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Crossing the Alchemic Bridge: A Qualitative Exploration into Leaders Emergence.

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# Abstract

**Background:** There is a notable gap in the current research regarding how emerging leaders interpret and respond to challenging situations they encounter. Specifically, there is insufficient exploration of how leaders' actions relate to their personal value systems and overall wellbeing. This area requires further investigation to better understand the emerging mechanisms of leaders.

**Aim:** The current study seeks to understand the lived experiences of leader emergence by focusing on value alignment, self-awareness and wellbeing.

**Methods:** Seven qualitative interviews were analysed using thematic analysis.

**Analysis:** Self-awareness drives the positioning of value alignment and subsequent wellbeing through decisions being in congruence with the decision maker. Overarching themes discussed were: Early leader development; Barriers encumbering leaders' emergence; the alchemic bridge of self-awareness; Transformational interventions.

## **Discussion and implications:**

Each of the participants reported that their unique leadership journey had been intimately shaped by their perceptions and experiences. Whilst each had a unique path into leadership, similar themes emerged in relation to the issues they had confronted. The underlying cause of these issues were referred to as stagnating barriers as they risked hindering progress and success. These consisted of fear, the feeling of not belonging, blind spots, lack of self-esteem, value misalignment and a sense of separation from self. While the participants' circumstances

differed, findings indicated a common theme that self-insight and self-awareness were key to overcoming barriers. The alchemic bridge was a metaphor utilised to capture emergence from a sense of being ‘stuck’ or stagnating, without a sense of progress or success. Through self-reflection on the barriers and with self-awareness, crossing the ‘bridge’ could lead to the alignment of personal values and beliefs with intentional purpose and direction. These processes were reported to support leader emergence and well-being. The participants utilised varying transformational interventions such as having social, spiritual or nature connection, mindfulness, coaching, and prioritising self and others.

A key thread running through this research is the societal context in which leaders are currently emerging in relation to technology and the internet. Often within leadership emergence studies, the wider context is excluded. Consideration must be given to the rapid shifts that are dramatically altering our organisational contexts. Technology has significantly reshaped leadership dynamics necessitating a shift within the traditional paradigms. The research suggests that self-awareness is important for leadership and wellbeing in this dynamic environment. Leader emergence was found to be complex and further exploration of underexamined or unstudied domains holds the potential to reveal novel insights. This study provides a reminder of the importance of widening leadership studies to explore complex contexts and processes and to examine the naturally occurring moments that take place within leaders’ daily lives.

# Acknowledgements

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I extend my appreciation to the research participants whose contributions enriched this study immeasurably. The depth of our conversations yielded a wealth of insights, many of which warrant further exploration. Your candid sharing was appreciated and instrumental in shaping this work.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

*I'm afraid I can't explain myself, sir,' said Alice, 'Because I am not myself, you see*

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland - Carroll (1865, p. 60).*

Wonderland, a fantasy world created by Oxford lecturer and mathematician Lewis Carroll (1865), is characterised by absurdity and a lack of logical coherence, where in Alice's confused disorientation, rational sequences and natural laws are turned upside down. Contextually within the story and on Alice's utterance of this line, Alice has gone through varying transformations leaving her with uncertainty about who she is, feeling herself in a disconnected state with unsurety and disillusionment dominating her interpretation of reality. Themes encompassing self-awareness, identity, unfamiliar environments, and sense making of contexts begin to develop. It is these themes that will be explored in this thesis as Alice's words mirror emerging leaders, finding themselves in new circumstances, metamorphosing into what they think they should be, whilst becoming entrapped within a mode of existence. Adapting to and inhabiting new roles in unfamiliar environments whilst the cognitive dissonance "of not being oneself" nestles easily in the disconnected space between sense of self and leadership expectations. Yes, we are all Alice!

Setting the scene an anecdote comes to mind ...

## **Anecdote**

A friend was buying his business partner out, thus signifying a defining leadership moment for his life, company and employees. Alone, he would lead the organisation without the backstop support of a co-owner who had helped to create and hold together the company culture. To

demarcate the transitional process between the old guard to the new fresh approach, he contacted me wondering if I could run a couple of value/team workshops. I worked with him to identify what was important for his staff, what type of work environment could amplify their skills and being an 'eclectic bunch', bring them together with a common value set. We parted ways with him wanting the next steps to be an e-mail from me with what the workshops would entail, how many hours, and costs.

Reflecting, I paused to consider ... is this leadership? It certainly sounded like a notable investment of time and money to develop an agreed set of values to lead a team and to have reference during exacting moments. It would be a way to ensure each member would have a voice to conjure a notion of belonging and have some fun along the way. He would be positioning himself as a leader who wants his staff to know they are valued, showing that he cares while creating the special fusion sauce to fashion his workplace into a land of rainbows and feel-good gestures and to champion them through the perplexities of work, knowing they also have a life.

Whilst it appeared vogueish, elementally it was a flawed approach, fable riddled in aiming to develop a 'textbook' workplace phantasmagoria that would quickly evaporate into an ethereal silence, with employees left thinking of what could have been.

Why the blunt critique? A leader must interweave themselves into the leadership role and the only way to do this is through an underlying awareness of the self. I left him with a couple of suggestions:

- An approach where the focus would be on the creation of value and culture through some fun, engaged sessions whereas as a leader you would allow the culture to become as ‘authentic’ as possible.
- An approach where you would have a good session yourself, answering simple questions around what type of leader you are, any shifts you want to see and how you want to blend this into the team.

There are subtle differences between the two.

In the first approach, a disconnected focus would ensue. This would be one that is lauded in the leadership textbooks, whereby ample numbers of consultants, university professors and management coaches using terms like authentic, transformational and other leader superlatives extoll leader development theory and how to lead a team in the most perfect way. In this approach, we would talk about and create shared values, culture, respect and dutiful performance, with agreement, buy-in and tangible outcomes for reference points. This would focus on the team as desired but, over time, employees would very likely turn to familiar behaviours that, while unhelpful in the long term, are comforting.

In the second approach, the focus would be around self-awareness for the leader. Failure to see ourselves as we are and a tendency to see others as they are not, risks creating a misalignment. Only through self-awareness can an emerging leader withstand the challenges of the world we live, work and lead in. This would mean first building an understanding of why self-awareness holds the means to what a leader wants while recognising that there is no destination or ‘endpoint’ to the process. Self-awareness can hold the key to the wellbeing of

the self and team as, through leadership, they become connected, enabling value creation and natural engagement patterns.

## Rationale

Currently there is not enough research focused on how emerging leaders make sense of critical conditions they are confronted with and how they act in situations relative to their value constructs. Organisations' diverse and often conflicting objectives create ongoing challenges for leaders as they attempt to balance multiple stakeholders varied and sometimes contradictory demands with their own personal values. This constant tension between organisational goals, stakeholder needs, and personal values can significantly impact a leader's wellbeing. This thesis is an exploration into organisational leadership focusing on the lived experiences of leader emergence. Focusing on value alignment, self-awareness and wellbeing, leaders across New Zealand were interviewed to understand how they navigate through this unstable invention of becoming a leader. The current technological environment will be a thread woven through the research as the invasiveness and rapidity of change lend gravitas to the importance of requisite leadership skills required for emergence.

The aim of this research is to investigate the lived experiences of leaders to gain insight into the interplay between values, self-awareness, leader emergence and wellbeing which I hypothesise are the key fundamentals that make up the leader while steering clear of the rose-tinted leadership constructs. Qualitative interviews examined how leadership experiences and self-awareness led to decision-making that supported individual beliefs and values and the interrelationship with well-being. A glimpse into the current societal state interwoven with technology will contextualise issues that today's modern leaders are now emerging into. The following sections will explore each of these points.

## Leadership

The nature and practice of becoming a leader evolves continuously within societal norms, cultural values, and contextual conditions. This dynamic process of transformation reflects the ever-changing landscape in which leaders operate. Back in the early 1990's, the social construct of leadership was seen by some as a myth, purely to reinforce existing social beliefs through the perceived necessity of hierarchy and deeply ingrained dogmas. Underpinning ontological and epistemological beliefs led to reification, the social process converting a mental construct – leadership, into objective reality. In other words, it was felt (at least by some) that simply because the word 'leader' exists there must be an independent objective reality that it designates (Gemmill & Oakley, 1992).

Fast forward 30 years and socially inspired leadership lexicon aficionados have created a multi-billion-dollar industry, and organisations have scrambled to pour mammoth investments into their people. Processes to identify leadership styles and strengths have run alongside a plethora of leadership skill training activities such as active listening, team building and diversity training, with optimal behaviours being described, taught and evaluated in a continuous, looping cycle (Dare, 2020). Prospects are mentored and coached but always there appears to be a missing aspect as something intervenes or gets in the way of participants becoming consistently worthy, successful leaders. This raises the question: is progress impeded by the nature of leadership development itself, or by ideological constraints born from an underlying social fiction?

*If a particular ideology continues to influence research over many years, it can impede progress. Political ideology can become a stultifying straitjacket in relation to research. Yet,*

*ideology is the most difficult of biases to erase because its advocates seldom recognize or acknowledge it* (Eagly, 2018, p. 882).

Leadership research and development tends to have a strong market orientation, portraying grandiose images of success (Einola & Alvesson, 2021), but leadership models are just theories (from the Greek word *Theoria* meaning ‘a viewing’) and marketing packages that are charismatic and seductive can be misleading (Spoelstra, 2018). Leadership theory is implicitly value-based as measures, methods, interpretations, judgements, conclusions and recommendations all require evaluative judgement (Putnam, 2004; Spoelstra et al., 2016). The practice of leadership development builds on these theories and continually requires fresh and stimulating models so publishers remain relevant to their broad audiences, who may or may not be interested in serious academic knowledge. As Gardner et al. (2021) notes, even dubiously-supported theories tend to linger in publications, leadership folklore and consultancy practice while their advocates move on to something more fashionable and promising. Left in their wake is confusion and challenges in understanding the relevance of the research.

Part of the underlying problem is the illusory reassurance that leader development can offer. When members of a social group face ambiguity and uncertainty and experience discomfort, helplessness, hostility, disappointment, fear of failure and anxiety, then reassurance can be found by looking towards the leader role and a familiar and comfortable social order (Gemmill & Oakley, 1992). This perpetuates the research into a ‘perfect’ leader or redeemer to save the team. Less ideological and more theoretically solid research is needed to move forward from the search for the “right leadership” formulae. Currently, there is a risk that faulty theory and defective operationalisations rest on “a limited sense of realities of organizational life, strongly

focused idealized imaginary, and unrealistic expectations on human nature” (Alvesson & Einola, 2019, p. 384) .

One example in the leadership literature focuses on authentic leadership. Positive psychology advocates of authentic leadership like to use words such as trustworthy, real, genuine, and reliable to conceive authenticity through expressing the “real self” with thoughts and emotions (Tourish, 2019). Excessive positivity exudes airs of confidence and authority, whereby leaders future gaze with scenarios that are optimistically inspiring, encouraging all to be upbeat and positive. This however is discordant when the future is not rose-tinted, running its course whilst soaring to great heights and plummeting to deadly lows. Collinson (2012) coined the term *Prozac leadership*, building on the conception that as a drug, Prozac induces artificial happiness by moderating depression, a common drug prescribed across the Western world. The chemical metaphor of an anti-depressant masks what a leader truly is, wholly human.

Whilst we implicitly recognise that a positive attitude impacts positively on wellbeing, reaffirmations when this positivity is not present is damaging. Feehly (2024) examined research whereby those with low self-esteem who uttered self-help mantras ended up feeling worse, as they simply did not believe. Ehrenreich (2009) notes that a pervasive, dominant, almost mandatory inculturation of positive, aspirational states of being with agreement from medical, academic and religious groups, has become entrenched within the corporate psyche. Characterised as denying unpleasantness and negative thoughts, accentuating only positivity sustains mass delusion and continual deliberate self-deception. Einola and Alvesson (2021) believe authentic leadership theory is just one example of a much greater dysfunctional family of positive leadership theories. Continued refinement and theorizing of existing leadership models will not resolve their fundamental flaws and persisting with these inadequate

frameworks risks several negative outcomes. It may erode the credibility of academic research, diminish the legitimacy of educational institutions, create unrealistic expectations in organizations, and lead to identity crises among managers and leaders striving to conform to these flawed ideals.

Whereas Taylorism (Taylor, 1919) excluded emotions, treating workers as automatons, positive authentic leadership slices and dices emotions, allowing the exposure of only what are construed as virtuous emotions to be exposed. The misconception that negative emotions such as anxiety, sadness, fear, hate, anger etc are better set aside to magnify pleasant emotions, is a highly damaging notion. Lazarus (1966) developed the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping noting that God needs Satan and vice versa; in the same way, positive and negative emotions are two sides of the same coin, intrinsically linked, and when one narrows the focus of attention, much-needed perspective is lost. The process of coping is an integral determinant of health and well-being. Appraisal plays a crucial role in the initial stages of the cognitive-motivational-relational process of emotion generation by unveiling an emotional response that requires careful consideration. This process of evaluation serves as the starting point for understanding and interpreting the emotional experience that follows (Lazarus, 2003). Reappraising all negative emotions as positive distorts the complexity of reality and as Shakespeare (1869, pp. (Act 2, Scene 2)) notes in Hamlet “There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so”.

In this thesis I do not engage in the discourse of positivist, transformational, authentic leader emergence paradigms. As Alvesson and Einola (2019) note, the Disneyland-inspired good moral leader always peaking with performance has been lapped up by the leadership

community and journals. Prototypical leadership ideologies that present leaders as exceptional in every way are described as:

*The almost cult like belief in leaders as heroic, larger-than life, charismatic figures who have enormous self-belief and commensurate egos, and who will pursue their objectives come what may* (Burnes & By, 2012, p. 241).

Fundamental flaws exist in these popular theories. The intellectual foundations can be seen as extremely rickety as mainstream leadership studies are continually reconstructed in the image of science (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2016; Spoelstra et al., 2016; Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013).

## Emerging leaders

Leader emergence is a critical study area within organisational behaviour, ultimately determining organisational success (Sholikhah et al., 2024). Within emergent leader theory and research, there is often little distinction between informal and formal emergence. Definitions and general conceptualisations of a leader centre on whether an individual is viewed as a leader by others and themselves, as well as perceptions of how they perform in influencing and guiding others' activities towards goal achievement (Judge et al., 2002). Informal leader emergence can mean the granting of the leader role by prospective followers, without a change in formal status or authority, while formal leadership is a visible granting of leadership, legitimised with formal status authority over another (Badura et al., 2021). This distinction appears clear, but leader emergence and efficacy are the result of the social system where interactions occur, and of complex relational and social processes in which the identities of leaders and followers emerge not only within the self-concept of individuals but also those

around them (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Roles can be clear or ambiguous, interrelated with formally designated managerial positions or not.

Expectations of leadership vary across people and contexts, and are wrapped up in organisational policies and procedures as well as leaders' own interpretation of what leadership is, how it functions, and expected outcomes (Bedeian & Hunt, 2006; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Yukl, 2023). These perceptions shape interpretations of roles, values, outcomes and self through emotions and both accurate and inaccurate thought patterns, ultimately shaping our wellbeing. As Seneca (0060, p. 4) in his letters to friend Lucilius noted "There are more things, Lucilius, likely to frighten us than there are to crush us; we suffer more often in imagination than in reality". Internal mental processes exert a powerful influence on emotionality and leaders' awareness of these internal perceptions directly affects the interpretation of their roles, values and outcomes.

Hill (2003) followed 19 new leaders over a year to gain insight into the transformational experience of leadership emergence. Participants reported finding the necessity to unlearn their deeply held habits and attitudes as they moved forward motivating and inspiring others through collective, co-ordinated, and holistic mechanisms. Evolution of a new professional identity was noted as involving three different learning paradigms: learning something new, changing one's mind and changing oneself. This marked a significant shift in organisational leadership whereby scientifically based management views were surpassed in order to take in a 'becoming' which Segal (2017) saw as a full embodied existential dimension of lived experience. Becoming a leader through lived experience merges the inner self with the environment, a dialectal crusade with the person and the world, while anxiety forms a central tenet to this becoming. Overlaid by the rapidity of change within how we live, how we lead

and how we associate with self is the stimulus for our wellbeing, yet while we continually reinvent ourselves, we risk getting stuck within the complexity of our diverging identities (Bauman, 2013; Crary, 2013). Odiorne (1966) made the case that new situations are constantly present and managing them is the hallmark of leadership. Crises and situations require immediate and regular decision-making. Across the research, it became apparent that as this occurred, barriers existed for all participants, challenging their self-identity, values and wellbeing.

## Leader identity

Identity is the meaning attached to the self (Gecas, 1982). In synthesising definitions of identity Caza et al. (2018, p. 7) presents the following:

*the cognitive, discursive, physical, and behavioural activities that individuals undertake with the goal of forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, revising, or rejecting collective, role, and personal self-meanings within the boundaries of their social contexts.*

Moran (2018) claims the concept of 'identity' did not emerge until the 1960's when social movements began to claim identity in reference to an individual's essence, allowing for political expression of cultural affiliations. The concept of identity presents a fundamental paradox where we maintain our uniqueness as individuals while simultaneously sharing commonalities with those we consider part of our group (Pullen et al., 2008). Identity is then inherently precarious and ephemeral. As Knights and Clarke (2017) point out, identity is dependent on the unpredictability and uncontrollable social confirmation of others. The fragility of identity, dependent on external forces, has the vulnerability to implode when others do not provide the obligatory substantiations. Understanding a mind state focused on the

interpretation of others and how cues are received accentuates how a lack of social validation can impact an individual. Perceived threats and gibes can be experienced based only on subjective construction. In this sense, the only way to be secure is to be separate from the fluidity of life, yet this separateness itself creates insecurity (Watts, 1962). Rovelli (2016) in his writings on the *Seven Brief lessons of Physics* attributed the ‘Seventh Lesson’ to the question of selfhood and human identity and philosophised on this from a scientific viewpoint noting that we are nature.

*We are an integral part of nature; we are nature, in one of its innumerable and infinitely variable expressions ... that which makes us specifically human does not signify our separation from nature; it is part of that self-same nature (Rovelli, 2016, p. 74).*

DeRue and Ashford (2010) discuss a tripartite approach to leader-identity as individual internalisation, relational recollection and collective endorsement. Incorporating the identity of a leader into the self involves a creation aspect that is expressed and asserted within ensuing social interactions. A relational recognition of identity emerges as individuals recognise each other’s roles in the relationship (leader, follower) which transfers into the broader social environment where the recognition of social groupings occurs. For example, the social context determines that whilst an individual may not perceive themselves as a leader and having leadership qualities, the collective may have endorsed this person as a leader, therefore initiating the leadership identity creation process for leaders and followers. However, there is no single clear path to becoming or identifying as a leader.

Zheng et al. (2021) examined the ambiguity of leader identity, recognising the importance of leaders’ narrated origin stories for claiming an identity. Unfolding from leader origins to

current leader status, four dominant narrative frames were identified: *being, engaging, performing and accepting*. These frames were used for individuals transitioning through phases of interim identity creation to their present-day leadership roles amid the encompassing social forces. “Being” referenced the leaders’ enduring personal life attributes over time as their emergence stories reflected self-inspirational qualities whereby leadership was their destiny. “Engaging” reflected people beginning to believe themselves to be leaders as they engaged in activities associated with leadership. The active ‘doing’ of leadership could be decoupled from formally defined positions or personal attributes as leadership happened in undefined contexts or ambiguous situations. “Performing” was associated with a formal title therefore it was conferred, and leader enactment included a heightened sense of accountability and responsibility in their work which became role-focused, not task-based. “Accepting” was being seen by others as a leader and beginning to internalise this identity.

