 2014).

**Communication**

Just as collaboration was vital to the success of establishing common ground, it could be argued that communication was the most important component of any endeavor. Without communication, misunderstandings, rumor, misinformation, and confusion arise from most situations. With regard to conflict, a lack of communication could derail any progress made toward a resolution. Employees and leaders alike cited a lack of communication as a compelling source of conflict and confusion in organizations (Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014).

During the conflict management process, communication was imperative to the success of the resolution of the conflict; interestingly, it also acted as the accelerator for further conflict if mismanaged (Ayoko et al., 2014). Although the most common form of communication during conflict was verbal, written communications including memos and agendas could offer insight for the participants and prepare them for the proceedings. Leaders of conflict management generally were tasked with updating any and all
communications and distributing them to all interested parties (Ayoko et al., 2014). This transparency of information could aid in mitigating further conflict and allowed all interested parties to focus on the true source of conflict.

Though not formally addressed in current research, the role of communication in the establishment of common ground with the intention of producing breakthrough results was arguably important (Mishra et al., 2014). Business organizations in general relied upon the soundness of the communications disseminated to all, hopeful that it reinforced the vision and values set forth by the organization. Without such, organizations faced the danger of being in a constant state of conflict with no end in sight. Leaders would profit from knowing more about which communication practices had the potential to advance the positive transformation of conflict.

**Ethics**

Ethics, in the context of business and conflict, challenged participants to put their personal feelings and biases aside for the good of all involved. Howard and Korver (2008) explained that ethics were multi-faceted and easily distorted in high-pressure decision-making settings. Conflict posed an ethical dilemma for all sides due to its unpredictable nature and the overwhelming need to be a winner at all costs (Edmund, 2010). Ethics on their own could be manipulated in a situation facing an individual, and, in times of conflict, could be abandoned all together.

For common ground to be attained, ethics must be intact and adhered to by all parties to ensure that mutual satisfaction with the agreed upon outcome is met. Without ethical considerations, the pursuit of common ground could be compromised and the results produced could benefit only one interested party rather than all (Dolan & Altman,
Although Howard and Korver (2008), Edmund (2010), and Dolan and Altman (2012) investigated the need for ethics when establishing common ground, this concept, for the most part, was largely unexplored. Ethics provided the guidelines by which decisions were to be made, offered parameters for participants to work within, and ensured the interests of all parties were considered and respected during proceedings (Dolan & Altman, 2012). Without ethical considerations present, conflict became negative rather than a positive catalyst for breakthrough results. Ethics built the foundation for trust, which allowed for conflict to be viewed as an opportunity to be innovative and creative in the solutions produced as a result of collaboration (Howard & Korver, 2008). More information is needed to determine the role that ethics plays in transforming conflict into a positive force.

**Emotional Intelligence**

Emotional intelligence (EI) encompassed both personal and social competencies that include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009). EI addressed how individuals influenced the actions of others and recognized their own reactions to situations. During conflict in particular, a leader with strong EI was more skilled in managing the conflict and producing breakthrough results (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009).

Bradberry and Greaves (2009) made several recommendations to improve people’s individual EI that include trusting their own feelings, allowing themselves to be uncomfortable, knowing their values, talking about what they hoped to accomplish with others, learning how to build trust with others, and becoming a critical thinker. Each of those skills were applicable to EI and could also be employed when dealing with conflict.
An emotionally intelligent leader with command of each of these skills could apply them to various settings, including conflict (Pulido-Martos, Lopen-Zafara, & Augusto-Landa, 2013).

Emotionally intelligent leaders were able to understand their own competences and identify the strengths and talents in others (Greer, Jehn, & Mannix, 2008). The emotionally intelligent leader could be well equipped to lead an organization through conflict, ensuring that common ground was established and breakthrough results were rendered. By being able to accurately assess the situation from both personal and social perspectives, the emotionally intelligent leader could navigate conflict with confidence (Jordan & Troth, 2006). Although much research was conducted with a focus on EI, its use in transforming conflict was largely overlooked.

**Problem-Solving**

Problem-solving involved looking at conflict from different vantage points and determining the most appropriate course of action. Problem-solving required that all viable solutions were presented and examined for soundness so that no one party felt as though they were not being heard or considered (Ayoko et al., 2014). Business leaders often learn problem-solving skills on the job and adapt each to the situation faced. Although one solution worked in past instances, it was not guaranteed to work every time (Kelman, 2010). Exemplar leaders approached conflict with an array of problem-solving practices used in past experiences, all the while being mindful of potential solutions offered by others (Blech & Funke, 2010).

Similar to collaboration, problem-solving was most effective when several parties were involved in the formation of the eventual outcome of the conflict that was faced.
Problem-solving skills were honed over time and with participation in complex issues. Exemplar business leaders were prepared to put in the work and time necessary to ensure that agreements made were the solution to the problem at hand and not a quick fix (Blech & Funke, 2010).

Problem-solving often involved knowledge sharing, which typically involved communication or dissemination of information from person to person or group to group (Carmeli, Gelbard, & Reiter-Palmon, 2013). Through knowledge sharing, problem-solving could run the full cycle of idea, evaluation, implantation, and sustainability (Carmeli et al., 2013). This problem-solving cycle could be one approach to the establishment of common ground for the production of breakthrough results.

**Processes**

Processes sets in place the steps needed to maintain the integrity of the organization. Processes were the action plans followed in an organization, whether they were a set of guidelines that specified how to handle a particular situation, an employee handbook that offered rules of conduct, or the steps to be taken to resolve conflict (Kotlyar, Karakowsky, & Ng, 2011). Processes came together over time and evolved with an organization as needs changed. With regard to conflict management, establishing common ground, and the production of breakthrough results, processes impacted how future conflict would be managed by the organization.

Business leaders often relied upon processes to navigate conflict. Traditional approaches such as Robert’s Rules of Order (Robert & Robert, 2000) used formal guidelines and procedures to be followed to allow for structured and constructive formal meetings to take place, such as Board meetings. As the name implied, the rules were to
keep order and not resolve conflict. Many conflict situations in business did not involve formal settings and tools such as Robert’s Rules of Order were rarely used in those less-formal situations. Conflict was rarely resolved in one sitting, and process allowed for follow-up and communication to be handled in a respectful and professional manner. Other process approaches included distribution of agendas, meetings with interested parties prior to public forum or official meetings, or the use of an uninterested third-party to lead discussions.

Each of these processes could be helpful to the eventual resolution of conflict and offered the blueprints for standards in operating an organization (Kotlyar et al., 2011). Although not every scenario could be accounted for by processes, a sound approach of policies and procedures to the run of an organization with clear expectations acted as the glue that held the structure together (Leavy, 2013). Much like communication, exploration is needed to determine how processes were used to transform conflict in pursuit of breakthrough results.

**Statement of the Research Problem**

Conflict is inevitable. When two or more parties come together in any capacity, conflict can arise for one reason or another. Ambiguity, misunderstandings, differing agendas, the inability to compromise, and many like factors all contributed to the presence of conflict in every realm of life (Cramton, 2002). In business, conflict manifested itself in several ways, often times leading to the loss of valuable resources such as time, personnel, and profits. Lencioni (2002) cited fear of conflict as one of the five dysfunctions of a team. Lencioni (2002) further suggested that any team brought together would fail in the end if it did not only face conflict, but the team needed to work
together to overcome it. Exemplar leaders were skilled in identifying the source of conflict, navigating that conflict, and coming to resolutions that were sustainable and satisfactory for all parties (Whetten & Cameron, 2007).

When the word conflict was used, it typically carried negative connotations with it; yet, leaders who could muster the courage to use conflict to foster creativity, produce higher thinking, enhance listening skills, and produce long-term growth came out ahead of others (Ayoko & Chua, 2014). These courageous individuals were the leaders who created transformational change in their business organizations. It was suggested that conflict is a dynamic process that does not appear suddenly, but takes time to develop and passes through several stages, all of which call leaders to action to manage the conflict in a productive manner (Whetten & Cameron, 2007). The search for common ground movement challenged leaders to come together in times of conflict to seek understanding and work collectively to resolve the conflict for the betterment of all involved (Search for Common Ground [SFCG], 2014).

Contemporary management practices taught business leaders to simply deal with conflict without adding the expectation of producing sustainable change (Wren, 2005). As with any practice, the evolution of skill in the area of conflict is necessary to keep up the ever-changing business environment now faced in every industry. Business leaders must come prepared to face conflict, find common ground within that conflict, and leave the conflict with clear and sustainable resolutions that lead to breakthrough performance (Kotlyar & Karakowsky, 2007). Gridlock in policy-making, disagreements over responsibilities, and miscommunication rendered business leaders incapable of producing
results. The ability to establish common ground is becoming a vital management skill for business leaders as the landscape of business as usual grows more and more complex.

Women are increasingly being looked to for leadership in these times of rapid change. In two decades, the number of women who held the position of Chief Executive Officer in Fortune 500 companies went from 0 to 26 (Pew Research Center, 2015), perhaps indicating that a new perspective is needed with regard to change management (Cook & Glass, 2014). These female leaders are being called upon to navigate the conflict facing their organizations, offer solutions that produce long-term results, and work collaboratively with their constituents to find common ground (Hoyt & Simon, 2011), suggesting that an exploration into how female business leaders go about transforming conflict to establish common ground is timely.

Research in the area of establishing common ground is beginning to surface. Lewandowsky et al. (2013) made the unique discovery that, despite the notion that it would allow business leaders to view conflict as opportunity, it was necessary for innovation and advancement. The concept of managing conflict no longer satisfies the needs in today’s business atmosphere. The establishment of common ground through the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors suggested possible ways to transform conflict into sustainable change initiatives (Ganson, 2014). Bundling together the management disciplines of collaboration, communication, EI, ethics, problem-solving, and process has yet to be fully explored with regard to transforming conflict in the business industry. Literature indicates that more information is needed to determine if these six domain of conflict transformation behaviors could offer the theoretical
framework needed for business leaders to find success in transforming conflict (Ganson, 2014).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover and describe how exemplar female business leaders establish common ground and produce 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 six domains.

**Central Question:**

What are the lived experiences of exemplar female business leaders in establishing common ground and producing breakthrough results by engaging in elements of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors?

**Sub Questions:**

1. **Collaboration** – How do exemplar female business leaders use collaboration to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

2. **Communication** – How do exemplar female business leaders use communication to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

3. **Emotional Intelligence** – What aspects of emotional intelligence do exemplar female business leaders use to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?
4. **Ethics** – How do exemplar female business leaders use ethics to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

5. **Problem-Solving** – How do exemplar female business leaders use problem-solving strategies to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

6. **Processes** – What processes do exemplar female business leaders use to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

**Significance of the Problem**

Although conflict resolution and management concepts circulated in business management for decades, the search for common ground and the pursuit of mutually beneficial results remained relatively new (Ganson, 2014). Little had been done to truly understand the impact of establishing common ground, and the utilization of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors was left untapped. Collaboration, communication, EI, ethics, problem-solving, and processes were all concepts that were explored individually, yet the power of their interaction and integration to resolve conflict was largely overlooked.

The exploration of these six domains as the foundation to affect conflict and produce breakthrough results is greatly needed as business leaders continue to face conflict. Never before has the impact of a global marketplace been such a reality, and exemplar business leaders need common ground unlike any other time in history (Elenkov & Petkova Gourbalova, 2010). With a clear understanding of how those skills work together to transform conflict into sustainable and productive change, business leaders would be better prepared to embrace conflict.
Female senior executives continue to grow in numbers, and their exposure to conflict in their organizations will undoubtedly continue. Their ability to identify the source of the conflict and effectively resolve the conflict, and their innovative solutions in times of heavy conflict will be looked upon by women around the world who are looking to join them at the top of their fields. To face the challenges of a global marketplace, business must expand their leadership to include women as key decision-makers to compete and stay relevant (Elenkov & Petkova Gourbalova, 2010).

With the findings from this study, the results could be used by business leaders in organization of all sizes. Labor disputes, union proceedings, arbitration, and negotiations are just a few areas that face conflict regularly and are in need of strategies and processes for transforming conflict. Business management students, Chief Executive Officers and their boards, business owners, and business consultants may also benefit from innovative approaches to manage conflict and produce breakthrough results that impact their businesses for the long-term. Finally, women called upon by their organizations to lead them through turbulent times could find guidance from the exemplar women who forged a path for them during times of conflict.

**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, 2009).

**Common Ground:** When all parties involved aspire to, and willing to work toward, a new vision of the future together, one that meets everyone’s deep-seated concerns and values (SFCG, 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 (Maxwell, 2010).

**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, 2004).

**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 conducting behavior in a morally responsible way, given the values and morals of the culture (Ciulla, 1995; Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 2005).

**Problem-Solving:** The act of choosing and implementing a solution to an identified problem or situation (Harvey, Bearley, & Corkrum, 2002).

**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 include process design, process methods, and process tools (Schwarz, 2002).

**Delimitations**

The study was delimited to 15 female business leaders living and working in the state of California. Furthermore, the participants were limited to those who were considered to be exemplar in their leadership during times of conflict in an organization.
To be considered an exemplar leader, the leader needed to display or demonstrate the following criteria:

1. Evidence of successful relationships with stakeholders
2. Evidence of breaking through conflict to achieve organizational success
3. Five or more years of experience in that profession or field
4. Written/published/ or presented at conferences or association meetings
5. Recognized by their peers
6. Membership in associations of groups focused on their field

**Organization of the Study**

The remainder of the study is organized into four chapters, references, and appendices. Chapter II contains a literature review of what is currently known about conflict resolution and creating common ground; it explores the elements of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors and discusses female business leaders and their approach to conflict and common ground. Chapter III explains the research design and the methodology of the study. This chapter includes an explanation of the population and sample utilized in the study, details the data gathering procedures, and discusses the procedures used for data analysis. Chapter IV presents the data collected and analyzed, and discusses the finding of the study. Chapter V contains the findings, summary, conclusions, and recommendations for action, as well as suggestions for further research.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This literature review contains four sections. It begins with an examination of the existing research around conflict, organizational conflict, and conflict management versus conflict transformation. The second section discusses the foundation of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors: collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, ethics, problem-solving, and process. The third section introduces and explains the concept of common ground and its role in assisting female business leaders in transforming conflict. Finally, the chapter closes with conclusions drawn from the review of literature.

Conflict, Organizational Conflict, Conflict Management, and Conflict Transformation

Conflict

Conflict, at its most basic, was defined as a clash of needs between parties (Avruch & Mitchell, 2014); this clash then caused each party to cease any type of progress until the need in question was met satisfactorily. With that understanding of conflict, one could claim that conflict is everywhere, therefore, making it unavoidable. The root of conflict was often merely a difference of perspective and the inability to compromise with another. Lencioni (2002) claimed that conflict was needed for progress, suggesting that without conflict, the need to make changes could not be uncovered. For this study, conflict was defined 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, 2004).

According to Rahim (2011), conflict originated from six sources: affective conflict; conflict of interest; conflict of values; cognitive conflict; goal conflict; and substantive conflict. Affective conflict arose when interacting social entities realized that their feelings and emotions were incompatible. An example of affective conflict in a business setting could be two workers in the same business unit who cannot get along with one another due to personal biases or contradictory beliefs. This inability or unwillingness to work together created conflict and therefore caused one to resent the other or to become suspicious of one another (Rahim, 2011).

Conflict of interest was created when an individual or group engaged in activities that were contrary to those in which they were supposed to be engaged (Rahim, 2011). For example, if a hiring manager interviewed multiple candidates for a job opening, but chose to hire a friend versus the most qualified candidate, it would be considered a conflict of interest or at least the appearance of a conflict of interest. This conflict could undermine trust and cause other employees to question the ethics of the business unit manager, therefore creating a different conflict scenario out of the first (Rahim, 2011).

Conflict of values took place when individuals or groups differed in their values or ideologies on key issues (Rahim, 2011). Segal and Lehrer (2012) recognized that often in business, individuals were faced with conflicting expectations. They had to meet and uphold both internal (their own) and external (their organization’s) values to be considered successful. For example, a department head may be tasked with cutting costs and asked to lay-off workers to meet organizational goals; yet, that individual may
personally disagree with the decision to lay-off workers. This conflict of values could require an alteration to their values to be in alignment with their professional obligations.

Cognitive conflict came about when one person was unable to understand or perceive the task at hand in the same way as others parties involved (Rahim, 2011). Cognitive conflict could arise when one party made an attempt to complete a task without considering the impact that it would have on others in the same function or in a supporting function. Similarly, if a manager was coaching an employee, and the employee did not believe there was a purpose behind the coaching, the two would be in cognitive conflict with one another.

Goal conflict was a result of the incompatibility in the preferred outcome of individuals or groups facing the same task (Rahim, 2011). Sales teams were often measured by the number of products sold in relation to the goals set for them. If one product was weighted more heavily than another in terms of profit, the sales people might prefer to sell that product versus another that was weighted less. This preference could contradict the bottom line goal needed by the overall department, therefore creating a goal conflict.

Substantive conflict arose when members of a group disagreed on the task or content issues (Rahim, 2011). This type of conflict could be seen when a business owner expected his or her employees to greet a customer as soon as they walked into the business. The employee could view “welcome” is an acceptable greeting, whereas the owner may expect the employee to offer a more personalized greeting asking about the reason for the visit. The content of the greeting could be disputed and cause conflict between the parties.
Understanding how conflict developed and the best course of action to deal with conflict is needed more than ever as “we are connected human beings who must balance our need for personal autonomy with our need for interdependence” (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001, p. 32). Interdependence, a synonym of interconnectedness, suggested that different parties must be able to constructively work together to peacefully co-exist; consequently, conflict management became necessary. Often, conflict was thought to be negative and offered nothing to a situation (Longaretti & Wilson, 2006), whereas some believed that conflict served as a function to bring problems for the surface (Lencioni, 2002; Wilmot & Hocker, 2001). These contrary views of conflict were indicative of the practice of simply managing conflict versus transforming conflict.

Organizational Conflict

Evans (2013) sited four types of organizational conflict: intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup. Intrapersonal conflict occurred within an individual. Interpersonal conflict occurred between two or more individuals. Intragroup conflict occurred between individuals of a group. Intergroup conflict occurred between different groups (Evans, 2013). Today’s organizations deal with high levels of workplace conflict resulting from such things as differences in human relations, confusing organizational structures, competition among members and units for scarce resources, budget cuts, employee layoffs, job expansion, and global competition.