## Values

Understanding of how values influence life decisions remains incomplete. However, as Maio (2017) suggests, values play a crucial role in fulfilling various needs and helping us achieve equilibrium among them. When a particular need becomes more pressing, the values that support it gain prominence, while those that conflict with it become less influential. The Schwartz (1992) model of values relates to these needs, suggesting that they balance three universal principles of human existence: needs of individuals as biological organisms, needs for coordinated social interactions, and survival needs of groups. This balance requires trade-offs between ten different motivational attributes: achievement, benevolence, conformity, hedonism, power, security, self-direction, stimulation, tradition, and universalism.

Values are a focal component of the self, whereby an individual ascribes importance to outcomes. The formation of values for an individual is based firstly on genetically inherited factors and then through socialisation by culture, social groups and social institutions (Arieli et al., 2020). Within an individual, a hierarchy of values is formed with those holding greater importance more likely to stimulate action (Rokeach, 1973). An awareness of these values leads into the formation of personal attitudes (Rasheed, 2015). As a cognitive representation, they can easily be recalled, reflected on and then conscious choices can be made to act on or ignore them in a situation. These conscious choices make values a sense-making system for conscious evaluation, judgement and justification for action that can change over time (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022).

Values are formed through social interactions, and the bonds we make with others are constantly shaping who we are. Spoelstra (2018) notes that the distinction between revealing either the value-led authentic self or the socially formed self is implausible and we run the risk of self-deception in thinking our core values are truly our own. Therefore, it may be impossible to know whether an individual speaks their values-based truth without holding back and without intention to mislead. It may even be unlikely that we can know this personally, indicating that we may have a great capacity to mislead ourselves. As Loon et al. (2019) observe, stressing one polarity exacerbates the need for the other, sparking defences, impeding learning and producing counter-productive reinforcing cycles. If the tensions between the values-based and socially formed self are not attended to, ambivalence, conflict, chaos and ‘collapse ‘of a leader may transpire.

If values are partly made up of emotion in the conscious and unconscious, then intellectual examination will not provide a pathway for understanding alignment. A key focus is

understanding the alignment leaders develop as they emerge. Klussman et al. (2022) observe that more self-connected individuals engage in more meaningful social activities due to acting in alignment with their values, with less risk of rumination and defensiveness, and a sense of significance increases. To align with one's values, self-awareness becomes critical.

## Self-awareness

The self is a construct of words and memories, fantasies that do not exist in immediate reality. As Watts (2003) notes, we will always be stuck with ourselves and attempts to reject or accept ourselves are equally ineffective: the epicentre of our selfhood is unreachable. The true self comes from not trying to change who we are but accepting and becoming what we already are.

*The part of self that is wanting to change our self is the very part that needs to be changed, as inaccessible as a needle to the prick of its own point* (Watts, 2003, p. 4).

Elements of theoretical traditions have recognised the importance of the true self-construct. With weighty ponderance, theorists, mystics, literary experts, laypeople, academics, philosophers and psychologists from ancients to modernity have examined how the true self weaves into a well-lived life. The emergence of research indicates that across cultures, people not only believe the true self exists, but that it is morally good and represents who they really are inside, regardless of outward behaviour (De Freitas et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2018; Schlegel & Hicks, 2011). This theory of inherent moral goodness proposed by De Freitas et al. (2017) is grounded in psychological essentialism whereby identity continuity across differing contexts of the lived experience reveals the deep intrinsic properties comprising true nature. Findings by Christy et al. (2016) amplify this concept, as perceived self-knowledge is suggested to play a functional role in moral self-concept maintenance and regulatory processes. This subjective

construct is critical to reinforcing the linkages between perceived knowledge of true self and psychological well-being.

The *essential moral self-hypotheses*, a term coined by Strohminger and Nichols (2014), was based on their research findings that the moral character is central to how individuals understand their personal identity. Among the various aspects of human cognition and character, moral attributes have historically been regarded as the most fundamental components of one's identity, sense of self, and spiritual essence. These ethical qualities are seen as more central to defining an individual than other mental capacities or traits. As moral information can be heavily weighted in self-identity reasoning, being morally good allows coherence in aiding self-awareness within a true self-construct.

Self-awareness literally determines whether one lives or dies through everyday decisions. To pay attention and respond promptly to present dangers and opportunities is a process termed by Porges (2009) as neuroception. Neuroceptive evaluation involves the limbic, prefrontal and brainstem processes, shaping the appraisal of event significance in reference to the past. This evolutionary substrate forms the foundation for how our emotional life is formed. Through our consciousness expanding, imagined situations became critically significant to biological success and survival, as well as the way in which we live our lives. However, imagined situations whilst evoking the same mechanisms of emotion and interest do not elicit attention to the present moment. Attending to the here and now by evolutionary design ensures survival, yet external events can get confused with mental constructs (Waterworth et al., 2015).

Carden et al. (2022) noted the confusion and lack of clarity when self-awareness is discussed in the management literature. The complexity of the construct is not recognised and terms like

self-knowledge and self-consciousness are used interchangeably. Morin (2017) supports this premise, noting that confusion exists and self-awareness is a difficult term to define as often the context of the research determines the definition (Sutton, 2016). Carden et al. (2022) embarked on ambitious research conducting a systematic literature review of articles that defined the self-awareness concept to unite and provide clarity on the self-awareness construct, aiding in developing a common definition. The small catchment of articles remaining after the initial screening of 442,146 articles, showed that whilst self-awareness appears many times, authors who use the term often did not feel it necessary to define it. Three meta-themes (Figure 1) from 31 research articles emerged in how self-awareness appears within management literature.

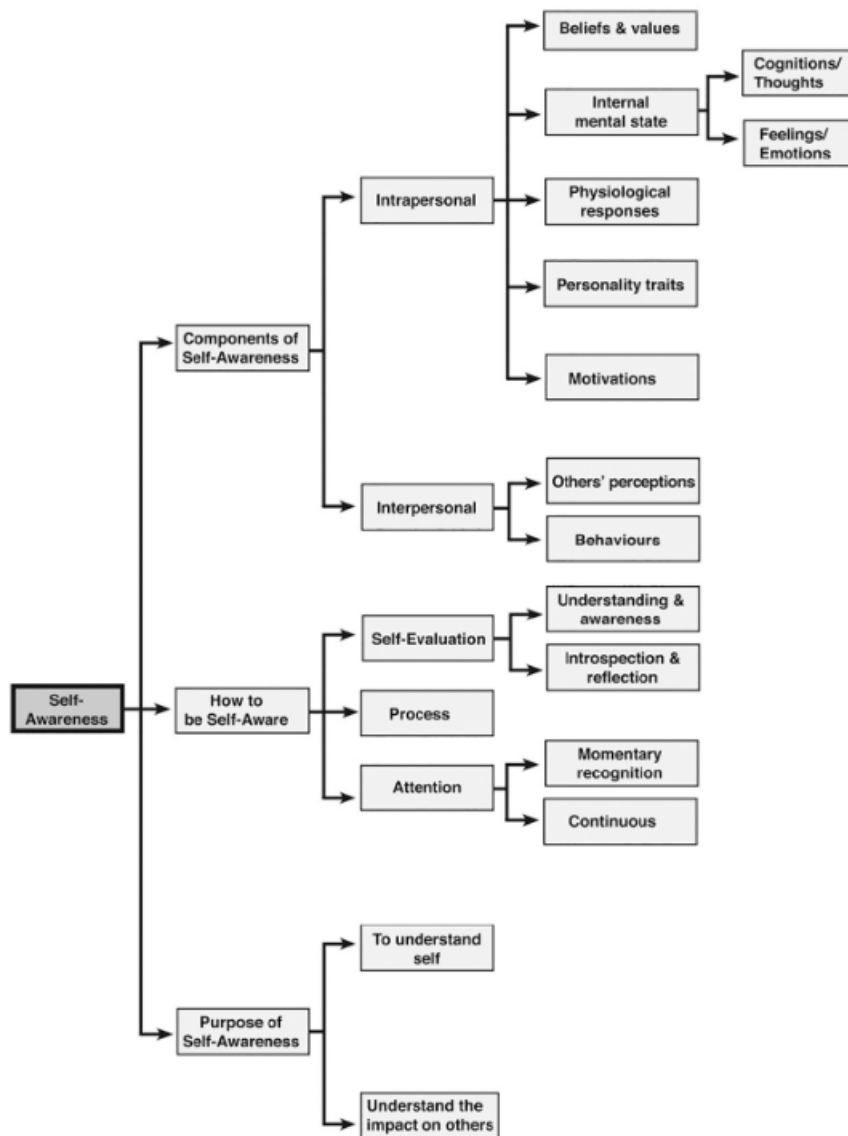


Figure 1 Hierarchical structure of themes from the analysis of definitions of self-awareness (Carden et al., 2022, p. 156).

Research revealed a significant overlap and ambiguity in the conceptual boundaries between self-awareness, self-consciousness, and self-knowledge. Despite these blurred distinctions, the researchers proposed a developmental sequence where self-consciousness serves as a precursor to self-awareness, which in turn generates self-knowledge. This framework suggests a hierarchical relationship among these interrelated concepts of self-understanding. The following definition was put forward.

*Self-awareness consists of a range of components, which can be developed through focus, evaluation and feedback, and provides an individual with an awareness of their internal state (emotions, cognitions, physiological responses), that drives their behaviours (beliefs, values and motivations) and an awareness of how this impacts and influences others (Carden et al., 2022, p. 164).*

Incorporating both inter and intrapersonal elements, this definition was utilised for the purpose of this study.

A fundamental principle in both philosophical and psychological discourse suggests that personal authenticity is conducive to mental health and overall well-being. However, empirical research indicates a potential bias in self-reported measures of authenticity. These self-assessments appear to be frequently influenced by socially desirable or positively viewed behaviours, potentially compromising the validity of such reports (Rivera et al., 2019). This is reflected in the meta themes suggested by Carden et al. (2022), who note that values have an intrapersonal focus which is interwoven with internal mental states, physiological responses, motivations and personality traits expressed as cognition / thoughts, feelings, emotions and actions. The true self is intimately connected to one's immediate experiential awareness and the continuous flow of conscious thought. Examining how individuals interact with their self-perceptions can offer valuable insights into their overall well-being (Christy et al., 2016; Ibarra, 2015; Schmader & Sedikides, 2018).

Mindfulness is foundational to the inner leadership qualities that open into self-awareness, intrapersonal skills and emotional intelligence (Furtner et al., 2018). Having origins within

Buddhist philosophy, mindfulness establishes the fundamental precepts of numerous meditative traditions. Within the Western vernacular, the term has countless reference points as it is widely bandied about in varying contexts (Khusid & Vythilingam, 2016). Professor Jon Kabat-Zinn, deemed as delivering mindfulness to medicine and western society, concentrated his research on the mind/body interface for healing, understanding how the brain processes emotions and the effects on the immune system. Kabat-Zinn (2003, p. 145) defines mindfulness as ‘the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.’ Drifting on habitual thought impulses triggers unaware automatic stress responses manifesting as anxiety, anger, chronic pain, depression, fatigue and confusion.

Meditation can serve as a buffer against this psychological distress, facilitating self-compassion and empathy (Cain et al., 2024; Im et al., 2021; Travis et al., 2018). By reducing deep cognition of conceptual processing of the past and future, awareness states are altered. The body's overall state of wellbeing undergoes a comprehensive transformation through a series of physiological changes. These adjustments encompass a decrease in heart and breathing rates, along with a reduction in cortisol levels and perceived stress effects. The endocrine system coordinates these changes, primarily involving the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis, the hypothalamic–pituitary–thyroid axis, and the renin–angiotensin–aldosterone system. This transformation also impacts energy balance in the body, lowers blood pressure, and enhances immune system function. Together, these interconnected changes contribute to a significant improvement in the body's overall state of wellness, creating a holistic shift towards better health and reduced stress (Alhawatmeh et al., 2022; Pascoe et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2024; Tseng, 2022).

Leadership development programs (LDPs) focusing on emotional and psychological connection with employees for emerging and established leaders were initially somewhat unknown in relation to organisational performance (Subramony et al., 2018). A systematic review of 284 articles by Tenschert et al. (2024) showed that training in self-leadership competencies (mindfulness) improved job performance, satisfaction and positive attitudes, allowing leaders to better organise and motivate their teams. Mindfulness training was strongly linked to stress reduction, self-regulation, better sleep, reduced burnout, improvement of job performance, emotional regulation and increased ability to establish positive relationships with employees.

Within the meditation suite, wide-ranging attentional training techniques can shift levels of consciousness, altering states of self-awareness. Laukkonen and Slagter (2021) suggest that a mind that is restricted within habitual modes of thinking and feeling, is not responsive to situational changes and can be maladaptive. Understanding that the brain through plasticity is a predictive organ, meditation aims at deconstructing the mind from within to allow new experiences, rather than subjecting oneself to externally acquired mental habits. These increasing levels of awareness lead to lasting psychological insights, clarity, joy and compassion and decreased hyperactivity and inattention (Gabriely et al., 2020; Giommi et al., 2023; Timmermann et al., 2023; Woods et al., 2023).

Awareness of self, enhanced by mindfulness, has been shown by research to have a beneficial impact on leader development. Relational aspects concerning ethical insights, reduction of emotional contagion, trust, ability to cope with external complexity, listening, access to cognitive tools, prosocial behaviours, aiding effective decision-making, connection,

collaboration, and insightful conflict management have all been attributed to mindfulness practice (Berry & Brown, 2017; Good et al., 2016; Roche et al., 2020; Vu & Nguyen, 2022).

Mindfulness practice promotes nine prefrontal functions: bodily regulation, attunement, emotional balance, fear modulation, flexibility of response, insight, empathy, morality, and intuition (Siegel, 2010). Stimulating growth maintains the functioning of integrative prefrontal circuitry also allowing engagement to be more prevalent rather than being governed by the primary process (Lazar et al., 2005). By detaching from past or future events, pain anticipation from fear is reduced. Anticipatory process may be triggered normally however the impact is reduced (Taylor et al., 2018).

## Wellbeing

Triandis (2007) notes that specific cultural features established through adaptive interactions between the environment and ourselves transmit generationally over time. Today, unlike ever before, we face information overload and continual, incessant messaging. Messages specifying who we are, what we like, how we feel and what we do come from family, friends, work colleagues, bosses, doctors, government etc. This propels a cacophony of epistemological revelations to the detriment of becoming self-aware and recognising how these cultural influences shape perceptions and actions. In this living maelstrom of complexities, self-awareness becomes difficult and perceived wellbeing remains at arm's length as leaders emerge into their roles while trying to understand their value structures. This context is important to provide an understanding of the central themes that later emerge.

Modernity thrived on the ability to progress as flawed constructs were remade, offering the promise of a better brighter future. As efforts to reconstruct institutions fell short of creating a dynamic and effective system capable of meeting humanity's evolving needs, combined with

accelerated rates of change, the fundamental character of contemporary organizations underwent a transformation. The bedrock of organisational stability has morphed into unreliable, uncertain instruments of change relentlessly in pursuit of efficiency and economic gains. Organisations that used to embed workers in patterns and routines have valued the loosening of rules and flexibility. The result has been more uncertainty, the acceleration of change and the excision of values making relationships fluid, insecure and unstable whilst self-identity becomes fragmented (Izak, 2014; Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2014).

Increasing disconnection and alienation are building on current volatility and instability. Bernard Steigler was a visionary French philosopher who discussed the digital age as the defining feature of the instability of humanity. His concern centred on the global circulation of mass-produced “temporal objects” that attract our attention through mediums such as television programs, popular music, movies, video clips, etc. He believed the 1990’s was the turning point for the mass synchronisation of consciousness and memory whereby the standardisation of experience on a significant scale removed subjective identity, leading to the extinction of individual participation and creativity. The widespread adoption of mass culture led to a gradual erosion of individuality. Technological devices, particularly those with screens, contributed significantly to the dissolution of personal identity. This shift posed a potential threat to people's intellectual and emotional capabilities. Consciousness is seen, in this view, to shift from the individual self through hyper synchronisation to the collective, which essentially is a ‘nobody’ as self-consciousness can only be singular (Stiegler & Roussow, 2020).

Embedded within Steigler’s concerns about homogenised consciousness in this hyper-industrialised era and the unfathomable amount of accessible information, lies the changing

nature of disconnection. Friendships and paying power bills are now managed through identical machinic processes and movements, homogenising interactions that were once separate areas of experience. As Crary (2013, p. 59) notes “Real-life activities that do not have an online correlate, begin to atrophy, or cease to be relevant”. Online interactions now easily surpass physical human connections as society at large acquiesces to technocracy (Bauman, 2013; Crary, 2013). This holds relevance when contextualising this thesis within the current milieu.

If this thesis has any significance, learnings must be seen against the backdrop of ever-invasive internet connectivity. This is becoming a merciless device of unkindness, addiction, connected aloneness, false hopes, neurosis, indebtedness, wasted life, the deterioration of memory and societal crumbling (Crary, 2022). Benefits can be seen as irrelevant against these detrimental and irreversible impacts. The influential minds of nineteenth-century economists expected economic growth to continue until human needs were met, which would then manifest as a stable economy continuing year after year. This preordained finishing line has now been crossed by obsessive and compulsive modernisation and consumerism fuelled by digitised appetites (Bauman, 2013).

According to some ideologues (e.g. Khatchatourov et al. (2019) this transhumanistic state supposedly sets the scene for humanity to free itself from limitations by increasing capability. Technoscientific advances that were supposed to support social progress have met a dominating tendency to favour technology that is devoid of any extrinsic purpose, as humanity is reduced to digital traces of information. There is now a need to discern what values need to be preserved in this age of proliferating algorithmic intelligence. This collective way of life that most people did not choose is now dominated by techno-discourses that can smother our

critical questioning when terms like “search engines”, “natural language”, “open data” and “cloud” suggest we have open access to absolutely anything (Khatchatourov et al., 2019). Unrestricted and ready to give us comfort, security and wellbeing, these opportunities paradoxically and emotionally enslave us within complex technical environments. Leaders are emerging into a digital environment they are not fully aware of yet are tasked with maintaining a self-aware state to aid decision-making with discernment.

Organisations facing a lingering hangover from 100 years of Fredrick Taylors “Principles of Scientific Management” theories (Taylor, 1919) still grapple with this paradigm for the improvement of systems, processes and profitability. “Taylorism” became the battle cry for commercial completeness as labour ideologies turned workers into machines (Derksen, 2014). This dehumanisation of labour excluded the whole self from work and forced each worker to show up as an automaton. As Tourish (2019) notes, Taylor condensed workers to the status of mechanical body parts whose emotional and social needs could be disregarded. This created a separation from the self with minimal focus on values, beliefs, initiatives, emotions and locus of control, which in turn propagates into stress and psychological struggle (Besson, 2000; Smith & Sainfort, 1989).

Organisations continue to grapple to remedy employee wellbeing as groupthink continues to unwittingly promulgate the status quo whilst believing change is happening. Due to this validation by consensus, leading specialists and organisational scientists are guided by a peculiar psychosocial undercurrent. This dynamic centres around cutting-edge insights being created to resolve issues of the emerging consensus, whilst in parallel the calibration of these insights is based upon consensus validation (Kastrup, 2014).

The search for personal health has become a moral responsibility, a quest in the endless pursuit of self-fulfilment. The wellness vernacular is instilling an ideology in which being healthy is essential, with the converse notion of the unhealthy being demonised as deviance for those not aspiring to replicate glossy imagery or the ability to access at will the mental toolbox. At its extreme, individuals can be seen as a direct threat to contemporary society for not cultivating their wellbeing (Cederström & Spicer, 2015). This captures part of the essence of capitalism whereby individuals must be kept suitably discontented so that they continue to seek change, but not so dissatisfied that they reject it outright. Under an organisational lens, healthy people are seen as productive therefore wellbeing becomes commodified into policy. As Davies (2011) believes, the notion of 'wellbeing' enables the mind and body to be assessed as an economic resource to be cultivated within the organisation. However, the essence of capitalism necessitates that individuals experience only limited satisfaction through their labour and consumption patterns. Too much fulfilment would be a satisfaction of desire, a notion abominable to economic systems relying on perpetual desire.

### Cyber wellness

Attentional harvesting of the mind is flourishing as industries manufacture consumption patterns so that new products that consumers did not know they needed are desired. An example is the focus on the unobtainable perfect health state, which multibillion-dollar pharmaceutical industries have focused on. Dumit (2012) notes the paradigm of 'inherent health' has been replaced by 'inherent illnesses.' Illness used to be a passing disruption to our healthy self but now our current state is presented as one of vulnerability and precariousness, ensuring that a constant state of vigilance is required. We have become conditioned to view any symptom as the start of a journey towards a disorder where intervention is required. Risk factors incite fear, ensure a compliance mentality towards treatment and dramatize the risk of

discontinuing treatment. Life is fused in pharmaceutical and self-improvement logic to create a state of 'dependent normality'.

Building upon the technological environment that envelops society, wellbeing by technology is at the forefront. Our health and wellbeing can now be explored through self-tracking devices such as watches and rings connected to devices and social media to monitor, measure and represent the human body. Biometric data can be collected to monitor ourselves and administer health prevention interventions. Wellbeing is recorded in numbers measuring blood glucose, body temperature, breathing rate, blood chemistry, body weight, blood pressure, heart resonance, heart rate, sleep patterns, cardiac output and brain activity to enable the emergence of the 'quantified self' and the techno-utopian vision of the flawless body (Lupton, 2013). The body is seen as the ultimate interface problem whereby feedback, only obtainable and made sense of through the internet, provides the desired self-mastery.

The absurdity is highlighted by Bearne (2021) who reported how wristbands can now be utilised to tell an employer whether or not their workers are happy. Remote employees are equipped with '*mood beam*' wristbands, allowing them to indicate their emotional state through colour-coded buttons: yellow for happiness and blue for sadness. This technology provides managers with a dashboard to monitor their staff's emotional well-being and implement targeted human resource initiatives to enhance it. The '*mood beam*' system also has the capability to integrate with healthcare plans. This development exemplifies how heightened workplace connectivity can blur the lines between professional and personal life, potentially facilitating explicit or implicit surveillance practice (Sewell et al., 2012). As Stiegler and Roussow (2020) note, these digital tools are not simply used as external objects, rather they enter and pharmacologically change us like a medicinal drug. Appropriately dosed they enable

new self-relationships and forms of sociality which can have desirous, positive effects however overdosing leads to toxicity. This notion of ‘digital pharmacology’ transcends its technological foundations. As Heidenreich (2022) notes, the usage of these digital tools restructures our brains and thoughts, and unlike other medicinal drugs, whereby dosing is voluntary or administered by professionals, digital tools enter the body because jobs require it.

These approaches to self-quantification of wellbeing are an added layer to the leader emergence/wellbeing paradigm confronting leaders with the impossibility of separating digital technology from everyday life. Seen as a desire for self-liberation rather than an imposition, self-monitoring becomes an extra anxiety booster with the omnipresent responsibility for self-analysis and decision-making. Anxiety and guilt arise if metrics do not adhere to expectations, leading to rumination to explore ‘why’ in order to modify behaviour to meet a future state. Biometric identification risks reducing our identity to something objective, which then produces new ways of being with oneself and others, new world views and new social interactionary norms. With multiple ways to exist, the reality is living in a time of fragmenting and multiple identities generating conflicting emotional states (Khatchatourov et al., 2019). The cultural ramifications of digitisation are unsettling. Whilst the proliferation of information technology within organisations has led to phenomenal gains in performance and efficiency, there is also the advent of the coined term *technostress* (Tarafdar et al., 2019). Extended use of technology leads to fatigue, inability to concentrate, frustration, loss of motivation, dissatisfaction at work, reduced productivity and burnout (Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008). This growth of the internet complex (Crary, 2022) and associated tools has also increased regimentation and exploitation, where these touted benefits are rendered irrelevant by injurious impacts, such as loneliness, addiction, trauma, false hopes, psychosis, memory corrosion and a sense of a squandered life.

The coalescing of technology within organisational roles presents an ever-increasing erosion of emerging leaders' ability to think critically. Through an algorithmic standardisation of culture, emerging leaders are suffused with a uniform logic shaping the content of what they see and interact with, based on what they already think. Unchecked, this homogeneity with cookie-cutter like precision will shape leaders as they emerge.

With the advent of the digitised world, people are becoming more trapped within blind spots. Blind spots form as new modes of digitisation, whilst supporting the illusion of enablement, create instead a debilitating unintelligibility, undermining what is focused on. A numbing cacophony of data does not diminish these blind spots. The machines are becoming part of the intuitive self as we lean on them for agency, influence and empowerment, however the more we lean, the more compromised and helpless we become. Gunter Anders (1902-1992), a prescient Austrian philosopher, addressed the individual and social consequences of modern technology and exposed its implications. Muller (2016) notes the discrepancy that Anders explains is that although machines empower us as individuals, "99 per cent" of us who do not create these machines and technological infrastructures are excluded from decisions around how the world is shaping us. The creation is of a world for us, but not with us. Anders implied that these futuristic technologies that offer to make us more efficient and better, instead load us with self-deprecation and self-humiliation. He implies that we perceive ourselves as flawed machines in constant need of updates and perpetual mending.

As post-activist advocate Akomolafe and Benavides (2020) note, these are urgent times and we need to slow down. The existence of the 24-hour 7 days a week life, as Crary (2013) notes, has us becoming an algorithmic byproduct. Capitalism never stops and our existence within

this framework is unrelenting with incessant happenings. At any moment we can become connected as we live in a data collection machine that never stops, we can even be tracked and connected in an unconscious state as smart technologies track our sleeping patterns. Work and play increasingly use the same online equipment and boundaries become eroded along with time for rest, recuperation and regeneration.

### Today's organisational world

The 2024 Gallup State of the Workplace report (Gallup, 2024) reinforces Steigler's propositions as it reports that stress amongst employees reached its highest levels since the Gallup surveys began. It claims that overall employee wellbeing has declined and one in five employees experience loneliness daily. Of note is that, although overall levels of engagement are reported to have reduced, fifty percent of employees, when engaged, are thriving in overall life. In this context, the notion of 'belonging' appears increasingly important as people want to belong to the organisation, family, friends, culture and place.

The key area to focus on is those in leadership positions. When leaders are engaged, it is more likely that employees will also be engaged. However, leaders are experiencing higher levels of negative emotions, one in four feels burnt out, leaders are more likely to leave their current role and hybrid and remote working present challenges for issue resolution (Gallup, 2024). Further findings from the Gallup report show that high-performing organisations prioritise manager hiring and development, integrating engagement into every stage of the employee and management life cycle and emphasising wellbeing at work and in life (Gallup, 2024). The findings afford insights into managers' state of being – the reality of being a leader. Corporations have transformed economic development over the past two hundred years. Life expectancy has doubled, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty has declined and

access to basic education and improved drinking water has increased (Roser, 2024). Businesses are evolving to incorporate environmental and social characteristics as customers, employees, suppliers, communities, and stakeholders place an elevated focus on these areas of responsibility. Organisational leaders must grapple with all these concerns, yet these transformations have not been matched by elevated wellbeing of individuals at work.

Social upheaval combined with geopolitical tensions are exposing cracks in the beliefs and values of what constitutes a just society (Mohrman & Bartunek, 2023). Nature, politics and the global economy are interconnected and driving planetary change. Yin and yang have meant that economic development has perpetuated unease and dis-ease at all levels. Child labour exploitation, chronic diseases from long-term exposure to toxic chemicals, air pollution, water contamination, (Rockström & Klum, 2015) inequalities in wealth and health, mental health crises and more create a burden (consciously or unconsciously) on how leaders now emerge. As Noonan (2024) emphasises, the strong weighting placed on incessant economic growth and the diversions used to achieve it through advertising, media and government channels are fundamentally robust and successful. However, the canary in the coal mine of worsening psychological distress amongst workers and others whilst recognised, is largely ignored. The absence of wellbeing in the workforce is part of a larger picture. It is a worldwide phenomenon as research continually shows that stress and disengagement remain high. Loneliness, disconnection and separation are coalescing year on year and rippling out into the family, workplace, community and society to a global level. The economic transformation is occurring as multiple forces operate to highlight wellbeing in the lexicon of our time.

## Chapter 2: Methods and Methodology

*Life is lived forward and understood backward.*

Kierkegaard in Segal (2017, p. 471)

### Ethics

Ethical approval for this research was assessed according to Massey University guidelines via a Low-Risk Notification and confirmed 3rd August 2023 (4000027852 reference number). It was deemed low risk as all participants were adults over forty years of age and were able to give informed consent, and the questions were not distressing or sensitive.

### Design

Qualitative data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews. I was seeking an understanding of central themes and open accounts of experiences therefore the semi-structured approach provided both a framework and the opportunity for free expression. Responses could be provided by interviewees in their own terms, thoughts and language (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Representations of language and knowledge are difficult to capture therefore the metaphor by Kvale (1996) of the interviewer as a traveller helped to encapsulate the whole experience, to bring the story home and allow each different interview to flow. This is opposed to the metaphor of the interviewer as a miner, probing for nuggets of essential meaning and transforming them into the purest state by seeking to quantify objective facts.

The interview schedule (Appendix A) had 8 key questions supported by probes to elicit expanded responses. Questions were initially derived from a wide range of literature, then refined and pilot-tested in a practice interview. The interview included definitions where

required for 'leadership' and 'values and beliefs' and gave a definition of 'self-awareness' incorporated within the question. Topics included in the interview schedule related to the participants' leadership journeys, what changes they experienced when becoming a leader, strengths and limitations as a leader, value shifts over time and their own perceptions of self-awareness during their leadership development.

## Recruitment

The aim was to recruit 6-10 leaders from senior levels in New Zealand corporations. An email with information about the study (Appendix B) was circulated to personal contacts, and on forwarded and interested participants made contact. Upon receiving an expression of interest, an email was sent with an information sheet (Appendix C) describing myself, the nature of the study and providing details around the time required, their obligations and rights and the ethics approval notification. Emails were exchanged, a designated time was agreed, and a meeting invite through Microsoft Teams was sent out. I initially lined up three participants in quick succession from the initial recruiting process and did not recruit again actively until I had completed these interviews. After the next recruitment drive, three more participants responded quickly and a fourth responded from the first tranche explaining that she had been away and would like to be involved, After the seventh interview, it was agreed with my supervisor that I had traversed the spectrum of insights offered and we both agreed I had sufficient data, rich in substance to generate the analysis.

## Interviews

All interviews took place between August to November 2023. They were scheduled in advance through Microsoft Teams. The target interview time was between 30 to 40 minutes in length therefore I made a calendar booking for one hour to allow for preamble and slippage. Using

the question sheet (Appendix A) as a guide, I introduced again the content and then began the recording once participants were comfortable with the format. Participants were given the opportunity to refuse any questions where they might feel uncomfortable and to stop the recording at any time. This did not occur for any of the interviews. I ensured the interviewees were aware that I was recording the interview which was simultaneously transcribed through Microsoft Teams. All responses were anonymised against pseudonyms and once the transcripts had been edited for accuracy against the recordings, all recordings were deleted. The final transcripts used in the analysis were emailed to each participant for checking and correction; no corrections were required.

## Participants

Five male and two female participants were interviewed. All participants had worked professionally for a minimum of 25 years experiencing leadership emergence and growth at varying stages of their corporate life. Some had lived overseas for a period of time but at the time of the interview, all were living in New Zealand. The current titles the participants held within New Zealand companies included Directors, Chairperson, CEO's and members of senior leadership teams.

## Holding reflexivity

Qualitative research depends on subjectivity as this is how the exploration is shaped, with the potential for bias intertwined with all phases of qualitative research (Rees et al., 2020). Olmos-Vega et al. (2023), realising the murkiness that exists within approaches to and definitions of reflexivity, searched qualitative methodological publications that focused directly on reflexivity. After inductively analysing the material to detect similarities, they synthesised their results to develop the ensuing definition.

*Reflexivity is a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023, p. 242).*

Throughout the duration of this thesis, I have been aware of my positioning in relation to the research. I am a corporate leader and have experienced emergence into leadership roles, therefore I could identify with the participants' accounts of their journeys. By way of introducing myself to the participants I focused on my studies rather than my own leadership journey. I briefly described a couple of roles I had held but only at a superficial level. I wanted the participants to feel open and comfortable within the context of our discussion and hopefully this openness aided in developing a non-judgemental space. This may have positioned me as an ally to the discovery process, as we were embarking on the interviews with the shared knowledge that I could comprehend the gist of where they were coming from. I understood their corporate speak and with an overt interest in meditation and well-being I hoped to be a reasonable witness to their inner exploration. As Gallais (2008) observes, being a member of the 'in-group' should be embraced for the richness of insights it offers.

## **Analytic approach and procedure**

Thematic analysis was utilised for the analytic approach in the version developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) which has subsequently been refined over time (Braun & Clarke, 2021). It offers a robust, systematic framework for coding qualitative data to then apply the coding to recognising patterns throughout the dataset. The patterns and interpretations are left for the researcher to determine. A rich understanding of the data is indicative of thematic analysis, which allows for surface-level and more in-depth interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2014).

All transcripts were uploaded into qualitative research software Nvivo to enable ease of coding. The original coding was bland and quite rigid when building comfort with the technology and then building familiarity with the transcripts. The early codes were nondescript and honoured only the literal words rather than the meaning. When coding, meaning can be explored across a continuum from the semantic (surface, obvious, overt) to the latent (implicit, underlying, 'hidden') (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The progression in the coding and theme development is not just to find evidence for pre-conceptualised themes. As Braun and Clarke (2006) note, some of the worst examples of thematic analysis have simply used the questions asked to participants as "themes" identified in the analysis where in fact no analysis has taken place. Dwelling with data, reflecting, mulling, searching, re-reading and allowing time and space become the essence for the non-obvious and unanticipated themes to emerge. The data becomes entangled within day-to-day happenings, the podcast listened to, the read book, and the mundane or sacred conversations taking place. There is no container the data is confined within as it becomes an organic, emerging, enriched swash of lived phenomenology.

Immediately after the interviews, I noted down reflective comments as to my interpretation of the interview, how it flowed, where the participants struggled at times to answer a question, where a theme was explored under the participants own volition without prompting and participants' insights that were delivered. These notes were referred to only on a limited basis as the themes that subsequently arose during analysis minimally intersected my held past views.

After being immersed completely in the data the coding and general themes emerged. The analysis phase revealed pivotal progression points culminating in a chronologic progression as

richer understandings developed. However, it wasn't until the recognition of the metaphor of an alchemic bridge arose that it enabled the positioning and depth of themes to emerge. The thematic analysis provided a roadmap with destinations to be investigated to fully understand the relevance of the data and resulting insights. The commonalities across participants were significant and without the emergent metaphors, the findings would have languished in the mundanity of generalisations. The refining of the themes with this perspective captured nuances and challenges within the interviews. Weaving the analytic narrative into coherency was fraught with challenges, self-doubt and difficulty as the structure allowed for multiple overlapping of ideas. The key themes of self-awareness, leader emergence, values and wellbeing are well-explored topics and determining which research was pertinent was challenging.

## Chapter 3: Analysis and discussion

Greek Stoic Philosopher Epictetus: *Men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of them* (Cavanna et al., 2023, p. 1864).

This chapter will present the findings of the thematic analysis, integrated with the discussion of relevant literature, in four sections. The first section explores the formative experiences that shaped their development as leaders. This is followed by discussion of impediments to leadership they encountered. Described as stagnating barriers, these were obstacles to progress and development threatening to potentially derail their leadership trajectories. As all participants were current leaders with high levels of role responsibility, they were clearly able to overcome these barriers, and the third section explored the ‘alchemic bridge’ of self-awareness that helped them move through these barriers and obstacles. The fourth section reports the other main theme that was identified in the analysis, that of the transformational interventions that participants described as helping them grow and develop further as leaders.

### Leadership origin stories

The forming and expressing of self-identity come through stories of self-constructed narratives to enable communication of who we are (Pentland, 1999). As Richardson (2008) notes, origin stories are the true source, enabling people to gain an understanding of how their reality comes into existence with beginnings being one of the most significant focuses in narrative theory. The criticality of this notion within leadership emergence is all-encompassing as meaning and purpose are created with these stories.

Leadership involves social influence at varying stages of life and to give wholeness to the progression of leadership emergence, participants provided their stories, recounting their earliest leader memories. Their first perceptions of their leadership journeys will be summarised to enable coherence with later leadership and self-awareness insights. Each participant had a unique entry point into the leadership paradigm and with reflection, identified certain enabling points that spurred them into future leadership roles. Early leadership experiences, whereby cognitive and social readiness attributes are manifested, can progress the development of determination, self-control, social ideals, a grasp of the abstract and awareness of personalities (Avolio & Vogelgesang, 2012).

Informal leadership roles can manifest whereby a lack of directional guidance can envelop an individual and a response is required to move in a direction that can be known or unknown to the individual assuming this quasi-positional role (Walumbwa et al., 2008). In the case of Hannah who experienced life-altering circumstances at ages 8 and 9, she took on the role of family caregiver.

*I was probably about 8 or 9 and Mum and Dad parted. Dad moved away and he used to be, I would say, he was the Rangatira in our family, our leader and he organised most things. And when he left, it was left to Mum who actually ended up having a breakdown. With severe depression, she stepped out of her leadership role, and I think I assumed my first sort of leadership role then, probably as a 9-year-old for my younger sister and for Mum (Hannah).*

At a young age Hannah turned fear and insecurities into developing trust in herself. Development of trust is the determinate of more conscious awareness of thoughts and feelings and an understanding that there is purpose and meaning in what we do (Looman, 2003).