Intrapersonal conflict involved a single individual engaged in an internal struggle to clarify contradictory values, or the perception that he or she was in conflict with the organization or other employees (Cox, 2003). It may occur if there was a significant difference in the role an individual was expected to perform in relation to the role held in
their organization (Cox, 2003). Intrapersonal conflict also led to interpersonal conflict. An example of this type of conflict could be a salesperson working for a company who felt the company discriminated in who it was willing to sell its product to or targeted a specific demographic, and this practice was in conflict with the personal values of the salesperson.

Interpersonal conflict could exist between coworkers, workers and supervisors, and at every level or an organization (Kessler, Bruursema, Rodopman, & Spector, 2013). This inability to peacefully co-exist and focus on workplace goals often led to further stress and heightened conflict. Interpersonal conflict could stem from differing values and beliefs, misunderstandings, prejudices and biases, as well as an individual’s inability to work with others (Kessler et al., 2013). Interpersonal conflict could open the door to intragroup conflict if those individuals were unable to resolve their differences worked together in the same work unit, department, or project team. An example of this type of conflict could be two co-workers in the same department with similar roles who refused to share information with one another.

Intragroup conflict consisted of conflict among members of a group or team (Rahim, 2001). Whether this team was working together on a long-term or short-term basis, conflict was likely to be present. It was suggested that conflict needed to be properly managed or it could create a toxic workplace (Harvey & Drolet, 2005). When people were brought together and expected to work collectively, conflict arose because no two people were exactly alike in their thinking, values, goals, or approaches (Danielsson, Bodin, Wulff, & Thorell, 2015). An example of this type of conflict could be a team that was brought together with individuals from different parts of the company
who were unable to work together due to a difference in priorities within the organization.

Intergroup conflict referred to conflict between two or more teams or groups within an organization (Rahim, 2011). Although this type of conflict was the most uncommon of the four types, it tended to have a strong and lasting impact when it occurred (Nastase, 2007). Imagine an accounts payable department and an accounts receivable department in conflict with one another, and the detriment to the organization if those two units could not work out their differences. Business would halt, profits would be lost, and jobs could be in jeopardy.

Conflict was believed to be a natural outcome of human interaction, and as such, was believed to be common in workplaces (Danielsson et al., 2015). Several studies documented that senior and middle-level managers and supervisors spent 21% to 42% of their time dealing with conflict as a primary or third party (Dana, 2001; K. W. Thomas & Schmidt, 1976; Watson & Hoffman, 1996). Other studies concluded that over half of supervisors’ and managers’ workdays were spent engaging in meetings or talks trying to reach an agreement between parties to resolve conflict (O’Leary & Van Slyke, 2010).

**Conflict Management**

Conflict management “involves designing effective strategies to minimize the dysfunctions of conflict and enhancing the constructive functions of conflict in order to enhance the learning and effectiveness of an organization” (Rahim, 2001, p. 76), and developing macro-level strategies to lower dysfunctional conflict and improve functional conflict (Ozkalp, Sungur, & Ozdemir, 2009). Functional conflict came by way of skillful management of substantive disagreements between organizational parties, often resulting
in stronger group performance through a better understanding of different perspectives and solutions. Dysfunctional conflict often stemmed from a strain in interpersonal relationships that led to anger, betrayal, hurt feelings, distrust, and other negative emotions that broke down teams resulting in decreased loyalty, poor performance, and lower levels of satisfaction (Alghamdi, 2011; Jehn, 1995; Rahim, 2011; Wang, Jing, & Klossek, 2007).

Mayer (2004) believed the field of conflict resolution was in crisis and needed to be redefined to be relevant and effective. Mayer (2004) stated that since business and global relations were swiftly evolving, conflict management had the potential to play a key role in the success of organizations, although perhaps not in its traditional form. Experts in the field of conflict management treated conflict as an episode that could be navigated, resolved, and forgotten, rather than a starting off point for transformation and sustainability.

The ability to manage conflict in a manner that produced a mutually beneficial outcome was conceivably a skill needed by all due to conflict being ever present (Wilmot & Hocker, 2011). Conflict management and mediation in contemporary society revolved around managing the conflict at hand and eliminating the cause, rather than examining the potential outcomes of conflict transformation. Although transformation could be more cumbersome and time-consuming, the eventual outcome could be sustainable and rewarding. Traditional conflict management practices believed that “on-going, unresolved workplace conflict has negative effects that reach far beyond the principle parties” (Wilmot & Hocker, 2011, p. 5), suggesting that swift intervention was needed with regard to conflict.
Early inventors of labor negotiations standards, Walton and McKersie (1965) suggested that negotiations involve mixed-motive decision-making, hinting that both sides of the negotiation had differing agendas. This difference therefore suggested that the conflict at hand could be mitigated, but never fully resolved, or further, never result in a sustainable change. Whereas conflict management policies became institutionalized in the organization (Lipsky, Seeber, & Fincher, 2003), the practice of transforming conflict versus merely managing and containing conflict was still greatly needed.

K. W. Thomas and Killman (1974) identified five approaches to conflict management: collaborating, compromising, accommodating, competing, and dodging. Collaborating created an environment where a win-win solution was available if both sides were willing to work together. Compromising meant that both sides in the dispute had to be willing to give something up to come to some type of resolution. Accommodating involved one side giving in to the other when it became apparent that the issue at hand was more important to one versus the other. Competing took place when both sides felt as though they were right and they refused to concede to the other; this often heightened the conflict. Dodging was typically a short-term strategy used when there was no chance of winning or resolving the conflict, or it was used as an attempt at letting things work themselves out without interference (K. W. Thomas & Killman, 1974).

Today’s conflict mediators continue to employ the standards set nearly half a century ago, suggesting that conflict stayed stagnant and required the same tried and true methods of the past. Transforming conflict, therefore, was a phenomenon that not all leaders were capable of producing. This transformation included finding common
ground in the face of conflict, meaning that the conflict was the catalyst for transformational change. Ackerman-Anderson and Anderson (2010) stated “transformation is one of the most challenging yet potentially rewarding undertakings for leaders” (p. 59), suggesting that merely managing conflict could not truly transform an organization.

**Conflict Transformation**

A step beyond conflict management, conflict transformation took place when all parties involved in the conflict were able to fully understand, acknowledge, and verbalize what was going on, and to that end, committed to reaching new understandings that could redefine the situation (Dmytriiev, Freeman, & Haskins, 2016; Pluut & Curseu, 2012). This transformation was often triggered by critical moments during conflict that challenged the participants to become aware of incompatible behaviors and attempted to alter those attitudes, beliefs, and emotions toward mutually beneficial outcomes (Dmytriiev et al., 2016; van den Berg, Curseu, & Meesus, 2014). These turning points fundamentally altered an individual’s perception of oneself, the other party, and the issue at hand. Conflict transformation differed from conflict management in that it often improved relationships and led to better organizational-level outcomes.

Conflict transformation sought to involve individuals and larger groups and drew on historical, religious, and cultural resources to frame and re-frame actions in the conflict. It sought to create short-term and long-term interventions that were seemingly ground-breaking and of wider importance (Dmytriiev et al., 2016), and assumed that conflict was caused by real problems of inequality and injustice that were expressed by competing frameworks (Richards, 2001). Conflict itself was crucial to the transformation
so long as it was utilized as constructive disagreement, which could produce beneficial outcomes that improved a process or decision. These outcomes often caused an organization to be more ethical, informed, and innovative; have greater engagement and more closely knit teams; clarify the company mission and values; and stop bad decisions before they were made (Jameson, Sohan, & Hodge, 2014)

Conflict transformation relied upon common ground as it involved many different people and influences connecting in complicated ways that keep on changing, and it was complex because the relations between the elements of conflict changed over time as well (Dmytriyev et al., 2016; Jameson et al., 2014). Although it sought to halt on-going conflict, the conflict itself had to reach a point where the need to change was critical. When conflict reached that turning point, conflict transformation developed processes that promoted empowerment, justice, peace, forgiveness, reconciliation, and recognition, thus, producing transformational change (van den Berg et al., 2014). Transformational change was “catalyzed by a number of forces that first trigger awareness and then action. Understanding what drives change is critical because the drivers establish the overall context within which any change is identified, scoped, and planned” (Ackerman-Anderson & Anderson, 2010, p.7).

Transformational changes altered the organization, leaders, employees, culture, vision, values, and mission (Ackerman-Anderson & Anderson, 2010). The theoretical framework for conflict transformation is transformational change, whereby the conflict itself acts as the critical moment and turning point needed to transform the organization. Transformational change redefined an organization’s goals and values, adapted to the changing needs of the internal and external customers, and resulted in improvements to
organizational functions (Kuntz & Gomes, 2012). Transformational change was a process that took place over time, was rarely a linear process, and required a commitment from every level of an organization.

Poutiatine (2009) described transformation as having the following nine principles:

1. Transformation is not synonymous with change
2. Transformation requires assent to change
3. Transformation always requires second-order change
4. Transformation always involves all aspects of an individual’s or organization’s life
5. Transformational change is irreversible
6. Transformational change involves letting go of the myth of control
7. Transformational change always involves some aspect of risk, fear, and loss
8. Transformational change always involves a broadening of the scope of worldview
9. Transformation is always a movement towards a greater integrity or identity – a movement toward wholeness

The first principle suggested that transformation was a constant process of change (Anderson & Ackerman-Anderson, 2010), and was a particular type of change in that it did not just happen, rather it was chosen (Quinn, 2004). The second principle indicated transformation and change in an individual or organization could not be transformed unless they agree to the process (Dirkx, 2006; Kovan & Dirkx, 2003). This agreement often occurred when an experience did not fit within the view currently held by the
individual or organization, and change needed be made to gain understanding and acceptance. The third principle of second-order change was said to be multi-dimensional, multi-level, qualitative, discontinuous, and involve a paradigm shift (Levy & Mary, 1986). Second-order change implied a dramatic difference in past and current practices that altered a whole system. The fourth principle, according to Strickland (1998), involved all dimensions of an individual. Tolliver and Tisdell (2006) agreed that “transformative learning is best facilitated through engaging multiple dimensions of being, including rational, affective, spiritual, imaginative, and socio-cultural domains through relative content and experiences” (p. 38). This suggested that transformation was always changing at more than one level. The fifth principle pointed out that transformational change was most often an irreversible shift. Quinn (1996) noted that once transformational change occurred, there was no way to go back to the original state. The sixth principle, according to Anderson and Ackerman-Anderson (2010) meant surrendering control and being mindful that significant change was full of uncertainty, and Michael and Wortham (2009) believed that the myth of control hindered the transformational change process. The seventh principle involved letting go and moving on. Anderson and Ackerman-Anderson (2010) stated “transformational process begins with the ever increasing disruption of the system and moves to the point of death of the old way of being, and proceeds towards an inspired rebirth” (p. 40). Though it could cause grieving, Senge (1990) suggested that if old behaviors and patterns could be reconstructed or expanded, the grief dissipated. The eighth principle challenged individuals, leaders, and organizations to change their world view, and Tolliver and Tisdell (2006) claimed this allowed for an expansive understanding of the world and
could bring meaning. The ninth and final principle was described by Tolliver and Tisdell (2006) as a process that affected internal and external levels, expanding one’s understanding of the self as well as the rest of the world.

**Six Domains of Conflict Transformation Behavior**

Prior to the start of this thematic research, Brandman University faculty members Patricia Clark-White and Keith Larick identified six behavioral domains of conflict transformational behaviors. They noted these six domains included specific behaviors used by leaders when transforming conflict and creating breakthrough results. There was little existing research on transforming conflict and finding common ground. White and Laricks’ interest in researching the six domains of conflict transformation and their relationship to finding common ground led to the formation of a research team. This research team consisted of nine doctoral students who worked together as a peer research team to describe how these conflict transformation behaviors related to exemplar leaders finding common ground and transforming conflict in their fields. The domains are explained in this section and arranged alphabetically as no one is more important than another.

**Collaboration**

In relation to conflict management, collaboration was deemed a win-win strategy that sought to find a mutually satisfying outcome and was considered a long-term resolution (Moisoglou et al, 2014). “Although definitions of collaboration can vary according to the particular context…all researchers in the collaborations field identify the need for a shared vision or common purpose to both motivate and structure the collaborative endeavor” (Berman, 2006, p. 44). Collaboration during times of conflict
asked that multiple parties, often with differing agendas, come together to produce an outcome that benefited all.

Collaboration often required cooperation to move past the conflict at hand to ensure that a resolution was met (Marek, Brock, & Sayla, 2015). It was argued that collaboration seldom occurred naturally, often times requiring the senior most leader of the conflicting group to facilitate collaboration. Although collaboration was recognized as an effective means to resolve conflict, it was often difficult to achieve because it asked participants to recognize the strengths and weaknesses in their own efforts (Marek et al., 2015). Despite challenges, collaboration during times of change and conflict could offer the greatest ability to innovate because more than one solution was likely presented (Hattori & Lapidus, 2003).

Collaboration only took place when trust was present within the group. “True collaboration can’t exist without personal commitment, and commitment brings with it the possibility of engaging in healthy conflict and debate” (Weiss, 2011, p. 1). The notion that collaboration was the responsibility for the whole group further established the trust that needed to be present within the group to achieve extraordinary results (Hattori & Lapidus, 2003). This same notion also ensured that progress occurred rather than just generating ideas that went nowhere and produced nothing. Working with a common vision and/or toward a common goal laid the foundation for collaboration.

“Three behaviors define a collaborative leadership style: redefining success, involving others, and being accountable” (Hansen, 2013, p. 147). Redefining success entailed the collaborators agreeing on a common goal as a group. Involving others meant the leader of the organization or group brought stakeholders together to resolve the
conflict, and often those individuals had differing interests and values. Being accountable reinforced the concept that collaborators were responsible for the good of the whole and to each other. Collaboration therefore led to critical cooperation where the stakes were high and the need for real change to be made and sustained was essential (Arenas, Sanchez, & Murphy, 2013).

Collaboration, and its synonym cooperation, were thought to come more naturally to females due to societal influences and beliefs about female characteristics (Meng, 2014), and as such, it could be assumed that female leaders were more collaborative by nature. Eagly and Johnson (1990) studied both male and female leaders and discovered that female leaders were more interpersonally oriented than male leaders; specifically, they sited that the male leadership style tended to be more autocratic compared to the female leaders who were more democratic and encouraged participation. Encouraging participation aligned itself well with the strategy of collaboration and could come more naturally to female leaders.

Communication

Researchers agreed that communication required a source that had an intended meaning and encoded the message to be sent to the receiver (Daft, 2012; Hellriegel & Slocum Jr., 2004; Schermerhorn, Osborn, & Hunt, 2008; Stuart, 2012; Wyatt, 2014). The message was transmitted via a channel to the receiver who needed to decode the message and its perceived meaning. To ensure the message and perceived meaning was correctly received, the sender provided feedback. If the perceived meaning was correctly understood by the receiver, then the communication process worked; if not, the sender could revise any portion of the process to ensure the intended meaning was understood by
the receiver. Additionally, almost all sources recognized the impact of noise and filters and how they influenced and altered the communication process (Daft, 2012; Hellriegel & Slocum Jr., 2004; Schermerhorn et al., 2008; Stuart, 2012; Wyatt, 2014). In less technical terms, communication was a process whereby one party sent a verbal, physical, or written message to another party or parties to express opinion or fact.

Communication remained a crucial element of daily life and was often how people related to one another. Ideas, emotions, views, and the like were shared through communication, and without communication, a lack of understanding would complicate most aspects of life. Managers spent the majority of their time engaged in communication; thus, the mastery of leadership communication was noted as a priority skill for leaders (Barrett, 2006). Employees and leaders alike cited a lack of communication as a compelling source of conflict and confusion in organizations (Mishra et al., 2014). In times of change and conflict, a leader’s ability to communicate effectively often influenced the change or conflict either positively or negatively (Campbell, Carmichael, & Naidoo, 2015). Transparent communication that carried the vision and values of the organization was often well-received and offered reassurance or clarity to employees.

Miscommunication, on the other hand, undermined the efforts made regarding change and conflict management. Mixed-messages, lack of communication, and rumors damaged the progress made in times of conflict, and added to the conflict being faced (Barrett, 2006; Campbell et al., 2015). Leaders who were able to convey clear messages that addressed the conflict directly and with empathy were seen as capable and most often respected by their subordinates. Clear, concise, and effective communication created
trust and understanding, and encouraged others to follow the leader “through effective communication” (Barrett, 2006, p. 385).

Academic research recognized the importance of communication in managing organizational change for decades and concurred that communication was vital in managing employee expectations and emotions during change (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Fairhurst, 1993; G. F. Thomas, 2007). Further, research found that change communication must represent a diversity of voices and interests in the organization to bring about credible and sustainable change (Dutton, Ashford, O’Neill & Lawrence, 2001; Lewis, 2000). Without such, the change efforts often failed, leaving the stakeholders feeling defeated and frustrated (Barrett, 2006). Effective communication built relationships as it was able to reinforce the vision of an organization, connected employees to the business, and had the power to facilitate change and drive business results (Shilpee, Damodar, & Singh, 2012).

Although women continued to rise up as senior leaders in their organizations, stereotypes associated with male and female leaders included communication styles. Women regularly contended with gender stereotypes that portrayed them as lacking in qualities commonly associated with effective leadership (Catalyst, 2005). Male leaders were often linked with the masculine modes of communication that included assertion, independence, competitiveness, and confidence, which were emphasized in masculine speech, whereas female leaders were associated with feminine forms of communication that included supportiveness, attentiveness, and collaboration (Gaur, 2006). The implications of continuing to perceive communication through gender stereotypes could mean that men and women need to communicate differently to be equally effective,
suggesting that both male and female leaders were equally challenged when having to communicate change (Gaur, 2006). Regardless of the gender of the leader, both male and female leaders needed to demonstrate competency in communicating change and anticipating conflict that could arise (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2006).

**Emotional Intelligence**

In the past quarter century, particular attention was paid to the study of managing one’s emotions and understanding the emotions of others. The pioneering research from Goleman (1995), along with Mayer and Salovey (1997), found that emotional intelligence (EI) played an important role in organizational settings, especially in times of work conflict. EI was defined as the individual’s “ability to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustration; to control impulses and delay gratification; to regulate one’s moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to emphasize and to hope” (Goleman, 1995, p. 34). Although it was implied that emotions did not belong in the workplace, the fact remained that emotions were present and could not always be concealed, and therefore needed to be acknowledged (Putman & Mumby, 1993). The burgeoning interest in managing emotions effectively continued in today’s organizations as the workforce grew more dynamic and leaders were faced with conflict on an almost daily basis.