*Those are probably my earliest memories of when it was sort of a no choice thing, and I felt it was a complex combination of feeling obligated (Hannah).*

Hannah inadvertently focused her self-belief into self-leadership by influencing herself to achieve goals. Using cues from her social environment to construct meaning, her context heightened the salience of specific information for her, increasing relevancy and developing her attitude based on the available social knowledge. As Bracht et al. (2021) notes, the social sources of information in attitude formation are an individual's perception of the social context as it is constructed within daily interactions. As Walumbwa et al. (2008) points out, leader self-awareness is developed through how one makes meaning of the world and subsequently, how this progression influences the way one views oneself over time, for example, through a growing awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses and influence on others. Hannah goes on to describe how this influential period formed leadership traits and perhaps the desire to continue to take on leadership roles.

*So, knowing I had to step into that and from there just got on with it and did it, it was probably developing that belief that helped me be okay, to put my hands out for future leadership roles as they evolved (Hannah).*

Whilst anxiety can be paralysing, it is also a central tenet of becoming a leader through occupying unfamiliar roles. Anxiety is a natural byproduct of interacting and acting in the world (Segal, 2017). Within Lily's leader emergence on the high school sports teams, the notion of taking on responsibility within a controlled setting at a young age formed a pivotal juncture for future leadership responsibilities. As Sartre (1948) notes, no one is born a hero or

coward but transmutes through the actions they perform. This transition from school leadership forged fundamental traits into an organisational setting.

*I guess I've always ended up in leadership roles even if I look back at school, I was the captain of sports teams and head girl of my high school. So, I don't know if there was something about the way that I approached things that meant that those were opportunities that kind of came my way and kind of evolved through my work career (Lily).*

In contrast, Oscar when asked to recall his early leadership transitional memories framed the answer around being a supporter of those with a great vision.

*I often think of myself as I suppose a leader in some ways and in other ways, I'm a good follower. You know I like to support people who I think have got a great vision. And so, I've always seen myself really as more of a supporter rather than, you know, a trailblazing leader (Oscar).*

This self-realisation and personal self-fulfilment concept may have unshackled the ego from gratification associated with positions of power. With increasing self-awareness, the ego becomes the conduit to continued self-realisation (Dare, 2020; O'Brien & Bentley, 2021). Authentic meaning in work was enabled whereby Oscar grew his leadership journey through a more inner spiritual connection with himself.

Nicolas attributed an early mentor to his leadership progression upon leaving high school.

*When I left school, I went into the textile industry as an apprentice and, you know, being reasonably young, I ended up working in quite a robust area and the foreman at the time collared me and gave me some life lessons particularly around leadership and then the nature of that carried me in quite good stead (Nicolas).*

Leadership development can be significantly facilitated through mentorship which serves as a powerful mechanism for the gradual acquisition of advanced leadership expertise and competencies (Grocutt et al., 2022). A key element is knowing that relationships do not occur in a vacuum. Individuals are embedded in differing social networks influencing how bonds are formed and developed over time. The foreman engaged with Nicolas not only for positive outcomes for his business but also for positive relational aspects. This follows the social exchange norm and rules of giving benefits with the expectation of receiving benefits in return, as well as communal norms of giving benefits without expecting anything in return (Janssen et al., 2016). Through this interface, Nicolas developed trust in himself and became acquainted with the underlying essence of leadership. Trust comes from the letting go of fear and becoming more conscious of thoughts and feelings. This became extremely relevant by Nicolas claiming:

*My “leadership” style is very high EQ. I’m very principled, orientated. I’ve had a strong value set, so I’ve had a strong moral compass in the sense of what’s right for me and how I like to work (Nicolas).*

Recognising the interconnectivity of all things is the hallmark of trust, along with recognising that there is purpose and meaning in everything we do. This releases limitations that prevent growth for self and others. This genesis of Nicolas’s social character of course cannot be related

purely to the early mentor intervention as many sociological and ideological factors continue to interact (Fromm, 1955; Looman, 2003).

Lachlan followed a similar trajectory to Nicolas, whereby the influence of his parents and grandparents, deeply steeped in values, set the basis for his emergence.

*So, if you go right back, I think it was more guidance from my grandfather that started my leadership and a very strong leadership direction from my father and mother who set very clear values (Lachlan).*

Implicit leadership theories, or ideal instances of leadership, occurred when Lachlan observed traits from stimulus individuals (parents, grandparents) who acted as representations of certain archetypal leadership traits. These were instilled in him and subsequently, when he encountered situations that resonated with these traits, his internalized leadership framework was triggered. Once activated, this schema facilitated his selective recognition, processing, and recall of information that aligned with his leadership construct. Parental figures play a crucial role in moulding leadership tendencies, as they offer children their foundational encounters with leadership dynamics (Keller, 1999) with Stark (1992) claiming that home is one of the most important sources of on-the-job training.

Ethan's leadership journey began in a non-managerial or non-leadership position, observing how leaders develop the team and protocols they had in place.

*I began my career with (Company) in a non-leadership position or non-managerial positions.*

*I was reporting to managers who were very skilled in their role in marketing and trade*

*marketing, but also, you know, quite good leaders, good people who are good at building a team, people who were good at managing me. So, I guess my first experience of leadership in the workplace led to understanding how my managers were getting the best out of me and my colleagues (Ethan).*

Experience is essential to individual learning, however in the context of leader emergence, observing is a relational phenomenon whereby watching the interplays of social situations provides awareness and insight. Early formative leadership learning as a follower can embed understanding of a self-styled leadership philosophy (Kempster & Parry, 2014). How one observes leadership role models changes over time as natural affinities arise with more aligned influencers within the organisation. With experience, Ethan would have become more aware of competent and effective leadership styles that gave him a sense of belonging, connectedness and achievement.

Dylan's leadership began by crafting a social identity within the North American university context of fraternities. Dylan increasingly took on responsibilities that were intertwined with legal obligations and embodied norms and values of the group he identified and had grown up with. Becoming the fraternity President, he became responsible for the welfare of his group.

*You're legally responsible for everybody that's there. So when we have parties of 100 people or whatever, the President is the one that's responsible. When the police show up or noise control or the university police, you're the one that's on the hook (Dylan).*

Leadership emerged within these social interactions as his influence grew within his network of friendships. This aligns with social identity theory in which leadership emerges where there

is an apparent similarity of the leader to the group prototype. As van Knippenberg (2023) notes, groups tend to have a shared reality of common norms, values and aspirations, and when leaders share these, then followers are more open to the leaders' influence. This in turn raises the leaders' ability to influence the followers' attitudes and behaviours. Dylan's leadership was heavily reliant on motivating others towards collective goals for the benefit of the group. Skills developed through hands on-experience and situational trial and error were expressed by Dylan when managing reluctant followers:

*Probably didn't do it as well, but when you first kind of learn (about) trying to manage other people who don't want to be managed. You're having to get people to behave on the drinking and understanding the rules (Dylan).*

Elements of inspirational motivation were developed early when requiring fraternity members to set aside their self-interest for the greater good of the group and community.

*Getting people to get up on Saturday morning to do community clean ups and things like that (Dylan).*

This early stage of leadership progressed for Dylan by expanding his domain of influence to becoming the President of the Council, having oversight of all fraternities. Expansion of leadership grew from representing the interests of his own fraternity to advancing the interests of the collective and being able to represent shared group identities with increasing levels of associated complexity. Dylan's emergence as a leader showed a transition from hands-on leadership of friends to more complex multi-stakeholder leadership roles.

Intelligence, emotionality, memory and personality are psychological characteristics identified as relevant to leadership. Debates about whether these traits are hereditary or environmentally contextualised for emergence will continue to shape psychological theory (Amoretti, 2022). Lynn (2016) claimed that of an individual's intelligence, 55-60% is genetically based. Tellegen et al. (2013) had the proportion of personality (character, temperament) that is inherited as between 39-58% genetically based. Therefore, the propensity for each individual to be a leader is likely to vary, with the environment shaping and providing the context that allows or inhibits emergence. The identification and recognition of leader potential through demonstratable traits needs to be considered in relation to context.

Participants' subjective construal's of their early leadership experiences were wide-ranging. The formative emergence period leading to formal leadership roles meant that they all came into the transition point with wide-ranging skill sets, beliefs and views on how they as a leader should lead. Each encountered barriers that created limitations, anxieties and concerns, and these are the focus of the next section.

## Stagnating Barriers

Organisational leadership is an unstable social convention, morphing in form, function, and effect over time in response to changing values, norms, and circumstances (Segal, 2017). All participants encountered varying encumbrances emerging into effective leadership, referred to here as stagnating barriers. Stagnation implies a lack of progress or fresh ideas/opportunities that impede effective advancement. These barriers reduce opportunities, hinder creative thinking, plateau skill development, unhinge relationships and lead to decreased levels of motivation and enthusiasm. Five sub-themes within these stagnating barriers emerged: fear,

not belonging, blind spots, lack of self-esteem, value misalignment and separation from self. These will now be explored.

## Fear

Fear was an early driver for Hannah in her leadership progression which led to varying psychological and sociological crippling states.

*So, it's interesting that I'd put myself into leadership roles and I'd still say it was fearful earlier in life. Like you know, I did have a fear of failure, or they were two things when I unpack it, fear of failure and fear of reputational damage. And so, what was interesting is, I put my hands up for these leadership roles, but then there would be a point where I'd pull back. And I would almost sabotage my next opportunity or sabotage opportunities to put myself out there more (Hannah).*

Self-perception is selective, partial and biased (Vazire & Carlson, 2010), largely stemming from nonconscious processes (Daniel, 2017). Dispositions and implicit motives coupled with intrapersonal and situational / environmental processes that people are not aware of can precipitate action. Vazire and Carlson (2010) note that people are not completely clueless about their own behaviour, however people are far from perfect. When uncertainty about action arises, and the cause seems foreign, the possibility always exists that this characteristic was caused unconsciously by an aspect of their psychological makeup (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2019). If a significant disconnect continues to exist and people do not have insight into recognising these emotional underpinnings, the continuance of fear, in this case for Hannah, will be a lead determinant of her wellbeing, reality interpretation and subsequent actions within her leadership positioning.

Lachlan reported the fear of failing due to having no academic qualifications and the perceptions that others may have regarding this.

*I operated a lot from fear and fear of failure because of my lack of academic achievement  
(Lachlan).*

Leaders who lack formal education can bring diverse experiences and innovative solutions fostering creativity and out-of-the-box thinking. However, Lachlan trapped himself within the imposter phenomenon characterised by a mindset of inadequacy and a fear of being seen as a fraud despite previous accomplishments. The impact this can have on personal performance can be acute as decision-making, self-efficacy and the innovative work behaviour that secured his progression are now tempered by self-doubt. This can lead to inhibited organisational growth, diminished creativity and reduced agility (Bowen, 2023).

Leaders promoted from within who find themselves leading their colleagues can lose the notion of inclusive belonging that they had previously formed. Dylan noted this aspect as his sharpest wake-up call to leadership.

*I think the hardest, bluntest one is because (they are) your friends and your buddies and then all of a sudden you are telling them what they can do, and they can't do. And people who were really good friends, automatically start treating you bit differently. You can see that conversation when you come into the room just stop or die off. You become not part of the group, you're become separate from the group, which was hard and not something that I had expected and something that I struggled with for a while ... Realizing that when you're in a leadership role you're not part of the group anymore (Dylan).*

Conscious thinking has enabled humans to learn from past actions, consciously plan for the future, engage in self-reflection and provide self-views to guide actions. It has also enabled thoughts about what others may think of us and how we are perceived (Leary, 2004). However immediate experiences begin to disappear into the realms of self-relevant thought which can give rise to a self-generated torment of extreme self-preoccupation (Leary & Diebels, 2017). The primal urge to keep belonging, the fear of abandonment or being disapproved of, and the fear of punishment and reputational impairment all can result in a form of stuckness leading to a smaller, diminishing life.

Normal fear reactions play a role in averting danger but can give rise to panic and maladaptive avoidance in attempts to feel safe. When one is unaware of what is occurring and habitual thought patterns hijack cognitive interpretations, negatively biased information processing becomes likely. This has physical effects on the brainstem, spinal cord, peripheral sympathetic nerves and organ systems. Due to the unpleasant experiences of catastrophic thinking, acute panic, impending doom and emotional distress, avoidance actions are likely to take place (Jeffrey Greeson, 2009).

### Not belonging

Oscar was blazing a lonely path with his commitment to sustainability before it became more mainstream. A deeply ingrained passion and his drive for societal transformation was ahead of the curve and meant he did not have a sense of belonging to a community. Even though his sense of purpose was strong, the lack of community contributed to his isolation, causing stress. The stress was also founded on home responsibilities in supporting a family in tough times.

*There are a lot of people who don't see the necessity to transition and transform the way that we organize our economic activity or the way we organize our social structures, to align them with a sustainable development approach. So, in that sense, and particularly early on, it was a pretty lonely journey. So that was quite stressful, but it was also very rewarding when you did find those people who were committed to it. The challenge for me has always been making sure at the personal level we had enough ... bringing the bread home was my job. There was always quite a bit of tension there just to make sure that we had enough to get by (Oscar).*

Purpose-driven leaders exhibit high levels of commitment and can have magnetising qualities, attracting and motivating others. Aligning strategies and operations to champion a purpose can drive performance (Cnop, 2023) but can conversely cause misalignment within communities if perceived as being beyond the bounds of societal acceptance. The absence of a work community, crucial for mitigating stress, combined with the tension at home and these experiences aligns with findings from Fan et al. (2015) who show that job insecurity and home stress are related to elevated depression and anxiety symptoms.

### **Blind spots**

Blind spots are referred to as an unrecognised limitation in one's ability, whereby harming the self, others and the organisation itself is a real possibility. They are often identified in hindsight and, once identified, require a willingness to acknowledge and resolve them.

*I never felt I could ask for help ... I was really not good at asking for support or help or guidance. I felt I couldn't do that. And this is all subconscious. I only realized this a few years afterwards that I know that that wasn't the right thing. Which was stupid because that was not the way I managed other people. But I just hadn't realized I'd had that mindset and*

*that was a real big blind spot for me and something that was working against me because I wasn't getting my managers on board to help me to achieve what I wanted to achieve (Ethan).*

Some participants reported having become aware of their blind spots, but the more lacking in self-awareness people are, the greater the likelihood of being unable to expose and address these areas to the detriment of personal growth and team performance. Lacking emotional intelligence keeps the blinkers firmly on.

*I wasn't particularly self-aware. I lacked the subtlety of reading the room. I was absolutely blind to some of those things, and so I have worked very hard to build some EQ. I'm aware of the things I'm really good at. And I'm aware of the things that I'm not very good at. But we've all got the blind spots and mine can be that my passion completely overrides my sense of self (Nicolas).*

There appeared to be some consensus that blind spots are inherently challenging to recognise without external insight as they operate within the subconscious.

*Yeah, it's a good point because I still definitely have them. You know, I'd like to think that my awareness allows me to (expose them) but there's some where I've had to count on feedback from other people to really shine a light on them (Hannah).*

*They are really hard to spot on your own. I think, because they are kind of wired in (Oscar).*

Failures can be unpredictable, uncontrollable and encumbered by situational blindness which in effect blocks awareness. The most visible blind spot appeared to be leaders' lack of awareness of their impact on others. Leaders risk thinking they act in one way e.g. delegating authority, when in reality decisions are being made for others. Shaw (2016) notes that leaders' greatest strengths often have a shadow blind spot and even when the blind spot has been illuminated, habitual patterns will continue to guide the leader. However, a leader who can absorb and understand relevant information would be able to respond nimbly and thrive in different environments (Goleman, 2021).

### Lack of self-esteem

Self-esteem, the evaluative element of the self, delves into how we feel about ourselves, the ways in which we judge ourselves and the building blocks for negative or positive self-constructs. Trait-based self-esteem is how we generally regard ourselves most of the time, while situational self-esteem varies based on the perceptions of settings we encounter (Waller, 2020). Self-esteem is the self-rating of one's overall worthiness, the value we attribute to our self therefore it is perception-based and not reality determined (Baumeister et al., 2003; Donnellan et al., 2015).

Lily indicated that difficulty and discomfort in expressing emotions can be linked to low self-esteem via a fear of vulnerability and not being comfortable showing true emotions. This was wrapped up within worry about others' perceptions of oneself.

*One of the bits of feedback I always get is that I'm pretty hard to read. People can't tell if I'm frustrated or rattled. I'm quite calm and I think that helps a lot. Having someone that you can count on for consistency, think it's quite important. So then if I look at the downside*

*of that. It's on the inside of me that I'm rattled, and you know I've read enough to know that that's not the optimal thing. If I give my reflections of the board, they could equally say, well, we had no idea you were feeling like that because you seemed so together and calm about it*

*(Lily).*

The need for approval and conflict avoidance prioritises relationships over performance. Lacking confidence in one's ability to handle both simultaneously due to the fear of negative feedback is a common theme of low self-esteem.

*I like to be liked and so sometimes I will take longer to have those tough conversations where people aren't performing, than other people would (Ethan).*

By taking “longer to have those tough conversations” Ethan suggests a sense of inadequacy compared to his expectations of how a leader is supposed to act. This reflects self-doubt about the leadership position and possible imposter syndrome.

Self-doubt can suggest a lack of confidence associated with low self-esteem. By focusing on his failings, Lachlan discusses his perceived shortcomings and inability to adjust his communicative style.

*I failed to be detailed enough for those people who require detail, and I sometimes left them behind because my ideas were way out there (Lachlan).*

By leaving “them behind” he suggests concerns about not meeting their expectations because of his ideas being “way out there.” This could also fall into the ‘not belonging’ theme as a

notion of separation indicates he felt separate from others. Additionally, it could be an attempt to prove one's self-worth by compensating for perceived inadequacies.

Difficulty in assertiveness can be associated with low self-esteem. Regardless of the environment, Oscar felt he should be able to express himself openly and honestly.

*I really like people who are really clear and frank and honest in their communication. One of my limitations there is making sure that I play my part and encouraging that kind of communication (Oscar).*

An overwhelming sense of excessive responsibility meant that Lily felt that she must prove her worth through her actions but that this came at a cost to other focus areas. This can drive cognitive dissonance whereby an imbalance is recognised yet associated with an inability to act. There are also elements of perfectionism apparent here, where self-value is tied tightly to the approval of others. The requirement for external validation of accomplishments can override an intrinsic sense of self-worth.

*I think it's a responsibility like I always feel I've been given this role, and I am responsible for making sure the other people who were relying on me, get the best. One of my downfalls is that I wear that responsibility really heavily at the expense of other things that I intellectually know I should be giving greater weighting too (Lily).*

An association exists between psychological well-being and self-esteem. In synthesising a colossal amount of research on self-esteem in a meta-analysis of over 2,000 studies and one million participants, Zell and Johansson (2024) findings suggest that self-esteem is one of the

most robust psychological correlates of overall health and wellbeing and should be viewed as a major foundational pillar in the well-being construct. Lack of self-esteem is a risk factor linked to anxiety and depression through ruminative thought processes, excessive checking into others for reassurance-seeking, and the associated hypervigilance to cues suggesting social rejection.