Goleman (1995) described EI using the four components of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Although each of the four components held relevance in conflict management, arguably relationship management played a particularly vital role as it had the ability to develop, inspire, and influence others (Riaz, 2012). As such, relationship management, as it related to the leaders of
organizations, suggested that a leader’s skill at forming relationships with key stakeholders during times of conflict had a significant effect on conflict management and the opportunity to find common ground. Subsequent research into EI offered insights into understanding its role in conflict management. Goleman’s (2000) continued work to understand emotions, how to effectively manage them, and how to recognize the same in others, laid a foundation for the role of emotions in conflict. Emotions could have a profound impact on how people conceptualized conflict and could influence their decision-making, and strong EI could facilitate a leader’s interactions and relations with others (Hopkins & Yonker, 2015).

Empirical studies indicated that EI contributed to a cooperative course of action in conflict management and results suggested that an array of EI abilities related to more effective conflict management (Druskat & Wolff, 2001; Fulmar & Berry, 2004; Jordan & Troth, 2006). A leader with the capacity to identify and address underlying tensions and conflict at the source was employing EI strategies in managing conflict. EI increased the level of awareness in leaders, enabled them to acknowledge and understand their own emotions and the emotions of others, improved relationships, and thereby increased the likelihood of transforming conflict (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Emotional competency was considered an essential skill in the workplace; thus, a leader’s ability to form relationships with others was a necessary strategy to deal with conflict (Schlaerth, Ensari, & Christian, 2013).

Leaders who possessed a high level of EI and were skilled at deploying strategies during times of conflict and were often able to influence the problem-solving performance of their team members (Jordan & Troth, 2004). The combination of the
ability to empathize and also manage one’s own emotions positively affected conflict management. As women continued to rise to leadership positions within their organizations, the need for them to possess EI was considerable (Petrides & Furnham, 2001, 2006). Many leadership skills were observed through gender stereotypes and regarded differently when performed by men versus women, though studies found no significant difference with regard to EI (Bar-On, Brown, Kirkcaldy, & Thome, 2000; Hopkins & Bilimoria, 2007; Petrides & Furnham, 2001, 2006). Given EI was comprised of emotional and social intelligence, conceivably it was more important for male leaders to show these competencies to give the picture of outstanding leadership, whereas female leaders were expected to come by them naturally (Hopkins & Bilomoria, 2007). Nonetheless, EI set the framework for both male and female leaders to effectively transform conflict.

**Ethics**

Human beings should be responsible for their choices and have a duty to make choices in a morally responsible way (Strike et al., 2005), suggesting that managers and leaders were responsible for upholding the ethics of their organizations. “Managers and their companies are trusted because of their reputation, because they are good at what they do, because of their knowledge, because they appear confident, and because they are believed to be ethical” (Barrett, 2006, p. 389). Leaders were expected to play an important role in creating and supporting an ethical climate at work, and cultivating change that fell within ethical boundaries (Dickson, Smith, Grojean, & Ehrhart, 2001).

Ethical leadership was comprised of ethical behaviors that included acting fairly, allowing voice, and rewarding ethical conduct to create a culture of shared values and
common interests (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Dolan & Altman, 2012). A culture’s ethical values were what defined the concept of leadership (Ciulla, 1995), and with a globalized, fast-changing world marketplace, ethical behaviors were needed more than ever (Dolan & Altman, 2012). Poor economic performance, declining business, and a tarnished corporate reputation all had unethical leadership and behaviors to blame (Kacmar, Andrews, Harris, & Tepper, 2012), reinforcing the notion that ethics were necessary in business more than ever.

Ethics, in the context of business and conflict, challenged participants to put their personal feeling and biases aside for the good of all involved. Howard and Korver (2008) explained that ethics were multi-faceted and easily distorted in high-pressure decision-making settings. Conflict could pose an ethical dilemma for all sides due to its unpredictable nature and the overwhelming need to be a winner at all costs (Edmund, 2010). Without ethical considerations, the pursuit of common ground could be compromised and the results produced may benefit only one interested party rather than all (Dolan & Altman, 2012).

Ethical leaders were those who developed an ethical code or rules to live by that assisted in behaving ethically or making ethical decisions (Howard & Korver, 2008). Large corporations such as Enron, Volkswagen, Countrywide Home Mortgage, and the Department of Environmental Quality in Flint Michigan were each plagued with ethical dilemmas that were handled poorly and resulted in closures, loss, and mistrust from the public. These ethical conundrums regularly occurred, and those organizations that were adept at facing and overcoming them had ethical leaders at the helm (Swaine, 2013). Brown and Trevino (2006), Webley and Werner (2008), and Bass and Steidlmeier (1990)
all uncovered that top management had the most influence on the ethical or unethical behavior of their subordinates, and argued that ethical leadership emerged as a thriving research field.

Ethical leaders were those with good character, which included a good attitude, trustworthiness, self-awareness, the ability to build relationships, and compassion (Denham, 2010; Horsager, 2012; Jameson, 2006). Good character was also associated with holding an ethical foundation, which could help both employees and stakeholders trust the leader. Ethical leaders were sited with characteristics of having a good reputation, being knowledgeable, exuding confidence, and being ethical when the stakes were high (Barrett, 2006). Ethics provided the guidelines by which decisions were made, offered parameters for participants to work within, and ensured the interests of all parties were considered and respected during proceedings (Dolan & Altman, 2012). Ethics built the foundation for trust, which allowed for conflict to be viewed as an opportunity to be innovative and creative in the solutions produced as a result of collaboration (Howard & Korver, 2008).

Whether the leader was male or female, the fact remained that s/he must be an ethical leader to uphold an ethical culture in the organization (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Webley & Werner, 2008). For decades, studies examined the ethical behaviors of men and women, finding that males tended to be more utilitarian, tentative, and neutral in their approaches to business ethics, whereas females expressed more definitive ethical positions (Arlow, 1991; Betz, O’Connell, & Shepard, 1989; Borkowski & Ugras, 1998; Ruegger & King, 1992). Additional studies reported that women tended to be more situationally and generally ethically aware, sensitive, and responsible compared to men.
(D’Aquila, Bean, & Procario-Foley, 2004; Deshpande, Joseph, & Maximov, 2000); nonetheless, both male and female leaders recognized the need for ethical leadership.

**Problem-Solving**

Problem-solving was defined as “the act of choosing and implementing a solution to an identified problem or situation” (Harvey et al., 2002, p. 5). During times of conflict, effective leaders searched for multiple solutions by way of different approaches, such as through consensus of the group, and chose the best alternative (Harvey & Drolet, 2005). Business leaders often learned problem-solving skills on the job and adapted each to the situation faced. Although one solution may have worked in past instances, it was not guaranteed to work every time (Kelman, 2010). Exemplar leaders entered conflict situations with an array of problem-solving practices used in past experiences, all the while being mindful of potential solutions offered by others (Blech & Funke, 2010).

Problem-solving skills were honed over time and with participation in complex issues. Exemplar business leaders came prepared to put in the work and time necessary to ensure agreements were solutions to the problems and not quick fixes. Through knowledge sharing, problem-solving ran the full cycle of idea, evaluation, implementation, and sustainability (Carmeli et al., 2013). A frequently used strategy for resolving conflict, Harvey et al. (2002) suggested a six-step approach to problem-solving: mind-set, problem definition, solution criteria, possible solutions, solution choice, and implementation.

Mind-set asked the group tasked with solving the problem focus all of their energy on finding a resolution, setting the tone for the remaining steps. During the problem definition step, the group created a specific statement of the problem that was
agreed upon by all, allowing them to move to solution criteria. Solution criteria documented the parameters of the solution determined by the group and categorized the needs, wants, and nice to’s, which were used to generate possible solutions. Brainstorming possible solutions that fell into the solution criteria then helped the group determine the best solution to attempt. Implementing the solution was then done after reaching consensus.

An interactive approach to problem-solving promoted change in the individuals involved, the larger social system, the political culture, and the conflict system at large (Kelman, 2007). To be most effective, the conflict to be solved needed to be viewed as a shared problem for all parties involved and the solution needed to address the underlying causes of the conflict (Kelman, 2007). Burton (1990) first developed the term problem-solving for conflict resolution and pioneered the development of problem-solving workshops. The primary purpose of the workshops was to open communication channels with interested stakeholders to encourage new ways of thinking about the conflict that induced participants to approach conflict as a shared problem (Burton, 1990).

Female business leaders need to know how to problem-solve and be decisive in their decision-making (Sonfield, Lussier, Corman, & McKinney, 2001); in doing so, they were thought to be competent leaders and strategic (Eagly, 1995). Problem-solving required the female leader to draw out the underlying cause of conflict and address it directly. This skill was called upon more regularly as business was conducted on a global scale and leaders faced challenges that did not exist a decade ago (Dolan & Altman, 2012).
Process

Having a process meant there were internal, external, or systematic conditions completed in a predetermined series of actions directed toward some end (Hamme, 2015). Schwarz (2002) described a three-level process that included process design, process methods, and process tools. Process design was the least detailed and included structuring a group’s time and activities, and provided purpose for the meeting. Process methods were used as a way of directing the process design and aimed to set the group up to achieve the goals established during process design. Lastly, process tools dealt with the specific activities detailed for the group (Schwarz, 2002). The three levels of processes assisted successful leaders in working through conflict and building effective teams that knew how to work through change and conflict (Harvey & Drolet, 2005).

Being prepared to face change and conflict was an effective strategy as process was considered to be “the flow of information through interrelated stages of analysis toward the achievement of an aim” (Pearce & Robinson, 2011, p. 16). Process appeared dynamic, meaning it was constantly evolving and changing; however, formal planning provided stability (Schwarz, 2002). Business leaders who developed and abided by a strategic process that underwent continual assessment and subtle updating would be far more prepared than those who neglected to define processes (Pearce & Robinson, 2011). Processes came together over time and evolved with an organization as needs changed. Processes could be helpful to the eventual resolution of conflict and offered the blueprints for standards in operating an organization (Kotlyar et al., 2011). Although not every scenario could be accounted for by processes, a sound approach to the running of an
organization that set clear expectations by way of policy, procedure, and process acted as the glue that held the structure together (Leavy, 2013).

Kotter (1996) proposed the following eight-step process for creating change:

1. Establishing a sense of urgency
2. Creating the guiding coalition
3. Developing a vision and strategy
4. Communicating the change vision
5. Empowering broad-based change
6. Generating short-term wins
7. Consolidating gains and producing more change
8. Anchoring new approaches in the culture

Though broadly supported in literature (Ansari & Bell, 2009; Raineri, 2011), there was not a single model that could provide a sweeping solution to organizational change, though Kotter’s model was used across diverse industries. The need for a change model increased as leaders were expected to navigate and implement change in their organizations.

**Common Ground**

Common ground was defined as 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; Snowe, 2013; Tan & Manca, 2013). Often confused with compromise, common ground was unique in that it took place when all those affected by the same conflict aspired, and were willing, to work toward a cooperatively forged vision of the
future. Common ground was achieved when the differences present in the group were used to find commonalities that allowed for change to benefit all involved. Contrary to conflict negotiation or mediation where one party left as the victor and the other in a state of loss, common ground made it possible for both parties to come away winning (Kousakova et al., 2012).

Common ground provided “a way for people with differences to work together” (Jacobsen, 1999, p. 78), and encouraged results that were mutually beneficial to all parties involved. Contrary to negotiations and compromise, common ground incorporated the ideas and agendas of all stakeholders to produce results that left them feeling as though they had equal representation in the end results. “Diversity of values and of normative assumptions among management researchers is critical to policy relevance. Competing values give rise to the multiple interests that lie at the heart of most policy debates and contribute to policy innovations” (Kochan et al., 2009, p. 3).

The construction of common ground was a dynamic process as it was the convergence of shared knowledge and the ability to build rapport with those same knowledge seekers (Kecskes & Zhang, 2009); consequently, common ground was intentional and took effort from all involved. The Search for Common Ground (n.d.) shared that common ground came about when participants settled on the highest common denominator rather than settling on the lowest one. This quest to build on areas of common interest served organizations by establishing common goals, values, and beliefs, while at the same time building tolerance and respect for others (Dobkin & Pace, 2006).

Common ground crossed boundaries and sought to include all perspectives in finding resolution to conflict and further pressed participants to be innovative in
developing long-term solutions to current issues (Jacobsen, 1999). Common ground gained recognition in business and government and was alluded to in a speech given by former Speaker of the House, John Boehner, in January 2015, where he stated “finding common ground is what the American people sent us here to do” (para. 4), suggesting that it could help Congress focus on the American people versus their fundamental conflicts as a governing body. The Search for Common Ground (n.d.) also urged citizens of the world to envision a future where everyone had their values met and their concerns acknowledged by leaders who wanted all to benefit.

The current practices of compromise and negotiation omitted an imperative factor that creating common ground satisfied, which was that all involved in conflict stood to gain something from participating in creating a solution (Kouzakova et al., 2012). Conflict management theory continues to evolve, and with it so must the approach. The need to put differences aside to focus on issues at hand was increasingly important as business expanded both inside and outside of the United States (Robson et al., 2013). Finding common ground incorporated cooperation, collaboration, ethical considerations, and the recognition of the importance of values in devising a plan of action. Leaders must possess the acumen of establishing common ground if they hoped to keep up with the increasing speed of change taking place in the global marketplace. Further, it was important to know what behaviors were utilized to transform conflict. The literature suggested that the ability to establish common ground could be predicated on leaders exhibiting transformational behaviors that included collaboration, communication, EI, ethics, problem-solving, and processes.
Female Leaders

The Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Senior Vice President, or Chief Operating Officer of an organization is one of the most senior leaders in the company. As such, much of their time and energy is spent on ensuring the business is profitable and successful. Park, Shin, Lee, and Ro (2015) suggested the CEO was responsible for every aspect of running the organization, up to and including the employee attitudes and morale. Working with a Board of Trustees, establishing and promoting corporate values, coaching and mentoring others, analyzing budgets and projections, and hiring and firing all fell under the job description for the CEO. Conflict could be present in any one of these dynamic arenas; therefore, the CEO must to be prepared to face it head on.

Although conflict became a permanent fixture in organizations, women in leadership positions have yet to become commonplace. According to findings from the Pew Research Center (2015), only 26 women served as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in Fortune 500 companies, which translated to 5.2% of available positions. Women faced unique barriers in their attempts to reach the top of an organization (Hearn & Parkin, 1986), and the existence of the glass ceiling still impedes the advancement of women into leadership positions within organizations (Cook & Glass, 2014). Though challenged on their rise to the uppermost level of organizations, in many cases female leaders displayed the characteristics necessary to be recognized as transformational leaders and were able to face conflict, overcome it, and transform it (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). In 2013, General Motors promoted Mary Barra to the position of CEO after narrowly avoiding collapse; this historic move put one more female leader in the most powerful position in
her organization, in a country where only one-quarter of the 1.5 million CEO positions were held by women (Forbes, 2013).

Transformational leaders in today’s business landscape were “energized by the changing environment and create conditions in which people can be their best. Such leaders seek a meaningful future for their people, organizations, and communities” (McKee, Boyatzis, & Johnston, 2008, p. 2). Whether the leaders were male or female, they were expected to guide the organization down a path of success. The CEO of an organization was expected to sculpt and effectively communicate and embody the vision set forth by the organization and provide the proper resources to those who worked for the organization, as well as being responsible for building a culture in the organization making good business decisions that supported the values and culture, and overseeing the organization’s performance (Dragoni, Park, Soltis, & Forte-Trammell, 2014).

Additionally, leaders in organizations needed to be nimble enough to anticipate the inevitable conflict and skilled enough to transform the conflict into workable and sustainable solutions for the business to thrive (Mayhew, 2014).

In May 2016, Ellen Alemany returned to CIT Bank as the CEO after retiring from RBS Citizens Financial Group in October 2013, largely due to stockholders’ trepidation that the current CEO John Thain was not equip to lead the organization to becoming a middle-market leader (Broughton, 2016). As female leaders continue to become CEOs, entrepreneurs, and senior executives, the leadership styles they bring garner more attention. Transformational leadership was said to display supportive and appreciative behaviors, which motivated the employees to excel (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003). Although female leaders may face different standards based on
stereotypes than their male counterparts, studies found that female leaders used transformational leadership more often than men (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Eagly et al., 2003). Their abilities to handle conflict well was essential to their continued success and the success of their organizations (Brandt & Laiho, 2013). Although it was suggested female leaders approached management from a more humanistic lens compared to males, more information is needed to determine if their approach to conflict produces desired outcomes (Prime et al., 2009). Recent research in leadership identified a female leadership advantage (Eagly & Carli, 2003); coined transformational leadership, this style of leadership involved engaging with and inspiring subordinates to reach a higher level of motivation.

**Gender Stereotypes**

Gender stereotypes were long established, and male and female leaders may be viewed differently due to stereotyping and differing expectations (Brandt & Laiho, 2013). Studies indicated that men were socialized to be assertive, independent, rational, and decisive, whereas women were expected to show warmth and concern for others, as well as be helpful and nurture (Eagly et al., 1995; Northouse, 2016). As such, when women did not behave according to their socially defined roles, they were often viewed in a negative light, which could be particularly damaging for women in leadership roles (Kunda & Spencer, 2003). Eagly (1995) posited that individuals behaved according to societal expectations and historically effective leadership was perceived to require traits stereotyped as masculine.

Men were found to be somewhat more self-assertive, aggressive, and coarse in their manner and language; in contrast, women, were found to be more expressive of
emotion and compassionate (Chesler & Parry, 2001; Simmons, 2001). Social role expectations influenced leader effectiveness. In leadership positions, women resorted to displaying masculine characteristics to be seen as effective (Kawakami, White, & Langer, 2000). In the recent decade, women’s roles showed marked change; more women entered male-dominated occupations and increasingly possessed typically masculine qualities (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Eagly and Carli (2003) argued that as women continued to gain access to stereotypical male leadership roles, the stereotype of leaders would be forced to change to reflect more female characteristics and may influence the pace of social change.

Hogue and Lord (2007) asserted that “if women are not accepted as legitimate leaders, then their effectiveness across all types of leadership, both formal and informal, will be constrained making gender bias a practical and significant problem for organizations” (p. 370). Contemporary leadership recognized that the best person for the situation must hold the most authority, whether man or a woman (Simon & Holyoak, 2002). Lord and Hall (2005) explained that developing leadership skills and reputation required proactive self-development that both men and women were capable of achieving; consequently, the emergence and acceptance of women as leaders should be encouraged.