However, Baumeister et al. (2003) note that professional and academic psychologists are hesitant to endorse these claims, stating instead that the self-esteem construct is a peculiar notion of Western individualist cultures and is not a universal human motive but merely an ideological artifact. One example they provide is that it is difficult to detect in collectivist cultures, especially in Japan. Renowned clinical psychologist Albert Ellis was convinced that “self-esteem is the greatest sickness known to man or woman because it is conditional” (Epstein, 2001, p. 72). Futility then exists in trying to wrap the personal insights of participants around attempts at objective evaluations of human subjectivity. Research that aims to tie the self-judging, subjective articulation of self-esteem into a scale to generate objective analyses leaves little faith in the determinative outputs, especially where this type of research embodies the concerns of Henrich et al. (2010) who noted that studies encompass only Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) societies. As Norenzayan and Heine (2005) assert, the foundational claim for psychology is the sharing of core mental attributes by all human beings. However, human evolution and adaptive responses to environments require different sociocultural arrangements when occupying varying ecological niches. This has meant that phenomena like self-esteem cannot always be utilised across the ever-changing landscape of cultural variety.

## Value misalignment

Having shared values, mission, and purpose galvanises leaders and their colleagues to meet the goals of the organisation. A unified focus enables beneficial results, as leaders whose behaviour is closely monitored and interpreted by followers tend to lead as expected. Unfortunately, misalignment arises where personal values conflict with organisational purpose. Dylan was conflicted in having to make redundancies, as he did not believe this was the right course of action. Inner conflict and dissatisfaction meant he wrestled with the decisions he was making and his subsequent actions that had consequences for the staff. A conflict of values can lead to disillusionment with the role and a negative impact on wellbeing.

*But there is tension as well because sometimes commercial realities and requirements of the board, push you to do things that you wouldn't want to do. When you get to redundancies as an example and you know the board says you have to save X amount of money, even if you don't agree with it, because you know the next cycle through, you're gonna need those people. So, there's times when you have to swallow your own morals because of commercial realities of the role and it's the s\*\*\* side of being a leader sometimes is when you have to do stuff that you really don't believe, but you're required to (Dylan).*

Oscar describes feeling like a cog in the machine whereby his constant compromising of values led to unhappiness. Not having a sense of control in decision-making diminished his sense of purpose, increased his lack of fulfilment, and sowed seeds of unjustness, leading to unhappiness.

*I got a job with one of the big law firms and became a part of a machine which I didn't really enjoy it all. There wasn't a lot of leadership there. You were at the beck and call of people who are doing other things and have got their own problems and wanna get them solved.*

*And I didn't feel that really aligned with my values. Values is interesting because at the personal level you bring those inherently day-to-day, and the challenge is you have to compromise them. And again, that's what leads to unhappiness. And I think that's why I was unhappy working with a big law firm. I didn't really feel like I had any control over my daily destiny... the last parts of my legal days, I got quite depressed and I did go and see a psychologist (Oscar).*

Organisational changes leading to misalignment with leaders' values can have consequences for both the company and the individual. Donning a metaphorical mask of integrity when being required to enact values not aligning with the self can give an example of leader emergence in reverse. Feelings of inauthenticity and disillusionment are powerful drivers of actions. For both Lily and Lachlan, continuing within the leadership role when their values were compromised meant resignation was the only option.

*It's the values displayed by the organization have changed and they no longer align with my own values, and I've actually left as a result. Once it's been because of an ownership change, once it's been because of a leadership change and once it was just a change of strategy where I knew that I was going to have to do things that I didn't believe in. And I believe anyway for me, if I can't front something I don't believe in, I wouldn't communicate with integrity. I could fake it. Probably really well, but it just wouldn't feel right. I'm not prepared to do it (Lily).*

*So, when I left it was because of disillusionment that shareholder wealth seemed like the only driver and that from a leadership perspective, I thought it was critical to stick with strategy*

*and not just do things that were based on shareholder wealth. I remember making a distinct decision that I no longer fitted because I just didn't have the same beliefs as the senior leadership team that I was operating with, and my voice was becoming less and less relevant because I wasn't aligned with that (Lachlan).*

### Separation from self

This theme encapsulates the disconnection from the self that participants felt due to the demands on both their personal and professional lived experiences. A sense of separation from the self emphasises the profound impact of work-related stress combined with personal responsibilities on the state of mind and wellbeing. Participants reported stress-related physical symptoms in relation to an experience and the resulting decisions or actions taken at the time. The swings in irritability and short-temperedness for Lily had an impact on home life.

*If I'm the leader, then I've gotta wear this mantle of whatever the big s\*\*\* thing is. And that comes at the detriment of myself always. I'm not sleeping properly. I'm short tempered at home. Things that I do for myself, I don't have time for. Distracted with work when I should be giving time to my kids. And I would say, you know, those times are s\*\*\* (Lily).*

The notion of work-life balance hinged on separateness, implying that balance is achieved when equal weightiness in presence occurs. However, the unbalanced life is rich in understanding, the ability to view angles, and emotional states that shift with perspectives. It accentuates self-connection, the knowingness that somehow separation has taken place and that there is a chance to return to what is true. Hannah described how anxiety and the shame of reputational damage led to physical illness.

*I remember there was one episode that I had, and I felt it was reputational wise, you know? And I had that extreme embarrassment, and I just went home. I just hopped in bed for about four days and just slept. Everything in me ached. Everything was sore. I think I manifested in the flu. It felt like a sickness in my body. You know, when there is fear or anxiety or shame running in your body, feel it everywhere. And I just couldn't shift, it was just in there, and it was just permanently there. Horrible (Hannah).*

This was also the case for Dylan and whilst it did not present fully in a physical sense, at an emotional level feeling 'tightly wound' meant he was not sensitive to the people he needed to be receptive to in accordance with fulfilling his role as an effective leader.

*I can be really quite hard on myself that leads to anxiety. Which kind of then leads to being a bit short. I get overly self-critical, then I start being more anxious. Then I lose that ability to really listen as well because I'm kind of so tightly wound. I'm not listening to the people that I need to so well, so I need to make sure I don't get into that loop (Dylan).*

Stress and the unrealistic expectations from a manager contributed significantly to separation for Ethan.

*I had a manager who was a real bully (and he said) don't come to me with problems. Come to me with solutions, which is fine, but they had to be the right solutions, which was his solution in his head which I didn't always know. And so, it was just terrible. It was a horrible time for me in my career (Ethan).*

The pressure of meeting these unspoken expectations led to a sense of helplessness exacerbated by the perception it could not be resolved. This led to a reluctance to seek help in future jobs.

*As a result of that in my next roles I never felt I could ask for help (Ethan).*

Within the workplace, what is experienced and the decisions made carry an assessment of what is fair and unfair. Positive perceptions of organisational justice link to higher performance (Colquitt et al., 2013), increased wellbeing and lower levels of absenteeism (Tenhiälä et al., 2013). Workplaces have embedded interdependencies shrouded in the complexity of perceptions (Bonau, 2024). When stress is aggravated, then perceptions of even objectively benign actions may gain a negative slant. Impaired judgement can result and flow through the organisation. This stagnating barrier will fester as the inner turmoil continually activates the stress response system, resulting in anxiety and depressive thoughts. Dylan noted this with his following comments.

*You're watched quite regularly. If you make a mistake, people will notice it quite quickly. So, people are kind of waiting for you to make a mistake, so having to be much more aware of what you're doing. So yeah, really having to be self-aware of how you're perceived and your actions and that's quite limiting cause you end up becoming quite self-critical like I should have done that better. Yeah, you're quite hard on yourself which leads to anxiety and all those kinds of things (Dylan).*

Lily made personal sacrifices for the benefit of others. Her perception now may be one of regret and noting the misalignment and poor decision-making from the past. Decisions made

whilst in the heat of the role can later, with reflection, lead to different interpretations that bring a negative emotional charge.

*People would be wanting my time, and I always give up the things that mattered most to me for everybody else around me. So, I guess now I would call it being a bit of a martyr, but it didn't feel like that at the time. It felt like I was making the right decision, but you know, now*

*I would look back and didn't make the right decisions (Lily).*

Research shows strong associations between self-connection and health and wellbeing outcomes (Klussman et al., 2020). Trying to understand unconscious drivers and feelings can lead to misinterpretation and erroneous conclusions. This then is a pathway to stress and ill health. Technological innovation has exacerbated the impact of separation from self. With the marketing of flexibility, convenience, plentiful market information, low transactional costs, greater functionality and connection constantly spurring us on in the rapidity of adoption, Stiegler (2010) viewed this invasiveness as leading to a loss of practical knowledge and skills, ultimately separating the self from proficiency and capability. Montévil et al. (2020) likens this to a process called 'denoetization', losing the ability to think (noesis).

## The Alchemic Bridge

The alchemic bridge is a metaphor to enable richness in imagery and to break from conceptual rationalism and intellectualised abstract concepts (Marlan, 2014). Psychological alchemy was considered by Carl Jung as philosophical gold (Raff, 2000) and whilst the depth of Jung's psychology will not be examined, the principles of accepting raw material in the forms of emotions and relationships and changing them into a refined resource will be utilised. Base materials of challenges, weaknesses, self-doubt, not belonging, fear, and separation from self

can alchemise into connected growth and coherence enabling leader emergence. Enhanced self-awareness is the connecting, unifying consciousness that can align values and beliefs, enabling states of well-being. The bridge metaphor is considered as a conduit to link, join, connect, unite and span interconnected elements of self.

## Alchemy

Alchemy, of great antiquity, has roots in Arabic and Ancient Greek referring to “fluidity”. (Bleakley, 2023) It is twofold in nature: an outward exoteric and a hidden or esoteric nature. The exoteric practice historically concerned transforming metals and the making of gold, whereby a substance, the Philosopher’s Stone (or Elixir and Tincture), would have the power of transforming base metals into precious metals. Esoteric or mystical alchemy gradually developed in which the mundane transformations of a base into sacred metals became symbolic of transforming a sinful man into a perfect being (Holmyard, 1957). Between 1918 and 1935, Carl Jung began expressing psychological processes in alchemical terms in relation to moving through stages in his psychotherapy en route to individuation – the moral aim whereby the outcome is to take both oneself and the outside world seriously (Crellin, 2021). The term alchemic bridge in this thesis will hold value as an important metaphor for understanding the profound and transformative psychological and social processes in realizing leadership potential.

## Bridging within a natural state

The concept of an alchemic bridge in leadership development draws parallels with the remarkable living root bridges of Meghalaya. Indigenous perceptions of resilience through

connectivity allow the Khasi and Jaintia communities in Meghalaya, India to form natural bridges in a mishmash of aerial roots that weave and knot together over time (Figure 2).



Figure 2: A bridge formed organically through the shaping of natural growth. (Watson et al., 2021, p. 55)

This area has the highest precipitation rate in the world therefore an integrated system is the requisite for bridge design, rather than one constructed of steel that will rust or concrete that will get washed out over time. Instead, the patience in development means the bridge can last for hundreds of years and rather than degrading, will gain resilience over time: *“the living root bridge will naturally self-repair and grow stronger as the structural roots grow thicker”*(Watson et al., 2021, p. 55). This intricate process of development, at the speed of nature, allows builders to intertwine the roots whereby they merge and fuse to form a natural bridge, enabling a crossing to be made (Edholm, 2020). Long-term thinking with patient foresight enables, over a lifetime, the training of the fig tree’s roots to bridge the dividing spaces that otherwise leave the Khasia people disconnected. This bridge demonstrates how persistence, forethought, and integration with natural processes can create enduring structures

that gain strength. Just as the Khasi and Jainta communities harness the power of interconnected roots to span gaps in their landscape, leaders must cultivate their inner connections and integrate diverse elements to bridge divides and overcome challenges. Also, the living root bridges naturally self-repair and adapt to their environment, gaining resilience. This characteristic mirrors the ideal development of leaders crossing the alchemic bridge who can adapt to changing circumstances, learn from experiences, and continually strengthen themselves.

The terms ‘grow stronger as structural roots grow thicker’ and ‘speed of nature’ have meaning when understanding the alchemic bridge and the emergence of leaders. As mentioned, inspired leadership lexicon enthusiasts have created a multi-billion-dollar leadership industry to teach people how to become leaders. However, leaders emerge at the speed of their own nature, in natural time with this pace of emergence allowing them to grow stronger with the realisation and insights from experience. The key to combining concepts is knowing this is occurring in the accelerated backdrop to what Stiegler and Rousow (2020) call the homogenising of consciousness in this hyper-industrialised age of rapidity and immediacy.

For the participants in this research, differing tools were utilised to proceed on the alchemic pathway. These are the insights given to move through the stagnating barriers enabling emergence.

### Crossing with awareness

The concept of crossing the alchemic bridge is symbolic of the journey towards self-awareness and personal growth. Emerging and knowing are centred in self-awareness, as knowing one’s strengths and weaknesses is essential for effective leadership. Becoming destabilised when

self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-coherency are being undermined leads to feelings of inadequacy, fear, value misalignment, blind spots and notions of not belonging. Psychological progress can be viewed as a daunting and a selfish process. Jung surmised that whatever we deny inwardly will come to us through the external world in what we call fate or karma. Developing an increased self-awareness can also have guilt associations associated with time by yourself, however the benefit of elevated awareness enables the alchemic bridge to be crossed with great learning and growth as a result.

Adopting inauthentic behaviours may provide a fleeting dopamine response but this is temporary. Across all participants, self-awareness emerged as the fundamental support structure for values alignment, wellbeing and leadership, providing the key to unlocking potential.

*I think that self-awareness is just really key (Ethan).*

Being responsible for one's own behaviour, reflection and self-assessment were seen as part of determining the right actions with the right mindset, which leads towards greater communication.

*I think it's quite important to be able to step back and know who you are, and that's not necessarily easy to do. When you step back that's a self-awareness process. You step back and analyse. Are you doing the right thing or are you saying the right thing or you acting the right way? That's kind of necessary, yeah (Dylan).*

This acknowledgment from Nicolas was critical to enable him to evolve from being stuck and fostering meaningful change.

*I needed to do something different. I need to change and become more aware of what I was doing (Nicolas).*

Self-awareness was a key guiding component for Hannah, not just for introspection but also for leveraging and utilising strategies and skills to traverse challenges with integrity.

*So that's when I look back and think about the biggest strength or the biggest sort of assets that I've got in life to support me on my leadership journey. It's that awareness. It's just that awareness and acting on it and knowing that I've got a toolkit of different things that can help me (Hannah).*

For Lachlan, within the aging process a more defined sense of self emerged, possibly characterised by clearer views, values and beliefs. Conversely, a tendency to shrink within set boundaries could limit possibilities, therefore understanding this and actively pursuing a wider lens to move into new experiences with a continuous learning attitude was crucial for personal and professional enlargement.

*Recognizing that from a self-awareness perspective as one ages, I tend to get far more defined. Therefore, I'm trying to widen back as much as I possibly can and be aware of a lot greater stuff around me (Lachlan).*

Creating calm and reflective moments to process thoughts had importance for Oscar. Intentionally allowing for a self-aware state was essential to gain clarity about his emotions, decision-making and actions.

*Those moments when you can let go ... and just have some calm space to reflect and process those thoughts. You know, those are the times when I probably have my best sort of self-aware thinking (Oscar).*

This notion is reinforced by a 2023 World Economic Forum survey. After surveying a large cross-section of organisations to understand the Future of Jobs, the results showed self-awareness to be a key socio-emotional attitude alongside allowing for curiosity and lifelong learning, resilience, flexibility, agility, and motivation (Di Battista et al., 2023). As Jongman-Sereno and Leary (2019) claim, people typically believe they have a suitable sense of who they are, what they are like, and why they do what they do, but all indications suggest that people's self-perceptions are partial, selective, and biased. A perception shift through self-awareness can be the metaphorical bridge allowing insight, recognition of purpose, interpretation and a way to manoeuvre through habitual emotions and thought patterns. We continually perform actions driven by our perceptions with the interplay between objective and subjective information characterising dualistic theories of perception (Poulsen, 1976).

Self-awareness is the entry point into sense making about our beliefs. Some beliefs we are caught in represent a limited reflection leading to self-doubt, for example self-told narratives around 'something is wrong with me', 'I'm going to fail', 'I'm not attractive', 'I can't change', 'people don't understand me'. This prevents trust in ourselves and others, risk-taking, sensing possibilities and limits creativity.

*What you resist persists and it's about being prepared to open up, to examine your own values, your own beliefs (Lachlan).*

Whilst the bridge metaphor is recognised as a connecting point between two sides, there is also significance in the space to be bridged. Frankl (1985), the Holocaust survivor, famously referred to the space that exists between stimulus and response. In that space is the power of choice and in the choice of how we respond lies growth, our opportunity to step onto this alchemic bridge and progress to the other side for personal and professional emergence.

### Alchemising the crossing

Choices made in daily life can wield powerful interventions. With awareness of self, virtues and values relational to character traits become embedded ideologies that guide. Within this awareness and reflexivity lie options to make change. Participants utilised varying interventions to foster self-awareness. Shaping meaning from what, at times, were distressing emotional states was done through varying activities.

All participants recognised what was important and engaged a range of tools cultivated either over their working careers or when adversity required a search into their toolbox. Some mentioned yoga, work organised courses, alcohol (either reducing/stopping drinking or using wine as a de-stressor), podcasts, holidays, religious faith, massage, journaling, and nutrition. The most frequently mentioned tools centred on being in nature, time with family, professional or close friend support, exercise and meditation. Connection was undoubtedly the strongest theme to emerge which included connection to self, others, nature and spiritual connections. Hannah Arendt, an influential political theorist and philosopher in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, recognised

that for self-development to occur, there needs to be a demarcation between public and private life whereby private life is removed from any economic signals (Arendt, 2013). This became apparent in the tools utilised by those participants who took time to remove themselves from work priorities. An example is this quote from Hannah, who reported a holistic integration through personal responsibility and agency synthesised with purposeful intent.

*I've learned what I can do and I've learnt what shifts me faster. And if I don't shift faster then I know I've got other tools in my toolkit from meditations, going for a walk in the forest, and if it's really deep, if it's something really deep, then calling on my coach to help me with some, you know, some deeper work on that (Hannah)*

### Prioritising self

For Dylan and Lily, knowing how critical it was to look after themselves first due to the downstream effects of ill health at work was a critical realisation.

*Well, in order to be a good leader, I have to look after myself first.*

*I can't just, you know, go through the door to the office and be a good leader.*

*If I'm feeling depressed or if I'm anxious or if I'm sick, or over tired and not sleeping, all that needs to be looked after in order to be a good leader as well. I've realized later that, if you're not well in yourself, you're not going to be a good leader. It directly affects your team (Dylan).*

*How do I show up as a good person at home as well as showing up as a good person at work? There were definitely times where my family got, you know, the sh\*\*iest version of me and so recognizing that and then thinking about things I need to do differently to kind of get*

*better. It was easier to show up as a good person at work because I felt like someone was paying me to do that. And then you get home exhausted, and you know those people are going to love, you no matter what (Lily).*

A psychological phenomenon in daily existence encompasses the shifting of attentional and emotional allocation between “work” and everything else. Shared stressors may present as job dissatisfaction, long working hours, amplified stress at work and home with overlapping and competing priorities, lack of autonomy and physical and emotional exhaustion (Baeriswyl et al., 2016; Csikszentmihalyi, 2004; Obrenovic et al., 2020) . Past studies have focused on the limiting effect of psychological well-being (Allen et al., 2000; Allen & Kiburz, 2012; Karimi et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2013; Matthews et al., 2014) and leadership (Hammer et al., 2009; Hill et al., 2016; Major & Cleveland, 2007; Major & Morganson, 2011) when formulating insights into overlapping priorities. Demands in one realm and the realisation of these as a hindrance for the other implies that they remove valuable energy and resources. Physiological and psychological reserves are then channelled into ruminative, lamenting, disparaging, stress-enhancing measures which limit the capacity for insight and trigger an even more diminished state of being.

### Spiritual connection

Ethan and Hannah prioritised spiritual connectivity as allowing insight into personal values and purpose to align actions with deeply held beliefs. A key element was the holistic connection that occurs whether it was with God or family to their own spiritual essence.

*You know what’s your objective in life and what do you really want to achieve? And for me, it came down to a love of my kids, which then meant, you know, love of my wife and family.*

*And then a love of God. And then love of others and so if I want to be a great father and husband and Christ follower then to do that, I kind of need to be healthy and ... got to keep focusing on that mindset ... I was always regularly attending a church and would often go when I was in town and go to a small kind of Bible study gathering, and that was also good for my spiritual development (Ethan).*

*And why Karakia is really important and clearing? Because energy can get stuck. But this energy, our Wairua you know, things get caught in it, other people's energy get caught, and it starts playing out. So how do you keep that as clean as you can? So, you can move through this world. So, it is a whole heap of different things that I just do (Hannah).*

*Several courses which have helped me understand it more and initially they were all spiritual healing courses. So, looking at it from a quite a spiritual healing perspective and then when I learned this and started doing it was like, wow, why does this stuff work? This is, you know my analytical accounting brain kicked in, why is this working? This is so strange this working so then that led me to quantum science because I wanted to understand the science behind it. And so, in the last, probably 3-4 years I've linked into the science and there's just so many matches (Hannah).*

## Nature connection

Participants commonly offered that connecting with nature acted as an effective reset mechanism which helped them to emerge with mental clarity and in a better state of emotional wellbeing.

*It's that connection to nature, I guess in that natural environment just re-set, massive reset.*

*Really, really fast. You know, it takes me 40 minutes to do my walk, but I could enter the forest quite jumbled and all over the place and differently out of my vortex and come out and*

*I've got crystal clear clarity on what's next. What exactly what I need to do. I'm happy*

*(Hannah).*

*Walking around the streets of Auckland is nowhere near as good for centring yourself then walking along the beach (Lily).*

Through a sample of 2,096 adults in the United Kingdom, Richardson et al. (2021) found that engagement with nature through simple everyday activities e.g. flower smelling, sitting in a garden, collecting shells on a beach, watching a butterfly, and listening to bird song were prominent factors in predicting health and wellbeing. This was seen with Oscar and Dylan.

*Ah, I like spending time outdoors. That's always good and get my hands in the soil, getting down to the beach (Oscar).*

*Also being able to leave the situation (work), not spending all my time and then going off and doing things that I like doing, you know, surfing (Dylan).*

Consistent evidence is emerging about the importance of nature for wellbeing (Bratman et al., 2019; Capaldi et al., 2015; Pritchard et al., 2020) and it is increasingly seen as a fundamental human psychological requirement. The importance of taking time alone in nature for reflection on oneself and the environment allowed for perspective shifts. A widening of perspective

through curiosity and delight in the surroundings created an alchemic shift in mind state for Lachlan.

*Going out into nature has become really important for me, so being really clear about the need to separate from people at times and just being able to reflect and that doesn't mean self-reflection all the time, but also means being aware of what's around, particularly in the nature perspective. Being fascinated I think about the smaller things rather than the bigger things has changed my perspective a lot. The magic moments (Lachlan).*

A profound spiritual interconnection with nature and the world itself is what Hannah found essential for wellbeing. This connection has support both within ancient wisdom and scientific understanding as research studies reveal how nature contributes to human thriving (Capaldi et al., 2015; Mantler & Logan, 2015; Poelina et al., 2022). Indigenous wisdom is context-specific, enabling Indigenous communities to survive and thrive throughout time. A fundamental aspect is the recognition of the interrelations between the spiritual, the natural world and the self, as well as how the environment provides the mind, body and spirit the opportunity to interconnect in harmony (Marques et al., 2021). Hannah expresses this notion in her Māori whakatauki (proverb) “*ko au te awa ko te awa ko au*” (I am the river; the river is me). Evidence in the New Zealand context focuses on the importance of nature in indigenous ways of understanding the world. Mark and Lyons (2010) note that Māori *kaumātua* (elders) have a belief that spiritual communication with ancestors can occur through listening to a song of a bird – personifying natural elements.

*But when you pull it back at the core of it, I believe that what we've been confronted with is a wakeup call to have a deeper connection with nature, to acknowledge my whakatauki “ko au*

*te awa ko te awa ko au” that we are one. In quantum physics, science tells us that we’re all interconnected through this quantum space and our health and wellbeing is conditional on our environment (Hannah).*

*I’m happy because my walks in the ngahere are really special. We are connected with nature. When you’re thinking about a higher level. I’d love, love, love to be able to bring more of this knowledge to humanity. I think it’s a gift. I think it’s a huge gift, you know, it’s higher consciousness (Hannah).*

Relocating and spending more time within the natural environment improved not only Lily but also extended into family connection.

*Me and my family moved to a smaller place by a beach, and I think it’s enabled a lot more good outside time with nature. Things that have kind of naturally happened as a result of just being in an environment that is a bit more kind to walking bare feet on the ground (Lily).*

### Inner voice and gut feel connection

The bridge to cross is not just about an endpoint. The answers we find along the way will resonate for a time but as time goes on, new understandings will arise to allow new spaces to be crossed. This realisation will allow a lightness of foot to enable this crossing.

Participants reported that learnings emerged through trusting the inner voice, the gut feel, and the intuitive guidance that bellows for attention provided that one is able and prepared to listen. Nicolas realised within his early leadership journey that his ego limited his capability to lead. A sense of superiority and positional power imbued him with feelings of not belonging and

neglect of the leadership title he was trying to fulfil. As Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), a monk and mystic, wrote along the lines around learning the lesson that if you are to do the work of a prophet, what you need is not a sceptre but a hoe. True work requires humility and hard work and not the power and authority symbolised by the sceptre.

*Well, I think the first thing was taking stock of my own ego. I think it's very easy to fall in a trap you know, be easily persuaded or swayed, or seduced by the fact that you're leading a group of people or a team (Nicolas).*

As to why or how this insight was realised is unknown but according to Hollis (2005), Carl Jung wrote along the lines that we walk in shoes too small for us, in that we have adaptive, protective narratives which are self-limiting. Nicolas recognised how the narrowness of his view of the world and himself as a leader curbed his ability to flourish. Hollis (2023) notes that our vocation is not really about the job but more on what is truly worthy of our commitment. Nicolas realised that his commitment extended beyond his self and that the true way to his vocation was through his inner voice.

*And I also learnt I had to learn to trust my inner voice. You know my gut feel and there was a period of time when I didn't do that. I took some coaching to help reengage with my gut feel and my inner self and that was quite an interesting time from a leadership perspective because you know I had some real professional challenges; things weren't going that well, but it was because I wasn't listening to myself (Nicolas)*

Lachlan developed an increasing intuitive reliance over time with a deep sense of believing that what unfolds will happen for a reason.

*I trust my intuition with regard to decision making. I relied on how I felt and had an inherent knowing. Knowing that you already belong, that ego dissolving rather than fuelling presents the capability to simply be without the trappings of societal complexities that are bestowed on and absorb for the fleeting feel good moments. That when you suspend the belief that you need to prove things to others, then opportunities abound .... I have a belief that the right thing will happen, and people will come into my lives and the pivotal moments have been for me when I've have been opened to inviting somebody in or inviting something to happen*

*(Lachlan).*

Hannah had cultivated this connection to self over time. This natural bridge developed for her to lead with more understanding and insight into others. The ability to read the energy of another is likely to lead to better connections.

*I guess one thing that you know, since I've been on this journey coming into my intuition is when I'm in that space I am a bit sharper and my ability to read the energy of a space in individuals is more heightened* (Hannah).

Oscar realised the strength it takes to trust yourself. It can be difficult to move beyond the logic of the rational mind and base a decision on a feeling; however, with time, this area can develop and innate trust increases.

*One of the challenges I faced is, you know, I recognize quite strongly that we're emotional creatures and when we make decisions emotionally it takes a lot of strength to trust your gut feeling as opposed to do what you know, logically what you think is right. And*

*that's something again that you know, as I reflect, I feel that I have developed in that area, and I think that's really important as some really important aspect of leadership is to trust your gut sometimes and bring other people on that journey (Oscar).*

Looman (2003) argues that leaders must challenge the status quo and become reflective by seeking universal truths and listening to their inner, intuitive voice. This was apparent in a number of quotes from participants.

*It was almost like I get attracted to people who are gonna make a difference in my life and that sounds very woo woo (Lachlan).*

*And I also learnt I had to learn to trust my inner voice.*

*You know my gut feel and there was a period of time when I didn't do that. I took some coaching to help reengage with my gut feel and my inner self and that was quite you know an interesting time from a leadership perspective (Nicolas).*

*I don't know if there's a difference between gut and intuition. Umm, I don't know. When you're growing up and obviously the influences of the traditional educational system, it's very logical and evidence based or what have you. But then you know as you experience more in the world, you feel signals and I think you feel them and sense them as opposed to think it's an emotional experience and certainly as I've gone through you know my career and life, you recognize that you missed some opportunities because you don't listen to those signals and sometimes you listen to them and you get it wrong you know and that can hurt too (Oscar).*

In his writings more than 140 years ago McCosh, (McCosh, 1882, p. 3) claimed in his early investigations of intuition within a scientific framework, “There is an eye of wider sweep than the telescope and more searching than the microscope”. Earlier philosophers such as Plato, Bergson, Spinoza, Ovid, Russel and Eastern philosophical perspectives also claim the potential for the individual and benefit to the community in harnessing intuition (Arvidson & Davis-Floyd, 2016). In the realm of cognitive psychology, Kahneman and Tversky (1982) theorise that intuition encompasses judgments that align with an individual's worldview. This occurs when a person is not consciously aware of the underlying rules and processes guiding their decision-making and lacks explicit analytical or computational methods to arrive at a conclusion. Participants referred to intuition as a gut feeling, a somatic view of intuition whereby awareness was below the participants’ level of consciousness and activated a feeling. Learning to trust it took time. One international study took place whereby managers were asked whether intuition had a place in their decision-making process. An overwhelming majority of senior managers reported that they used intuition when making decisions and that this contributed to greater success, as over time, more experiences were built up and held in their mental map, influencing conscious thought. A key recommendation for developing this intuitive feel is to create the inner state to give your intuitive mind the freedom to roam (Sadler-Smith, 2004).

Radical subjectivity and unverifiability prohibit the true self from being studied as a scientific concept. Delving further, the notion that authentic parts of the self exist alongside other parts that remain masked can resonate within the superstition realms (Strohming et al., 2017). When delving into what a self-connected state is, Klussman et al. (2022) combine three components: awareness of self, acceptance of self based on this awareness and alignment of

this awareness with behaviour. Vazire and Carlson (2010) identified informational and motivational differences as barriers to connecting with self. Informational barriers arise when we have limited self-knowledge such that cognitive structures, social norms and cognitive load impact the ability to accurately process information. Motivational barriers are based on common perceptual biases such as a positive bias in the perception of the self and when selective attention is paid to information that substantiates preexisting beliefs concerning themselves. Klusman et al. (2020) focused on internal and external barriers to connection with the self. External barriers included not having enough time to devote to self-connection, work requirements and associated stress, inability to meet basic needs and powerlessness to change external situations. Internal barriers included feeling lost and not aligned with life's purpose, negative self-judgements, lack of motivation and avoiding self-connection due to fear of what may transpire upon investigation.

### Social connection

The metaphorical bridge allowed for a deeper understanding of the power of connection and social interactions. Having genuine conversations that enabled sincere connections became a priority. Ensuring the importance of relationships within work requires investing time and energy in these areas and for some, putting less priority on money or advancement.

*I love talking with people. You know the people you feel that you get a connection with, and you always get something from those conversations (Oscar).*

*I could get more money being a full time CEO 100%, but I'd end up giving up some of those relationships that I've got. I don't want to give them up because that's really important.*

*So if I'm gonna invest my energy and time with somebody I want to, with good people, not a*

*bunch of pricks (Nicolas).*

Intentionality was required to prioritise spending time with loved ones and ensure it was a priority to enhance connection and wellbeing. It is easy to forego connections if one becomes duty bound to the employer and places salary over family. Lily experienced a perception change. Previously wellbeing had been associated with only a physical fitness element however this shifted into the realisation that connection is fundamental.

*I think for a long time. I thought about wellbeing as I am fit, you know, physically. Am I getting enough exercise? ... So, I did things like signed up to an art class with my daughter. So, she likes that. I like that. Every Monday evening, we go and do that for three hours together (Lily).*

Social factors are critical for health and well-being (Holt-Lunstad, 2021). Santini et al. (2020) showed that social disconnectedness predicted depression and anxiety and vice versa. Additionally, the subjective feeling of isolation acted as an intermediary factor in this relationship. Developing critical understandings and situational awareness can help evaluate whether social networks fulfil the needs for connectedness (Newman & Zainal, 2020).

### **Purpose and presence**

The key themes, specifically purposeful intent and cultivating presence, proved essential in traversing the alchemic bridge. With focused commitment to matters of personal significance and activities that promise meaningful life impact, an alchemic shift occurs. This shift was characterised by a synergistic process where each action reinforced and amplified the overall transformation, creating a powerful coalescence of purpose and presence. When the purpose

was bigger than self, it provided a strong motivating force, as experienced by Oscar and realised by Lily.

*Having a purpose that's bigger than yourself. Serving the greater good, whether that's at a local level or a national level or a global level or whatever. Understanding what you know now that challenges what's good short term versus long term good*

*(Oscar).*

*I'm pretty smart. I've made a ton of money for a ton of organizations in a number of countries around the world. You know, I intellectually understand that it's created jobs for people and delivered customers, good experiences and blah, blah blah. But you know what is it that I could do to make a better contribution to society with the skills and talents I've got?*

*(Lily).*

Suspending belief in the importance of external validation or judgement allowed for the alignment of purpose with values and clarity in pursuing goals. This was a realisation for both Lachlan and Nicolas. Opening to opportunities and possibilities that resonated with his core values and purpose contributed to Lachlan's overall wellbeing.

*When you suspend the belief that you need to prove things to others, then opportunities abound. Because often we just continue to strive, but I guess that's been an epiphany for me in my wellbeing etcetera, is that I have enough (Lachlan).*

Nicolas emphasised the importance of clarity in decision-making and alignment with his core values. His reflection tended towards authenticity when acknowledging the difference between

fulfilling personal needs and just fuelling the ego due to the associated glamour the choices would lead to.

*I'm being clear about the choices. I was making that were right for me.*

*Not because I've, you know, because I've potentially an ego position or whatever, because they were glamorous or interesting, but they actually might not be providing the value validation that I needed and wanted (Nicolas).*

Engaging in reflection and acknowledging incongruence in aspects of oneself provided a catalyst for adjustment. A common theme across the participants was taking the time for self-examination to occur. Dylan emphasized the importance of introspection with honesty when facing uncomfortable truths and noted the discrepancies between current actions and desired outcomes. This is a fundamental building block of self-awareness, crucial to identifying purpose.

*Ask yourself hard questions and you might not like the answer, but you'll see it (Dylan).*

Journaling allowed for deep self-reflection, whereby challenges and emotional states amalgamated into insights around values, priorities and motivations. It became a safe place for emotional processing, with the ability to explore different perspectives, enabling clarity and maintaining a clear focus on purposeful intent. Hannah revealed the benefit this gave her during tough times.

*Journaling has been remarkable in I don't do enough, and I want to do more of it because I tend to journal when things are really tough. I end up journaling and then will have crystal clarity in terms of next steps ... by the time I've finished it, I'm like ohh wow (Hannah).*

Lily attended a course that enabled facilitation of areas that were new to her. This provided a different perspective on her own actions, allowing better informed and intentional decisions in the future. By examining and confronting the past with structured reflection, Lily was better aligned with her overarching purpose when progressing through future challenges.

*I just recently did a leadership course that was really helpful. It made me reflect on some of the things that I haven't done so well in the job that I've been in. That was really helpful for what I actually wouldn't have really kind of thought up on my own. So, I found it to be quite powerful and confronting exercise (Lily).*

Resilience with a growth mindset was hugely essential for purposeful intent. A mindset that viewed setbacks as opportunities rather than a definitive failure was an alchemic insight, as a focus on longer-term purpose remained once the learnings had been realised. This aspect took courage in pursuing self-purpose by being out of the comfort zone while realising that it led to greater well-being. Embracing failure and seeing it as merely a part of learning was the epitome of transmutation to a greater purpose. Oscar recognised this trait within others, which allowed him to cultivate it for himself.

*But the confidence to take those chances and genuinely see a failure as a success.*

*I think it's something that's, well, an area I would like to grow more and something I really admire in others. And that, I think helps your well-being in that if you genuinely feel that and*

*believe it, it takes a lot of stress out of your life because you're not worried about the fact that it didn't work (Oscar).*

An intrinsic understanding of one's emotional condition exemplified self-awareness, particularly in recognising when one was not functioning at their best. For Hannah, corrective actions with purposeful intent then ensued through self-reflection, enabling forgiveness and wellbeing through emotional regulation

*For me a big strength is acknowledging when I'm out of vortex. ... I'm catching myself probably within half an hour. Ohh, I'm out. I'm out, and so instead of beating myself up for it, I do a little energetic clean up and forgive myself for that judgment on that person or something I may have said and if I do need to clean up with that individual then I'm pretty fast to do it as well. And for me to get back into the vortex, the things, you know, whatever gets me back into a state of love. A state of higher vibrational frequency energy (Hannah).*

Incorporating deliberate practice into a daily routine aligned with personal values and goals had resultant benefits as shown by Lily and Hannah. Consistency and discipline in engaging in meditation and yoga on a routine basis demonstrated how valuable regularity and commitment were to wellbeing. Pausing with intent and making time for interventions in a positive practice allowed alchemy to take place.

*I was doing a yoga class once a week because, you know, I'm aware that kind of breathing and stopping is something I'm not very good at (Lily).*

*And so, I have got some practices which are just every day for me ... because I know they make me feel good. They have a great effect, and it's just become like eating so Transcendental Meditation. I meditate twice daily, 20 minutes (Hannah).*

Engaging in life's activities with purposeful intent cultivated moments of presence. There is no unified theory or definition for presence, given that the term has multiple meanings depending on the context and author. Presence, however, can be characterised by synthesising ideas from Waterworth et al. (2015) and Heeter (2003), as the feeling of being in a perceptible external world around the self, occurring during periods when cognition processes such as attention, thought, affect and perception are tied to the perceptual stimuli. The here and right now, deeply entwined with the present real-time world, are the focus, attending to the present environment within and around the body. Presence is an actively receptive state requiring learning to observe subjective features of reality to become mindful and move into a self-attuned state.