**Female Leaders and Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leaders spent time communicating to gain subordinates’ trust and confidence to encourage and develop them to their full potential. Such leaders set goals for the future and developed plans with their subordinates about how to achieve them (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Eagly et al., 2003). This style of leadership was more
common among women, was positively associated with leadership effectiveness, and was referred to as female leadership style (Eagly et al., 2003; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 2002).

Burke and Collins (2001) found that female leaders had a tendency to more effectively utilize a transformational leadership style as it tended to incorporate innate female qualities such as nurturing, caring, cooperative, just, and considerate. However, some studies suggested the gender advantage was overstated (Manning, 2002; Rowald & Rohmann, 2009; Vecchio, 2002). Despite contradictory findings, Jogulu and Wood (2008) asserted that transformational leadership was the style of leadership that was more strongly equated with effective leadership, regardless of the gender of the leader. Eagly et al. (2003) posited that the transformational leadership paradigm was most meaningful in today’s diverse and complex world, and it was women who were most often associated with this style.

**Summary**

The review of literature for this study revealed that several studies investigated conflict and conflict management styles. The six domains of conflict transformation were researched as separate topics, but not collectively as strategies that could facilitate transformational change. Research into female leaders was conducted, yet it was limited and did not fully explore how female leaders went about establishing common ground to transform conflict.

As female executives continue to lead organizations, they continue to face conflict. The current study was necessary because it focused on the lived experiences of
female business leaders who transformed conflict by finding common ground and producing breakthrough results. This study filled an important gap in research.

This chapter explored what was currently known about conflict resolution and creating common ground, discussed the elements of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors, and examined female business leaders and their approach to conflict and common ground. Chapter III explains the research design and the methodology of the study. Chapter IV presents the data analysis and discusses the finding of the study. Chapter V contains a summary of findings, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for action, as well as suggestions for further research.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overview

Chapter III outlines the methodology used in this study. This phenomenological study sought to determine how exemplar female business leaders transformed conflict to establish common ground through the utilization of six domains of conflict transformation behaviors. This investigation included female business leaders in the state of California who were members of Leadership California, the National Association of Women Business Owners, and/or the Women’s Leadership Exchange. This chapter presents the methods and approaches used to identify the population and sample, as well as the instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, limitations, and the summary.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover and describe how exemplar female business leaders establish common ground and produce 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 six domains. The central research question was: What are the lived experiences of exemplar female business leaders in establishing common ground and producing breakthrough results by engaging in elements of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors? The sub questions were:

1. **Collaboration** – How do exemplar female business leaders use collaboration to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?
2. **Communication** – How do exemplar female business leaders use communication to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

3. **Emotional Intelligence** – What aspects of emotional intelligence do exemplar female business leaders use to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

4. **Ethics** – How do exemplar female business leaders use ethics to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

5. **Problem-Solving** – How do exemplar female business leaders use problem-solving strategies to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

6. **Process** – What processes do exemplar female business leaders use to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

**Research Design**

This phenomenological study utilized qualitative research methods to render its results. Qualitative research typically sought to create themes and derive meaning by way of interviews, observations, and documents; the researcher was immersed in the field and used more than one type of data collection (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research was usually also inductive, meaning hypotheses were not made prior to data collection; rather, the researcher allowed the data to drive the direction (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). The researcher was able to “collect data directly from the source, focus on why and how behavior occurs, and evolves and changes as the study takes place” (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010, p. 321).
Rationale

A thematic team of nine researchers was assembled to research the topic at hand, and therefore, they collaborated to determine the research design most appropriate for the study. Three qualitative methods were considered for this study, ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenology. Ethnography was used to uncover and define the culture of a group of people (Patton, 2002). As such, it was essential the researcher be immersed in the culture being studied. Each member of the thematic team would have needed to join the group being studied, experience the behaviors and people interacting together, and report back on their findings. The current study was not looking to experience conflict as it existed in most settings, but rather see how exemplar leaders in various fields went about transforming conflict; consequently, ethnography was discarded.

Grounded theory was also discarded as it asked the researcher to generate a theory after conducting research by assigning meaning to what was observed during fieldwork and then making a systematic comparison of what took place (Patton, 2002). The current study needed a descriptive method to tell the story of how conflict was transformed as told by the leader themselves. In the storytelling, making such comparisons would not have been a possibility, so grounded theory was not an appropriate research method for this study.

It was decided that a phenomenological approach to the study was most fitting as it described “what is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this group of people” (Patton, 2002, p. 132). A phenomenological study typically explored and captured the human experience of the phenomenon taking place and asked the participants to give meaning to the experience so a better understanding
could be attained (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). Phenomenological studies examined the perceptions of the participants of the study to make sense of the phenomenon at hand (Patten, 2012). The researcher was asked to suspend any preconceived notions about the phenomenon and allow the participants to describe their perceptions of the phenomenon. Organizations and their leaders continue to struggle with managing conflict and those exemplar leaders who were able to transform conflict to find common ground and create breakthrough change were at the root of the phenomenon being explored.

**Population**

The population for any given study was known as the group to which the results of the research study could be generalized (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2012). The population for this study included the 1,039,208 women who owned businesses in California, and specifically the 93,397 women who owned businesses in Orange County, California (US Census Bureau, 2007).

**Target Population**

The population was narrowed to exemplar female business leaders in Orange County, California who were members of the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO). NAWBO was selected because it specifically identifies and recruits Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and other senior executive female business leaders who value entrepreneurship, engage in courageous communication, promote community responsibility, and pursue excellence. Thus, the target population was the approximately 300 members of the NAWBO Orange County chapter.
Sample

Flick and Foster (2007) explained that sampling in qualitative data sought to allow the findings to be generalizable to the larger population being examined, and went on to say “our cases should be able to represent the relevance of the phenomenon we want to study in our research participants’ experience and concern with this phenomenon” (p. 29). Sample selection for this qualitative research referred to choosing a subset of individuals out of the general population of the study who most closely represented the phenomenon being examined.

Snowball sampling was utilized to identify interviewees. Snowball sampling was defined by McMillian and Schumacher (2010) as “a strategy in which each successive participant or group is named by a preceding group or individual. Participant referrals are the basis for choosing a sample” (p. 327). The researcher contacted NAWBO to create a list of possible participants for the study. The researcher sought sponsorship from a respected member of the organization to gain entry into the organization and to establish credibility in the group. Using the snowball sampling strategy, one exemplar participant nominated another to be included in the sampling of the study (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). The initial person recommended from NAWBO as an exemplar leader was interviewed and provided the contact information for additional female leaders, all of whom agreed to participate in the study. Each of those seven provided the contact information for an additional three to four people. Through this process, the desired number of 15 female business leaders was reached.
Instrumentation

Researcher as an Instrument of the Study

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002), suggesting that “the credibility of qualitative methods, therefore, hinges to a great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing the fieldwork” (Patton, 2002, p. 14). Creswell (2014) asserted that observation, interviews, and artifact collection were sound approaches to conducting phenomenological research. Interviews allowed the researcher to act as an interpreter of content and body language, and gain a general understanding of the phenomenon at hand. Observations allowed the research to see the phenomenon first-hand and artifacts provided another data source to review for further examples and explanations of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). In this study, the researcher conducted interviews, observed behaviors, and reviewed artifacts.

Data Collection Protocols

The primary data collection instrument utilized for this phenomenological study was a series of open-ended questions developed by the thematic team. The open-ended questions were created to aid the researcher in capturing the essence of the experience of transforming conflict to find common ground through the six domains of conflict transformation. These six domains were derived from the research discussed in the literature review in Chapter II.

The thematic team met on a weekly basis for a one-month period to develop the questions to be used for the study. The purpose of the open-ended questions as the instrument for research was to solicit dialogue from the participants in an authentic and organic manner (Patton, 2002). Given the study was phenomenological and focused on
the lived experiences of female business executives regarding transforming conflict to find common ground, it was necessary to create questions that sought to evoke responses that told of the possibility and structure of the phenomenon being examined (Shank, 2002).

**Validity**

Validity, as applied to qualitative research, meant that the instrument designed for data collection measured what it intended to measure (Patton, 2002). Several steps were taken to improve the validity of the study.

**Criterion Validity**

Creswell (2000) suggested that qualitative researchers use credibility criterion and persistent observation as appropriate. Credibility criterion focused on establishing a match between the responses of the experts (the exemplar female business leaders) and the realities represented by the evaluator and designer of the instrument. This criterion, which was established by the thematic team as a whole, aided in data rendered being trustworthy and dependable. Work done with a thematic research team allowed for multiple researchers to establish the criteria by which participants were selected, which in this case were:

- Evidence of successful relationships with stakeholders
- Evidence of breaking through conflict to achieve organizational success
- Five or more years of experience in the profession or field
- Written, published, and/or presented at conferences or association meetings
- Peer recognition
- Membership in associations or groups focused on their field
Content Validity

To preserve validity throughout the study, the use of the open-ended questions assisted the researcher in creating a rich pool of data regarding each of the six domains of conflict transformation. For example, if a domain was not discussed in the initial conversation between the researcher and the participant, the researcher was able to refer to the open-ended question developed for that particular domain as a means to uncover data. The research questions were created by the thematic team during a virtual meeting where ideas were shared and questions were generated and revised as a group. Once the questions were developed, they were reviewed by a research expert and the dissertation committee to ensure the content validity of the questions.

Pilot Interview

Patten (2012) advised, “a novice who is planning qualitative research should conduct some practice interviews with individuals who will not be participants in the study” (p. 153). Prior to the interviews taking place, the researcher practiced her interviewing skills with a fellow research who had conducted qualitative research and interviews. The purpose of the pilot interview was to ensure the researcher took a neutral perspective, maintained neutrality throughout the interview process, and asked valid questions with a consistent approach.

Reliability

Reliability in qualitative studies was determined by consistency amongst the data gathered (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research sought to “understand phenomena in context-specific settings, such as a ‘real-world’ setting, where the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 2002, p. 39). Therefore,
reliability could also be viewed as credibility, transferability, and trustworthiness (Patton, 2002).

**Internal Reliability of Data**

Triangulation was used in qualitative research to test for consistency in the findings rendered from the data (Patton, 2002). Three data collection methods were used, interviews, observations, and artifact review. Each data set rendered findings that were compared and contrasted to allow the researcher a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of transforming conflict as experienced by the exemplar business leaders. The use of data triangulation across the different types of data helped establish greater credibility in the findings.

Patton (2002) stated triangulation was typically a strategy employed by qualitative researchers as a means for improving the validity and reliability of research or the evaluation of findings. The use of multiple data points built the argument for valid data being rendered by this study (Patton, 2002). The researcher conducted interviews, gathered artifacts as they were made available, and observed the participants in their natural settings to ensure the data were rich with multiple perspectives.

**Inter-coder Reliability**

Reliability could also be established through the use of multiple coders looking at the same data (Patton, 2002). According to Lombard, Synder-Duch, and Bracken (2004), inter-coder reliability was established when another researcher coded at least 10% of the data gathered from the primary researcher and reached a goal of 90% agreement in coded data to be considered the best, and 80% agreement on the coded data to be acceptable.
This agreement in coded data rendered the findings more reliable due to the consistency between the researchers.

Following the Lombard et al. (2004) approach to inter-coder reliability, each researcher involved in the thematic study conducted his or her individual research. They then transcribed and coded the data independently. Once coding was completed by the originating researcher, another researcher from the thematic team coded 10% of the data provided by the originating researcher. As a thematic team, it was agreed that if greater than 80% of coded data aligned with the originating researcher’s findings, the data coding was considered reliable.

**Data Collection**

**Types of Data Collected**

**Interviews.** Interviews in qualitative research were used to gather stories from the participant perspective to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon being examined (Patton, 2002). Interviews were said to be conducted in one of three ways: the informal conversational interview, the general interview guide approach, and the standardized open-ended interview (Patton, 2002). For this phenomenological study, the thematic team determined the standardized open-ended interview format was most appropriate as it allowed for greater consistency across interviewers. Open-ended questions (Appendix D) were crafted regarding the six domains of conflict transformation.

**Observations.** “Examining perceptions is known as a phenomenological approach to acquiring knowledge” (Patten, 2012, p. 155). As a phenomenological study, it became necessary for the researcher to use observations to supplement the interview
process. Patten (2012) described observations as either nonparticipant or participant-based. Nonparticipants were outsiders not involved in the group being researched whereas participants were or became members of the group being observed. The purpose of observations as either a nonparticipant or a participant observer was to garner data that was not obtained verbally during the interview process. “The purpose of observational analysis is to take the reader into the setting that was observed. This means that observational data must have depth and detail” (Patton, 2002, p. 23).

**Artifacts.** Artifacts were items that could be collected from an organization, such as by-laws, codes of conduct, personnel directories, and the like. They were described as “tangible manifestations that describe people’s experience, knowledge, actions, and values” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 361). Artifacts were collected to further assist the researcher in understanding the context in which the phenomenon was examined. “Objects are created symbols and tangible entities that reveal social processes, meanings, and values” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 362).

**Data Collection Procedures**

Upon completion of pilot testing and dissertation committee approval, an application for approval to conduct research was submitted to the Brandman University Institutional Review Board (BUIRB). With BUIRB approval to conduct the study, potential participants were contacted through introductory letters and the data collection process was able to commence.

Introductory messages that described the study were emailed to potential participants. Those who were interested in participating were asked to provide the researcher with times to conduct an interview. Interviews were scheduled at a time and
location that was convenient to the study participant. Before each interview, the researcher went over the informed consent form and respondents were reminded that participation was voluntary, meaning the respondent was able refuse to participate at any time, elect to not answer a question, or stop the questioning to ask for clarification. Each participant was asked to sign an informed consent indicating she was aware of her rights as a study participant and volunteered to participate (Appendix A).

Interviews. “The data collection mainstay of a phenomenologist is the personal in-depth, unstructured interview” (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010, p. 346). The interviews allowed the participants to express how they were affected by the phenomenon of using conflict transformation behaviors to establish common ground with breakthrough results, and provided a personal account of their success in this area. After BUIRB approval was obtained, the potential participants were contacted via email. The email acted as an introduction to the study, gave an overview of the topic, and was accompanied by an email from Dr. Patricia White, the Dissertation Advisor, encouraging participation. The email (Appendix B) also informed participants of the use of the data collected and included a consent form to be completed prior to scheduling the interview.

Each interview was between 45 and 60 minutes in duration, and was held at either the office of the participant or via Adobe Connect. At the time of the interview, participants were given a brief introduction to the study, asked to provide consent to be voice recorded and to have notes taken, and received the Participant’s Bill of Rights (Appendix C). Each participant was identified by initials and the date of the interview to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Once consent was obtained, the interviewee was
asked to describe her experience with the phenomenon and asked follow-up questions from the protocol that were designed by the thematic team.

Following the interview, the researcher asked each participant to supply the name and email of another female business leader who could potentially qualify to participate in the study. The researcher wrote down reflections immediately after the interview as advised by Patton (2002) as a means for the beginning of data analysis and to capture the setting of the interviews and initial reactions to the data gathered. If clarification on a response was needed, the researcher called the participant and asked the question again and took additional notes. This follow-up process was employed to ensure that missing or insufficient data was a minimal occurrence. Data were then transcribed by both the researcher and a transcriptionist to ensure accuracy.

**Observations.** Observations were used by the researcher to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon that was investigated. Patten (2012) advised researchers to use observations as a form of data collection as it offered the researcher an opportunity to experience the phenomenon first-hand, as well as observe the participants in their regular setting. Patten (2012) also asserted that observations allowed the researcher to uncover information about the phenomenon that the interviewee was not aware of and therefore could not comment on. This discovery of desired information enabled the researcher to gain a more thorough understanding of the leaders’ abilities to transform conflict.

The researcher conducted observations at the organizations represented by the female business executives who participated in the study. The sponsor for each organization set-up dates and times for the observations to occur, which included staff
meetings, speaking engagements, training sessions, and conferences. Each of the executives knew that observations would be taking place and consented to having the researcher take field notes. Field notes were then examined to “provide a comprehensive perspective” (Patten, 2012, p. 306), and were coded similarly to the data gathered from the interviews that were conducted.

**Artifacts.** Patton (2002) explained that artifacts complemented interview data and researcher observations by offering data that was not uncovered or data that may have been previously overlooked. Artifacts for this study consisted of published biographies of the female business leaders who participated in the study, which in most cases highlighted their backgrounds and accomplishments, along with public information about the organizations they represented. Additionally, whenever possible meeting agendas were retained and reviewed, along with meeting minutes and other supporting documents. The purpose of gathering these artifacts was to complete the full picture of the lived experience of the phenomenon. Although those data were not explicitly coded like the interview and observation data, artifacts aided the researcher in finding the meaning in the phenomenon and uncovering themes and consistencies in the data collected.

**Data Analysis**

**Data Coding Process**

Upon completion of the interviews, observations, and the review of artifacts, the task of data analysis began. Creswell (2014) offered the following steps for data analysis:
• Step 1: Organize and prepare the data for analysis.

• Step 2: Read through all the data. Gain a general sense of the information and reflect on the overall meaning.

• Step 3: Conduct analysis based on the specific theoretical approach and method.

• Step 4: Generate a description of the setting or people and identify themes from the coding.

• Step 5: Represent the data within the research report.

• Step 6: Interpret the larger meaning of the data.

Data organization began with the researcher transcribing the data from audio recordings to paper transcripts. A transcriptionist was used by the researcher to ensure that the data transcribed were a true representation of what was said by each participant. The researcher independently transcribed, as did a transcriptionist, and the records were compared for accuracy.

Once the data were accurately transcribed, they were reviewed by the researcher to aid in the development of potential codes for analysis. Codes were those patterns and themes that emerged from the raw data collected in interviews and observations, and helped to make sense of the core content of the data (Patton, 2002). This initial interaction with the data allowed the researcher to create coding categories for the data.

Analysis

The purpose of data analysis was to identify the themes that emerged from the qualitative data gathered. Data analysis was conducted through the use of a computer software tool used for data storage, data coding, and data retrieval; the actual data
analysis was left up to the researcher (Patton, 2002). Analysis included taking the transcribed data and placing phrases and key ideas into the corresponding code or category most appropriate. Once properly coded, the researcher was then responsible for deriving meaning from the findings. This analysis allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of how the respondents were able to transform conflict by creating common ground.

In phenomenological analysis, the researcher was expected to extrapolate concepts and ideas out of the data at hand and tell the story of the phenomenon studied (Creswell, 2004). Analysis of the data in qualitative research should be an iterative process and could take place until the final report was drafted. Data analysis also aided the researcher in drawing conclusions from stories shared by the respondents. Patton (2002) suggested that credible findings in data analysis were strengthened by the researchers’ ability to look for data that both supported and rivaled explanations of the phenomenon when drawing conclusions.

**Limitations**

Limitations in qualitative research referred to factors that negatively affected the study and were typically outside of the researcher’s control (Roberts, 2010). All studies have limitations. The factors that affected this study were time, sample size, geography, self-report, and the researcher as the instrument.

The researcher needed to create a timeline for completion of the study that included the timeframe for interviews to be conducted. As such, a 45-day window from February 2016 to April 2016 was created to conduct interviews and follow-ups as needed. Since the interviews were limited to a one-hour window, the interviewees sometimes had
distractions due to job demands that took away time from the interviewing process, and extended interviewing time was not allowed.

Sample size was determined by the thematic team prior to collecting data and was set at a minimum of 12 and maximum of 15 participants because qualitative research had broad guidelines for sample size. Narrowing down to 12 to 15 qualified participants could have caused other qualified participants to be excluded from the study. It was also possible that the participants were not able to relay all relevant information being sought in the study.

Geography was also a limiting factor in the study. Exemplar female business leaders were recruited out of southern California, as that was most convenient for the researcher. Since sponsorship was utilized as a means to gain entrance into participant pools, it was logical for the researcher to work in a geographic region in which she also resided. However, that ruled out participants from other regions who may have provided more or different insights.

The researcher had to take what the participants said during the interview process at face value. Self-reported data could potentially contain biases, cannot be independently verified, and on occasion, the participant may forget exactly what transpired. The participants were also subject to exaggeration, meaning that they may embellish on what truly took place.

Since the researcher acted as the instrument in the study (Patton, 2002), the researcher’s ability to remain neutral and unbiased in the data collection process had the potential to affect the validity of the study. However, this was mitigated through the collaboration with the thematic team in the creation of the interview questions, the use of
an expert in qualitative interviews to observe and provide feedback during a mock interview, and the use or another researcher to verify accuracy in coding data. The researcher also had to remain mindful of any pre-conceived notions or theories developed in the research design phase of the study while analyzing the data for results.

**Summary**

This chapter discussed the methodology for the phenomenological study that was conducted to explore how exemplar female business leaders were able to transform conflict and find common ground. The chapter included the purpose statement and research questions used by the thematic team of researchers. It also included a description of the research design, population, sample, and the instrumentation, which included interviews, observations, and the examination of artifacts. It concluded with data collection procedures, analysis of the data, and a discussion of the limitations of the study.

Chapter IV revisits the purpose, research methods, methodology, population and sample, and presents a detailed report of the research findings. Given the qualitative research methods used, the findings are presented in narrative form and include tables that highlight key findings. Chapter V concludes the study and offers major findings, unexpected findings, conclusions, implications for action, recommendations for further research, and concluding remarks and reflections from the researcher.
CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of exemplar female business leaders to discover themes that contributed to how they found common ground and produced breakthrough results through using the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors. Chapter IV commences with the restating of the purpose of this study and the research questions, and provides a brief overview of the research methods and data collection procedures. This is followed by an overview of the research demographics. The second part of this chapter presents a narrative of the data analysis along with a summary of the key findings.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover and describe how exemplar female business leaders establish common ground and produce 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 six domains. The central research question was: What are the lived experiences of exemplar female business leaders in establishing common ground and producing breakthrough results by engaging in elements of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors? The sub questions were:

1. **Collaboration** – How do exemplar female business leaders use collaboration to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?
2. **Communication** – How do exemplar female business leaders use communication to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

3. **Emotional Intelligence** – What aspects of emotional intelligence do exemplar female business leaders use to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

4. **Ethics** – How do exemplar female business leaders use ethics to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

5. **Problem-Solving** – How do exemplar female business leaders use problem-solving strategies to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

6. **Process** – What processes do exemplar female business leaders use to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

**Population**

The population for this study included the 1,039,208 women who owned businesses in California, and specifically the 93,397 women who owned businesses in Orange County, California (US Census Bureau, 2007). The population was narrowed to female business leaders in Orange County who were members of the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO), which included female Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and other senior executives. Thus, the target population was the approximately 300 members of the NAWBO Orange County chapter.
Sample

To vet possible participants for the study, the thematic team created a list of criteria that needed to be met. To be considered an exemplar leader, the participant must have demonstrated the following:

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

The researcher selected NAWBO, which identifies and recruits exemplar female leaders in business, to create a list of possible participants for the study. The researcher sought sponsorship from a respected member of the organization to gain entry into the organization, and to establish credibility in the group. Using the snowball sampling strategy (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010), one exemplar participant nominated another to be included in the sampling of the study.

Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures

For this qualitative phenomenological research study, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 15 female business leaders who led their organizations through times of conflict with breakthrough results. The primary form of data collection was interviews with female business leaders who were either CEOs, senior executives, or owners of their organization. Interview questions (Appendix D) were posed that covered how they found their way to the position they currently held, their experience with
leading in times of conflict, and scripted questions from each of the six domains of conflict transformation: collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, ethics, problem-solving, and process. Thirteen of the 15 interviews were conducted in person and lasted 45-60 minutes, whereas the other two were conducted over the phone and were of the same duration.

This was supplemented with observations and the review of artifacts. Seven observations were conducted as part of this study, which included a mix of private and public settings such as presentations made by the participants, staff meetings, pod-casts of shareholder meetings, and interactions with employees. Table 1 shows the types and durations of the observations.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observation Type</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meetings</td>
<td>5 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcasts</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions with employees</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eleven artifacts were included in this study. Those data were not explicitly coded like the interview and observation data; however, artifacts aided the researcher in finding the meaning in the phenomenon and uncovering themes and consistencies among the data collected. Table 2 presented the types of artifacts collected and reviewed.
Table 2

*Types of Artifacts Collected*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artifact Type</th>
<th>Number of Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internet/website information</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter to female business leader</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting minutes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission statement</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memo to staff</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Demographic Data**

All participants and the organizations represented were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality, represented as Respondent 1 through Respondent 15. The study participants all met or exceeded this study’s selection criteria, as shown in Table 3.
Table 3

Qualifying Criteria for Exemplar Female Business Leaders (EFBL)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<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</th>
<th>Membership in professional associations in their field</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PL</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants represented a wide variety of ages ranges, years of experience, and industries. For example, two of the participants were in the field of property management, two were in the field of banking, two were in the field of human services, one was in the field of finance, one was in the field of healthcare, one was in the field of government services, one was in the field of education services, one was in the field of publishing, one was in the field of executive coaching, one was in the field of logistics, one was in the field of marketing, and one participant was in the field of management.
consulting. Table 4 reflects the demographic information of the study participants, including age range, years of experience, industry, and position held at time of interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent 1</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 2</td>
<td>35-45</td>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>CEO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 3</td>
<td>45-55</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>Government Services</td>
<td>CEO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 4</td>
<td>45-55</td>
<td>15-20</td>
<td>Education Services</td>
<td>CEO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 5</td>
<td>45-55</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>Publishing</td>
<td>Owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 6</td>
<td>55-65</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>Banking</td>
<td>SVP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 7</td>
<td>45-55</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Property Management</td>
<td>CEO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 8</td>
<td>55-65</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>Human Services</td>
<td>CEO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 9</td>
<td>45-55</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>CFO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 10</td>
<td>35-45</td>
<td>15-20</td>
<td>Banking</td>
<td>SVP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 11</td>
<td>35-45</td>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>Human Services</td>
<td>CEO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 12</td>
<td>45-55</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Executive Coaching</td>
<td>Owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 13</td>
<td>55-65</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Logistics</td>
<td>SVP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 14</td>
<td>35-45</td>
<td>15-20</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>CMO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 15</td>
<td>55-65</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Management Consultant</td>
<td>Owner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Current data at the time of the study.

**Presentation and Analysis of Data**

The findings in this chapter were determined using the anecdotal accounts of the lived experiences in response to the scripted questions that were posed during the interviews.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo, a computer software tool used for data storage, coding, and retrieval. Analysis included taking the transcribed data and placing phrases and key ideas into the corresponding code or category most appropriate. Once
properly coded, the researcher was then responsible for deriving meaning from the findings. This analysis allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of how the respondents were able to transform conflict by creating common ground.

**Reliability**

These anecdotal accounts were triangulated with the data gathered from observations and artifacts, and were reported based on the relationship to the central research question and research sub-questions. Inter-coder reliability was also established through the use of multiple coders looking at the same data. According to Lombard et al. (2004) inter-coder reliability was established when another researcher coded 10% of the data gathered from the primary researcher and reached a goal of 90% agreement in coded data to be considered the best and 80% agreement to be acceptable. Another member of the thematic team independently coded 10% of the data with 85% agreement, indicating the data were coded reliably.

**Results for the Central Research Question**

The central research question for the study was: What are the lived experiences of exemplar female business leaders in establishing common ground and producing breakthrough results by engaging in elements of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors? As part of the interview process, participants were asked to provide examples of the types of conflicts they experienced. Table 5 presents examples of types of conflict described.
Table 5

**Types of Conflicts Identified by Exemplar Female Business Leaders**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Conflict between CEO/owner and stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conflict between employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conflicts between departments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conflicts arising from power struggles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conflicts caused from miscommunication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conflicts from unethical or inappropriate actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conflicts over resources and their appropriation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conflicts with customers/clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conflicts over the mission/vision of the organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 details the types of conflict encountered and described by the participants of the study. Evans (2013) described four types of organizational conflict: intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup, each of which were experienced by participants of this study. Each type of conflict experienced by the study participants fell into one or more of the types of organizational conflicts Evans (2013) explored. For example, conflicts between departments could be classified as intragroup because the types of conflict in departments were often related to groups of people working together on common tasks. Exemplar female business leaders regularly faced conflict and were easily able to recall the types of conflict they faced. Conflict between the CEO or owner of the business and key stakeholder arose consistently. One participant stated, “in the beginning, the board of directors and I could not agree on a single item on the agenda,” while another said, “the investors could not seem to grasp the importance of funding this project over another more popular project that was costing us more to maintain.”

Conflict between employees ranged from two people who did not want to work together on the same project to employees who complained about one another.
Danielsson et al. (2015) believed conflict was a natural outcome of human interactions, making it common in the workplace. Conflict between departments was described as one department blaming the other for their inability to meet goals. Power struggles, and how they manifested themselves, were cited as a cause for conflict, and ranged from undermining to deliberate sabotage. Miscommunication of goals, initiatives, and/or expectations led to conflict and one leader stated, “every time I have faced a major conflict, I can track it back to not effectively communicating with my team what I expected from them.”

Unethical and inappropriate actions created conflict the leaders faced and most often were accompanied by damage to the reputation of the business. The fight over available resources and how they were divided was given as a source of conflict within six of the businesses, and the leaders were left to make tough decisions. Conflicts with customers/clients ranged from unsatisfactory reviews to demands for refunds, and the loss of revenue were all referenced as issues faced by these business leaders. Conflict was also present when all 15 business leaders were developing and implementing the vision or mission of the organization.

**Results for Sub-Questions**

As the researcher coded the data, 31 themes emerged on how exemplar female business leaders used elements of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors (collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, ethics, problem-solving, and process) to find common ground and produce breakthrough results. The data from each domain were used in writing the results of the six specific conflict transformation
behaviors. Figure 1 illustrates the number of major themes that emerged in each of the six domains.

The 31 themes were spread across the six domains of conflict transformation. Ethics had the most identified themes with seven. Emotional intelligence had six themes, both problem-solving and process had five, and both collaboration and communication had four.

Through further coding, the researcher determined the number of references within each domain. The number of themes was not directly proportional to the number of references for each domain. For example, process had more identified themes than collaboration (5 compared to 4); however, collaboration had more references than process (160 compared to 136 references). Figure 2 shows the breakdown of the number of references for each of the six domains.
The data presented 1,072 references made to the six domains of conflict transformation. Emotional intelligence had the most references with 242 (23%), whereas process had the fewest references with 136 (13%). Problem-solving had the second highest number with 194 (17%), followed by ethics with 172 (16%) and communication with 168 (16%). Collaboration accounted for 160 (15%). Emotional intelligence, ethics, and problem-solving accounted for 608 references, or 56% of the coded data, whereas collaboration, communication, and process accounted for 464 references, or 44% of the coded data.

**Collaboration – Major Themes**

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). There were 160 separate references to the 4 different collaboration themes. Table 6 shows the major themes developed in the conflict transformation domain of collaboration.
**Table 6**

*Collaboration Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th># Sources of Theme</th>
<th># References to Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bring the right people together to create a solution</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build consensus through asking questions</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use champions early on to create buy-in</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bring in outliers who offer a different perspective</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

**Bringing the right people together to create a solution.** This theme was referenced 54 times from 16 different sources and represented 34% of all collaboration references. Involving others in the solution was a consistent theme across all participants, and 14 of the 15 respondents described themselves as collaborative. Hansen (2013) shared that involving others, redefining success, and being accountable were the behaviors needed for one to be considered a collaborative leader. Seeking out the individuals who had a vested interest or stake in the solution emerged as a strategy often utilized by the study participants, with one respondent sharing, “my normal pattern was collaboration. Really getting to know people, talking together, finding the common ground.”

Bringing others together with the purpose of crafting a solution was a resounding theme of collaboration, and one respondent recalled,

I wanted to look at all of the things we do well, things we could do better, and things we should really take off the table. I don’t want to look outside the box…I said, I want to dump the box out on the table. So we did. I think that bringing stakeholders in was very beneficial.
A third went on to say, “we have a very collaborative leadership style here. We have a leadership team, and a lot of decision making happens around that table. I think that’s how we approach all of our work in general.”

To highlight the idea that female leaders brought others together, the researcher observed, one of the exemplar female business leaders during a staff meeting pull a small group of employees together and tasked them with devising a solution to a customer service issue that was causing complaints and refunds. She described the issue to the entire department, asked for volunteers to be part of the team, and asked the department supervisor lead the team. She told them she would check-in at the next meeting on their progress and discuss the ideas they generated as an entire department.

The participants of the study expressed that involving others in the solution was a practice that yielded sustainable results because multiple people were responsible for crafting the solution, rather than just those with intimate knowledge of the problem.

**Build consensus through asking questions.** This theme was referenced 40 times from 14 different sources, and represented 25% of all collaboration references. Consensus was described by the respondents as agreement regarding how to proceed and was established by asking questions to gain understanding. All parties involved in the conflict needed to fully understand, acknowledge, and verbalize the problem, and commit to reaching new understandings that redefined the situation (Dmytriyev et al., 2016; Plutt & Curseu, 2012). One respondent described this process as,

You have to look at the problem at hand, ask a lot of questions, figure out exactly want the problem truly is, and then create a solution around what that problem is. Bring the right people in if need be, create a taskforce if
that’s the case. But really understanding what the problem is, and figuring
out how to resolve it.

Consensus building through asking questions was also described as, “employee
collaboration and making sure that I understand because it was interesting what we found
out on all sides…There’s a lot you never would have known if we hadn’t engaged
everyone and asked a lot of questions.” Another respondent stated,

When I talk about collaboration, it’s you being the manager, and you just
ask them. You white board it. To me, if you’re going to do collaboration,
you have to understand all of the steps that they are envisioning, and then
you come up with what are the best steps to get to the end result. I always
start by asking lots of questions to understand what the end goal is.

The tactic of asking questions to gain understanding and build agreement over
time was consistently referred to by 14 of the participants of this study, and allowed the
leaders to understand the issue at hand. Respondents shared that asking questions let
others contribute ideas and insights into the problem at hand, as well as make a
contribution to the solution, which often built common ground and consensus on how to
proceed.

**Use champions early on to create buy-in.** This theme was referenced 34 times
over 12 different sources, and comprised 21% of all collaboration references. Getting
employees and key stakeholders excited about the changes taking place could be
challenging to leaders, though Arenas, Sanchez, and Murphy (2013) found that leaders
who were able to gain critical cooperation were often successful in bringing about real
change. Twelve respondents recounted the importance of involving others in the change

from the beginning to have them vouch for or endorse the changes taking place. One had the following to say:

   We establish common ground of what it is that we want to accomplish.
   When you get the buy-in of what you want to accomplish by establishing common ground, you have the power of persuasion. Everybody bought in; they can hear you. It’s very different than trying to shove your opinion or your position down someone’s throat because it often time falls on deaf ears. Being able to tap into what I believe everyone else in the room wants, then I’m able to establish common ground, and then I have these amazing results because they’re all ears. Then I can talk about, ultimately, what’s in it for you, versus looking at what’s in it for me…Through that, it’s amazing how much you can accomplish when you collaborate that way.

   During an observation, a respondent pulled an employee to the side after a meeting and asked her to help implement a change brought up at the meeting. The leader recognized and informed the employee that she could influence her peers and build excitement about the change.

   Finding another person to rally for the cause aided the leaders in implementing change and created a sense of ownership. This collaborative approach was credited with taking some of the pressure off the leader and letting others help lead important initiatives.

   **Bring in outliers who offer a different perspective.** Referenced 32 times across 12 sources, and making up 20% of all collaboration references, having outliers included
in collaboration was deemed important when facing conflict. Outliers offered opinions different from the status quo and challenged others to change their perspective. Gladwell (2008) noted that outliers were imperative to transformational change for those reasons.

One example shared was:

It’s really bringing in the people that agree with you and don’t agree with you, and saying, ‘you know we’re just going to throw this out on the table. We’re going to debate it a little bit. It doesn’t mean that I’m always going to agree with you, and it doesn’t mean that you’re always going to agree with me. We have a common goal…let’s keep that at the forefront and then come back.’

Another respondent stated:

The reason collaboration was so necessary was because, even though I was the Chair, it was a shared decision to be made by 15 different people. We knew that 15 different people were never going to agree on one or two selections…We asked for the other participants on the committee who were the outliers…the anti-whatever. Those types of people can be essential in finding the best solution to the problem. We worked very hard to take everybody’s input with all the different variables to come to a solution.

Identifying outliers and bringing them into the group was said to provide the group with an alternative perspective to the problem at hand. Collaborating with these individuals allowed the leaders to look at issues from a different perspective and to consider varying approaches to resolving conflict.
Communication – Major Themes

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, 2001; Maxwell, 2010; Schermerhorn et al., 2008; Stuart, 2012; Wyatt, 2014). Barrett (2006) found that managers spent the majority of their time engaged in communication, making the mastery of leadership communication a skill that must be a priority. This was echoed in the findings of the current study with 168 separate references to the 4 different communication themes. Table 7 shows the major themes developed for the conflict transformation domain of communication.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication Themes</th>
<th># Sources of Theme</th>
<th># References to Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create an environment for open/honest/transparent dialogue</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask for feedback and mean it</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be inclusive and sensitive in communications</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a consistent/authentic message</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

**Create an environment for open/honest/transparent dialogue.** Referenced 56 times across 15 sources, and comprising 33% of all communication references, this theme rendered the highest frequency of all recorded themes. Communicating in a way that allowed for all parties to understand and engage in decision-making stood out as a key factor in transforming conflict. Fourteen participants explained that open and honest communication, described as everyone being comfortable with speaking up, was key to
alleviating or avoiding conflict. One female business leader recalled, “I learned a big lesson about the importance of communication, and openness, and transparency. That doesn’t just happen, you really have to build in those mechanisms and assure that it is happening.” Another shared:

I have great people who don’t hesitate to ask questions, or present some obstacles, or potential objections that they may have come across. It’s really good to be able to just have an open dialogue and allow people to ask questions and know that their voices are important.

The importance of open communication was also observed. During a staff meeting, the female business leader had a piece of paper on the wall labeled “parking lot” and she told those in attendance that if they had questions to place them in the parking lot. She explained they could get up, put the question on the paper, sit back down, and then she would answer the questions at the end of the meeting. If one of the questions was answered during the meeting, it was taken out of the parking lot. She went on to explain that if the question could not be answered at the time of the meeting, they were put on the agenda for the next meeting.

Open and honest communication was credited with reducing, and in some cases eliminating, conflict because the leaders were able to effectively convey what was expected. Fourteen of the respondents cited this type of communication as the reason they were successful in mitigating conflict and creating common ground.

**Ask for feedback and mean it.** Fourteen sources cited feedback as necessary for communication. Making up 26% of communication references and being referenced 42 times, leaders found genuinely seeking feedback was invaluable in times of conflict.
Dutton et al. (2001) pointed out that leaders must have communication that represents a diversity of voices and interests in the organization to bring about credible change, and it may not always be volunteered unless asked for. Similarly, one leader stated:

I love critical feedback. I’ll ask for feedback and what you generally get is all the compliments, and I say, ‘you know, I am going to stop you because that’s not helping me. I really need some critical feedback, even if it’s one or two things that are small, know that I take it as a positive.’ I always act on it.

Another leader described this process as:

I actually go out and talk to everybody individually and get their feedback. That might be collaboration, but I really look at it as you get much better ideas if you get the whole team behind you…you basically go and talk to different people, figure out their ideas, and come together with the best idea for the team. That blended format might be a larger picture of what we might be doing, but it has everyone’s feedback in it.

This form of communication was said to provide the leaders with a clear picture of what was really going on, and how they could effectively respond to issues. The respondents said they sought out feedback as a means to establish trust with their employees and a method for ensuring that communication was clear.

**Be inclusive and sensitive in communications.** Referenced 36 times from 13 separate sources, and comprising 21% of all communication references, inclusive and sensitive communications resonated with several exemplar leaders. Gaur (2006) found that female leaders tended to be associated with feminine forms of communication that
included supportiveness, attentiveness, sensitivity, and collaboration. Being sensitive in the language used and the tone of communication was described by one leader as:

I think it’s most critical when emotions are high. When you are dealing with difficult situations or sensitive situations that aren’t necessarily difficult, it’s important in your communication style to do more listening than talking. When you are speaking to the individual, you are speaking to them with them in mind. Being able to do that you’re able to actually have a much more meaningful conversation.

One of the artifacts collected was a memo sent to employees that discussed and described the expectations and changes to the dress code for the company. It gave examples of what was appropriate and not appropriate for men and women, and included the phrase “if you are not sure it is appropriate, have a back-up outfit available.”

Being mindful of the message being sent was said to be an effective strategy for minimizing conflict. Using language that did not instigate negative reactions and sought to include everyone in the organization was found be helpful in creating common ground.

**Have a consistent/authentic message.** Making up 20% of all communication references across 11 sources, 34 separate references were made to having an authentic and consistent message both during times of peace and times of conflict. Barrett (2006) pointed out that mixed-messages, lack of communication, and rumors could damage the progress made during conflict and in some instances, could add to it. This sentiment was shared by one exemplar leader who stated, “it’s a lot of work trying to make sure that everyone is understanding what’s going on, and that they are reading from the same page of the book.” Another recounted:
Everyone was called into one big room, and told what had happened. People were allowed to express their feelings, and it was still a very professional moment. It was a sense of let’s get everybody together in the same room and let’s just talk about this even if its five minutes. At least you’re all hearing the same information at the same time.

This point was furthered by the researcher observing one of the female business leaders read a corporate memo that had been sent out to all employees that addressed a change that was coming up in the organization. She prefaced the reading of the memo with “I want to keep all of you informed about what is going on in the organization”.

Leaders found that providing the same information to every level of the organization, and ensuring that everyone had an understanding of the information, was essential for reducing conflict. Authentic messaging from leaders was described as key to finding common ground and minimizing or eliminating conflict because all involved had the same information from the same source.

**Emotional Intelligence – Major Themes**

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). EI, or lack thereof, served as the major predictor of success or failure in a leadership position (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009; Kouzes & Posner, 2002). In the current study, 242 separate references were made to the 6 different EI themes, the most of any of the six domains of
conflict transformation. Table 8 shows the major themes developed in the conflict transformation domain of emotional intelligence.

Table 8

*Emotional Intelligence Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th># Sources of Theme</th>
<th># References of Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Give people time to absorb information and react to it</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take the time to build/create trust with team members</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be aware of your own emotions and how they influence your actions</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accept that people do not always have to like decision/direction/change</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know what battles to fight and when</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be willing to admit when you are wrong</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

**Give people time to absorb information and react to it.** Referenced 54 times across 17 sources, and comprising 22% of all EI references, exemplar female business leaders consistently allowed their employees to process the emotions that came about during times of conflict. Putman and Mumby (1993) found that emotions in the workplace were present and needed to be acknowledged. One leader recognized the emotional state of her employees when discussing an upcoming change and stated:

I just had to think, if I was in their position how would they be reacting to what they were hearing, and I had to allow them to go through the process of understanding what happened. Getting angry, getting over it, or not getting over it, it’s their choice…but I really have to take a step back and remember who I am dealing with, and remember how emotional some of these issues can be.
Being aware of, and anticipating reactions, was discussed by respondents and another leader pointed out, “I always try to take into consideration the way they view the world and they process things when it’s something that’s a conflict.” A third leader mentioned:

If you’re somebody that needs to process, I’m going to give you the time to process, and let’s get back together in a couple days. If you’re somebody that’s like me that’s go, go, go, and can just run with it, then we are going to do that.

This point was illustrated during an observation made by the researcher. One of the female business leaders walked over to an employee and said “I know we went over a lot… and I wanted to give you time to think about all of it. If you want to discuss it further, please let me know and I will make time for you.”

Allowing for employees to react to new information was found to alleviate tensions and minimize conflict, and contributed to finding common ground. Exemplar female business leaders shared this practice helped them to acknowledge the feelings of their employees and often expedited the change process.

**Take the time to build/create trust with team members.** Making up 22% of all EI references from 14 separate sources and referenced 54 times, building trust was essential in transforming conflict. Taking the time to get to know the team during times of low conflict proved to be a sound strategy for exemplar female business leaders. Lencioni (2002) asserted that trust was the foundation all successful teams were built upon. One leader shared, “I spent a lot of time individually with them, building
relationships, and that was my emotional intelligence and really awareness.” Another leader shared how she created trust:

I think you can establish trust by being a trustful person…people then start to see you for who you are, and they’re able to develop trust based on how you deliver and come to the table, especially when you are consistent. In doing that, I am able to establish relationships with my staff where they don’t feel intimidated by the fact that they are dealing with me.

A third leader stated:

We’ve gotten to a place where we trust each other implicitly. There’s nothing I can’t discuss with them…we are in such a great place as a team that we can disagree, tell each other they’re wrong, and at the end of the day when we walk out the door, it is the 3 Musketeers.

Building trust with the team was said to take time and effort on the part of all involved. The leaders were responsible for initiating the trust building activities and reinforcing behaviors, but found that during conflict, when the trust was firmly in place prior to the conflict arising, it was easier to overcome.

**Be aware of your own emotions and how they influence your actions.** Fifteen sources referenced this theme 42 times, accounting for 17% of all references to EI. EI was said to increase the level of awareness in leaders, enabling them to acknowledge and understand their own emotions, helping to improve relationships, and increasing the likelihood of transforming conflict (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Each of the 15 interviewees acknowledged the importance of knowing their own emotions and how those emotions influenced them when faced with conflict. One leader shared, “I really
had to put my own emotions in check because I was being misquoted, misunderstood, accused of things that I didn’t do, and it was a challenging time.” Another leader recalled, “I’ve recognized that I am responsible for my own experiences. if I want to have better relationships with people.” A third leader stated, “When you start to depersonalize because you are aware of who you are as an individual, things don’t affect you in an emotional way. You’re able to continue and move forward.”

The researcher observed one of the female business leaders demonstrate EI by acknowledging she was feeling rushed, apologizing for being curt, and asking if they could meet later in the day when she had more time.

Knowing themselves and being aware of how their emotions influenced their actions was described by 14 of the respondents. They stated this awareness was powerful in that they felt in control and were able to move past the emotion of the situation and move to crafting a solution.

**Accept that people do not always have to like the decision/direction/change.**

Accounting for 16% of references to EI with 38 references from 12 sources, exemplar leaders cited understanding that having to make controversial or unpopular decisions or change was a component of EI. Goleman (1995) found that leaders needed to know how to persist when frustrated or challenged, and mind motivation in times of distress. One leader shared, “it was the right decision for the organization’s growth, but growth is not easy. I had to accept the fact that people weren’t going to settle with the Kumbaya philosophy. Change was brought to people who didn’t like it.” Another leader stated:

For some people you never do enough, and for some people you do too much. Also accepting that we can do as much as we can do, and then you
sort of have to deal with it. Some people will still be unsatisfied. For me, 
that was a big, personal area of growth around it’s not about me.

Accepting that, at times, just being a leader put them in conflict with others was a 
lesson shared by 12 leaders. Each shared that part of being a leader often meant making 
tough and unpopular decisions that took time to become the norm. They expressed that 
being able to differentiate popularity from effectiveness was a breakthrough for them.

**Know what battles to fight and when.** Making up 15% of all EI references 
across 13 sources, and being referenced 34 times, exemplar female business leaders 
voiced the importance of knowing what to fight for and what could be tabled for a later 
time. Jordan and Troth (2004) found that leaders who possessed a high level of EI were 
skilled at deploying strategies during times of conflict. One leader stated:

Eliminating those battles that I didn’t want to fight at this time. There 
were so many things that I knew I was right on. I knew I needed to make 
a change because we needed the organization to go this way with the 
program, but I could see that it didn’t necessarily need to take place right 
then. It was something that was causing so much tension. You know, it 
was just identifying, alright, I’m not going to fight this battle now, I’m 
going to save it for a later time and then get to it then. That was helpful.

Thirteen of the respondents shared that being able to know what should be fought 
for, when to fight the fight, and when to put things to the side was a skill that aided them 
in mitigating conflict. Some issues were known to be important enough to bring to the 
table and demand change, whereas others were important but not urgent and could be 
dealt with at a later time.
Be willing to admit when you are wrong. Twenty references from 10 sources accounted for 8% of the references made to EI. Leaders agreed that being able to admit mistakes, lead with transparency, and be accountable for their actions, right or wrong, contributed to their EI. Hopkins and Yonker (2015) found that a leader’s interactions and relations with others were predicated on his/her EI. One leader shared, “I also believe that, if you lead with integrity, admit when you mess up, that when you’re given feedback it’s really about empowering people with the knowledge to do their best.” Another simply stated, “whenever I am wrong, I am the first to admit it to my team.”

The researcher observed one female business leader tell the team she had done a poor job in communicating the changes being put into place and asked them what questions they had because she wanted to make sure that everyone was on the same page. She apologized four separate times while taking and answering questions.

Accepting responsibility for errors and being seen as human was shared by the respondents as a necessary quality of a leader. Being viewed by employees as transparent and accountable was credited with building common ground and a foundation of trust for a team. Respondents shared that admitting when they were wrong was uncomfortable at first, but important for employees to respect and accept their flaws.

Ethics – Major Themes

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). Ethics was referenced 172 times across 7 different themes. Table 9 shows the major themes under the conflict transformation domain of ethics.
### Table 9

*Ethics Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th># Sources of Theme</th>
<th># References to Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model the right behaviors as a leader</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a strong mission/vision for the organization</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be aware of public perception and organization reputation</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have the courage to bring problems to the surface</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know what you personally stand for</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know when it is time to leave an organization</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create and utilize an ethics committee</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

**Model the right behaviors as a leader.** Comprising 21% of all ethics references across 20 sources, and referenced 36 times, all 15 participants spoke to the need for the senior most leader of an organization to behave the way employees were expected to behave. Ethical leadership was comprised of ethical behaviors that included acting fairly, allowing voice, and rewarding ethical conduct (Brown & Trevino, 2006). One female business leader stated, “ethics is a huge part of my personal management style,” and another shared, “I think it’s modeling it. You just can’t compromise it. People will see it immediately because it’s so against what you say or what you look like. You just have to model it in the toughest of times.”

Described as “walking the walk, and talking the talk” all 15 respondents noted the importance of needing to model what was expected of others. Asking the employees to behave one way while the leader behaved another was said to be how ethical leaders demonstrated incompetence. They all agreed that being a role model in their organizations influenced their success.
**Have a strong mission/vision for the organization.** This theme was referenced 32 times from 16 different sources and represented 19% of all ethics references. Defining the purpose or goals of the organization was said to be invaluable to its success. Dolan and Altman (2012) described the need for organizations to create a culture rich with shared values and common interests. One female business leader recalled, “at the end of the day, the values that guide everybody are the same, and that makes a significant difference.”

A strong mission/vision offered employees the chance to know what they were striving for and make a choice about the importance of what it was they were asked to do or produce. One leader said, “I never perceived an ethical conflict. The mission drove us all, similar with the staff…they believe in the mission.” Another female business leader shared, “I that what we’ve really done over the years is to articulate what our values look like in action. Not just the words, but what does it look like.”

The researcher found that four of the organizations had their mission statement on their website. Each mission statement discussed what the organization stood for, who they served and why, and how their employees went about upholding the mission.

Having a strong mission/vision for the organization meant that each of the leaders were able to articulate what the organization stood for, state how it expected employees to behave, and set clear expectations regarding what the organization wanted to achieve.

**Be aware of public perception and organization reputation.** This theme was referenced 28 times from 12 different sources and accounted for 16% of all ethics references. Barrett (2006) shared that managers and their companies were trusted because of their reputation and because they were believed to be ethical. Acknowledging
that reputations could be damaged from unethical behavior, eight of the female business leaders reiterated the importance of preserving one’s reputation. One leader shared:

It’s a very critical part about being a leader. Especially if you’re in a position of power or a very visible position. People watch you and they watch everything you do and everything you say. You have to be careful that things aren’t misconstrued.

Another leader also expressed this sentiment by stating, “at the end of the day it’s just not worth it. I’m sure you’ve read the newspapers, there are so many [type of business] that are convicted of [business type] fraud. It’s just not worth it.” A third said, “Ultimately, you get judged by your actions. You have to act appropriately, and that’s where I think the leadership comes from.”

The researcher found that on two of the organization websites, there was a section for customer comments. Each comment was displayed, good or bad, and had a response generated by the organization. In five instances when a negative comment was left, the response went into detail as to how it would be resolved and avoided in the future.

Being aware of public perception meant that leaders discussed with employees how the actions they took could be perceived by the public. They reiterated that actions were judged all the time and it was everyone’s responsibility to uphold ethical standards.

**Have the courage to bring problems to the surface.** This theme made up 15% of all ethics references and was referenced 26 times from 11 separate sources. Female business leaders knew that problems could not be ignored or swept under the rug, and that doing so could be perceived as unethical or irresponsible leadership. Brown and Trevino (2006) found that ethical behaviors included acting fairly, allowing voice, and
rewarding ethical conduct. One leader shared, “You can’t sweep it under the rug. I don’t want leaders who sweep things under the rug. I need to make sure that I am being brought in the loop, and we can decide what appropriate actions to take.” Another leader remarked, “We created an ethics hotline so anonymous reports could be made about questionable activities or practices, and all of them are fully investigated.”

The researcher saw this finding in action during an observation of a staff meeting. One of the female business leaders brought up a topic that was not on the agenda, stating that “I know we don’t like to talk about what we did wrong, but it is important that we learn from it so it doesn’t happen again.” She then led the group in a discussion about what was learned from the mistake.

Talking about issues as they came up was said to alleviate conflict in many circumstances. Those leaders who encouraged their employees to talk about questionable activities and had a way to report those behaviors found they were able to address issues more confidently and they encouraged employees to bring issues to the surface.

**Know what you personally stand for.** This theme comprised 15% of all ethics references and was referenced 26 times across 11 separate sources. Ethical leaders developed an ethical code or rules to live by that assisted in behaving ethically or making ethical decisions (Howard & Korver, 2008). Having and maintaining a set of morals or values helped female business leaders behave ethically inside and outside of their organizations. One leader echoed this sentiment by sharing:

What I have really learned is that in order to stay true to who I am as an individual that I also have to teach people how to treat me. That means setting boundaries and making sure that I maintain my moral compass, and
operate with ethics and integrity that I believe in who I am. I show up that way, and not be hypocritical. I will tell you that it is very, very challenging. It’s challenging. You have to be conscious and be intentional about who I am, and make sure I’m maintaining the ethics and integrity in terms of who I am and how I want to be seen.

Having a personal code of ethics or code of conduct that is in place prior to becoming a leader was referenced as imperative to exemplar female business leaders. This moral standard allowed the leaders to know what they were willing to do and what they had to decline. The ethics they had in place helped them to make tough decisions and conduct themselves to a predetermined standard when they faced conflict.

**Know when it’s time to leave an organization.** This theme made up 9% of all ethics references and was referenced 16 times from 8 sources. Having the awareness that the organization was behaving in a manner that was contrary to one’s values proved to be an essential skill to female business leaders. Strike et al. (2005) pointed out that everyone had a duty to make morally responsible choices for themselves. One leader commented, “I knew I couldn’t stay with that organization. I just had to leave. It just flew in the face of my moral values.” Another shared, “I have worked in, and started my career, in environments where our ethics did not match. What I found was that I could not continue to work for those organizations. It really was pretty simple.”

A misalignment of values could cause leaders or employees to make decisions or behave in a manner that directly contradicted with their personal values. This misalignment could then cause conflict or the inability to forge common ground. One leader shared, “It was a very uncomfortable place to work at that point, and they had a lot
of layoffs. I fortunately left on my own accord and found another job that I thought was better, where I didn’t feel unaligned.”

Leaving an organization that was out of alignment with the leader’s morals and values was said to be the only option for eight of the respondents. Knowing they could not partake in the activities or stand behind decisions being made meant they knew they had to leave the organization. None of them came to the decision lightly; rather, they evaluated what they could and could not live with, and ultimately made the decision to leave.

**Create and utilize an ethics committee.** This theme accounted for 5% of all ethics references, and 5 sources referenced it 8 times. Dickson et al. (2001) found that leaders were expected to play an important role in creating and supporting an ethical climate at work. The usage of an ethics committee provided an organization a formalized process to handle issues. An ethics committee also helped eliminate the appearance of a conflict of interest because it was often made up of members from across the organization. One leader stated, “In those instances, you have a whole ethics committee that deals with those types of things. We do have an ethics committee.” Another leader commented, “We have so many checks and balances behind the scenes. I’ll get emails to say ‘so and so has gotten some results that were heavily weighted here, can you just go validate to make sure these sales are appropriate’. That’s thanks to our ethics committee.”

During an observation of a staff meeting, the researcher saw one respondent inquire about a complaint she received. After a discussion of the complaint, it was decided that it needed to be sent to the ethics committee for review and recommendation.
Utilizing an ethics committee provided the leaders with an alternative approach to resolving or investigating issues brought to their attention. Similar to collaboration, it involved others in determining the correct course of action and minimized conflict because the leader was not alone in reaching a decision.

**Problem-Solving – Major Themes**

The peer research team defined problem-solving as the act of choosing and implementing a solution to an identified problem or situation (Harvey et al., 2002). Harvey et al. (2002) suggested a six-step approach to problem solving: mind-set, problem definition, solution criteria, possible solutions, solution choice, and implementation.

There were 194 separate references to the 5 different problem-solving themes. Table 10 shows the major themes developed in the conflict transformation domain of problem-solving.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th># Sources of Theme</th>
<th># References to Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ask lots of questions to identify the root cause</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bring in key stakeholders or subject-matter experts</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work with the end in mind</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work towards a common goal that aligns with the</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organization’s mission/vision</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a trusted advisor or mentor to turn to</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

**Ask lots of questions to identify the root cause.** This theme was referenced 52 times across 14 different sources and comprised 27% of all problem-solving references. Asking questions to drill down to the cause of a conflict was the first step in problem-
solving. Taking the time to ask questions before attempting to solve the problem helped leaders know exactly what they were trying to accomplish. One leader shared:

I try to look at whatever the challenge is from multiple perspectives in asking an awful lot of questions. You know the old rule about how men just want to solve your problems and women just need somebody to listen to them talk so you can figure out the answer on your own? Especially with staff volunteers, board members, whoever it is we’re dealing with, that is resistance to change or solving a problem or thinking that there is a problem to be solved. Asking lots and lots of questions and having them think through all of the answers. They come up with it on their own in general. So I’m really big on talking through things and asking lots of questions and asking people for their input.

Another leader shared, “When I’m in a conflict situation, I also think that sometimes you have to ask questions. You have to go back to the individual, or the situation, where there is conflict, and ask some clarifying questions.” A third leader recalled, “Asking a lot of questions. It’s asking a lot of questions, and they also learn to say, ok, walk me through how you would deliver this. Show me how you would do it now.” Another female business leader added:

You have to look at the problem at hand, ask a lot of questions, figure out exactly what the problem truly is, and then create a solution around what the problem is…but really understanding what the problem is, and figuring out how to resolve it.
The researcher observed one female business leader bring up an error that was made, and she asked questions around who was involved, what took place, when and where the mistake was made, and what could be done to avoid the error from being made again.

Thirteen of the respondents conveyed that the most effective method in solving a problem was to ask questions to understand how it occurred in the first place. Asking questions led to the determination of the root cause, which allowed leaders to craft a solution aimed at eliminating the issue and therefore reducing conflict.

**Bring in key-stakeholders or subject-matter experts.** This theme accounted for 26% of all problem-solving references, and was referenced 50 times across 15 different sources. Involving others in problem-solving was a resounding response. All 15 participants spoke to the importance of involving others when faced with conflict or problems, and alluded to minimizing conflict by involving stakeholders from the onset of an issue. Kelman (2007) found that an interactive approach to problem-solving promoted change in the individuals involved, the larger social system, the political culture, and the conflict system at large. One female business leader responded by saying, “If there’s stakeholders involved in the decision, I’m usually the one together with those stakeholders and let’s talk it through.” Another shared:

The problem-solving is, I called everybody in. I was able to get their perspective on what customers are telling them. Once you have all the different perspectives, we were able to chart them all out. Being able to have a different perspective, and bringing all those together, we really did end up having a more best in class.
One leader described:

I think we also have different tables where leaders come together in different parts in the organization, and often times [the solutions] surface in those conversations. We create the space for these open dialogues to happen. We talk about, well, what’s the strategy for addressing that? Do we need to get more information before we make a decision about that? That’s how we deal with that, or how we surface and deal with things.

Another leader recalled:

When I see something, I’m immediately pulling people in to talk about how we got this, what can be our solution? I’m literally problem-solving as we go along. I see the solution, but I don’t necessarily see what the best way is to get there. Because there are lots of ways to get there, I figure, if I pull everybody in, or key stakeholders in, at whatever level, to kind of come up with what would be the best way…Get everybody on board to say, yeah, this is the solution and this is the best way to get there.

Experts offered an educated opinion on the issue at hand and were often able to guide the leaders to a solution more quickly than going at it alone. This added resource of an expert or stakeholder provided the leaders with a solution that was crafted with their insight on the matter at hand, often avoiding conflict from arising.

**Work with the end in mind.** This theme was referenced 38 times from 13 different sources and comprised 20% of all problem-solving references. Having a clear path to the intended outcome greatly assisted leaders in crafting solutions and gave their employees a deeper understanding of objectives. Harvey and Drolet (2005) found that
during times of conflict, effective leaders searched for multiple solutions, chose the best, and set the team on the course to resolution. One leader said:

For the most part, we sit down and map out the situation, work out what the options are, and then figure out which will be the best for the company, for its finances, and for the future going forward. The steps are clear. You work the steps. Once you figure out where you’re going, you’re gone.

Another leader shared:

I try to be cognizant of what my outcomes are going to be. I try to look at what’s the end result I want to get to first and foremost. I don’t try to figure it out first. I just look at what is the end result I need to get to. Then I go back into it and think, OK, if I take this step what’s going to happen? If I take this step what’s going to happen? It helps me work through the process of what needs to occur.

One of the artifacts collected was a goal setting worksheet given to the employees. It outlined the sales goals for the quarter, the incentive that could be earned if they were met, and the plan to achieve them. This document further supported how the leaders worked with the end in mind.

Having defined outcomes and crafting a solution based on the stated outcomes assisted the leaders in resolving conflict and finding common ground. Twelve respondents shared that having the end result in mind allowed them to create a path to the end result and that conflict was reduced because all involved knew what they were working toward.
Work toward a common goal that aligns with the organization’s mission/values. This theme made up 16% of all problem-solving references and was referenced 32 times from 11 different sources. When faced with problems, establishing common goals aligned with the organization’s mission/values allowed leaders to transform conflict. Kelman (2007) shared that to be most effective, the conflict needed to be viewed as a shared problem for all parties involved and the solution needed to align with shared values. When approaching problem-solving, one leader shared, “We have a common goal, that’s our mission, that’s our values. Let’s keep that at the forefront and then come back.” Another leader stated:

We had a problem, they came up with the solutions. We all talked about the solutions, and everybody had a vested interest in making sure we had the right outcome. It makes a big difference when those outcomes align with the mission.

Alignment with the mission meant that goals fit within the scope of what the organization wanted to accomplish. Leaders who were able to assign goals that were within the parameters of the organizations’ values found that conflict rarely arose.

Have a trusted advisor or mentor to turn to. This theme accounted for 11% of all problem-solving references and was referenced 22 times across 10 different sources. Developing relationships with others who faced similar issues in the past or who had similar responsibilities offered a great resource to leaders. Blech and Funke (2010) cited the importance of developing relationships with others who had past experiences with conflict situations to offer an array of problem-solving practices. Being able to turn to
others to discuss ideas or ask their opinion on a situation could ease conflict. One female business leader described:

> The other thing is that sometimes you need to have a mentor who has already accomplished or walked through the types of situation you’re walking through. They’re not necessarily on the ground with you…You know that they’ve gone through that, and bounce it off of them in order to see what’s the best way to resolve it. To me, it’s a strategy.

An artifact obtained was a copy of a letter to one of the respondents from her mentor. The content of the letter was a reassurance that the respondent had made the right decision by implementing a major change. It told her that the change was for the best, that it would take time to manifest, and that she was the right person for the job.

Finding a mentor who had faced similar situations in the past and who could be used as a sounding board was mentioned by nine respondents. This relationship allowed the leader to be vulnerable and seek advice in a safe environment and the mentor was able to provide guidance or just be a sounding board for the leader.

**Process – Major Themes**

Processes were defined by the peer research team as the methods that included a set of steps and activities that group members followed to perform tasks such as strategic planning or conflict resolution (Schwarz, 2002). Kotter (1996) proposed an eight-step process for creating change: establishing a sense of urgency, creating the guiding coalition, developing a vision and strategy, communicating the change vision, empowering broad-based change, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains and producing more change, and anchoring new approaches in the culture. Each of the five
process themes identified from the data fell into one or more aspects of this eight-step framework. In all, 136 separate references were made to the 5 different process themes. Table 11 shows the major themes developed in the conflict transformation domain of process.

Table 11

*Process Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th># Sources of Theme</th>
<th># References to Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use active listening</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have and update guidelines/policies and procedures for decision-making</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create committees as needed to tackle issues</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use SWOT or root cause analysis tools</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work with outside consultants as needed</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

**Use active listening.** This theme accounted for 28% of all process references; it was referenced 38 times across 13 different sources. The importance of active listening was captured by one female business leader who shared:

I think this has been a theme through this piece: valuing other people’s opinion even though we may not agree. We all do it. We come in and we have our pre-conceived notions, and inside you’re like I’m right, and you’re wrong. When you talk it through, and really listen and pay attention, it’s like oh, you know what, that does make sense. They’re going, I get what you’re saying. Sometimes by doing that you actually come out at the end and it’s different from both of your original thoughts.
Another leader described how workplace conflicts could be resolved through active listening, noting:

I found in most times when I had a conversation with both parties, or however many parties there are, and say, you guys need to sit down and talk this through. Really listen to each other’s point of view, because while I believe that you’re right on this, there’s a reason why there are some things here causing them not to listen or whatever. I would say 9 times out of 10, it will resolve itself, if everyone is willing to listen to each other.

Active listening meant the respondents were seeking understanding for the situation at hand rather than assuming they knew the cause already. It was described as a process that took time and effort to listen to those involved in the situation, ask questions, and then form an opinion. They were invested in the process of discovering the root cause of the situation at hand.

**Have and update guidelines/policies and procedures for decision-making.**

This theme comprised 24% of all process references and was referenced 32 times from 12 different sources. Business leaders who developed and abided by a strategic process that underwent continual assessment and subtle updating were far more prepared than those who neglected to define processes (Pearce & Robinson, 2011). Implementing guidelines for conduct while facing conflict allowed leaders to deal with conflict in a constructive manner and led to mutually beneficial solutions. One leader explained:

I really liked empowering my staff and making sure they understood lines not to cross. It’s easier to tell someone a line not to cross, instead of
telling them every single thing they can do. That’s how I worked with my Board of Directors. We used a system called John Carver’s Policy Governance. That is how we interacted. We had a number of policies and a policy manual that I had to report on whenever we had a Board meeting. We had five board meetings per year. That would trickle down to my staff so I would then use the same method with my staff saying here’s the end results you need to get to. Here are the things you cannot do. If you have questions, come and ask me.

Another leader replied:

The best thing I’m able to do by utilizing processes to deal with conflict and deal with any kind of resistance, to get people to agree, is to establish standard operating procedures…I was dealing with an issue on the floor where one of my departments did not execute a project appropriately. In doing that, you first go back and you make them aware of what your findings are, and then you ask questions about why they did what they did. The key is that everybody thinks different. When we first started talking, we talked about the fact that people come with different backgrounds. People process differently. If you are conscious of the fact that the intentions are in the right place, then you have the possibility of resolving the conflict through common ground. I take for granted that people have good intentions. I ask questions. Then what I did was I brought up based on what they told me they did, I referred back to what the standard operating procedure was. These individuals, for whatever reason, decided
to deviate. They were resistant…Then I asked, “Well, this is the standard operating procedure that yields a return 100% of the time. You decided to do something different. Why?” It forces them to think, “Why did I do that?” …When I walked him through that, he said, “Yeah, I do that see that. I should have done this, that, and the other.” Using the process takes out the emotion where he doesn’t feel like I’m making him, calling him wrong, or telling him he made a mistake. It’s not about what I think, or what he thinks, or what I feel, or what he feels, it’s about the process. By having processes in place, it really does neutralize the situation… When you really are focusing on the process, people are not caught up in how you feel about them, or how you think about them, and they let us fix it.

Having guidelines or policies and procedures in place gave the leaders and their organizations the blueprint for conducting business. When situations arose that deviated from the policies, it provided an opportunity to review and revise the guidelines as needed. This process of review and revision allowed the leaders to continue to make and enforce sound business decisions and mitigate conflict.

**Create committees as needed to tackle issues.** This theme made up 19% of all process references and was referenced 26 times from 12 different sources. Bringing in a group with the purpose to concentrate on a certain set of issues was described by female business leaders as fundamental. This was demonstrated by one respondent who said, “I often look across the organization and pull out individuals who, together as their own team, could tackle a particularly challenging issue or pain point for our customers.” One leader stated:
We created an interdisciplinary committee to actually look at the issue. We might even change the whole process of how we’re getting something done because the right discipline is not handling it, or it might be out of the scope of practice of one person.

**Use SWOT or root cause analysis tools.** Referenced 26 times from 11 different sources, this theme made up 19% of all process references. Looking at conflict, or issues that could lead to conflict, under the microscope of an in-depth analysis was one process described by female business leaders. One leader detailed:

> We actually have something very sophisticated called a Root Cause Analysis System, where we literally can draw down to the root cause. So we literally identify the issue, do a full investigation, identify pathways that caused that issue, and of course have a whole laundry list of potential solutions and things to implement so it doesn’t happen again.

Another leader shared:

> Other processes that I have done that I have found very effective is, again, if I know there’s a lot of conflict coming into the situation, I try to start with some very basic SWOT analysis. Let’s talk about what your goals are, and where you want to go. Where the discussion is something so far from what the conflict is, but they can start to see that they have some similar goals or similar concerns. Those similarities, maybe, we can build some bridges.

**Work with outside consultants as needed.** This theme made up 10% of all process references and was cited 14 times across 8 different sources. Bringing in neutral
parties to assess a situation proved to be an effective strategy for transforming conflict. One leader shared, “We would sometimes bring in a facilitator who was not part of the organization had skills, and had no stake at hand. That was helpful.” Another stated, “we used a consultant that pointed out where we needed to concentrate our efforts, and without them, we could have potentially overlooked that issue because it wasn’t right in front of us.”

Key Findings

After the interviews were transcribed, coded, and checked for emerging themes, several key findings were evident with regard to how exemplar female business leaders used elements of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors in an effort to achieve common ground. The following findings reflected the top two themes in every domain and include three key findings in the area of conflict.

Key Finding 1: Collaboration

Female business leaders who were successful in transforming conflict:

- Brought the right people together to create a solution
- Built consensus through asking questions

Key Finding 2: Communication

Female business leaders who were successful in transforming conflict:

- Created an environment for open/honest/transparent dialogue
- Asked for feedback and meant it

Key Finding 3: Emotional Intelligence

Female business leaders who were successful in transforming conflict:
• Gave people time to absorb information and react to it

• Took the time to build/create trust with team members

**Key Finding 4: Ethics**

Female business leaders who were successful in transforming conflict:

• Modeled the right behaviors as a leader

• Had a strong mission/vision for the organization

**Key Finding 5: Problem-Solving**

Female business leaders who were successful in transforming conflict:

• Asked a lot of questions to identify the root cause

• Brought in key stakeholders or subject matter experts

**Key Finding 6: Process**

Female business leaders who were successful in transforming conflict:

• Used active listening

• Had and updated guidelines/policies and procedures for decision-making

**Key Finding 7: Conflict**

Female business leaders who were successful in transforming conflict:

• Were of the opinion that conflict was necessary for change to occur

• Confronted conflict head-on rather than hiding or avoiding it

• Used a blended model approach to all six domains of conflict transformation behaviors
Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover and describe how exemplar female business leaders established common ground and produced breakthrough results by utilizing the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors. The chapter presented the data summarizing the major themes for the research questions. The data were derived from 15 interviews, 7 observations, and 11 artifacts. The data were coded and analyzed, which generated several emergent themes across the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors. The analysis was able to identify the lived experiences of the female business leaders, and the specific behaviors used to transform conflict and find common ground through building relationships.

Chapter V presents a final summary of the study, including major findings, unexpected findings, and conclusions. The chapter also includes implications for action, recommendations for further research, and the concluding remarks and reflections of the researcher.
CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This qualitative phenomenological study set out to explore the lived experiences of exemplar female business leaders to discover themes that contributed to how they found common ground and produced breakthrough results by using the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors. Based on the themes uncovered through the data analysis, conclusions were formed and recommendations for further research were suggested. Chapter V begins with the restating of the purpose of this study and research questions, and provides an overview of the findings from the study. The second part of the chapter discusses conclusions, presented implications for action, makes recommendations for further research, and closes with the researcher’s reflections.

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

1. **Collaboration** – How do exemplar female business leaders use collaboration to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?
2. **Communication** – How do exemplar female business leaders use communication to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

3. **Emotional Intelligence** – What aspects of emotional intelligence do exemplar female business leaders use to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

4. **Ethics** – How do exemplar female business leaders use ethics to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

5. **Problem-Solving** – How do exemplar female business leaders use problem-solving strategies to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

6. **Processes** – What processes do exemplar female business leaders use to establish common ground and produce breakthrough results?

The research method used in this study was qualitative phenomenology, with primary data collection consisting of personal interviews with female business leaders in Orange County, California, that were conducted using scripted questions. Observations were completed and artifacts were collected to triangulate the anecdotal information. The data were transcribed, entered into NVivo, and analyzed for emerging themes. The target population was the approximately 300 members of the Orange County Chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO), which included Chief Executive Officers, Senior Vice Presidents, and other executive level staff.
The sample consisted of 15 female business leaders who were considered to be exemplars in their field. To be considered an exemplar, the leader needed to demonstrate at least five of the following criteria:

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

**Major Findings**

The central purpose of this study was to discover and describe how exemplar female business leaders established common ground and produced breakthrough results by utilizing the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors. A summary of the key findings discovered and presented in Chapter IV is presented with respect to the central research question and sub-questions.

**Key Findings**

After the interviews were transcribed, coded, and checked for emerging themes, several key findings were evident with regard to how exemplar female business leaders used elements of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors in an effort to achieve common ground. The following findings reflected the top two themes in each domain and included three key findings in the area of conflict.
Key Finding 1: Collaboration

Female business leaders who were successful in transforming conflict:

- Brought the right people together to create a solution
- Built consensus through asking questions

Key Finding 2: Communication

Female business leaders who were successful in transforming conflict:

- Created an environment for open/honest/transparent dialogue
- Asked for feedback and meant it

Key Finding 3: Emotional Intelligence

Female business leaders who were successful in transforming conflict:

- Gave people time to absorb information and react to it
- Took the time to build/create trust with team members

Key Finding 4: Ethics

Female business leaders who were successful in transforming conflict:

- Modeled the right behaviors as a leader
- Had a strong mission/vision for the organization

Key Finding 5: Problem-Solving

Female business leaders who were successful in transforming conflict:

- Asked a lot of questions to identify the root cause
- Brought in key stakeholders or subject matter experts

Key Finding 6: Process

Female business leaders who were successful in transforming conflict:
• Used active listening

• Had and updated guidelines/policies and procedures for decision-making

**Key Finding 7: Conflict**

Female business leaders who were successful in transforming conflict:

• Were of the opinion that conflict was necessary for change to occur

• Confronted conflict head-on rather than hiding or avoiding it

• Used a blended model approach to all six domains of conflict transformation behaviors

**Unexpected Findings**

Three unexpected finding emerged from this study. The first unexpected finding came up in the ethics domain. All 15 participants stated they worked for an organization that they had to leave because of ethical differences at some point in their career. The second unexpected finding from this study was in the domain of emotional intelligence, which received the most references out of the six domains. Both “give people time to absorb information and wait for their reaction” and “take the time to build/create trust with team members” had 54 references each, the highest of any theme coded. The third unexpected finding was that active listening was cited in the domain of process. Though many consider active listening to be part of communication, 13 of the 15 participants in the study described active listening as a process used to resolve conflict.

**Conclusions**

Conclusions were drawn based on the findings of this study that related to how exemplar female business leaders established common ground and produced breakthrough results by utilizing the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors:
collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, ethics, problem-solving, and process.

**Conclusion 1:** Female business leaders who want to transform conflict and find common ground with stakeholders should take a blended model approach to all six domains during times of conflict.

Exemplar female business leaders regularly blended the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors (collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, ethics, problem-solving, and process) to achieve breakthrough results in finding common ground and transforming conflict. The Search for Common Ground (n.d.) believed that devising a plan of action needed to incorporate cooperation, collaboration, ethical considerations, and the recognition of the importance of values. Supporting data for this conclusion included:

1. Exemplar female business leaders who participated in this study were able to describe how they effectively blended all six domains of conflict transformation behaviors while facing and working through various levels of conflict.

2. Exemplar female business leaders who participated in this study shared several instances where more than one of the six conflict transformational behaviors were reliably and effectively used to successfully establish common ground and transform conflict.

**Conclusion 2:** Female business leaders who are collaborative and include stakeholders from the beginning are more likely to transform conflict and make decisions that are sustained by stakeholders.
Exemplar female business leaders effectively used collaboration to transform conflict and find common ground with all stakeholders. Eagly and Johnson (1990) found that female leaders were more interpersonally-oriented, more democratic, and encouraged participation. Supporting data for this conclusion from the current study included:

1. Exemplar female business leaders who participated in the study consistently discussed how they involved others in the decision-making process to establish common ground and transform conflict.
2. Exemplar female business leaders who participated in this study were able to describe the importance of having the entire team working toward a common goal to help alleviate and transform conflict.

Conclusion 3: Female business leaders who want to effectively transform conflict should keep lines of communication open at all times, especially during times of conflict.

Exemplar female business leaders consistently used communication to aid in conflict transformation and the establishment of common ground at all levels of their respective organizations. Gaur (2006) described the female leader communication style as supportive, attentive, and collaborative. Supporting data for this conclusion from the current study included:

1. Exemplar female business leaders who participated in this study noted the importance of constant communication during times of peace and conflict, all the while being inclusive and thoughtful in the message being relayed.
2. Creating an environment for open/honest/transient dialogue received 56 references, the highest of any theme. This conflict transformation behavior was deemed to be the most important component of effective communication.

**Conclusion 4:** Female business leaders who are aware of their emotions and can accurately gauge the emotions of others during times of conflict are more likely to find common ground and transform conflict.

Exemplar female business leaders demonstrated familiarity with and consistently exercised their emotional intelligence to help establish common ground and transform conflict. Goleman (1995) advocated for self-awareness and social-awareness, stating that awareness in those areas helped leaders anticipate reactions and responses to change. Hopkins and Bilomoria (2007) found that female leaders came by this awareness more naturally than male leaders. Supporting data for this conclusion from the current study included:

1. Exemplar female business leaders who participated in this study demonstrated social-awareness and revealed the importance of knowing their team and anticipating how they would respond to conflict.
2. Exemplar female business leaders who participated in this study successfully used the self-awareness aspect of emotional intelligence by knowing themselves and their emotions both during times of peace and conflict.

**Conclusion 5:** Female business leaders who behave ethically by considering their own reputation, and that of the organization, are more likely to find common ground and transform conflict.
Exemplar female business leaders were cognizant of the fallout that could ensue when unethical behavior rose to the surface. The reputation of the organization and its leaders could be damaged, making conflict nearly impossible to resolve. According to Howard and Korver (2008), the creation of a code of ethics provided a foundation for ethical behaviors intended to minimize reputational damage. Supporting data for this conclusion from the current study included:

1. Exemplar female business leaders who participated in this study knew exactly what they stood for and sought out or founded organizations that aligned with their ethics.
2. Exemplar female business leaders who participated in this study crafted a strong mission/vision for their organization that aligned with their values.
3. Exemplar female business leaders who participated in this study discussed the importance of modeling the right behavior as a leader so that employees knew how to act in times of both peace and conflict.

**Conclusion 6:** Female business leaders who develop and implement problem-solving strategies that include stakeholders and outliers are more likely to find common ground and transform conflict.

Exemplar female business leaders that involved others from the onset of conflict found it easier to craft a mutually beneficial solution by utilizing this problem-solving strategy. Harvey et al. (1997) suggested that involving others in the problem-solving process was an effective approach and could assist leaders in establishing common ground and transforming conflict. Supporting data for this conclusion from the current study included:
1. Exemplar female business leaders who participated in this study consistently shared that involving others in the problem-solving process allowed them to look at the problem from multiple perspectives and assisted in finding common ground.

2. Exemplar female business leaders who participated in this study understood that allowing everyone to ask questions to properly identify the root-cause of the problem was vital in transforming conflict.

**Conclusion 7:** Female business leaders with guidelines in place for decision-making, and who are willing to update and revise those processes as needed, are more likely to find common ground and transform conflict.

Exemplar female business leaders that developed, implemented, and explained guidelines to their employees regarding decision-making were able to transform conflict and find common ground with stakeholders. Outlining the process for making sound business decisions was supported by Schwarz (2002), who advocated that leaders should take the time to create such processes. Supporting data for this conclusion from the current study included:

1. Exemplar female business leaders who participated in this study recounted the process they used to set clear expectations regarding decision-making and how they held their employees accountable.

2. Exemplar female business leaders who participated in this study recognized the importance of allowing for revision or removal of processes that no longer met the needs of the employees or the organization, therefore eliminating some conflict before it arose.
Implications for Action

The implications developed from this research have the potential to influence actions of leaders from small, medium, and large sized organizations; entrepreneurs; professional networking groups; and leaders from any type of organization seeking to establish common ground as a way of transforming conflict and producing breakthrough results within their organization.

1. NAWBO should implement a speaker series that highlights the elements of each of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors: collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, ethics, problem-solving, and process. Each speaker should be an exemplar business leader with direct experience in transforming conflict by utilizing the specific element of their presentation.

- Speaker 1: Communication – Talk The Talk: how exemplar female business leaders effectively communicate with their employees to find common ground.
- Speaker 2: Collaboration – Two Heads Really Are Better Than One: how to involve others when the stakes are high.
- Speaker 3: Emotional Intelligence – I’m So Emotional: how to recognize your emotions and your employees’ emotions when change is inevitable.
- Speaker 4: Ethics – Take A Stand: how to ensure your personal code of ethics do not get compromised when facing conflict.
- Speaker 5: Problem-Solving – Get Through the Weeds: how to figure out how and why a problem occurred so you can weed it out.
• Speaker 6: Process – As Easy as 1, 2, 3: how to create processes that promote organizational objectives.

2. A recording of each of the speakers should be made and put on the NAWBO website so individuals who were unable to attend or missed a speaker could view them online; include any supplemental materials provided by speakers.

3. A mentoring network should be developed for female business new to their leadership role. Through the mentoring network, they could be paired with a female business leader who experienced conflict, was able to transform it, and had first-hand knowledge and application of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors.

4. A book should be written recounting the lived experiences of exemplar leaders and describing how they were able to find common ground while producing breakthrough results and transforming conflict. The format of the book should be such that it provides real-life examples across industries and discusses topics revealed in this study.

5. A website should be developed that discusses the topics of this study and explores the components of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors. Self-assessments specific to each domain should be developed and available on the website so a user could uncover strengths and areas of opportunities regarding the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors. Definitions, tips and hints, and an open discussion forum should be included in the website content.
6. Educational institutions that offer a Masters of Business Administration (MBA), a Masters in Organizational Leadership (MAOL), or a Doctorate in Organizational Leadership should consider adopting and offering courses specific to establishing common ground through the use of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the findings from this study, further research in the establishment of common ground through the use of the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors was recommended in the following areas:

- The current study focused on how exemplar female business leaders established common ground and produced breakthrough results by utilizing the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors. Further research should include all business leaders, male and female. A comparative analysis should be conducted to explore similarities and differences in the findings.

- The current study focused on how exemplar female business leaders in southern California established common ground and produced breakthrough results by utilizing the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors. To take the research further, future studies should include exemplar female business leaders in other geographic regions across the United States.

- As part of a thematic team, the data from this study along with the data from the other studies conducted in the thematic group, should be collected and further examined to expose and explore any overlapping themes from the
findings that could lead to generalizations of exemplar leadership across industries.

- One of the findings from this study was in the domain of emotional intelligence and the deep understanding of its role in relationship building and creating common ground. Further qualitative research should be conducted to explore how male business leaders utilize emotional intelligence during times of conflict.

- The current study focused on how exemplar female business leaders established common ground and produced breakthrough results by utilizing the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors, including the domain of ethics. Future qualitative research should focus on ethics and specifically how they affect establishing common ground and transforming conflict.

- The current study focused on how exemplar female business leaders established common ground and produced breakthrough results by utilizing the six domains of conflict transformation behaviors, including the domain of collaboration. Future qualitative analysis should focus on the different components of collaboration to see if one stands out as having a greater impact on finding common ground.

**Concluding Remarks and Reflections**

I have often wondered what the hikers think when they make it to the peak of the mountain that they set out to climb. Is it what they expected? Did they meet others along the way? Is her/his life forever changed? I can confidently say that my journey was life
altering, brought people into my life that I did not realize I needed, and was both
everything and nothing that I had expected it to be.

At a young age I knew that I wanted to go to college to make a life for myself that
included learning as much as I could each day, and being a role model for others. The
desire to earn a doctorate came later in my career as I sat behind a desk day-by-day
knowing there had to be more to a work/life than watching the hours tick away. The
opportunity to meet and interview the women who participated in this study gave me a
renewed sense of purpose and a desire to do more than punch a timeclock day after day.
I now approach my day with a purpose and know that all that I learned along the way
made me a better leader for my team.
REFERENCES


Bradberry, T., & Greaves, J. (2009). *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* [Kindle]. Retrieved from Amazon.com


Kacmar, K. M., Andrews, M. C., Harris, K. J., & Tepper, B. J. (2012, June 16). Ethical leadership and subordinate outcomes: The mediating role of organizational
politics and the moderating role of political skill. *Journal of Business Ethics.*

http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1373-8


APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – INFORMED CONSENT FORM

INFORMATION ABOUT: A qualitative study to discover and describe common ground strategies used by exemplar female business leaders to proactively transform and resolve conflict as they attempt to shape the future.

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY
16355 LAGUNA CANYON ROAD
IRVINE, CA 92618
RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Alida Stanowicz

PURPOSE OF STUDY: The purpose of this phenomenological study is to discover and describe how the lived experiences of the exemplar female business leaders, 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), law enforcement, 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 female business leaders would use the six domains of common ground to achieve breakthrough results and reduce or eliminate 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 July through August, 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 community college presidents. 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 by Alida Stanowicz. She can be reached by e-mail at or by phone at.
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.

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 ____________________________ Date Signed ______________
Dear (Female Business Leader)

I am a doctoral candidate in the Doctorate of Education in Organizational Leadership Program in the School of Education at Brandman University. I am nearing my dissertation research phase, and would like to share information about my research project with you.

This will be a phenomenological study, which will seek to explore the lived experiences of exemplar female business leaders in establishing common ground to transform conflict and achieve break-through results. Specifically, the study will examine how leaders use the concepts of collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence, ethics, problem-solving, and process to find common ground and effectively resolve conflict.

This study will be ground breaking, and I am seeking qualified female business leaders in Orange County who are willing to participate.

I, Alida Stanowicz, am the research director, and am available to answer any questions that you may have. Please contact me via email at or by phone at Your participation would be greatly valued and appreciated.

Respectfully,
Alida Stanowicz, Doctoral Candidate
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.
APPENDIX D – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**General Question:** As a leader in your organization, can you share a time when you were faced with a conflict in your organization and you developed common ground with stakeholders in order to break through the conflict? Please tell me about the conflict and what you went through to break through that conflict?

**Collaboration**

*Set up:* Collaboration can be a key component in transforming conflict within many organizations.

1. Can you share a story about a time when you used “collaboration” with internal stakeholders who were opposed to some direction in your organization, to find common ground and achieve breakthrough results?

*Set up:* The ability to involve others for mutually agreed upon goals is a major component of many leadership positions.

2. Can you share a story about a time when you used “collaboration” as the leader in your organization, to find common ground and achieve breakthrough results with external stakeholders to move through conflict?

3. In your experience as the organizational leader how has collaboration been a key element in finding common ground to navigate through conflict with stakeholders?

**Follow Up Questions**

1. What were the specific aspects of collaboration that created breakthrough results?

2. What was the final result?

**Communication**

1. Can you share a story about a time when you used “communication” as the leader in your organization, to find common ground and achieve breakthrough results with stakeholders to move through conflict?

2. Please share an experience you’ve had as the leader of the organization, when “communication” was a critical aspect in finding common ground with stakeholders?

**Follow Up Question**

1. How did you use communication to transform the conflict into a more positive situation?

2. How did communication play a critical role?

3. What was the final result?
Emotional Intelligence

1. Please tell me about a time when emotional intelligence helped you to transform conflict and find common ground.

2. Was there a time when you used self-awareness or self-management to transform a particularly difficult conflict?

3. Was there a time when you used social-awareness or relationship management to help you break through conflict?

Follow Up Questions

1. How do you feel that being emotionally intelligent helped you break through conflict?

2. How do you feel those competencies helped you succeed in transforming the conflict?

3. What common ground were you able to achieve?

4. Can you describe how those competencies helped you succeed?

Ethics

Set up: As a leader, ethics intersects your job in a number of ways. Your personal ethics, the ethics of your stakeholders, how are ethics related to the practice of the organization.

1. What have been the different types of ethical or moral dilemmas have you had occur during times of conflict with your primary stakeholders?

2. Most leaders face ethical dilemmas during their tenure. Can you share with me a time when you felt that your ethical values may have been similar or different from those in your organization?

Follow up question

1. What were the steps (processes) did you take to achieve common ground?

2. What was the most difficult part of this process?

Problem-Solving

1. Tell me how you engage others in problem solving in order to achieve common ground.

2. Can you tell me about a conflict situation where you needed to achieve common ground and used problem solving skills to break through the conflict?

3. Which of the elements or problem solving strategies was most helpful in transforming the conflict to a more positive outcome?
Follow Up Questions

1. How do you identify the underlying causes of the problem at hand?

2. How do you create a solution?

3. Please give me an example of when you have used this process.

4. What steps did you take to solve the problem?

5. How do you feel these skills helped you to transform the conflict into a more positive situation?

6. Can you describe the impact of those strategies on those involved in the process?

7. What impact did it have on you?

Process

Set Up: As the leader within your organization, understanding and managing various processes is probably not as glamorous as most people are lead to believe, but they are necessary.

1. Can you talk about processes, and in particular, if you had any conflict and what processes that you used with those who were resistant or in conflict?

2. What processes have you utilized to transform or neutralize a heavy conflict situation so that parties can engage in constructive dialogue?

Follow Up Questions

1. What process did you use to establish common ground?

2. I am interested to know your process on how you get people on your team to move beyond consensus to common ground?

3. What was the final result?

4. How important of a process is this to a leader within their organization?