### Moving beyond fear

Fear, deeply embedded in our nervous system as a survival mechanism, emerged as a significant contributor to the stagnating barriers experienced by all participants. When trapped by fearful beliefs, choices became limited, creativity was stifled, and perception of reality contracted. Through self-awareness, fear could be regulated by consciously acknowledging the emotion, enabling a degree of detachment. The challenge lay in the perception of fear-filled beliefs as truth, which consequently shaped reality. This results in a state devoid of an Archimedean point from which to objectively observe these self-imposed limitations. Instead, these fearful narratives and beliefs served as protective armour against societal, religious, cultural, and interpersonal standards of what constitutes a "good person." Importantly, we often

remain unaware of this process as we internalise cultural biases and become burdened by the weight of our constructed personalities. Pivotal moments, characterised by self-insights, value recognition and the dismantling of fear-based psychological constraints, facilitated progression. Upon reflection, participants identified these instances as life-defining, as shown by Hannah's experience.

*When you crack the shell. It's like this armour. Once you've done it, you can never go back and this armour starts breaking off you, and then all of a sudden you can see the world through a completely different lens (Hannah).*

Being made redundant could evoke uncertainty and fear about the future as was the case with Nicolas. Challenging circumstances opened the potential for gaining resilience in seeking ways to move beyond fear, allowing an opportunity to explore self and ensuring a stable and fulfilling career path. A clear sense of direction was required to align with Nicolas's goals and values.

*Being made redundant three times in a row over a two-year period or something like that, pretty galvanizing point of going \*\*\*\*, I better find out the freaking hell I'm doing because this can't carry on. And so that was like a defining point to ... becoming a lot more self-aware (Nicolas).*

Moving out of fear was a shift from knowledge to wisdom as Hannah notes.

*I was given the evidence that I was OK, and it wasn't the end of the world and if something went wrong it was fine as long as I knew how to clean up and take responsibility and reset it and provide calmness in that vision for the future, to those who are following you, that it's*

*going to be OK. I realized that life is just one big evolution and well actually it's those moments of adversity that help us grow and step up and learn more about ourselves, free that which doesn't serve us. So, disempowered beliefs I may have picked up in my childhood.*

*They don't serve me now (Hannah).*

When fear is the dominant reality, the interpretation of reality and associated cues can be bound in depression, anxiety, rage and anger. These constricting emotions tend to inhibit the prefrontal cortex from acting as a handbrake to allow engagement with open awareness and coherence. Engaging in the world from an unconnected mind frame amplified mindsets of anger, despair, worry, greed and violence. These aversive states have well-defined circuitry involving three neural pathways as described by Panksepp and Watt (2011), whereby the brain is the only organ in the body where the pressures of evolution have left a clear historical imprint. Hierarchical control in the regulation of emotionality comes from the primary process in the ancient subcortex, the secondary process of emotional learning and the tertiary processing of emotions, which are complex, affectively charged thoughts of ongoing emotional issues. This basic bottom-up primary process approach enables basic emotions like fear to be understood as an affective experience. Higher mind functions rule decision-making but can fail due to a fundamentally weak or unstable primary process. With fear, there was always anticipatory anxiety that dominated the mindsets the participants found themselves in. As Siegel (2010) notes, fear comes in many forms. Thinking about the worst-case scenario ensured attentive focus in preparing for the external world, where the dread of something bad happening caused one to continually doubt one's own thoughts.

The apprehension of failure can, paradoxically, contribute positively to a leader's wisdom, with this relationship mediated by psychological empowerment. Individuals who recognised the

possibility of failure were more inclined to exhibit cognitive, reflective, and affective aspects of wisdom. By noting the potential for failure and the related emotion of fear, individuals may be better prepared for their potential shortcomings and unknown risks (Solansky et al., 2023). Hannah noted this by ‘leaning’ into the roles. Knowing her vulnerabilities and being aware of the significance she placed on her reputation, she also knew that if issues arose, which they would, it would be the next immediate actions that determined the future. It was not that the feeling or emotion of fear evaporated into thin air; instead, there was recognition of the limiting consequences that would ensue if she bought into it.

*Why not lean in? Yeah. So that’s helped me to minimize the fear of taking on these roles and minimize that sense of fear. If it all goes wrong, what about my reputation? Ohhhhhh my reputation! That was one big block for me because without your reputation, I had a disempowered belief that you’re nothing (Hannah).*

The notion of being afraid or ‘stuck’ in fear was only possible when trying to remove themselves from it. When not trying to remove oneself from fear, the construct of being ‘stuck’ with fear was removed. Awareness of this feeling in the moment can free one up to enable forward progression (Watts, 1962).

### Coach intervention

Many of the participants engaged coaches, either on an individual basis or as a team coach. The coach was a supportive crutch to expose blind spots, provide insights and explore how their perception of events in varying settings may expose their trigger points. This proved to be transformative in assisting both their professional and personal progression.

The main theme that emerged within the coaching theme was the self-awareness they inadvertently became exposed to. This exposure aided reflection in understanding strengths, behaviours and areas for improvement. Diverse learning experiences were undertaken, integrating spiritual, scientific and practical aspects of leader efficacy while drawing on what resonated with each individual. This was particularly poignant with Nicolas and Dylan.

*And so that was like a defining point in terms of, taking on that coaching and becoming a lot more self-aware. And I wasn't particularly self-aware. I lacked the subtlety of reading the room (Nicolas).*

*everybody needs a coach or a counsellor or whatever at some point ... you need somebody that's kind of objective to talk you through the understanding. You've got ways that you do things which are just natural to you, but you might not realize that that's a particular schema or a way to respond. When you step back like that, you know, I think that's a self-awareness process (Dylan).*

For Lily, this extended beyond a self-appointed coach to a team coach. Understanding the interconnectivity of the team and realising the value in collective growth to create a higher collaborative synergy led to an overall enhancement of team performance. A culture shift materialised with open constructive feedback whereby the members of her team could address whatever issues were present in a direct and productive manner. This created psychological safety within the team. She also gained access to what her team members really thought about her that they previously could not express due to hierarchical constraints. This highlighted to Lily the direct cause and effect of her actions.

*And the other thing I did when I was in a leadership role that was awesome, was to get a team coach. So whilst I started out with everyone having individual coaches that were right for them and that was good for the individual, it wasn't so good for across the team and when I moved to having a team coach she was awesome because she helped us work out how we would work together and she also helped us create an environment where we could constructively give each other feedback in the moment. Because she was doing one on one coaching with my team, she could tell me stuff that people were feeling about me, that they would never tell me. Did you notice in the meeting when you did A others reacted like this? But in another time when you did B, it created a better environment. Why do you think that was? Did you even notice that? So those things in turn made me a bit more aware (Lily)*

An example of a simple but hugely efficacious coaching technique for Nicolas helped him to leave a role altogether and progress into an area that aligned more with his identity. Encouraging a conscious and deliberate examination of thoughts led to purposeful action aligned with his values. Nicolas was empowered to take control of both his personal and professional development.

*So that's when I started the listening and it was, you know, my coach gave me a couple of simple little things to remember. One of them was to imagine having my inner voice sitting on my shoulder, talking into the ear, so that when I was thinking about something, that voice was there and I was listening making a real conscious and deliberate attempt to do that. ... I did something that was a little bit different to what I had done before, it was far more grounded. And so, I started this process of effectively reinventing myself to a certain degree (Nicolas).*

Akin to Alice following the rabbit down the hole and having a coherent world upended, so too did leaders find sense-making via an objective point of reference, a coach, invaluable. This came to the forefront during Covid 19 when leaders had to dramatically transition into a unique working style and environment over a short period of time. Leaders turned to coaches for support as logistical challenges, personal fear, uncertainty and loss of identity enveloped them quickly (Mosala & Bennett, 2024). Overnight leaders had to merge with intent into their virtual leader identity which previously may have existed superficially but now had to be crafted to a functional state. Online avatars created by leaders provided additional layers to self-interpretation, adding ambiguity to how followers interpreted their leader's online presence. A forged juxtaposition between the 'real' and 'virtual' identity was not a seamless exchange or replication due to the haphazard mashing of identification dependent on the medium of engagement. While this thesis research did not focus on participants' virtual leader identities it is of paramount importance for any leader emergence theory to be in accord with the reality that is now present.

At junctures within leadership, crucial thresholds necessitate looking beyond self to engage with another and ask for help. This was one of the most prominent reorientating or recalibrating moments in the leader's transformational processes. The awareness to know and to seek help was complex and subjective due to the varying situational environments. Without understanding that they require essential assistance, leaders could not transition within themselves and their role. Although we are born with a requisite need for help, asking for it as a leader, exposes oneself to vulnerability. Vulnerability is an omnipotent, powerful force, but by not acknowledging it, leaders are not attuning to the self therefore will face difficulty attuning to their teams. The exposure to vulnerability affords a deeper connection with

followers and inspirational qualities (Hanson, 2014). Making oneself vulnerable is essential to establishing trust and the benefits that accrue for doing so (Gardner et al., 2021). How a leader acts is deterministic of their followers' sense of belonging, a 70% difference (Bourke et al., 2020), ultimately enhancing performance. For a leader to refuse vulnerability is to “refuse the help needed at every turn of our existence ... the only choice we have is to inhabit vulnerability ... to become larger and more courageous and more compassionate ... robustly and fully“ (Whyte, 2019, p. 172).

### Mindfulness / meditation

Behind the reality constructs lies a ‘state of mind’; thus, mindfulness is foundational in supporting the alchemic bridge crossing. Meditation was a common theme among participants and took varying forms, from sitting in a formal practice to walking. The benefits emerged in areas of self-control, emotional regulation, relief from daily stressors, a clearing away with a new mind state and an enabling presence.

*Certainly, meditation has become an important aspect for me (Lachlan).*

*And so, I have got some practices which are just every day for me, and I'll sort of built them into because I know they make me feel good. They have a great effect, and it's just become like eating (Hannah).*

*I started meditations, reasonably recent in the last couple of years.*

*I think I picked it up just after COVID. I want to kind of be able to control myself so meditations kind of helped in that (Dylan).*

*Like going for walks. That's sort of for me. It's like meditation. It's a time when I don't know whether it's just the rhythmic repetition of the steps, you know, and that takes your mind, frees your mind from a lot of other issues that might be creeping in and allows just that freedom of thought. Going for a walk in the morning is a really good way to start the day for me because it does give me that chance to breathe and just relax (Oscar).*

A poignant reflective comparison emerged in relation to another leader's state as opposed to her own. Lily reflected on not yet getting to the space where solace is found in just being, rather than doing. She recognised that there is value in meditation, however she reported simply moving at her own speed to arrive there when she would be ready.

*And I would say if I was to critique myself to some others in similar roles to me on things like breathing and meditation, which we are kind of supposed to be making time for, we're all doers. We're not very good at being and my observation about myself is I haven't yet got to the place where I am comfortable to just be, always felt like I need to do in order for that to be considered, you know, a successful and effective day in the life of me (Lily).*

### Feedback on blind spots and openness to receiving feedback

As human beings we have blind spots that hinder self-knowledge, providing the catalyst for interpersonal misunderstanding and conflict. In a world mediated by technology and to counteract fragmented attention this is now critical to explore. As noted earlier, this focuses on differentiating self, social perception and self-esteem motives. Blind spots exist, but failure to see susceptibility to them prevents the correct interpretation of interactions. This objectivity illusion cannot be found simply by looking inward for discovery as this may bolster confidence in one's objectivity (Pronin & Hazel, 2023). Therefore, seeking feedback from others is

critical for revealing the existence of blind spots, and this is deemed important by the participants.

*Some people are just not self-aware. Just don't know how damaging they are because they just don't have that awareness ... Every two years at least I would do a 360 assessment. So, you'd have your manager, colleagues and direct reports or team members fill out a survey about you and they rated you, et cetera and you know there'd be things there that that would then come into focus that I needed to work on or improve on, so I clearly see my strengths and weaknesses (Ethan).*

*Asking people helps as well, having trusted relationships where you can ask for advice and trust where it's gonna come from. I'm very open to asking how I'm perceived or being open to criticism. I'm always open to being critiqued, because sometimes we can be unaware of behaviours and how they affect others (Lachlan).*

Deeply ingrained, charged beliefs can be difficult to face, also honesty from the person providing feedback requires courage to disclose the information. That is a key point as exposure can be tempered with caution, and the person's blind spot may remain unrevealed if they deem them hurtful. Leaders reported that they needed to be prepared to see feedback as unthreatening.

*I think our traditional methods of getting feedback, are really important and so actually seeking feedback from those that you work with or friends or family in your life acknowledging though an element of feedback will come from a place depending on where that person's at and their journey as well. I trust that if it's meant to be given to me, it's*

*exactly the right feedback that I'm getting. And I hold that intention as well. If I'm going into a feedback session, this is exactly what I need to know. So that's still really important because there has been feedback given to me and I wasn't aware of that, you know and I'm like, how did I not know? When I look back, I'm like, oh, it was a really deep blind spot. Really deep for me, but then having this knowledge of awareness allowed me to deal with it and go OK, that was a bit of a shock. And wow, it's probably one of my weak points and it's been going on for a while and I wasn't even aware of that, but now I've got an opportunity to move through there and thank that person actually for being brave enough to share that with me and doing something different about it in a more conscious state (Hannah)*

Collaborative experiences and exposure to differing perspectives enabled a broadening of understanding, which also was a mechanism for uncovering these blind spots. As noted by Oscar, people can recognise the innate human tendency to doubt what hasn't been personally experienced. Therefore, to be told, rather than felt, can lead to ambiguous interpretations.

*That's where I particularly benefit from working with others, whether that's like a collaborative initiative where you work with somebody who does something a different way or you work with somebody who introduces you to a way of doing things or an experience that works differently than you had thought it might work. And that gives you the confidence that sort of trust and see that in action. And I think that's probably one of the challenges for human beings is that we struggle to believe things that we haven't seen the whole you know, that's probably the meaning behind the doubting Thomas story on the Bible, actually unearths this propensity of human beings to only really trust what they've seen as possible (Oscar).*

## Value alignment

Value alignment is an outcome of crossing the alchemic bridge in self-awareness. Understanding what truly matters enabled decisions reflecting participants' core beliefs and equipped them to better act on their purpose. Moving at their own speed of nature through discovery was key for inner understanding; time and effort will always be the requisite for transformation. As Oscar noted, service to others was a motivator in the roles he chose to align with his key values of honesty and integrity.

*No regrets, as Frank Sinatra said and that's not to say that you should do that in a selfish way, because you want to do it in a way that makes you happy. And then having values of honesty, integrity, purpose are really important for me. I suppose that notion of doing something useful with your life is being of service to others. So, something greater than myself has always been a driving force. I'm not sure if that's a belief or a value, but it certainly is. What has driven me? It's the difference between what the jobs are that I find appealing and the ones that I don't want to do (Oscar).*

Hannah was very similar in wanting to contribute positively to society by seeing life as one big wānanga (place of higher learning) offering openness to discuss differing thoughts, opinions and experiences.

*And the other thing I have in my values is wanting to contribute positively in society. It's just with a deeper connection though to other people and in seeing our life as one big wānanga, takes the pressure off everything (Hannah).*

Nicolas noted the importance of having alignment between his own principles and those of the organisation. Knowing there is a powerful force embedded within the fabric of work is a huge value added to the mere rote nature of simply showing up to do a job.

*I'm very principled, orientated. I've had a strong value set, so I've had a strong moral compass in the sense of what's right for me and how I like to work. Collegial. Collaborative. We need to do the right thing here and so when the values line up and the beliefs line up in an entity, like when I was working at [NZ Company] that can become quite powerful (Nicolas).*

This is where the bridge of self-awareness is the conduit to a conscious value alignment: matching actions with values.

*The businesses that I've worked with have been all values laid businesses and I think that's one of the reasons why I've been so long with [company] is because I'm very much aligned with those values. I really like the [company]values. I like the way we act. And so that's been really good (Ethan).*

## Belonging

To belong is to furnish oneself with true awareness and to set aside opinions / beliefs that were viewed with importance but have become simply a mere blockage to belonging. Leadership stories developed self-narratives, and the need to belong formed the emotive thread of identity through shared purpose and beliefs, enabling a transformation of the future. Eastwood (2021) reinforced the significance of belonging, as there has never been a time in human history when wellbeing has not been associated with belonging to a group. Isolation and loneliness have a potent influence on health and longevity, qualifying as risk factors for premature mortality

(Holt-Lunstad, 2021). Belonging can also simply be a shift in perception away from belief structures, inhibiting the ability to feel part of the group. The self-belief of belonging came from cultivating self-awareness. Lachlan through regular meditation practice enabled limiting thoughts to be alchemised into the realisation that he did belong. While he always did belong, he had been trapped within an energy sink, unhealthily obsessing over the environment and interactions he was having, which was to his detriment. When this shifted, unrealised potential and capability began to be explored.

*I've always felt that I did not deserve to be where I was from a leadership perspective or at a senior level ... When I changed that belief suddenly I deserved to be where I am, and I can contribute. So, that was quite a major step I took on these chair roles and leadership roles bringing organisations together when I had this incredible shift ... it was just a huge shift in self-belief (Lachlan).*

## Leadership competencies

Crossing the alchemic bridge led to various competencies developing through experiences. Leadership competency theories are normally utilised to fragment complex leadership constructs into superficial fixed variables. But as Day et al. (2021) presume, these are merely seductive frameworks to benchmark leadership attributes, in which individual competencies are treated as equally weighted and represented as independent of one another, a view which is extremely unlikely to represent reality. Competencies are dynamic entities therefore at varying stages of a career, competencies may be utilised or not depending on the situation. Research also tends to focus on the top five to ten percent of organisational leaders who possess the greatest leadership capability (Conger & Church, 2017) therefore creating a list and comparing the participants is futile.

The participants alluded to various competencies, which were wide-ranging depending on the challenges they faced and how resolution and growth resulted. These included personal insights as to what worked for them individually to build trust, solve problems, adapt their leadership style, collaboratively set goals, empower others, take responsibility, regulate emotionally charged situations, use active listening and balance confidence with humility.

Lily learnt to adjust her leadership style to meet the requirements of whom she was leading in different situations. This enabled her inner confidence, which led to her knowing she had an innate ability to navigate complex situations.

*I think the biggest changes within myself that I experienced were learning how to get the best from others to get the best outcomes ... when you're a successful leader, you tend to think well, I've dealt with all of these other things, there is a solution in here and I will figure it out.*

*That sounds arrogant. I don't think it's arrogance (Lily).*

As Oscar noted, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, being mindful of others and the ability to synthesise and act on this information are the hallmarks of a leader.

*Good leadership comes from an ability to process a lot of stuff together, the emotional stuff, the information, the logic and bringing that together in a way that is intelligent and*

*smart and thoughtful and mindful of others (Oscar).*

Trust was fundamental and through open communication and contextualising tasks, Dylan believed his staff were ten times more motivated. This approach also reduced ambiguity and any misunderstandings that may occur.

*If they know the context of what they're doing and why they're doing it and how it fits into the bigger picture, they are 10 times more motivated. If you kind of just say look, I need you to do this and you don't really give them an explanation, you're implicitly kind of not trusting them and people pick up on that either consciously or subconsciously (Dylan).*

Leadership is learning. The ability to receive and process learning comes from a state of willingness, self-openness and awareness. Becoming a leader is more than learning managerial functions, it is through practice involving the lived experience of interactions between a person, the world and interpretations that matter. Segal (2017) claims that, as leaders act, they are transformed into leaders by their ways of acting. This claim is backed up by the last quote.

*And that's leadership, it's kind of learning. I mean you have to learn how to do that (Dylan).*

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

*The psychological rule says that when an inner situation is not made conscious, it happens outside as fate. That is to say, when the individual remains undivided and does not become conscious of his inner opposite, the world must perforce act out the conflict.* Carl Jung in Jung and Hull (2014, p. 71)

Within this final chapter, I will reflect on the key themes that emerged and the key findings of the research. I will also discuss the implications, limitations and directions for future research.

The purpose of this research was to examine the interplay of self-awareness, value structures and subsequent effects on well-being that intersect with leader emergence. Nicely constructed thematic boxes for participant responses were easily filled and the framework was developing. However, a sentence from Braun and Clarke (2006) was a key reference as I thematically analysed the transcripts. They noted that some of the worst examples of thematic analysis have simply used the questions asked to participants as “themes” identified in the analysis where in fact no analysis has taken place. Unfortunately, this was exactly the path I was heading down, and I knew there was more required to harvest the richness in the participants’ responses. After considerably more analysis a metaphorical-themed chronology was identified. The *stagnating barrier* theme emerged then the metaphoric notion of needing to *cross the alchemic bridge* with self-awareness took shape.

Beginning with the participants’ starting points of their journeys into leadership gave perspective to the variety of ways each approached their leadership journey within their gestalt

of perception and experience. While each was moulded through their unique mode of arrival into leadership, it was the issues confronted along the way that were endured and alchemised that had similar themes, so their origin stories were critical to the reflections discussed in the interviews. Utilising the Zheng et al. (2021) framework of the four dominant leader narrative frames of being, engaging, performing and accepting provided a simple basis for interpreting their transitions. Whilst the depth and breadth of circumstance differed, the understanding immersed in self-awareness was where commonality was found as the participants matured into their leadership journey. The stagnating barriers of fear, not belonging, blind spots, lack of self-esteem, value misalignment and separation from self came through in varying ways for each of the participants.

As they progressed on their leadership journey, participants were filled with self-limiting beliefs perceived as reality. Standards given by society, religion, family, culture, social media etc. shaped views of what it is to be a person who belongs, and when they didn't match those standards, they became locked into certain belief cycles. They became absorbed, adopting the culturally biased stance and becoming stuck on the bridge unable to progress. In the pursuit to belong and live in a happy state with health and well-being, the bridges they attempted to cross, unfortunately, were bridges too nowhere.

A failure to see themselves as they were and a tendency to see others as they are not, could lead to psychological and sociological crippling. Participants when stuck in stagnating barriers knew they needed to shift from this state. When crossing the bridge, participants realised that discipline in their pursuits enabled a transformation, taking them to a deeper connectivity of themselves and others. As time progressed, a form of repatterning occurred, with the amount of interference dissipating and allowing alchemy within this transitional state. Cognitive detritus

and debris that once were characteristic of a stagnating barrier were freed and the dross began to evaporate. Attunement changed the perception during the alchemising state, fostering transformation through a cathartic interface of walking in nature, meditation, sharing, painting and art, spiritual connection etc. Through this step change process and utilising the varying tools, enablement into wellbeing, purpose and value alignment transcended the person from who they thought they were. Self-awareness and wellbeing were critical for understanding purpose as leaders' state of mind determines the direction of the organisation, followers and stakeholders. Self-awareness also drives value alignment, determining whether decisions are in congruence with the decision maker.

Participants realised they were not on a pathway to status but rather on a path to more nourishing and enriching moments. This is done through connecting and becoming attuned within themselves. The more accessible they became to themselves, the greater the perception of the meaningful life being lived. Allowing cultivated awareness as the radar detection system lessened the toll and allowed for greater leadership development. The risk of being trapped in the past and future was minimised as habitual stickiness of thoughts takes on Teflon properties, existing but flowing with coherence and flexibility rather than chaos and rigidity.

As described, the Khasi and Jainta communities demonstrate remarkable foresight in their bridge-building process, investing time and effort into natural structures to serve future generations. This long-term perspective is crucial for leaders within their development. Emergence is enduring and the importance of patience, connectivity through self awareness and focusing on the right elements to foster this is critical.

A key thread running through the thesis is the societal state in which leaders are currently emerging in relation to technology and the internet complex. Often within leadership studies, the environmental context is excluded. Consideration must be given to the rapid shift that is dramatically altering reality perceptions and impinging heavily on self-awareness in this dynamic and context-dependent environment. Technology has significantly reshaped leadership dynamics, necessitating a shift within the traditional paradigms. Borgmann (2022) argues that modern technology tends to commodify and simplify human experiences, leading to a disconnection from meaningful practices. When technology comes into our lives, then something else must go out. The connecting juncture between external computation power and the inner biological self is bound by complexity. Leveraging digital tools is crucial for leader emergence in productivity, however there is a need to recognise that technology alters reality perception and impacts self-awareness, wellbeing and value alignments. Stiegler and Roussow (2020) argue that through embodied experiences, a more accurate self-perception of a world mediated by technology is possible. Counteracting technology through self-awareness and practices that engage the world in a meaningful way is the key.

One example of combining a key stagnating barrier with technology is now given for context. When lacking self-esteem, seeking external validation through social media amplifies vulnerability to societal pressures and representations from the media. The digital world becomes a metaphorical crutch, validating oneself with immediacy. Stiegler (2010) concept of proletarianization is shown within this environment as individual autonomy diminishes further. This loss of individuation translates to people's decreasing ability to think critically so attention deficits increase and learning reduces which is continually exacerbated by pervasive exposure to online media channels. The key premise is to be able to critically engage with technology and, through skill development, shape its evolution rather than being shaped by it.

Lastly, a large proportion of leadership literature and the associated created vernacular was deemed obsolete in this research. There exists a precarious interaction between everyday life that has always existed and institutionally created forms of routine contaminating these experiences. Leader emergence not for the sake of commercial, capital or ego gain but for recognising and crossing the alchemic bridge is a lifetime pursuit, self-owned and not to be solved through monetised deliverance of a course. The whole person coming first and leadership second over a lifetime should be the approach.

To conclude, a great Zen master was asked by his student how to live a meaningful life. His answer was summarised in eight words.

*“Don’t believe your own bulls\*\*\*”. Enjoy the view”*

## Implications

The purpose of this research was to examine, within an organisational context, the interplay of self-awareness, individuals’ value structures and the effects these have on well-being within a leadership emergence paradigm. Leader emergence is bounded by complexity, fragmented findings and disjointed outcomes whereby exploration into the underexamined or unstudied domains holds the potential to reveal novel insights (Sholikhah et al., 2024). Progress could be impeded by either the nature of leadership development itself, or by ideological constraints born from an underlying social fiction of discovery. Within this research, self-awareness emerged as the cornerstone, crucial for effective leadership and leader emergence to occur. The issue within the management literature is that the complexity in the construct of self-awareness is often not recognised and terms like self-knowledge and self-consciousness are

used interchangeably, leading to misunderstanding (Carden et al., 2022). Morin (2017) supports this premise, noting that confusion exists around definitions and that self-awareness is a difficult term to define as often the context of the research determines the definition (Sutton, 2016). Unfortunately for the multi-billion-dollar leadership industry largely created on theories that continually require fresh and stimulating models to remain relevant, the findings presented in this research show that emergence into leadership will be unsteady. With self-awareness at the fore, the emerging leader is better equipped to deal with life surges, happening at the speed of the individual's nature.

The associations between wellbeing, value alignment, purpose, belonging, moving beyond fear, connection, vulnerability, etc. all bubble up from the well of self-awareness, especially when stagnating barriers serve as catalysts for the discovery of these areas.

My study provides a reminder of the importance of widening beyond constrictive theories that are implicit by design in order to examine the naturally occurring moments that take place within daily life. Firstly, if leaders know what their values are and work in accordance with these, then they are more likely to cultivate trust and respect from their followers. Equipping leaders to navigate complex organisational environments starts from within. Leader emergence is a complex process with multiple points of influence, particularly in the internet complex we are now interwoven with. Alice in Wonderland falling down the rabbit hole may have had an experience not too dissimilar to the experience of emergent leaders. Alice and emerging leaders undergo varying transformations, leaving them uncertain about who they are and in a disconnected state of uncertainty and conflicting interpretations of reality.

An emerging leader must be a rational thinker with profound self-awareness, fostering connectivity, wellbeing, intelligence, and wisdom in all pursuits. Developing practices and knowledge that enhance self-awareness serves as a metaphorical support system for overall wellbeing. By acknowledging the significance of facilitating this transformative process, employers can proactively initiate discussions and training programs early in an individual's self awareness development. True listening and receptive communication with self and others will then amplify leaders' potential. Whilst the stagnating barriers will be encountered, emerging leaders will be better equipped with the necessary insights for navigation avoiding the challenge of simultaneously facing obstacles and starting afresh with developing coping mechanisms.

I deliberately left out the happiness goal whereby existing in harmony with one's true self should translate to a well-lived life imbued with happiness. This concept of being in a constant happy state, bandied about through ontological theories and epistemological endeavours, delves into existential musings which take happiness as the centrepiece in the wellbeing halo. To prompt striving for this happy mirage destination, fleeting tasters are dished up as samples providing fuel for the continuance of the search for self-realisation to gain happiness. Literature, film, psychology, philosophy and theology intersect for this (Schlegel & Hicks, 2011) but shifting the paradigm to happiness as a derivative not an endpoint in life shifts this focal point considerably. Arrival is always a hairbreadth away, ensuring a constant, relentless, enduring pursuit.

## Limitations

While the number of participants was low, the commonality of the themes was consistent and robust. I have attempted to provide context regarding the rapid expansion of the internet complex which has ensnared organisational and personal life. Stiegler and Roussow (2020),

Crary (2022) and others have emphasised the importance of this context however the extent to which this environment plays a part in how leaders emerge has not been explored. Environmental factors give cause to emotional states therefore the alchemic bridge will be crossed within different settings. The participants interviewed were in the later stages of their careers therefore the social settings they emerged into were completely different from those of today's emerging leaders. The study focuses only on New Zealand business leaders, which may limit the understanding of diverse leadership experiences in different cultures and in multi-cultural organisations.

## Future Direction

Leader emergence is complex, as individual efficacy through influence, authority, recognition and many other phenomena interplay leading to success of the business. Ambiguities across the plethora of research and theoretical advancements tend to cloud relevance through over-complication. By drawing on the metaphor of the alchemic bridge, a reductionist approach was expressed through the emergent themes to distil rather than construct more to add to the leader emergent paradigm.

Future research is required to examine the transformative journey, with more specificity regarding the framework and concepts to reduce ambiguity. Multilevel investigations collecting qualitative data from not only the leaders but also family members, friends, social groups and the organisation to gain a full 360 perspective of emergence would provide amazing insights.

All participants were within the WEIRD paradigm therefore replication of this study cross culturally will enable new insights into emergence and possibly enable universal principles to be uncovered. Longitudinal research to follow leader emergence over extended periods rather

than in reflection will capture more of the complexities and highlight adaptive methods and techniques utilised by participants, reflecting the dynamic nature of leadership development and gaining relevant real-time insights.

Attention spans are changing through digital distractions therefore constant interruptions and communications within the business and personal worlds as more data is transferred are common (Subramanian, 2018). Future research examining self-awareness, role and task alignment and wellbeing within information saturation could be carried out through qualitative exploration. For a leader, maintaining clarity of purpose amidst constant change through self-awareness could be explored.

Quantum leadership theory is gaining momentum that aligns with the findings of this thesis providing a framework for future studies. Leaders in organisations may consider quantum physics an exotic science that has nothing to do with organizational leadership (Geok & Shaari, 2020). However, we live in a world where everything in our reality is made and shaped by energy, including organisations. Reality paradigm constructs are shifting as research fields engaging in quantum physics, quantum biology, epigenetics, neuroscience and consciousness offer differing views on reality. Quantum leadership, a newly emerging field, encompasses mindfulness, self-awareness and the understanding of interactions in all relationships. Leaders experience their lives as relational rather than ego-centred, contributing positively to a healthy business environment and enhanced wellbeing for self and organisational workers. This is different from current business strategies that focus on minimising social harm and ecological footprints. As Laszlo (2020) explains, the new sciences theorise that we are all part of one interconnected fabric of existence, instantly and everywhere connected to each other. The

quantum paradigm is relational and cooperative therefore research exploring this could show that leadership is the enabler of individual, family, community and global wellbeing.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A

### Interview script

Hi XX and great to have you participating in my leadership research. As you saw in my email, I am researching leaders' experiences and asking participants to reflect on various aspects of their leadership career specifically focusing on leader emergence, personal values, self-awareness and well-being.

I'll be recording the interview to analyse later, and I'll send you a transcript of the interview in the next couple of weeks.

ARE YOU OK IF I START THE RECORDING NOW?

You don't have to answer any questions you don't want to and can ask to have the recording to be paused at any time. You've got a copy of the information sheet I emailed you with information about the study. Have you got any questions for me? Are you happy to proceed with the interview now?

1. First can you please tell me briefly about your current role?
  - What is your current role and how long have you been in this position?
2. Please describe your pathway as you became a leader.

- Tell me about your earlier positions / opportunities that supported you in becoming more of a leader.
- definition if required

Organizational leadership is the practice of guiding and directing a group of individuals or teams towards a common goal or objective

3. What were the biggest changes you experienced in your life when becoming a leader?
  - Were there particular areas of your personal or professional life that you noticed undergoing transformation?
  - Any personal or professional skills you needed to develop or enhance to effectively carry out your leadership responsibilities?
  - Were there any shifts in your daily responsibilities, work dynamics, or relationships that you found particularly impactful?
  - How did your relationships with colleagues, subordinates, and superiors evolve once you assumed a leadership position
  - Did you experience any challenges or obstacles that were unique to your position as a leader? How did you navigate them?
  
4. How did you maintain your personal well-being in the face of those changes? Did you put any strategies or practices in place?
  - Could you provide examples of situations that posed challenges to your well-being and how you managed them?
  - Any specific adjustments you made to your self-care routine in response to the evolving demands of your role?

- Could you discuss any sources of support you tapped into during times of transition to ensure your well-being?
  - Reflecting on your experiences, are there any lessons learned that you could apply to better support your well-being
5. Reflecting on yourself as a leader, what would be some of your strengths and limitations?
- Are there specific instances or situations where your strengths were particularly instrumental in resolving challenges or driving positive change?
  - Do you seek opportunities to leverage your strengths?
  - what aspects do you consider to be areas where you could further develop or improve?
  - In what ways have your limitations motivated you to learn and evolve as a leader?
6. Asking questions now about personal values and beliefs. Description was given on values if required ... is that values provide a framework for what is considered important and guide behaviour, while beliefs represent an individual's convictions or understandings about specific aspects of the world and shape how they interpret and interact with their surroundings. Both values and beliefs are essential components of an individual's psychological and moral makeup and play a significant role in their decision-making and worldview.

Have your values changed over time, or have they remained relatively consistent? What factors have influenced any changes?

- For example, integrity, collaboration, accountability, innovation, etc.
- What strategies do you employ to remain open to evolving your values and beliefs in response to new information and experiences?
- can you share a specific instance where these principles guided a significant decision you made as a leader?
- Do you perceive any tensions between your personal values and societal expectations or norms,
- Do you find that your values align with the organization's values, or have you encountered instances where there was a disconnect? How did you handle it?
- Do you have any fundamental beliefs or philosophies that underpin your leadership style?
- Do your personal beliefs contribute to creating a positive and inclusive organizational culture?

Changes can occur through

- Values:
- Life Experiences:
- Cultural and Societal Shifts:
- Education and Learning:
- Relationships:
- Beliefs:
- New Information:
- Personal Growth:

- Crisis or Challenge:
- Cultural Exposure:
- Changing Values:

7. Self-awareness is (definition) .... How do you define self-awareness in the context of leadership or just in daily life?

“Self-awareness consists of a range of components, which can be developed through focus, evaluation and feedback, and provides an individual with an awareness of their internal state (emotions, cognitions, physiological responses), that drives their behaviours (beliefs, values and motivations) and gives an awareness of how this impacts and influences others” (Carden et al., 2022)

- Can you describe the practices or methods you use to continually develop and refine your self-awareness as a leader?
- Are there particular moments or experiences that have helped you develop your self-awareness?
- Are there specific practices you engage in to better understand your strengths and areas for improvement
- In what ways do you actively seek to uncover and address blind spots in your leadership style?

8. Concluding question ... This interview has been about digging into the confluence of self-awareness, your values and wellbeing. Is there anything extra you would like to add?

That's everything I have to ask you, have you any final thoughts or anything you'd like to add that hasn't already been covered?

Really helpful and useful for my research.

Thank you very much I will have a transcript to you within a couple of weeks.

## Appendix B

Email to potential participants:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

My name is Vaughan Judkins, and I have spent some time working in varying leadership roles across the corporate sector. I am currently doing my Master of Arts thesis in Organisational Psychology at Massey University, and I'm interested in interviewing leaders about their own leadership development. Specifically in relation to their self-awareness and well-being.

I will be interviewing eight senior leaders from organisations across Aotearoa New Zealand. The interviews will be by video conference, taking approximately 30 - 45 minutes. Participation is completely voluntary and confidential.

There is more detail about my study in the attached information sheet.

If you would like to take part in my study or would like more information, please contact me by email or phone.

Best regards

Vaughan

## Appendix C

### Information sheet

Organisational leaders' reflective perspective on their own leader emergence, self-awareness and wellbeing.

My name is Vaughan Judkins, and I am studying for my master's degree in psychology at Massey University. This complements my master's in biomedical meditation and health, completed recently whilst living in Brunei. I began studying psychology part time in 2017 when I was General Manager of BerryCo, a highly innovative enterprise growing world leading proprietary blueberries across New Zealand, launching a premium brand into New Zealand and Asian markets. Prior to BerryCo I held varying leadership roles at Zespri International, managing teams across the supply chain and as Global Marketing Manager. Currently I am General Manager of Technology, Commercial and International expansion for 26 Seasons, New Zealand's first controlled environment indoor vertical berry farm.

From my own leadership experience, I have become very interested in the interplay between leader emergence, self-awareness and well-being. For my thesis I would like to interview business leaders about their experiences and would appreciate your participation in my research.

Research participants will comprise of senior leaders in varying organisations across Aotearoa New Zealand. If you are interested in taking part, I would like to interview you by video conference using Microsoft Teams. Each interview will take approximately 40 to 50 minutes,

will be recorded and transcribed. You will be given a copy of the transcript to check for accuracy. The interviews will be conducted from now to the end of November 2023.

Participation is entirely voluntary and confidential. Recordings will be erased once they have been transcribed, and all transcripts will be stored securely. No information that could identify individuals or organisations will be released. You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Decline to answer any question.
- Withdraw from the interview at any time.
- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation.
- Ask for the recording to be paused at any time during the interview.
- Provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used.
- Be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

Researcher	Supervisor
Vaughan Judkins	Assoc. Professor Dianne Gardner
School of Psychology, Massey University	School of Psychology, Massey University
Email address	Email address D.H.Gardner@massey.ac.nz.

**Human Ethics Approval:** Ethics Notification Number: 4000027852

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher named in this document is responsible for the ethical conduct of this research. If you have any

concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher, please contact the Research Ethics Office, email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz)