LEADING IN THE MIDDLE:
CONVERSATIONS AND DIALOGIC LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

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Higher education leaders face many challenges and uncertainties that require people to interact and work together for the common good. Unfortunately, many of these interactions involve people thinking alone, defending own views, and functioning in a telling mode. Conversely, when meaningful dialogue occurs, people become engaged in ways that enhance awareness and understanding. This phenomenological study focuses on the experience of the mid-level academic leader who bridges the desires of faculty and the needs of administrators, while aiming to build a culture within the department that engages people in collegial ways. This study helps address the gap in higher education mid-level leadership research identifying the value of a dialogic way of leading that emphasizes listening, respecting, and a genuine valuing of people, building on the premise that dialogic leadership promotes collaboration and collegiality (Easley, 2008).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews of eight mid-level leaders at a small, private, liberal arts university, resulting in the four emergent themes of (1) conversational landscape: engaging important conversations, (2) creating the environment: valuing people, (3) dialogic leadership: listening and respect, foundational qualities, and (4) mid-level leadership: more than paperwork, leadership matters; and an overarching statement of the mid-level leader experience. Without explicitly naming the importance of a dialogic way of leading, the overarching statement for this study identified these mid-level academic leaders as engaging in meaningful conversations and important issues when they felt listened to, respected, and valued. Although not always getting it right, they humbly attempted to lead in a way that genuinely
respected and valued people, as they listened to all voices—not just those who supported their way of thinking—asked questions in search of deeper levels of understanding, embraced difference and ambiguity of not knowing where things would end up, and suspended their own ideas and certainties to allow room for collective wisdom to emerge for the common good. The findings of this study suggest that dialogic leadership requires a valuing of people—where there is careful listening, respect for others, space for voices to be genuine, and suspension of one’s own biases, perceptions, and certainties.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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A dialogic way of conversing raises awareness and enhances learning, as people open themselves to others through respecting, listening, and searching for shared meaning together (Bohm, 1996). Although dialogue is a healthy form of conversation, it does not seem to be well understood today, as negative rhetoric permeates the national news and polarization immobilizes communities. Isaacs (1999a) suggested that in modern culture, the ability to think and talk together has been lost, highlighting the deficit often experienced in communication efforts.

Many conversations today are characterized by people thinking alone and defending their own views, functioning in a telling mode, and maintaining biases that often leave others feeling stuck and unable to move forward (Schein, 2013). Also impacting the conversational landscape are the dysfunctional behaviors of silencing, blaming, isolating, manipulating, and bullying identified by Scharmer (2009) as “economies of absencing,” that eventually lead to a collective collapse in relationships and conversation.

Unfortunately, higher education institutions are not immune to these negative ways of communicating (Keashly & Neuman, 2010). The growing divide between people and communities (London, 2010), as well as the isolation and individualism experienced in higher education (Chin, May, Sullivan-Chin, & Woodrick, 2014; Keashly & Neuman, 2010) impacts the ability to build relationships and model healthy dialogue. For leaders in higher education, navigating this conversational landscape is not a simple endeavor, particularly for mid-level academic leaders who work to bridge the concerns and interests of faculty, staff, students, and administrators (Brown, 2001; Bryman & Lilley, 2009; Gmelch & Burns, 1993). Nancy Thomas (2007), from University of New Hampshire and director of The Democracy Imperative, urged
that colleges and universities find a renewed commitment to guiding how people interact and work together, in an effort towards improving society and promoting respectful, open-minded inquiry. Understanding the current conversational landscape in higher education and gaining perspective of a dialogic way of leading is the focus of this study.

Working together and engaging in respectful, healthy dialogue within the current educational climate is needed as the educational community wrestles with how to respond to the ever increasing pressures of budget cuts, fewer financial resources, loss of public confidence in the market value of the university, broader student enrollment, and lower four-year graduation rates (Murchison & Pejovich, 2012; Schachter, 2011; Shugart, 2013; Stanley & Algert, 2007; Wood, 2011). Leaders can become overwhelmed with knowing how to address not only these pressures, but also when engaging colleagues in an academic environment of autonomy, expert status and posturing, competition, and faceless modes of communication (White & Weathersby, 2005), in addition to the disciplinary silos, power structures, individualism, aggression, and interpersonal conflict (Bennett, 2000; Chin, et al., 2014; Schiller, Taylor, & Gates, 2004; Stanley & Algert, 2007). As academic leaders experience the challenges and issues facing the university, the conversation can easily become divisive or manipulative, leaving many to feel disempowered and mistrusting of leadership.

The Carnegie International Survey of the Academic Profession identified a significant alienation between faculty and administration, with faculty expressing dissatisfaction and doubt about the quality of leadership by top-level administrators (Lewis & Altbach, 1996). Dissatisfaction and mistrust hinder meaningful engagement and collaboration, becoming toxic for any community. Scharmer (2009) identified three voices—judgment, cynicism, and fear that block people from reaching the deeper levels of communication where potential for new
possibilities can emerge. Understanding what lies below the surface when communication breaks down, along with creating ways for building trust and respectful inquiry among higher education professionals is at the heart of what Lewis and Altback (1996) encouraged, suggesting the need for new mechanisms to bring faculty and administrators together, reestablishing communication and renewed collegiality, while fostering trust and respect. Higher education should be a place for respectful, open-minded inquiry to be modeled (Thomas, 2007), becoming an important setting for modeling effective ways of conversing and engaging in important and sometimes difficult conversations, which is relevant and needed in society today. Thus, understanding the current conversational landscape in higher education and gaining perspective of a dialogic way of leading is the focus of this study.

**Rationale**

Educational institutions are natural places for dialogue to occur, yet Hoppes and Holley (2014) identified that individuals within academic departments, colleges, or offices often work in isolation from others, and that current organizational structures in higher education negatively impact communication efforts and interaction among colleagues. The academic environment of entrenched promotion and tenure systems, disciplinary silos, hierarchical power structures, individualism, and fragmentation (Bennett, 2000; Chin, et al., 2014; Schiller, Taylor, & Gates, 2004; Stanley & Algert, 2007; Thomas, 2007) seem to support interpersonal aggression and conflict that is particularly evident among faculty today (Keashly & Neuman, 2010). In the Pew Higher Education Roundtable report, Zemsky (1996) furthered this concern of fracturing within the academic community by calling attention to the individualism, privatization of academic work, and ineffective communication throughout higher education. Recognizing the prevalence
of these relational challenges highlights the importance for learning ways of supporting and stimulating healthy conversation.

The present study identified the unique role of the mid-level leader in the academic setting, as these departmental or academic program leaders not only lead conversations within departments, but also participate in group processes throughout the university. Interestingly, in spite of the significant mid-level leadership role (Temple & Ylitalo, 2009), literature identified that faculty leaders are not well prepared for setting long-term direction and vision for the department, receive little to no leadership training, lack prior administrative experience, and have an unclear understanding of the complexity and ambiguity of their role (Floyd, 2012; Gmelch & Burns, 1993; Wolverton, Gmelch, & Sorenson, 1998). Since this faculty leader plays an important role in the university, it seems that support needs to be given for traversing the challenges of leading colleagues.

Obstacles are inherent in academia blocking mid-level leaders’ efforts for collaboration, innovation, and beneficial conversation (Barge & Little, 2002), thus requiring a greater effort in communication (Drew, 2010) for navigating the tensions and uncertainties in higher education. When responding to these rising challenges, theorists such as Bohm (1996) suggested that when the door is opened for dialogue, awareness is raised and quality of thought and relationships are strengthened. Modeling dialogic ways of communicating, particularly among those in the leadership ranks within the academic setting, is an area that has limited acknowledgment in the literature. By examining how mid-level leaders experience conversations and dialogic leadership, this study offers insights into the conversational landscape within higher education and the mid-level academic leader role.
**Purpose of Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experience of mid-level academic leaders with conversations in higher education and dialogic leadership (Isaacs, 1999b). Easley (2008) suggested that dialogic leadership moves beyond intimidation, promoting collaboration and collegiality. This study was concerned with understanding better ways of talking and thinking together, impacting how people relate to and communicate with each other. Dialogue requires a thinking together with others (Isaacs, 1999a) and can emerge as people place value and meaning in creating healthy ways of engaging each other in conversation and collaboration. Through semi-structured interviews of mid-level academic leaders at a small, private liberal arts university, I sought to better understand the essence of dialogic leadership and how mid-level leaders experience the practices of listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing. These practices of dialogic leadership create a sense of wholeness while advancing a stronger, more effective form of conversation (Isaacs, 1999a).

The central research questions for this study focused on the essence of dialogic leadership and conversations that take place within and across departments in the higher education setting. The following research questions this study sought to address are:

1. How do mid-level leaders in higher education describe conversations that happen within the academic setting?

2. How do mid-level leaders in higher education describe their experience with dialogic leadership?

**Conceptual Framework**

The design of this study is guided by Scharmer’s (2009) structures of conversation within Theory U, utilizing the description of the fields of downloading, debate, and dialogue to depict
the conversational landscape today in higher education. Theory U is a framework and method for creating change at the level below the surface of symptoms and structures, to the underlying paradigms of thought, connecting to the deeper sources of creativity and self, in an effort to understand and practice learning from the future as it emerges. The structures of conversation emphasize the difference between talking nice, talking tough, inquiry, and collective creativity. The first of four fields, termed as “downloading,” refers to conversation described as habitual patterns and routines, blocking any emergent conversation as one does not see beyond existing behaviors and thoughts (Scharmer, 2009). The “participants” in this form of conversation are passive receivers of information who engage in talking nice and speaking what others want to hear, rather than what they truly see or feel. Scharmer described that many meetings and classrooms are designed to function in this way of downloading, somehow seeing this format as an efficient model for accomplishing tasks or teaching information. Nelson, Deuel, Slavit, and Kennedy (2010) also described this way of conversing as skimming the surface and avoidance of substantive conversation. Their research on collaborative inquiry confirmed that in the educational setting, teachers felt there was little time for engaging in professional dialogue, nor did they want to go beyond the superficial sharing of ideas.

The second conversational field of debate is another familiar conversation style modeled throughout society, focusing on one’s own views, assumptions, and biases (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999a; Schein, 2003). The purpose of this form of communication is centered on making a point, convincing others, or winning a verbal battle (Prewitt, 2011). As participants verbalize distinct sides of issues, debate quickly moves to an entrenched perspective polarizing people, blocking conversation from going beyond one’s own views and perspectives (Maiese, 2003). When operating within the downloading and debate fields of conversation, behavior becomes
reactionary to the immediate issues and crises (Scharmer, 2009), functioning more as a wall rather than a bridge in conversation.

The more habitual modes of conversation have their place and value (Gunnlaugson & Moore, 2009), but the challenges facing people today require going deeper, below the surface, seeking new awareness and ways to see (Isaacs, 1999a; Scharmer, 2009). When conversation moves beyond rational thought (Ho & Kuo, 2009) towards fields three and four, a new conversational spirit arises as people embrace the collective whole, rather than the reliance on a leader-as-hero who has the illusion of being in control (Wheatley & Frieze, 2011). Creating a new understanding and awareness within oneself helps shift conversation away from passivity and polarization, towards the third conversational field of dialogue, described as a more generative way of talking and thinking together (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999a; Scharmer, 2009). When letting go of biases and assumptions, dialogue builds a collective understanding, allowing creative thinking to occur and greater commitment to implementing decisions in the ways that the group intended (Schein, 2003).

In addition to the fields of conversation in Scharmer’s Theory U, David Bohm’s (1996) insights on the nature of collective thought adds understanding to the foundation and practice of dialogue. Bohm specifically identified the dialogue process as suspending assumptions, observing and listening to others, welcoming difference, allowing safe space for difficult subjects to surface, listening to one’s inner voice, slowing the discussion, and searching for underlying meaning. Extending the work of Bohm, the founding director of MIT’s Dialogue Project, William Isaacs (1999a) defined four practices of dialogic leadership as listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing. He recognized dialogue as a discipline of collective thinking and
inquiry, paying attention to what lies below the surface, with the ability to transform the quality of conversation.

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 depicts the foundation for understanding the conversational landscape in higher education, making a connection to downloading and debate ways of conversing (Scharmer, 2009), while exploring the connection to dialogic leadership (Isaacs, 1999b), particularly from the mid-level leaders experience.

![Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Conversational Landscape in Higher Education.](image-url)

The challenges facing higher education today are complex and in an effort to better understand the hidden territory that lies below the surface, leaders need to experience the conversational landscape with fresh eyes (Scharmer, 2009), aiming to understand the impact of the dialogic leadership practices of listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing. Though not
easy to describe, those who have experienced dialogue understand how the quality of conversation changes as persons embrace the new conversational spirit while learning to think and talk together (Schein, 2003). As mid-level leaders respond to uncertainties and tensions within higher education, these scholars (Bohm, Isaacs, Scharmer) suggest that a new conversational spirit that reaches below the surface, by engaging in deep listening, respectful inquiry, suspending of judgments, and genuine voicing, has the potential to open possibilities for a dialogic way of leading that supports collegiality and new ways for responding to challenges.

**Significance of the Study**

Building on the fields of conversation and the practices of dialogue, the focus of this study was to understand how the mid-level leader in higher education reflects on and makes sense of dialogic leadership and their experience with conversations in the academic setting. The different spirit that is created through the collective power of dialogue has the potential to create a transformative shift, as movement away from polarization is experienced and energy in difference is channeled towards something new (Cooper, et al., 2013; Isaacs, 1999a). Unfortunately, there are often obstacles that block effective communication (Maiese, 2003), so as leaders and facilitators discern ways to approach situations that have distinct sides or unengaged participants, learning ways of supporting and stimulating healthy conversation, even with differing viewpoints and understandings, creates the opportunity for new awareness and learning to occur while strengthening the quality of thought and relationship (Bohm 1996; Scharmer, 2009).

Dialogue and dialogic leadership have a significant effect on the community as persons learn to respect, listen, build understanding, search for shared meaning, and remain open to others (Bohm, 1996, Isaacs, 1999b; Schein, 2003). When there is meaningful dialogue people are
engaged in ways that model a sense of learning, openness, and understanding that is gained by the interaction with others (Scharmer, 2009). Part of the leader’s responsibility then is to create opportunities for individuals to meet others in communicative engagements, encouraging dialogue that helps to change and shape the way people see each other (April, 1999). Engaging in conversation that expects more from each other opens the space where people talk about things that matter. Wheatley (2009) contended that the world can be changed if people start listening to one another again, with simple and honest conversation where all have a chance to speak, everyone feels heard, and all listen well. As the quality of conversation grows, a new conversational spirit opens the possibilities for collegiality, connection, and collaboration throughout the campus community, with the potential for breaking down professional isolation (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010).

When leaders prime the environment for connection and respectful inquiry in group processes, shared meaning flows among and through the group, becoming the glue holding people together (Bohm, 1996). Although dialogue requires a commitment of time, as mid-level leaders realize the significant impact that the dialogic practices of listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing can have on relationships, the new conversational spirit opens possibilities for collegiality and better understanding of all stakeholders (Isaacs, 1999a; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010). The benefit of dialogue can be far reaching as the process serves to strengthen relationships moving conversation from individual perspective towards whole group satisfaction (Isaacs, 1999a) with the potential ripple effect going beyond the mid-level leader to those they interact with throughout the academic setting.
Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined to help bring clarity to the study:

*Collective* – all participants make an important contribution for developing an integrated, whole view (Maiese, 2003).

*Collegial conversation* – academic communities coming together to hold meaningful dialogue about central educational questions that are faced today in our colleges and universities (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010).

*Container* – the most important dimension of dialogue concerns the field in which interaction occurs, the “container” or setting which is created for human activity and where creative transformation can take place; containers are essential to sustain and deepen a sense of safety (Isaacs, 1999a).

*Debate* – try to overcome others with one’s own view, talking tough (Scharmer, 2009).

*Dialogic leadership* – consists of the four practices of listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing; a “way of leading that consistently uncovers, through conversation, the hidden creative potential in any situation” (Isaacs, 1999b, p. 2).

*Dialogue* – a structured conversation, or series of conversations, intended to create, deepen, and build human relationships and understandings (Coleman & Deutsch, 2012); a shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together; offering the possibility of a new order of communication and relationship with ourselves, each other, and the world (Bohm, 1996);

*Discussion* – dominant mode of interaction in professional settings, powerful but limited mode of exchange, goal to gain control and make a decision, choosing between alternatives, thinking alone (Isaacs, 1999a); avoid talking about hidden assumptions (London, 2010).
Downloading – functioning from patterns of the past, using polite routines and speaking not what one thinks but what others want to hear (Scharmer, 2009).

Empathic listening – capacity to connect with another person or living system by activating the intelligence of the heart (Scharmer, 2009).

Fields of structure – relationship between the observer and observed, the place or position from which attention originates: habits, open mind, open heart, and open will (Scharmer, 2009).

Framing conversations - framing a conversation influences how others see an issue and focuses their attention on particular aspects of it, is the essence of targeting a communication to a specific audience.

Generative - the subtle change that connects one to a deeper source of knowing, including one’s best self and future possibility (Scharmer, 2009).

Humble inquiry – the art of learning to ask better questions that help build positive relationships in hopes to build better understanding and mutual respect while recognizing and giving value to the other (Schein, 2013).

Inquiry - gaining insight into someone else's perspective through asking questions; as persons ask questions and listen, they gain greater awareness into their own and others' thought processes, and discover issues that separate or unite them (Maiese, 2003).

Lived experience – the breathing of meaning, the starting point and the end point of phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990).

Mid-level academic leader – for this study, the mid-level leader is someone who is in the role of department chair or academic program director.
Phenomenology – describes the common meaning for participants of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013), in this specific study it is the phenomenon or essence of dialogue and the transformative power of conversation.

Polarization - extreme positions in a conflict where people take sides and important lines of communication and interaction that are normal to peaceful relationships are cut off, and trust diminishes (Maiese & Norlen, 2003).

Shared meaning – meaning is not static but flowing, therefore when meaning is shared, the group talks together coherently and thinks together (Bohm, 1996).

Suspending – enables participants to become aware of things they would not have otherwise seen, and allows thought to move more freely so that truth can emerge (Maiese, 2003); opening a new space of inquiry and wonder (Scharmer, 2009); neither repressing nor following through on an assumption or reaction, but rather fully attend to it (Bohm, 1996).

Synergy - The interaction of two or more agents or forces so that their combined effect is greater than the sum of their individual effects.

Theory U – a framework and method for creating change at the level below symptoms and structures, to the underlying paradigms of thought, connecting to the deeper sources of creativity and self; proposing to understand and practice learning from the future as it emerges (Scharmer, 2009).

Transformative - deep and lasting change, a developmental shift or a change in worldview (Stevens-Long, Schapiro, and McClintock, 2012).

Delimitations

This study is purposefully limited to those participants who are mid-level academic leaders in higher education. These participants have the unique opportunity to lead groups in
departmental and program meetings as well as participate in group processes throughout the university. The study is limited to narratives of the participants who self-report their experiences with conversations and practices of dialogic leadership. I acknowledge that there are varying degrees of experience with dialogue and recognize my bias for what I perceive to be essential to the dialogue experience may be a limitation. How the mid-level leader experiences conversation may be due to their limited experience or understanding of the qualities of dialogic leadership and training for leading group processes. When interviewing participants, regardless of the expertise of the leaders, this study will determine how mid-level leaders attach meaning to the practices of dialogic leadership and the quality of conversations in higher education.

**Organization of the Remaining Chapters**

The following chapter presents a review of literature related to higher education mid-level leadership and understanding of dialogic conversations. Chapter 3 is an explanation of the methodology used to collect data and the procedures of the study. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the research and an analysis of the data, and finally, chapter 5 discusses the major findings and recommendations for future research and policy implications.
CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study sought to understand the meaning that mid-level academic leaders ascribe to their conversational experiences that happen within and across departments in the academic community. This chapter presents a review of the literature on dialogue, specifically exploring quality of conversations and dialogic leadership within society and higher education. The conversational framework presented in Theory U (Scharmer, 2009), along with Isaacs’ (1999a) art of thinking together, and Bohm’s (1996) practices of dialogue will be explored. In addition, this chapter will identify literature regarding the importance of mid-level leadership and the integral role of conversations within a department and the broader higher education community.

Frameworks for Understanding Conversations

Within the conceptual framework for this study, downloading and debate types of conversing were identified as being practiced and taught in the academic setting (McCambridge, 2003; Scharmer, 2009). What we do not know is whether a dialogic way of leading might impact the academic setting, and how dialogue can impact the climate and relationships among faculty and administrators. This section considers how the structures of conversation in Theory U, Bohm’s principles of dialogue, and Isaacs’ art of thinking together help us understand conversations today.

Human interaction and communication play pivotal roles in organizational life (Isaacs, 1999b), highlighting the importance of conversation and connection at all levels within organizations and between all people. In spite of the pivotal role that communication plays, many professionals feel that the format for which information is dispersed and deliberation takes place fails to connect and give people meaning (Wheatley, 2009). Too often, professionals and persons in authority engage in one-way conversations that result in a telling atmosphere (Schein,
2013) rather than recognizing what Peter Senge described as the undercurrents lying beneath the surface (Isaacs, 1999a). Unhealthy communication patterns coupled with the complex challenges and uncertainties of today seem to either bring people together or tear them apart, creating a sense of urgency for respectful inquiry with hopes of stimulating a new sort of conversation, and allowing for important issues to surface and relationships to be strengthened (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999a; Scharmer, 2009).

In the midst of challenging and uncertain times, Wheatley (2007) suggested that leaders need to help people stay present with the chaos, while walking together and looking for new insights and capacities to emerge. Even though chaotic times often bring forth difficult problems that lead to strained relationships, increased pressures, and unrealistic expectations, Isaacs (1999a) encouraged that kindling and sustaining a new conversational spirit has the power to penetrate and dissolve the most difficult problems within relationships, organizations, and communities. Understanding this conversational spirit grants a fresh look into the structure of traditional ways of conversing; laying the groundwork for helping people to recognize when groups get stuck and breakdown begins to happen. These breakdowns are all too familiar within politics, executive leadership, educational institutions, and communities as many speculations and harsh words are spoken among people. These challenges create greater divides between people, magnifying the need for and importance of discovering a new way of talking and thinking together.

**Theory U and Structures of Conversation**

Otto Scharmer, senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management, founding chair of the Presencing Institute, and author of *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges* (2009), identified ways for complex organizations today to move into a quality of awareness and
attention that people, individually and collectively, can apply to their actions and communication efforts. When actions reflect awareness and attention, behaviors can be transformed by an opening of the mind, heart, and will (Scharmer, 2009). These openings are the foundation of Theory U, birthed out of the early work at MIT with Peter Senge, Bill Isaacs, and other colleagues in the 1990s whose findings were based on research interviews of 150 leaders, entrepreneurs, and innovators, and the subsequent 18 years of work. Scharmer’s Theory U is based on the premise that quality of results is not based on what people do or how they do it, but on what people observe, pay attention to, and are aware of—the inner place from which people function (https://www.presencing.com/theoryu). Ho and Kuo (2010) described the U theory as going beyond the interpersonal aspects of team learning and systems thinking towards a “deeper personal generative learning” (p.106).

Scharmer’s research uncovered that when individuals, groups, and organizations let go of narrow perceptions and patterns of the past, they gain access to a deeper level of cognition and awareness by redirecting one’s attention from the exterior to the interior, allowing the quality of perception to change and a connection to the necessary creative process for uncovering what is emerging (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013). This theory describes the movement necessary down the left side of the U in order to experience the deep transformation that occurs at the bottom of the U. As persons begin to open the mind and heart as they move down the U, an opening of the mind at the bottom of the U allows for the capacity to see with fresh eyes as persons and groups begin to open themselves to something new. This movement towards an appreciative inquiry and empathic listening engages an opening of the heart, followed by the necessity of letting go of old identities to allow the opening of the will towards a new future. Crossing over the threshold at the bottom of the U is where new meaning emerges, tapping into an individual’s highest future
potential and sense of purpose and calling. The bottom of the U is described by Scharmer as the blind spot, a deeper place in a journey that not many travel. While on this journey, people are hindered by three voices: the voice of judgment that blocks the open mind, the voice of cynicism that closes the open heart, and the voice of fear that shuts down the open will. Leaders who recognize this journey and the obstacles in the way bring an awareness and transformation that helps people operate from a heightened level of energy and future possibility (Scharmer, 2009; Senge, et al., 2004).

Levels of conversation are also identified to help individuals and collective processes move towards this threshold at the bottom of the U. Figure 2 depicts the four fields of social structures showing the varying levels of conversation. Conversation described as downloading, starts as politeness, a speaking what they want to hear, and lacks reflection. The second field of debate is a speaking from what one thinks, which in Western culture has become identified as confrontational, yet can also be seen as an opportunity for sharing of views, assumptions and

![Figure 2. Four Field Structures of Conversation (Scharmer, 2009).](image-url)
observations. The challenge with these types of conversation—downloading and debate—is that complexities are not really addressed and persons do not speak up about what is truly happening within organizations.

Scharmer conveyed the importance of broadening one’s ability to converse in ways that address challenges. The higher fields of three and four, described as dialogue and presencing, are especially needed when the complexities are greater. When people move away from defending their own view to being curious about others, they begin to see self as part of the larger whole. Conversation then shifts into the third field described as dialogue. Reflection and inquiry help create this awareness of others viewpoints and experiences, with the potential for the conversation to move into a generative flow as a letting go helps one to find a deeper space of presence and connection to others. Based on years of research, Scharmer and colleagues (2009) discovered the fourth field of presencing, where conversation is described as reaching a point of communion, a deep sense of understanding and common ground.

To clarify, the first two fields of downloading and debate are described as conforming and confronting while fields three and four become more relational with a collective emphasis and connection. Field one is considered a hierarchical, centralized structure or bureaucracy, based on patterns of the past. Field two represents decentralized structures where competition thrives and decision-making moves closer to the customer, similar to the organization of university departments. Shifting then to field three, the quality of relationship and a networked structure of coordination occur through the mutual adjustment in relationships and the spirit of collaboration that moves not only within groups but between groups. Field three suggests that effective decision making and meetings should consist of an agreed upon agenda, an environment that holds space for difference in interests and viewpoints, allowing colleagues to
debate together, followed with suspended listening practice and reflective dialogue. Field four becomes the ability to launch towards the emerging whole, the future possibility based on the common ground of a sense of shared purpose and principles (Scharmer, 2009).

When considering the validity of Theory U and how it can inform a greater understanding of conversation in higher education, Figure 3 shows the collective social spaces that can create and destroy conversation. The U movement, described as the field of presencing (bottom of Figure 3) gives birth to newness, while the shadow side or antithesis of presencing in conversation is described as absencing (top of Figure 3). Absencing describes the shift into silencing of views, blaming others, and holding-on that keep that keep people from connecting to each other and creates a disconnection within the inner, authentic self. As this disconnect deepens, collective potential is poisoned with manipulation, harassing and bullying, ultimately leading to collective collapse (Scharmer, 2009).

Figure 3. Social Economies of Creation and Destruction, (Scharmer, 2009).
As leaders meet the daunting challenges within their institutions, those who understand the field structures within Theory U’s framework may be able to shift towards engaging people in deeper relationships and conversing of levels three and four rather than the typical functioning of levels one and two. Unfortunately, it appears as if the media and political system tend to feed the shadow space of absencing, thus, understanding the conversational structures of Theory U can be especially valuable, particularly for gaining greater clarity of what leads to collective collapse during uncertain times of leadership. Gunnlaugson (2011) identified the potential in exploring the fields of dialogue and presencing within the context of teaching in higher education. The study identified that for greater interpersonal discernment and depth, the embracing of liminality is needed, by moving beyond singular truths towards examining multiple possibilities. With hopes of moving people towards an emerging future, those in leadership are faced with the significant task of bringing people together in ways that build relationships and create a culture of healthy dialogue and inquiry.

**Bohm’s Principles of Dialogue**

Based on the literature reviewed, the work of David Bohm’s nature of collective thought is foundational in the understanding of dialogue. Bohm (1996) identified a core problem in society as that of not knowing how to live together in this ever-changing world, where current ways of dealing with problems and challenges are based on truths from the past and then imposed on others. Bohm believed instead that the dialogic process is generated and sustained at the collective level through a relaxed and nonjudgmental curiosity, with the aim of seeing things in fresh and clear ways. Making space for healthy dialogue is necessary in groups; and unless people share meaning, purpose, and values together, the culture among them becomes incoherent, driving people and societies apart (Bohm, 1996). Therefore, understanding what
happens as people communicate and how conversations move towards dialogue, is beneficial for all people, especially leaders who strive to create an environment that advances a stronger and effective form of conversation, bringing out the best in people as they engage in collegial conversations (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010).

The foundation from which the principles of dialogue are built, involve suspending of assumptions, not judging; observing and listening to one another; welcoming differences and exploring them; allowing taboo subjects to be raised safely; listening to your inner voice; slowing the discussion; and searching for underlying meaning (Bohm, 1996). Bohm used the analogy of a polluted river, recognizing that when pollution is removed downstream, the problem is not solved. He suggested instead that the real solution is in addressing what is generating the pollution at the source. Relating this analogy then to group processes and conversation, attention is drawn to understanding the source of underlying thoughts and assumptions, which often show up in conversation and group development, and at some point if not attended to, results in anxieties or tensions becoming the focus.

**Isaacs’ Art of Thinking Together**

Dr. William Isaacs, lecturer at MIT’s Sloan School of Management, co-founder of MIT’s Organizational Learning Center, founder and president of Dialogos, director of the Dialogue Project, and author of *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together (1999a)*, has had a far-reaching impact through his influential work with collective leadership and insight on dialogue. He described dialogue as a discipline of collective thinking and inquiry that transforms the quality of conversation and the thinking below the surface. Within modern culture, many have lost touch with the “fire of conversation” which reveals the current shallowness of trading information or
striving to win points (Isaacs, 1999a). He encouraged that better conversation can re-kindled that fire and bridge the communication gap within organizations and between people.

Conversation today has a tendency for people to think alone while defending one’s own views and maintaining positions that often leave the feeling of being stuck and unable to move forward. In contrast though, Isaacs (1999a) described that learning together can create a sense of wholeness as people have a direct responsibility in the dialogue, allowing the conversation to develop through and from the people. He also suggested that if dialogue can be seen as a “conversation in motion” one’s perception can move from a static, entrenched, linear concept towards an evolving movement, continuing even beyond the formal conversational setting. In dialogue, people explore the uncertainties and questions that do not already have answers (Isaacs, 1999b; Schein, 2013), creating a new sense of purpose in gathering together for conversations that matter.

Isaacs used Bohm’s (1996) theory of thought and principles of dialogue to develop the four key behaviors of listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing to further understand the art of thinking together. These principles became the foundation of the Dialogue Project at MIT and the understanding of dialogic leadership. People hunger for genuine conversation (Binding & Tapp, 2008), thus creating the “container” or environment for dialogue to occur could likely be the most important dimension of conversation and the group process (Isaacs, 1999a). Within dialogue, Isaacs described the creation of the container as necessary to hold the different “qualities of pressure, energy, and knowledge” in rich and complex ways, allowing for greater ability to see what happens “upstream” towards the source, while gaining greater clarity and capacity to reflect, change, and heal (Isaacs, 1999a, p. 255). As people gain this clarity and capacity for reaching to the deepest level of being human, learning occurs from the experiences
of diversity, tension, and conflict (Palmer, 2011). Furthermore, when organizations are understood as living systems, the essence of dialogue is experienced as neither static nor linear, and is not minimized to a few simple techniques or an imposing of oversimplified rules (Isaacs, 1999a).

Isaacs’ conceptual framework for conversation is depicted by two basic paths in Figure 4, describing the process when a conversation moves past the initial deliberations towards either the direction of discussion or towards dialogue. Within this framework, the underlying shift or critical point is identified when one discovers their own internal choice to defend or suspend their assumptions and understandings. When choosing the latter, listening without resistance leads to reflective dialogue and furthers the movement towards generative dialogue. This movement is where thinking and feeling happens as a whole, and where unprecedented possibility and new insights emerge, which is at the heart of thinking together (Isaacs, 1999a).

Figure 4. Ways of Talking Together: Two Basic Paths (Isaacs, 1999a).
Dialogue: Conversations that Work

As Scharmer (2009) suggested in Theory U, downloading and debate are the dominant ways that conversations are taking place today. Without an intentional effort to learn the possibilities for reaching a new way of thinking and talking together, people and conversations remain stuck in the fierce debates and telling way of communicating (Schein, 2013). In response to this type of communication, a movement towards conversations that seem to work has been growing as people have built on the understanding and teachings of scholars like David Bohm, William Isaacs, and others who have opened the doors for understanding dialogue. Some examples of organizations and networks that are working to advance the field of dialogue are the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, a network of thousands of innovators who bring people together across divides to tackle today’s toughest challenges; Kettering Foundation, an organization providing cooperative research and publications that are conducted from the lens of the citizen, focusing on what the collective body of people can do to help make democracy work as it should; along with many grassroots organizations such as, Public Conversations Project, World Café, Art of Hosting, and Living Room Conversations, all working to build a container for dialogue and healthy conversations.

Throughout history, rituals of conversation were evident in tribal gatherings and community events where all were treated with respect, taking days to gather together honoring each voice (Isaacs, 1999a). Similar to tribal gatherings, thoughts merge slowly in dialogic conversations, with words not being directed to any one person; similar to what happens when sitting at a campfire where the focus is directed in the center and often eye contact is not made with others. Lambrects, et al. (2011) suggested that the focus on the center gives a better chance of hearing and understanding what is actually said. Creating a good climate of communication
(Schein, 2013) helps people experience more deeply the power of conversation and what is meant by dialogue.

Moving away from the fields of downloading and debate towards the generative fields of dialogue and presencing, special attention is made for looking at the whole thought process rather than just the content in the conversation (Bohm, 1996; Hartz-Karp, 2005; Wilcox & McCray, 2005). Dialogue emphasizes components that are not as evident in typical conversations, such as slowing down, allowing time and space for the internal work of listening and reflecting to happen, and for all voices to be heard before addressing issues (Maiese, 2003). Interestingly, dialogue is often used to describe a conversation, but not all conversations are considered a dialogue.

Understanding what dialogue is not, may be helpful to understand. Dialogue is not mediation, negotiation, or debate, and is often confused with discussion. For example, a discussion emphasizes the analysis of many points of view, which has its value, but is limited and does not go much beyond various points of view (Bohm, 1996). Discussion emphasizes the selection of the best option, justifying and defending assumptions and opinions with the basic point being to convince or persuade (McCambridge, 2003). Participants operate from differing perspectives where they rarely ask questions, primarily thinking about what to say rather than listening, and focusing on moral or logical flaws in the “other side” (Maiese, 2003). Generally, one party wins and another loses (Isaacs, 1999a; Lasker & Weiss, 2003). However, what is most unsettling is that professional settings have typically adopted this powerful mode of exchange as the best way to obtain results, emphasizing either/or perspectives, focusing on order and control (Isaacs, 1999a) rather than on creating an environment, building relationships, engaging in humble inquiry, and generating opportunities for dialogue.
Creating the Environment

Leaders who model nonjudgmental behavior while acknowledging the challenge to be authentic, move away from the need to find a quick fix (Schein, 2003), creating the climate or “container” to help people build necessary relationships and handle difficult issues (Isaacs, 1999a). Creating an environment that holds these challenges delicately takes intentional focus. Focusing begins with the simple aspect of the physical setting where groups are often seated in a circle to encourage a sense of community. One effective technique that has been defined to help make conversations work is the Circle Process (Boyes-Watson, 2005b; Pranis, 2005). The Circle Process emphasizes inviting all participants to communicate face to face in honest dialogue, honoring each voice and experience, emphasizing connection while utilizing wisdom and life experiences for generating new understandings and possibilities (Pranis, 2005). As space is created for participants to have an opportunity to share, listen, and view each other as colleagues, they are also encouraged to leave status, power, and authority differences on the outside of the container (McCambridge, 2003).

When inviting people to the table for conversation, the goal is to have many perspectives represented. Traditionally, many voices are left out of conversations. So hosting conversations that have a variety of voices represented can offer new and important perspectives. These voices should not just be those who have power, money, position, resources, or as the token representative of a minority group (Baker & Collier, 2003; Boyes-Watson, 2005a; Leirvik, 2005; London, 2010; Umbreit, Coates, & Vos, 2007). Giving every participant equal voice creates a truer and better understanding of reality, particularly through restorative practices that develop a sense of community as people build awareness and respect towards others (Boyes-Watson, 2005b). As leaders realize the importance of the setting and tone, what is created in a healthy
and respectful dialogue connects people to a deeper level (Wheatley, 2009). Engaging at the heart level moves conversations to a new place as people become courageous and acknowledge that there is more to life than just self (Wheatley, 2007).

New life is breathed into relationships and organizations as environments are created where people feel comfortable asking questions, where a sense of confidence and value of each other is instilled, where face to face interaction is supported, where a sense of importance and respect is created, and where a climate of trust builds relationships (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2013) suggested that priming good feelings in those being led creates resonance, a reservoir of positivity that frees the best in people. These scholars suggest that people need to feel that their voice matters and that their vote counts, allowing for the opening to bring their best self to the table.

**Relationships**

Relationships and conversations are inseparable; shaping the quality and interaction as people share, explore, and weave together ideas, thoughts, opinions, and feelings, creating a newness and generative potential together (Anderson, 2012). In the diverse world of today, thinking more broadly and deeply about the role of relationships and the capacity for personal growth is something that all people can embrace (Schein, 2013). Relationships are built as people whose conversations reflect dialogue “speak in a way that seeks to contribute one to the other” (Isaacs, 1999a, p. 393). Building these relationships takes an intentional effort and when people experience connection and collaboration in relationships versus the usual isolation and competition that are often found in their workplaces, conversations become a place where trust is built and space is opened for dealing with complex situations (Schein, 2013).
Even though literature supports the importance of building relationships in group processes (Pranis, 2005), unfortunately focusing on relationships between people and within oneself are generally not seen as priorities (Boogaard, 2000). However, as people connect in real time—talking, laughing, and sharing stories—a powerful bond is created through their belief in what they are doing and in one another (Goleman, et al., 2013). Dialogue can be important for developing relationships (Amestoy, et al., 2014) and as groups move from expressing opinions and making statements, to asking genuine questions, they find new ways of thinking together (Scharmer, 2009). Once people find value in these ways of relating together they move towards more productive collaboration, including understanding of beliefs, meanings, values, and fears held by all involved (Chasin, et al., 1996). Effectively engaging the community ultimately brings commitment and change to the community as people think together, listen deeply to other’s views, explore new ideas and perspectives, search for points of agreement, and openly examine assumptions (Baker & Collier, 2003; London, 2010). When everyone is both student and teacher, expert and apprentice, a rich exchange of experience and learning takes place (Wheatley, 2007). This shared experience and learning opens the door for meaningful dialogue to occur as leaders emphasize relationship building and convening of healthy conversations (Scharmer, 2009).

**Humble Inquiry**

A desire to move beyond the telling mode of debate and downloading of information requires one to embrace the posture of curiosity and wonder (Scharmer, 2009; Schein, 2013). Interestingly, curiosity and wonder are not words typically used to describe conversations today. Yet for conversations to work, Schein (2013) suggested that asking genuine questions for which one does not have an answer is the type of inquiry that helps build relationships based on
curiosity and an interest beyond self. Schein has defined this art of questioning and drawing someone out as humble inquiry. He described that we live in a pragmatic, problem-solving culture where people value knowing things and telling others what one knows. This way of functioning is more like following a checklist rather than one of respect, genuine curiosity, and the desire to improve the quality of conversation (Schein, 2013). Opening the inquiry with a question and curiosity creates the space for exploring possibilities and perspectives together (Nelson, et al., 2010), helping to guide conversations towards substantive dialogue.

The essence of dialogue is experienced when participants are open to what others are saying, collectively exploring alternative points of view and searching for common understanding (London, 2010). People who participate in genuine group dialogue learn that common understanding does not mean reaching agreement or a solution, but that new meaning emerges, integrating multiple perspectives (Maiese, 2003). When the concern goes beyond self and position to making sense of each other, people can explore beliefs and feelings that shape behaviors, and develop skills of cooperation, compassion, understanding, and solidarity (Hernandez-Tubert, 2011). Movement from talking about opinions and making statements towards thinking together and asking genuine questions, launches a deeper connection (Scharmer, 2009) as persons redirect their attention from self to others. This collective intelligence is needed to address the complex questions that require a deeper focus on core processes, in order to positively affect systemic change (Hurley & Brown, 2010).

Practicing humble inquiry creates a new awareness allowing one to pause and pay attention to the behavior and talk that is happening (Schein, 2013). This awareness allows the ability to rethink how one is speaking and further recognize when there is no humility in inquiry, and ultimately blocking dialogue from taking place (Amestoy, et al., 2014). Humble inquiry
sends a new kind of message that shows interest in the other person and signals a willingness to listen (Schein, 2013) opening the space for deeper levels of conversation to take place. The reviewed literature suggests that discovering common interests and shared knowledge, asking deeper underlying questions to help understand critical issues, and engaging stakeholders in ways that cultivate collective intelligence, are significant leadership endeavors to understand.

**Generative Potential**

The tacit knowledge that emerges from the depth of conversation and relationship (Bohm, 1996) cannot be easily described or prescribed, but as one experiences it, they know they have entered a different level of conversation (Isaacs, 1999a). Conversation that moves into dialogue aims to “build a group that can think generatively, creatively, and most importantly, together” (Schein, 2003, p. 30). Generative dialogue emphasizes the natural flow of conversation where the whole group discovers collectively new ideas by genuinely and respectfully listening to each other, reflecting on one’s own views, and being open to the possibility that ideas will be changed or enhanced, even when one does not like what they hear (Isaacs, 1999a). Communities who convene together and engage in open dialogue about things that matter to them develop a sense of unity and resonance that moves them from talk to action as they become inspired and empowered, reviving a new hope and commitment to change (Campbell & Lassiter, 2010; Goleman, et al., 2013; Wheatley, 2009). Senge stated that when people rediscover the art of talking together, they do not go back, awakening something deep within themselves (Isaacs, 1999a).

Generative potential is described by individuals and groups as having reached a deeper level of behavior where intent, will, and commitment are strong (Pruitt & Kaufer, 2002). Leaders who become aware of the value of the undivided whole, linking all together (Isaacs,
move into generative leadership that is likened to an improvisational dance. With this dance, the starting point is clear but where the dance ends and the movements go in between depends on what the musician plays and how the dancer responds (Klimek, Rittenhein, & Sullivan, 2008). Through this dance, courage grows; the heart opens, and once engaged it becomes easy to be brave (Wheatley, 2009). As new possibilities are discovered, people recognize that they have been moved, and something great has just happened that often cannot be described in words (Isaacs, 1999a). Hartz-Karp’s (2005) study of a deliberative process discovered that the satisfaction level at the end of the process had forty-two percent of participants saying their views were changed as a result of dialogue, along with more admitting to broadening their views, and most importantly, that ninety-seven percent were willing to participate in a dialogue process again.

Even in healthy conversations there can be a period of uncertainty, making one wonder if engaging the hard work is worth the effort. When people can stay present with the uncertainties, questions, and messiness, groups begin to achieve inclusion, trust, collaboration, and the collective voice, so one’s best self and future possibility can emerge (Scharmer, 2009). Thinking together creates movement beyond just simply reporting out old thoughts as the generative spirit found in dialogue helps people learn to use the energy of their differences to enhance their collective wisdom (Isaacs, 1999b). Taking the posture of questioning and critical reflection moves conversations beyond the linear, sequential, rational process of seeing such that previously held views are now too narrow, too limiting, and really cannot explain the new experience (Cranton & Roy, 2003). Talking together creates a “natural cross-pollination of relationships, ideas, and meaning” as conversations become the heartbeat and life of organizations, communities, and cultures (Hurley & Brown, 2010, p.3). Understanding the
impact of the current conversations within our institutions urges leaders to embrace and understand the value and potential of dialogue and dialogic leadership.

**Dialogic Leadership**

Just as creating an environment, building relationships, engaging in humble inquiry, and thinking generatively are important areas to understand, learning a dialogic way of leading has importance as well. As the literature has suggested, within a culture that embraces dialogue, new opportunities have the potential to emerge. A culture that encourages leaders to talk honestly with each other, to genuinely “think together” rather than functioning in a “doing” mode (Senge, et al., 2004, p. 120) is not typically modeled. In order to move down the U towards presencing and sensing, persons need to experience a sense of connectedness; modeling connection as a strategic priority where colleagues regularly gather together face-to-face to share joys and challenges (Senge, et al., 2004). Deeper connections and strengthened communication are necessary links for this dialogic way of leading. Dialogic leadership is described by Isaacs (1999b) as a “way of leading that consistently uncovers, through conversation, the hidden creative potential in any situation” (p. 2).

Conversation becomes the avenue through which the art of leadership is practiced (Hurley & Brown, 2010). Isaacs (1999a) described the problems of today as being too much for any one person to manage, thus requiring an awareness and collective intelligence for new direction and opportunities. Isaacs (1999b) identified four distinct qualities supporting this dialogic way of leading: evoking people’s genuine voices, listening deeply, holding space for and respect of other people’s views, and broadening awareness and perspective. A dialogic leader is not only conscious of, but also comfortable with ambiguity, tension, and conflict, seeing themselves as part of a larger whole (Boogaard, 2000). When these differences are not seen as
something to fear or avoid, but recognized as opportunities for growth and learning (Boogaard, 2000), the space opens up for the leader to not only embody the qualities found in dialogic leadership, but also activates the same qualities and interactions in others (Isaacs, 1999b).

The dialogic leader’s ability to influence and act in a reflexive way while constructing horizontal relationships encourages respect, knowledge exchange, and mutual growth among the leader and staff (Amestoy, et al., 2014). Boogaard (2000) learned that being dialogic requires awareness, humility, and a trust in the primacy of relationships which does not come easily; and in reality some are not ready to commit to the rigor that is involved in leading dialogically.

Paying attention and making conscious choices about behavior helps people to become aware of their own intentions and the impact of their actions on others (Isaacs, 1999b). Learning and appreciating the merits of dialogue and dialogic leadership will certainly impact behaviors and one’s awareness of their actions. Isaacs (1999a) encouraged that leaders need to have first experienced the practices of listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing before being able to model and apply them to the conversations and teams that they lead. Following are the four dialogic leadership practices for building the leader’s capacity to respond to the complex challenges of today (Amestoy, et al., 2014; Boogaard, 2000; Isaacs, 1999b).

Listen

Bohm’s (1996) initial work with dialogue set the stage for the importance of listening. Generally, when people listen, they want to feel it is worthwhile and relevant (Schein, 2013). Stewart and Thomas (cited in McCambridge, 2003) listed key attributes of dialogic listening as focusing on ours rather than mine or yours; recognizing the conversation need not always be certain, controlled, and focused on closure; focusing on the present rather than the future; building the context of the circumstances that surround and relate to the topic, rather than the
topic itself; and considering the behavioral differences (attitude, intent, and awareness) between empathic listening and dialogue. As people take on the posture of deep listening, Wheatley (2007) suggested that relationships will be transformed allowing a moving past labels to bring people closer together.

Dialogue essentially focuses on the thinking process, including a role for active listening, though Schein (2003) contended that rather than focusing only on what the other is saying, there is a strong need for self-analysis. Therefore, moving beyond an emphasis on listening and being open to others requires an equal importance on listening quietly to oneself (Jorgensen, 2010; Schein, 1994). Initially, this self-analysis is necessary in order to get in touch with one’s own assumptions, leaving then less focus on the other person. Schein (2003) suggested that participants do eventually “listen actively” to each other, creating a shift so that listening as a whole group moves to learning and thinking collectively, reaching a higher level of communication.

Within the context of higher education, traditional approaches to the listening process, encourages students to be debaters and advocators, but fail to teach listening for understanding, limiting the opportunity for personal development and learning (McCambridge, 2003). Academic settings that can embrace the movement past debate towards dialogue, create an opening to an atmosphere that models and teaches deep listening, discovering what gives work and life meaning to others, and the common values that link people together (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Simmer-Brown’s (2013) study described an academic setting where students evaluated their ability to listen, respect, suspend, and voice while engaging in conversations. By recording and transcribing the conversations with their dialogue partner, in addition to their own inner dialogue, students reported that the most transformative moment was the awareness created for
seeing their own biases. Simmer-Brown (2013) discovered in this research that when people truly listen to another, an opening happens within the heart as the human connection is made.

**Respect**

Acknowledging the wisdom of colleagues, is a significant step for combatting the belief that the individual knows better than everyone else (Isaacs, 1999b). True respect of others enables genuine inquiry and willingness to lay down initial doubts and skepticism, moving people towards engaging for the common good (Schein, 2013). Interaction, conversation, work, and integrity, encourage a level of academic hospitality that lets others know they matter (Bennett, 2000). Working towards mutual interaction and reciprocity engages colleagues in honest, critical conversations. The more honesty in communication and intentional effort made to foster collaboration and collective aspirations, allows people to begin relating to one another in respectful ways (Bennett, 2000).

Recognizing that when people are in relationship with each other, communication with a variety of voices brings differing opinions; and as people gather, representing a variety of perspectives it is inevitable that conflict, disruptions, and dissonance emerge (Wals & Schwarzin, 2012). Working together then to resolve conflict requires people to spend the time and effort in doing the necessary work of examining differences (Pruitt & Kaufer, 2002). Difference in perspectives really can create a space and opportunity for adapting to changing conditions, helping to create new and innovative solutions (Wheatley, 2007). Typically, when a group can stay with the tension and identify points of agreement and commonly held values, a unified voice emerges transcending the differences of what sets them apart (London, 2010).

Communities need helpful processes for empowering individuals to learn from others, often leading to a shift of perspectives as people gain respect for others. When all are curious
and learn from each unique perspective, a richer mosaic is created (Lasker & Weiss, 2003; Wheatley, 2007). Dialogue that is grounded in the norms of inclusion and respect, emphasizes the importance of difference as the community is led to deeper and richer relationships (Shields, 2004). Sincere disagreement or difference of opinion should not be interpreted then as disloyal or a threat to a system’s unity, but rather, a learning opportunity to deepen understanding, solidify the quality of working relationships, and achieve alignment (Jorgensen, 2010). Creating this safe space for difference and respect for others requires a shifting of attitude so groups of people can learn to discuss issues that matter to them personally and for their communities (Palmer, 2011).

**Suspend**

Once people can see difference through the lens of respect, the ability to suspend—letting go of certainties, biases, and opinions—opens the space to accept differing views of others, seeing things that one might miss (Isaacs, 1999b). Also, acknowledging and observing thoughts and feelings as they arise without feeling compelled to act on them, makes room for the other's perspective in a way that enables new possibilities (Isaacs, 1999b). As individuals suspend their own judgment, they begin to listen to what others say without coming to a conclusion (McCamebridge, 2003). People begin to understand others in new ways as they practice deep listening which helps keep people away from judging, challenging, or debating, reducing prejudice and conflict (Rodenborg & Bosch, 2007).

Practicing this suspension of judgment is necessary for understanding others, yet there is real challenge when refraining from judgment, particularly in academia where faculties are trained to be critical evaluators (Schiller, et al., 2004). Scharmer (2009) questioned where the mechanisms are in institutions today for helping with this important concept of suspending judgment, as the majority of conversations and interactions throughout institutions involve
voicing opinions and articulating judgment rather than suspending. Isaacs (1999b) suggested in his research “that suspension is one of several practices essential to bringing about genuine dialogue” (p. 5). As participants practice suspension, a natural slowing down happens within oneself and the conversation, as reflection and deep listening brings about a calm manner (Scharmer, 2009). This type of conversation is reflected in a case study of two large health care organizations merging, where Marcus, Dorn, and McNulty (2012) described a point when the dialogue was fluid, mistrust faded, and each party recognized that alone they did not have any perfect solution, but that only through their curiosity and joint creativity could they create a sustainable solution.

Listening to the inner voice is essential in order to suspend one’s own assumptions and biases (Schein, 2003). Stopping the habit of downloading requires a shift from a focus on self towards being curious and asking questions for understanding. Suspension happens when persons can open themselves up to wonder and notice a world beyond the patterns of downloading (Scharmer, 2009). In reality though, many adults have not developed the capacity for articulating or criticizing their assumptions (Belenky & Stanton, 2000) making it difficult to move towards suspension and wonder. Scharmer’s research with Theory U suggested that the “more profound a person’s knowledge, the greater the likelihood that this person has cultivated a capacity for wonder” (p. 134). Cultivating curiosity and wonder are not typically described in professional conversations, leading one to consider how to encourage this shift in oneself and groups.

**Voice**

When listening, respecting, and suspending are practiced, the space is created for expressing one’s authentic voice, as well as encouraging others to do the same (Isaacs, 1999b).
Being in relationship with others opens the heart and empowers individuals to find and develop their own unique voice (Bennett, 2003). Speaking from the heart comes naturally in a safe environment, allowing people to share and build on what has been said versus imposing one’s view on others (Isaacs, 1999b). As the authentic voice engages in dialogue, people often describe the experience as generative, with a newness emerging from the synergy found in the group. Unfortunately, there are also barriers that keep people from speaking in an authentic way. Kramer and Crespy (2011) identified that people do not always want to share their opinions, particularly if they do not feel comfortable or have not appreciated past group experiences. People do not always feel comfortable with or have training/experience in speaking and presenting, thus for some, expressing oneself in words when participating in a group dialogue can be an obstacle and something leaders need to be mindful of when preparing for the dialogue process (Leirvik, 2005).

Scharmer (2009) identified the conversational barriers of voice of judgment, voice of cynicism, and voice of fear, which show in his research to inhibit the movement towards dialogue. These obstacles are not easy to overcome, magnifying the need for a greater understanding of dialogue and the structures of conversation that are described in Theory U. People who encounter challenges in conversation find it is easier to walk away from the difficult situations keeping them in the downloading and debate stages of conversations. Instead, leaders who help people to stay with the chaos, model the balance that is needed when looking for new insights and potential in the process (Wheatley, 2007). When this perspective can be embraced, the authentic voice engages in conversation and sees the challenges as necessary for reaching the growth and opportunities available from working together.
Four-Player Model

Isaacs (1999b) suggested that the four practices of dialogic leadership mirror the four actions described in David Kantor’s Four Player Model. The Four Player Model aims to find balance in systems, therefore creating an environment capable of dissolving fragmentation and opening the door for collective wisdom in conversation. When systems or conversations get stuck, leaders can look to the model for identifying what is out of balance. In the four player model there are movers, followers, opposers, and bystanders. Kantor suggested that movers initiate ideas and offer direction, followers help to support what is happening and bring completion to tasks, while opposers ask good questions that help to validate the process, and finally bystanders offer greater perspective on what is happening (cited in Isaacs, 1999b).

Kantor designed the model for family systems and Isaacs then aligned that model with the practices of dialogic leadership, benefiting organizations and the balance needed in teams. Isaacs (1999b) suggested that to follow well requires the capacity to listen in a way that relaxes the grip on own thoughts in order to understand the other. Then in an atmosphere of respect, the ability to look for the coherence in the others view is evident—even when there is difference or opposing views, leading to genuineness about oneself. Suspending is correlated with bystanding bringing an awareness, helping with objectivity; and then finally when one feels courageous, they are moved and speak their authentic voice, allowing an opening to create new possibilities.

The benefits of a balanced team that embraces dialogue is highlighted by the inclusiveness of many views, the ability to recover from imbalances, the flexibility to adapt to change, and an offering of unique contributions (Isaacs, 1999b). Boorgaard’s (2000) dissertation on dialogic leadership found additional benefits for when people lead and are led dialogically. These benefits include trust and appreciation of relationships, more satisfaction in work,
generation of energy rather than depletion, physical and emotional health, less absenteeism and burnout, development of both present and future leaders, greater retention, and greater return in leadership training in terms of both time and money.

Dialogic leadership is a perspective that has not been articulated by many in leadership, so understanding more fully the benefits of the practices for talking and thinking together is a gap that this study seeks to grasp. Understanding how leaders in higher education may or may not embody dialogic leadership and the practices of listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing is an area where the literature is lacking. With an emphasis on dialogic leadership, the quality of interaction shifts in noticeable ways (Isaacs, 1999b). As people embrace a dialogic way of leading, the literature identified that new possibilities can be created for addressing the challenging situations and uncertainties facing society, even those in higher education.

**Academic Environment**

Just as society faces problems and complex situations, Kettering Foundation research described that colleges and universities mirror the problems of society at large (London, 2010). External pressures as well as internal tension have created much anxiety affecting how people relate to each other and how decisions are made. Thomas (2007) suggested that within higher education, renewed practices and understanding are needed to help guide how people interact and work together to improve society. As university leaders work to promote the respectful engagement central to healthy conversations, the constant struggle of fragmentation is evidenced as faculty refuse to work together, and more likely work against rather than for respectful engagement (Bennett, 2000). The Pew Higher Education Roundtable report stated that the privatization of academic work and individual autonomy has increased the fracturing of the academic community (Zemsky, 1996). Knowing how to honor academic freedom, tenure, and
contractual agreements (Bowman, 2001) furthers the challenge within higher education and brings to the forefront the need for on-going communication efforts, where attention is paid not only to what is communicated but also how it is communicated (Hoppes & Holley, 2014).

Working together in the university setting is impacted as individualism is reinforced through the current evaluation and reward system that is based on individual scholarship, individual excellence in teaching, and individual participation in service (Chin, et al., 2014; Reilly & Morin, 2004). Tensions increase in this environment of individualism extending into the communication patterns between faculty and administrators. Flood (2014) named that the same language is not spoken among faculty and administrators, particularly as tensions rise and communication efforts look more like debate and polarized sides, making it difficult to co-exist and be innovative on campus together. Bryman and Lilley (2009) and Flood (2014) acknowledged a reason for this differing language as faculty look to gain legitimacy and recognition outside of campus with loyalties first being to their discipline and last, if at all, to the university. In contrast, administrators’ priorities tend to revolve around actions, reputation, and leaving a legacy at the university (Bryman & Lilley, 2009; Flood, 2014).

Differing priorities, communication patterns, and fragmentation can have the tendency to launch conversations into “absencing,” leading to dysfunction in many settings (Scharmer, 2009). Until the dysfunction is recognized within the culture of higher education, the divide among faculty and administration remains, as stakeholders lack the ability to communicate effectively, thus, preserving structures emphasizing individuality (Zemsky, 1996). Numerous scholars attested to how the current academic environment invites a competitive tenure and promotion process, entrenched disciplinary silos, hierarchical power structures, failing shared governance, as well as leaders who remain consumed with raising money, defending a decision,
or managing a crisis (Esterberg & Wooding, 2012; Oliver & Hyun, 2011; Olsen, 2009; Schachter, 2011; Thomas, 2007). In the current environment, university leaders and faculty have also become disillusioned by the increasing workload, declining budgets, and efforts to maintain academic quality versus business efficiency (Drew, 2010). All of these dynamics work against efforts for creating an environment that values thinking and talking together.

Schiller’s, et al. (2004) discovered that fear and individualism were a result of the privatization found in teaching; and further suggested that until this culture is addressed there would be no shift towards a sense of community. Rebuilding towards a culture that emphasizes building relationships and dialogue within a community may not be easy, but a sense of collegiality and collaborative leadership (Easley, 2008) may help to develop the collective expertise within departments—helping universities move away from the autocratic control that isolates and pits people against each other (Wolverton, Gmelch, & Sorenson, 1998; de Guzman & Hapan, 2013). Since key elements of dialogue involve respecting, listening, being open to others, and building understanding and shared meaning (Bohm, 1996), there is value in preparing leaders to feel capable of guiding a group towards dialogic communication where people feel engaged and discover new possibilities together. Removing barriers so that a culture of dialogue and inquiry can be created (Watkins, 2005) takes time and requires intentional work for an atmosphere of collegiality and dialogic leadership to emerge.

**Dialogue in Higher Education**

When considering what it would take for a renewed commitment to healthy campus conversations, engaging the voice of the people in dialogue and fostering collaboration are good starting places for modeling effective community change and developing a stronger relationship between faculty and administration (Flood, 2014). Although, London (2010) reminded that
many institutions are content to educate for democracy, but not practice it. Within the reviewed literature, there are references for where dialogue is being taught and modeled in higher education, but typically dialogue is referenced in areas such as deliberative pedagogy in the classroom, and within student learning communities, civic education, and student affairs venues. Much harder to find is research on dialogue among professionals such as faculty and administrators, even though the previous sections of this literature review point to the importance of incorporating dialogic conversations, relationships, and inquiry in the academic setting. With this said, the gap remains for learning how the practices of dialogic leadership may indeed be modeled in higher education and for understanding where dialogue happens at the professional level in the university.

The style and type of conversation changes within the academic setting as people become more connected. By finding a common language that spans within and across departments, dialogic conversations become a connector as department settings become the most likely arena for promoting this collective dialogue, fostering commitment to the institution, setting the tone for collegiality, and encouraging renewal within the discipline and the university (Zemsky, 1996). As people embrace the value and experience of dialogic communication and leadership, new energy and enthusiasm have the potential to grow. Meyers and Johnson (2008) reported the openness of participants to a more dialogic leadership structure as they experienced a change in climate at a retreat where participants said they actually felt that their opinions counted, leading to a greater level of trust and mutual understanding. In another setting, University of New Hampshire leaders instituted a “community of practice” to engage faculty in learning together from varied disciplines as they linked accreditation with an institutional commitment to engagement, hoping to positively affect the culture and future direction of the institution
(Sandmann, Williams, & Abrams, 2009). As leaders pay attention to current practices that address issues of power, control, and inequity, engaging in genuine dialogue can help to reveal how people feel devalued and their experiences silenced within the institution (Shields, 2004). Once these conversations surface, Shields (2004) described a new type of culture that emerged from the hard work and messiness that was involved in authentic ways of engaging in conversation.

When dialogue happens within the university, there is potential for faculty and administrators to gain valuable insights as they learn how the benefits of the dialogic experience is practiced throughout the academy. For example, faculty, students, and community members collaborated to facilitate community forums on race relations and community engagement in an ethnographic study focusing on the treatment of African Americans in Muncie (Campbell & Lassiter, 2010). Once the study was complete, the students and faculty realized that through the process they too had found greater ability to talk about race; and with deep listening throughout the process, they built relationships and trust together. Pedagogy is another area where dialogue is practiced in the higher education setting. From 2002 to 2004, the Intergroup Dialogue as Pedagogy Across the Curriculum Pilot Project took place at three educational institutions in Maryland where they explored, examined, and investigated the connections between student motivation, interest in learning, academic achievement, and dialogic pedagogy (Clark, 2005). The faculty reported professional growth and personal transformation as a result of employing intergroup dialogic pedagogy and themes such as better listening, more trust, and an empathic climate emerged as students engaged in new ways and a greater awareness was created. This project also helped faculty to think about their students differently while modeling new ways to handle interpersonal issues and ask better questions (Clark, 2005).
These examples suggest the potential for modeling the practices of dialogue, even at the middle and upper levels of administration, aiming to gain collegial support while creating an environment that invites people at all levels in the institution to shared meaning and generative possibilities for the future. The following section focuses on the faculty administrator who serves in the mid-level leadership role helping to fulfill the purposes and goals of the university, implementing important decisions and creating an atmosphere that can draw on collective intelligence and collaboration.

The Role of Mid-Level Leaders

Universities are known to have strong subcultures, also known as departments, with unique but seldom collaborative identities (Brubaker & Zimmerman, 2009). As those who serve the university in mid-level leadership positions would suggest, many decisions made at the department level affect the overall work-life for faculty (Stanley & Algert, 2007). The mid-level leader role is complex and stressful as these faculty leaders work to bridge between faculty concerns and administrators’ demands—while still being perceived as a peer to faculty (Brown, 2001; Bryman & Lilley, 2009; Gmelch & Burns, 1993). Even though most faculty that serve as department chairs do not consider leadership to be part of their career paths, these mid-level leaders really can be key leaders within the university (Brown, 2001; Stanley & Algert, 2007).

Department chairs handle the duties of course scheduling, equity in teaching loads, performance reviews, and pay concerns (Bartunek, et al., 1997). Bowman (2002) identified chairs primary work to be framing of challenges, identifying opportunities, and managing resources in an effort to invite colleagues to engage in a “mission that matters” (p. 159). Another common responsibility of this mid-level leader is to mediate and resolve conflict within the department, which is a difficult responsibility for many (Shields, 2004). Creating a climate where
it is safe to offer differing viewpoints and an openness to those who may disagree (Stanley & Algert, 2007) are needed components within the academic community (Nelson, et al., 2010). Viewing difference as normal is important to understand and to model (Shields, 2004), particularly as distance grows between people who prefer to retreat to an isolated, individualistic mode of operating.

Faculty serving in the mid-level leader role help shape the environment within their department or program, ultimately effecting the institution as a whole. For department chairs to be effective intermediaries there needs to be movement towards “collective work, collective dialogue, and collective goals” between faculty and the institution (Wolverton, Gmelch, & Sorenson, 1998, p. 212). Fostering collaboration and teamwork within and across departments reflects the need for chairs to work together and offer support (Wolverton, Ackerman, & Holt, 2005). Feelings of isolation are similar to other leadership roles, as relationships change, suggesting the need to look more closely at the importance of support. Bartunek, et al., (1997) described the decreased sense of isolation felt by those in the department chair role after experiencing shared learning and growth in an intentional group experience. This learning was the result of a group mentoring relationship where a number of persons who served as department chairs spent time dialoguing together about their experiences. Reaching towards the other, raises the possibility for the unexpected gift that is found in relationship.

The experience of the mid-level leader involves much pressure and stress, making it very difficult to take the time to make connections with others and build relationships. According to a National Survey of Department Chairs in Higher Education, using the Department Chair Stress Index (DCSI) instrument, 59% indicated that there is too heavy of a work load, causing serious stress (Gmelch & Burns, 1993). High stress situations also revolved around seeking
financial/program approval (54%); staying current in own discipline (54%); job interference with personal time (48%); making decisions affecting others (46%); excessively high self-expectations (45%); and resolving collegial differences (45%) (Gmelch & Burns, 1993). Recognizing the additional pressures and the continual turnover related to the department chair role supports why the challenges are significant for creating a culture where dialogue and relationships are valued.

The literature on dialogic leadership suggests that laying the foundation for the dialogic practices of listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing prepares the way for trust to be gained as leaders effectively communicate and listen in a manner that faculty feel heard and empowered (Isaacs, 1999b). Garnering faculty trust is of utmost importance in a departmental culture where mistrust is evident. This mistrust unfortunately leaves the chair powerless while reinforcing the perspective that they are just scholars who need to only fulfill their duty of administrative tasks (Wolverston, Gmelch, & Sorenson, 1998). In the midst of this difficult culture, finding one’s own voice is needed in order to lead with courage, vision, and heart that comes from the core of the leader, hoping then to instill trust in ways that leadership strategies, models, and techniques cannot (Brown, 2001). When the department leader can be someone who is approachable and reasonable, it helps to improve the climate of trust within the department (Sanders, 2013).

Collegiality

As part of a qualitative study on higher education leader effectiveness, Bryman and Lilley (2009) defined that collegiality is at the heart of what makes a university distinctive. Although, some participants of the study described that collegiality is being eroded by an increasing managerial style of leadership. In educational settings, for professionals to move past the typical congenial conversations and begin to risk sharing uncertainties, they needed to trust they could
voice their uncertainties without fear of retaliation. (Nelson, et al., 2010). Exhibiting transparent behavior within an organization helps build trust, confidence, understanding, and mutual support (de Guzman & Hapan, 2013). Additionally, by acting with integrity, committing to open communication, exhibiting openness to growth and criticism, valuing others potential and humanness, and manifesting a spirit of collaboration (Wolverton, Gmelch, & Sorenson, 1998) creates an environment where collegiality flourishes. When leaders encourage collaborative work, relationships are deepened, performance and attitudes are enhanced, and knowledge and expertise are appreciated and shared with others, as the atmosphere becomes one of involvement and affirmation (de Guzman & Hapan, 2013). Giles & Yates (2011), both faculty within an Australian education department, suggested that involving faculty in dialogue provides a model for collegiality and mutual support, such that when faced with pressures, new strategies are opened through dialogue and ideas reflect collective interests, responsibility, and care because relationships mattered.

Within the academic setting, and particularly for the department leader in the trenches among colleagues and students, learning how to build collegiality is relevant to understand. This involves understanding what it takes to listen, slow down the inquiry, suspend judgment, maintain curiosity in others, act cooperatively and collectively on common challenges, and build bridges among colleagues and departments. Literature suggested the importance of inviting a perspective that moves beyond managing functions, to engaging others for the common good (Bowman, 2002). When serving in a leadership role, one needs to be capable of interacting with people at multiple levels within the institution, warranting that the department chair have interpersonal skills, with an ability to communicate and the willingness to respond quickly in a situation, which are essential to their effectiveness (Bowman, 2002; Wolverton, Ackerman,
Holt, 2005). A qualitative study of academic and mid-senior level leaders in an “accelerated succession leadership program” at an Australian university found that leadership support and development deserve increased attention as there is need for environments where leaders can share and discuss challenges while hearing others experiences and strategies (Drew, 2010).

When academic departments within universities commit to a common cause, individual and collective accomplishments become an organizing principle for the community, as important conversations regarding significant topics help reshape and redefine the department (Bowman, 2002). In a case study of four exemplary institutions that moved from an individualistic culture towards facilitating collaborative work, Kezar’s (2005) findings suggested the need for creating mechanisms to help facilitate interaction among people and for building relationships early. Reshaping the priorities of those within departments and universities is important as new energy helps to shift departmental conversations and actions beyond the conversational fields of downloading and debate as defined in Scharmer’s Theory U (2009) towards collegial conversations (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010). The dialogic leader who embraces the practices of listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing place a deeper value on healthy relationships, humble inquiry, and conversations that enhance collegiality within the academic setting.

**Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to present and synthesize literature related to the topic and growing field of dialogue, while laying the foundation for articulating what is occurring in the conversational landscape today (Scharmer, 2009). The literature review highlighted the value and need for thinking and talking together in higher education, particularly related to the responsibilities and expectations of the mid-level leader who serves in the unique role of balancing the needs and concerns of students, faculty, and administrators. Many faculties come
to the position of mid-level leader without leadership training, prior administrative experience, or a clear understanding of the role (Wolverton, Gmelch, & Sorenson, 1998), therefore preparing future leaders with an understanding of and preparation for dialogic leadership would prove to be beneficial. When educational communities move towards collegial conversations, old ways of making policy decisions change as administrators recognize the need to find common ground with constituents, shifting into a new kind of conversation that looks at values and beliefs, hopes and concerns, and listens in a way that moves below the surface to a deeper level (Johnson, 2008). Shifting towards a dialogic way of conversing places value and meaning in better ways of engaging each other in conversation. When priorities move towards relationships, an atmosphere is created for meaningful and purposeful dialogue, opening the space for a fresh conversational spirit and for generative opportunities to emerge. With this mindset, higher education institutions have the potential to model and teach healthy ways of conversing and leading amidst the complexities of today.

Engaging in healthy conversations has become increasingly difficult within workplaces, schools, homes, and communities, as people not only experience the challenging dynamics of technology, diversity, and individualism, but also the complexities surrounding financial pressures, external accountability, and increased expectations by stakeholders. Important conversations seem to happen in crisis mode within the context of a culture that perpetuates individualism, competition, short-term fixes, arrogance, and impatience (Schein, 2013). In order to address the complexities of today, Scharmer (2009) suggested that people need to go deeper than the rational mind and traditional ways of decision making, requiring better ways of communicating and a greater understanding of people’s experiences so that relationships can be built and trust earned. Validating all voices, listening deeply, speaking from the heart, and
staying curious about the other helps to create a stronger and more advanced way of talking and thinking together (Isaacs, 1999b). As the leader moves from needing to have the right answers to asking the right questions people are encouraged to be curious, reflective thinkers going beyond book knowledge towards practice (Skordoulis & Dawson, 2007). In summary, the value of dialogic leadership seeks to bring people together to engage in conversations around things that matter, moving towards an environment of collegiality and collective thinking.
CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how mid-level academic leaders in higher education describe their experience with conversations and a dialogic way of leading in the academic setting. Dialogue is one of the fields of conversation (Scharmer, 2009) identified in the literature as representing movement from self-focus, personal assumptions and perspectives, towards an openness for learning and understanding in new ways (Bohm, 1996). While listening deeply to all voices (Rodenborg & Bosch, 2007), space opens for something greater to emerge that could not have happened when persons are self-focused or function in isolation of others (Isaacs, 1999a). Romney (n.d.) confirms the need for the collaborative voice of dialogue to emerge, creating contexts where people can think, feel, and talk together (http://animatingdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/documents/reading_room/art_of_dialogue.pdf)

In relation to this study’s emphasis on conversation and dialogic leadership, the following sections present the research questions, rationale for a qualitative study and phenomenological method, and strategies of inquiry focusing on participant selection, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and validation.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research has grown since the 1980s and gained respect as a valuable research method, offering a number of approaches to consider when designing a research study (Huberman & Miles, 2002). As part of the design process, the researcher looks at philosophical assumptions of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology as the nature of reality is considered, knowledge is understood, values are studied, and how process or language is used in the research (Creswell, 2013). Each researcher has a different lens through which to approach and understand a study, so it is always important to be clear about the perspective and approach
used, as it shapes how the problem and research questions are formulated and how the subsequent search for meaning and questions are answered. Qualitative research aims to acquire information that is useful in understanding a phenomenon’s complexity, depth, or context rather than generalizing from a sample to a population as in quantitative research, thus producing statistically precise quantitative results (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, & McKibbon, 2015; Patton, 1999).

Qualitative research methods begin with assumptions and use of an interpretive framework that informs the study of the research problem (Creswell, 2013). The social constructivism framework is how I, as the researcher, have approached this study, aiming to understand the world in which I live while developing meaning that attaches to experiences, and viewing the complexity of the whole rather than the narrow meaning of a few ideas (Patton, 2002). As the researcher, I listened carefully, asked open-ended questions in order to understand mid-level leadership, and ultimately made sense of, and interpreted the participants experience and meaning of dialogic leadership and conversations that took place within the academic setting of higher education. I believe this framework laid the foundation to validate the voices of participants by developing a complex description, and interpretation of the problem, ensuring reflective discipline and contribution to the literature base (Creswell, 2013) on dialogue and leadership in higher education, particularly from the lens of faculty who serve as mid-level leaders.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a qualitative research design used to explore how people describe and make meaning of a phenomenon experienced by them directly (Patton, 2002) and reflects upon those experiences which they have lived (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher’s task is to make
visible the meaning of this experience for the individual and across individuals, aiming to gain a
deeper understanding of the nature or essence of the experience that is already passed or lived
through (Van Manen, 1990). Focusing on the wholeness of the experience helps the researcher
to view the behavior and experience as an integrated and inseparable experience with the
phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This thoughtful and true reflection of the lived experience is
necessary as the researcher attempts to “bring into nearness that which tends to be obscure, that
which tends to evade the intelligibility of our natural attitude of everyday life” in hopes to grasp
the special significance of the experience (Van Manen, 1990, p. 32).

The essence of phenomenology emphasizes the transformative learning that takes place
as one works to understand, make sense of, and talk about the meaning of a lived experience
(Creswell, 2013). Curiosity and questioning (Bohm, 1996; Schein, 2013) that occurs in the
interview process helps bring an understanding of the “whole” or essence of what is being
studied. There has been little research on this topic, thus, this research design is an appropriate
way to explore the transformative nature of dialogue (Cooper, et al., 2013) and for understanding
the experience of mid-level leaders with the phenomenon under study—dialogic leadership and
conversations in higher education.

**Research Questions**

The central research questions for this study focus on the essence of dialogic leadership
and conversations that take place within departments and across campus in the higher education
setting. The research questions this study seeks to address are:

1. How do mid-level leaders in higher education describe conversations that happen
   within the academic setting?
2. How do mid-level leaders in higher education describe their experience with dialogic leadership?

**Researcher Role**

The researcher role and vantage point from which my orientation to the life-world (Van Manen, 1990) is viewed within this study is one of an administrator, educator, and parent. Although I do not have experience as a faculty member or with academic leadership in higher education, my experience in group processes and leadership are varied and have spanned my lifetime. Some of these experiences have involved participation in and coaching of athletic teams, participation in and leading of staff training and team building experiences within Student Affairs, leading of committee meetings within higher education, and participation in larger community conversations. All of these opportunities provided me with ample opportunity to feel inspired and engaged and to feel like a valued member of groups and at other times invisible, disconnected, not capable, and not needed within the group.

One significant experience was attending a restorative justice training for student conduct. As a society, we tend to have a narrow focus when an offense or crime has been committed, leading to the typical response of punishing the offenders while ignoring the victims and their needs. This training helped to expand my lens to include the victim’s voice, helping me to move towards a new awareness that works to restore dignity, giving opportunity for both victim and offender to come together and agree on ways to repair the harm, thus reaching a deeper level of impact and restoration. Since then, I have a greater understanding for the importance of inviting all people to the table, that all voices are needed and valid, and that conversations do not need to be divisive but can actually be restorative, meaningful, and transformative in nature.
Following that training, my view of conversation and the importance of people’s voices have impacted how I lead and advocate for hearing all voices in conversations. Not having fully understood the difference between dialogue and discussion, my first experience with leading a conversation with this new lens opened my eyes to how dialogue and its emphasis on the natural flow of conversation, helps the whole group discover collectively by genuinely and respectfully listening to each other, reflecting on one’s own views, and being open to the possibility that ideas will be changed or enhanced, even when one does not like what they hear (Isaacs, 1999a).

One particular conversation that occurred concerning an issue raised on campus stands out in my mind as being a significant turning point. I started by being mindful of who should be invited to the meeting, being sure to invite a variety of persons that brought different perspectives, including students, physical plant employees, faculty, and administrators. It was not a large group, nor was the issue large, but I started the conversation by simply asking for each person to share what their interest was in the issue which opened the door for sharing, listening, and validating of each voice. As the conversation continued it was evident that there had been a movement into dialogue where an individual would raise a concern and the whole group listened and new ideas emerged.

I remember this conversation as being transformative as I paid attention to who was speaking the most and who had not contributed. One particular person had not spoken, so when invited to share from their experience, the whole group gained an additional perspective that was necessary for shaping the shared meaning. Although I do not know why the person did not have the courage to speak on their own, I do know that their voice was very important to bring new synergy into the conversation. I left that meeting with a deeper understanding of the need for being mindful of who is invited into the conversation, framing the conversation, creating the
container and giving guidance when needed. This environment gave space for the group to wrestle with questions and concerns together, ultimately allowing the group to experience the generative opportunity of coming together to engage in a conversation that mattered to them. For me, this experience is what I define as dialogue.

Another conversation experience I had was attending a community town hall type meeting where the topic was divisive in nature. I entered the setting with the expectation that I would listen to understand and if I felt I had something to contribute I would hopefully have the courage to speak. I did not speak and it was much more difficult to listen and not want to join a side versus listening to understand. When reflecting on the experience, I describe it as needing to self-talk myself through the meeting to remain open to what I was hearing. As persons spoke I felt myself either closing off to what they had to say or nodding in agreement. As I paid attention to my inner thoughts, opinions, and biases, I learned how difficult it really was to hear what was said and not make it about sides or the issue, but to really listen, creating awareness regarding my own biases and assumptions.

As part of my reflection, I realized that regardless of what side the comments fell on, there was more below the surface than what was said and I truly wanted more time to engage together, to hear more. I believe that the town hall style meeting serves a good purpose, yet I also believe that in order for anyone to move towards the center rather than taking sides, the conversation needs to continue in a way where all voices can be heard and there be movement towards dialogue. The format adequately portrayed the depth and difficultness of the situation, yet how the leader chose to engage the community only allowed for an emphasis of the two sides. In the end, I would have liked the opportunity for more of a dialogic exchange to happen,
but this conversation did highlight for me the difficulty for being attentive to the inner self when the tendency is to polarize the sides.

**Purposeful Selection Strategy**

Within qualitative research, purposeful sampling is a useful selection strategy where the researcher selects individuals and sites based on the ability to purposefully inform an understanding of the problem being studied (Creswell, 2013), as well as being relevant to the goals and questions of the research (Maxwell, 2013). The power of purposeful sampling lies in the ability to select information-rich cases for learning in depth about the issues of central importance, focusing on understanding rather than on generalizing from a sample to a population (Patton, 2002). “If the goal is not to generalize to a population but to obtain insights into a phenomenon, individuals, or events, as will typically be the case in qualitative research, then the researcher purposefully selects individuals, groups, and settings that maximize understanding of the phenomenon. As such, the most common method of sampling in qualitative research is purposeful sampling” (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

**Site Selection**

A natural setting for inquiry to occur is in higher education; therefore, the research site for the present study was selected based on evidence of the institution’s intentional efforts towards engaging in dialogue on campus. Data collection for this study occurred at a small, private liberal arts university, that offers undergraduate, graduate, and seminary degrees to over 1800 students. The institution was founded in the early 1900s with a religious affiliation and has become known for its core belief in peacebuilding. In more recent years, an awareness and practice of using group dialogue processes has occurred throughout various parts of the curriculum as well as in campus conversations. At this university, efforts are made to bring
people together worldwide to study and practice ways for solving conflicts with words, in addition to understanding facilitation and the group dialogue process. The campus community is also encouraged to engage together in academic forums, interfaith discussions, and university colloquiums, in addition to the traditional faculty meetings.

Having been a former employee at this institution, I have a general understanding of the culture even though it has been years since engaging with the community. Within the past two years, administrators launched a listening process to engage the campus, community, and constituents in an effort to review and understand the significance of a particular institutional policy. Because of these intentional efforts and understanding of dialogue within their community, I made an initial contact to the Provost inquiring about conducting my research interviews with mid-level leaders on campus. Based on his positive response, I made a follow-up contact with Institutional Research and they responded with an invitation to submit a proposal for my study, which was then accepted.

**Participant Selection**

Literature identified the mid-level leader role as providing the unique lens of a faculty leader who participates in a variety of campus meetings and aims to bridge the varied needs of faculty and administrators (Brown, 2001; Bryman & Lilley, 2009; Gmelch & Burns, 1993). Using a purposeful, non-random sampling procedure (Miles & Huberman, 1994), participants selected were typical mid-level academic leaders who ranged in age, experience, and gender; all holding the university position of department chair or academic program director. Based on criterion strategy (Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994), an invitation was extended to persons who exhibited the criteria of: (1) currently serving in the mid-level academic leader role of department chair or program director, (2) served for at least one year in this administrative
role, (3) experienced leading group conversations, and (4) participated in group processes in the academic setting. Using this purposeful, non-random sampling allowed for information rich data from which to learn in depth what is being studied (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990).

By late June, I invited all fifteen faculty members who fit the criteria to be participants in the study. As these potential participants were identified, an email invitation was sent with a description of the study and informed consent, allowing opportunity to reflect on their experience as a mid-level leader with the conversations they had engaged in with their department and throughout the campus. I conducted interviews with the eight leaders who responded to the invitation, gaining depth and meaning to their leadership experience within their departments and across campus, while seeking to understand how they attached meaning to conversations and practices related to dialogic leadership. Since the participants were part of the faculty, their understanding of the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) was evident, yet an explanation of the particular components for the study, including risks and confidentiality, ensured protection against human rights violations. At the interview, participants were provided the opportunity to sign an informed consent (Appendix A), and were assured that pseudonyms for their identity would be used throughout the study.

Data Collection

My goal for this study was to learn how the participants described their experience with conversations and dialogic leadership in the context of higher education, particularly within departments. Data collection happened through personal interviews as a means to explore and gather narrative data about the academic leaders’ experience with conversations and leadership within the department or program. The interviews served as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of the types of conversations that take place within departments and
across campus, as well as the specific dialogic leadership practices of listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing.

For each participant, one interview was conducted, lasting approximately one to two hours. The interviews were semi-structured and conversational style, digitally recorded, and focused on the participants’ experiences. A qualitative interview guide (Appendix B) was developed to ensure there was an emphasis on the participant’s experience with conversation and for a similar description of dialogue and dialogic leadership to be used. The interviews began with a curiosity about their role and experience and evolved from there as the interview questions centered around describing conversations in higher education, best conversation experiences, ways of supporting communication and relationships, and cultivating qualities of dialogic leadership (i.e. listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing; Isaacs, 1999b).

The initial steps in the study followed Maxwell’s (2013) advice of conducting pilot interviews. Prior to gathering data, three pilot interviews with mid-level leaders who were similar to the participants, although, from a different institution, were conducted for testing the interview guide. As part of the feedback from these pilot interviews, feedback was given that it would have been helpful to include the language of Scharmer’s different levels of conversation earlier in the interview in order to better articulate their experience with conversation. The pilot interviews also helped for learning the importance of starting the interview by asking easy to answer questions about their role for creating a comfort level together before delving more into their experience.

From the outset, I organized data and research thoughts, including interview field notes, reflexive journals, and analysis of data in a notebook and binder (Glesne, 2011). This data collection stage began at the end of June with approximately one to two interviews happening
per day during a two-week period during the summer. Timing for the interview visits took into account the summer schedules and other activities that the participants were involved with. As data collection commenced, participants were asked informational questions for gathering demographic information to ensure diversity based on gender, years of experience, and position held at the university, as well as for gaining a comfort level together. Each interview began with an explanation of the study, assurance of confidentiality, the option to not answer any question, and permission for digitally recording the interview.

Following each interview, I began the process of data transformation: summarizing what happened, synthesizing what happened, and interpreting what happened (Wolcott, 1994). I transcribed the audio into written text as well as my field notes documenting my thoughts regarding the information gathered during the interview and personal journal entries recording my reflective thoughts. Each participant received a follow up email with the synthesized themes, inviting them to provide any further written recollections that were missed during the interview or aspects they wanted to clarify or revise within the emergent themes. At this point, one participant chose to respond through a phone call rather than a written response. These steps ensured the authenticity of the interview data and credibility of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the process I kept my journal with me to record personal notes and inspirational thoughts regarding coding and emergent themes. The goal for the interview process was to explore in greater depth how conversation is modeled in the academic setting, and to gain understanding of a dialogic way of leading.

Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) presented a structured method of data analysis in his modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. This method includes the researcher’s own experience to be
a part of the research process, beginning with a full description of one’s own experience with the phenomenon as an attempt to then move into full focus on the participant’s experience. As part of the data transformation process (Wolcott, 1994), synthesis begins by reviewing the verbatim transcripts, developing a list of significant, non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements or “meaning units” (Moustakas, 1994). Making sense of data requires listening and re-listening to the digitally recorded interviews to gather overall key concepts and significant statements. Re-reading the transcripts, memos, reflexive journal, and field notes also helps to immerse oneself in the data (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2011). Following transcription, highlighting and coding significant phrases and important transitions into “meaning units,” allows the ability to then group the meaning units into essential themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Moustakas, 1994).

Themes or categories are the broad units of the information that consist of aggregated codes or the “meaning units” that combine to form the common idea which is then written into a textual description of “what” the participants experienced using verbatim examples (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). A structural description of “how” the experience happened gives a reflection on the setting and context for the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Utilizing constant comparative technique to compare the current text from previous texts ensures a consistent coding scheme, as well as new codes (Boeije, 2002). From the initial codes and themes, tables are created to align narrative summaries with similarities and differences in literature along with how research questions are answered (Glesne, 2011). Ultimately, an overarching statement is developed that describes the overall essence which in this study is the mid-level leaders experience with dialogic leadership in higher education and the meaning that these mid-level leaders attached to conversations that occurred in the academic setting (Creswell, 2013;
Moustakas, 1994). Each of these steps of data analysis can be found in more detail in the methods and procedures for data analysis section in chapter four.

**Trustworthiness**

Not only is making data sensible and accessible an important part of the researcher’s responsibility (Glesne, 2011) it is also important to establish standards for assessing the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research in order to help the reader judge the quality of the conclusions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Establishing trustworthiness through the interpretation of the data can be achieved by ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In essence, the goal is to rule out plausible alternatives and threats to the interpretation of the data (Maxwell, 2013) and to convince the reader that the researcher generated quality data, was rigorous during analysis, and inferences were appropriate and not pre-determined (personal communication, M. Earley, 2014).

Credibility allows there to be confidence about the observations, interpretations, and the conclusions such that the weight of evidence should become persuasive (Eisner, 1991, cited in Creswell, 2013). Transferability tests whether the conclusions of a study fit or are transferable to other contexts by providing a thick description that allows the reader to assess whether there is potential to transfer findings to a comparable setting (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Dependability refers to the quality and integrity of the study, whether the process was consistent, clear, reliable, and auditable (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) and finally, confirmability is the process to establish the value of the data (Creswell, 2013). The transformative value of qualitative research opens the door to new possibilities and stimulates new dialogue that leads to action and change (Creswell, 2013). My attempt as the researcher was to ensure trustworthiness throughout this study by presenting written narrative data, being transparent in the data
collection, analysis, and interpretation stages, and tying the value of the data to the existing literature.

**Strategies for Validation**

Awareness of validity threats throughout the data collection and analysis process, along with identification of strategies to address the threats, ensured the quality of the process. When I considered strategies and rationale for addressing the validity threats, I first acknowledged my desire to remain open to what the data showed me. One way to keep my own bias at bay is what Husserl termed as “bracketing” my own experience and the epoche process, where I engaged in a self-reflective process and became a part of the data as the first interview and intentionally aimed to set aside my own perspective prior to each interview in order to focus on the understanding of each mid-level leader participant (Moustakas, 1994). I utilized peer debriefing to help address researcher bias, by having my dissertation advisor review essential meaning units, themes, and overarching essence to ensure accuracy of analysis, rather than ones I hoped would emerge (Creswell, 2013).

Member checking is another way of ensuring trustworthiness and validity (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). After all interviews were complete and the data analysis process was in progress, member checking occurred as each participant reviewed and offered feedback on the participant profile, the essential themes, and the overarching statement verifying if their experience was captured. Triangulation was also utilized as the collection of data came from a range of people—age, experience, gender, and departments or programs—as well as gathering data through field notes, memos, and journal entries (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). Lastly, when writing the narrative of the participant’s experience, I provided verbatim statements that offered rich, thick descriptions for the reader to draw their own inferences (Creswell, 2013;
Maxwell, 2013). Within these descriptions, capturing the experience of negative cases also proved to be very beneficial in understanding what blocks dialogue from taking place and inhibits participants from thriving in their role (Glesne, 2011; Maxwell, 2013). Ultimately, qualitative research allows the reader to appraise the quality based on their own perspective and practice. A phenomenological approach creates an opportunity for insights and deeper understandings to emerge, offering space for voices to be heard, and an opportunity to move beyond the individual experience to an overarching essence of a phenomenon.

**Ethical Considerations**

When entering into the interview setting, neither the researcher nor the interviewee can “know in advance, and sometimes even after the fact, what impact an interviewing experience will have or has had” (Patton, 2002, p. 278), thus, employing safeguards to ensure the rights and protection of participants was an important consideration for this study. Prior to any research, I submitted the research proposal to the Human Subjects Review Board at Bowling Green State University and upon approval (Appendix C), then submitted a proposal to the research site’s Institutional Research Board, which was also approved. The approved informed consent form was sent to each participant along with the email invitation, and a signed consent form was obtained at the start of each interview. This study anticipated no serious ethical threats to any of the participants, although confidentiality was maintained throughout the study as the name of the research site and each participant’s name was kept confidential by using pseudonyms. Security measures were also taken to keep transcripts secure with a password protected file as well as the signed consent forms kept in a safe inside my home, with only myself as researcher having access to the material.
Summary

In this chapter I described the research design and rationale for using a phenomenological method. I discussed the role of the researcher, the data collection procedures, and the strategies to be utilized for data analysis, ensuring trustworthiness and validity. This approach to answering the research questions emphasized the focus on the participant’s subjective experiences and interpretations of their lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990). My research hopes to build on current understanding of the fragmentation that is happening within the academic setting and the importance of leadership within the academic department for building a dialogue culture among colleagues. Since dialogue begins with the individual, this study specifically attempted to attach meaning to the mid-level leader’s experience of dialogic leadership and the practices of listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing (Isaacs, 1999b), exploring how conversations and mid-level leadership were experienced in the academic setting.
CHAPTER IV. ANALYSIS OF DATA

This chapter organizes and reports the main findings of this study, including qualitative narrative data. In an effort to gain deeper insight into the social fields of conversation and the impact of a dialogic way of leading, the following two central research questions are addressed in this study: (a) How do mid-level leaders’ describe the conversational landscape in higher education, and (b) What are the participants’ experiences of the phenomenon of dialogic leadership? These research questions lent themselves to a methodology that focused on the mid-level academic leader’s lived experience of leadership and conversational participation within the academic setting. According to Creswell (2013), phenomenology focuses on the experience of the everyday lives of people in order to generate a common meaning for several individuals of their experience of a concept or phenomenon. Therefore, by using a phenomenological approach for this study, I was able to focus on the experiences of the participants, with the goal being to formulate and understand an overarching meaning or essence of a dialogic way of leading for mid-level leaders within the academic setting. In this chapter, I present participant profiles and details for the data collection and analysis. The goal for this chapter is to lay the foundation for the analyses, conclusions, and recommendations that appear in chapter five.

Methods of Data Collection

My data were obtained from in-depth interviews with mid-level leaders. Once the participants were contacted, those who responded (over fifty percent) selected the date, time, and location of their interview. Each of the interviews lasted between one and two hours and were very conversational in nature as we engaged together in meaningful dialogue. The phenomenological approach used for the data collection phase interestingly mirrors this
particular study’s focus on dialogue, where learning to set aside biases and assumptions is necessary for entering into a deeper level of listening and conversation.

Before each interview, I engaged in the “epoche” process in which I made a good faith effort to put aside my own judgments and certainties about dialogue and leadership in higher education in order to see with fresh eyes the participants’ views and experiences. Therefore, prior to each interview I spent time in self-reflection, focusing on the questions and opening myself to understanding through another person’s lens or viewpoint. I utilized an interview protocol (Appendix B) to help guide the conversation, using open-ended questions that allowed the conversation to flow naturally while exploring the leader’s experience with conversations and leadership in the academic setting. Phenomenology utilizes an informal, flexible, and interactive nature for the open-ended questions and comments during the interview (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, letting go of a pre-scripted order of questions and pre-conceived ideas of what might emerge prior to and during the in-depth interviews was necessary in order to listen deeply and allow a natural flow within the conversation. The participants became co-researchers (Glesne, 2011) as we explored together their experience and furthered our understanding of dialogue and the structures of conversation that were present in their situation.

Upon completion of the interview period from June 26 to July 9, 2015, the digital recordings were transcribed verbatim and consisted of 4113 lines of narrative data. By listening and re-listening to the digital recordings and transcribing word for word the interviews, I became immersed in the experiences of these mid-level leaders. An analysis of what the participants experienced regarding leading and conversations (textural) and how the participants experienced the environment for engaging in conversations (structural) was accomplished beginning with the coding of significant statements (Moustakas, 1994). Pulling together the significant statements
and textual descriptions for each individual in a summary form led to synthesizing the significant statements into fifty-two codes, followed then by further synthesis into eleven overall meaning units, four theme clusters, and finally an overarching statement.

Each interview revealed new experiences and understanding as well as another opportunity for me to refine my interviewing skills. Listening deeply, allowing the participants to share authentically without me making assumptions or asking leading questions, required intentional work. At times the conversations evolved easily, moving from the head to the heart (Scharmer, 2009) and at other times, the questions needed to be more prescriptive, in order to delve more deeply into their experience. I aimed to be a humble inquirer (Schein, 2013) where I asked questions that I did not have answers to and could be curious, which had the feel of a conversation in motion, rather than rehearsed, habitual routines (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999a; Scharmer, 2009). Many times we experienced the synergy of connection and authenticity of conversation, which was especially meaningful as I continued to make sense of and understand the social fields of conversation in Theory U (Scharmer, 2009) and dialogic leadership (Isaacs, 1999a).

**Demographic Data**

The recruitment of participants yielded a mix of gender, years of service to the institution, and years in the chair/director role. Of the eight mid-level academic leaders, who were all serving in departments or academic programs, four were men and four were women, with an average number of years at the university being sixteen—four with 10 years or less and four over 10 years. Half of the participants have served in the chair or director role for five years or less, three persons have served multiple times throughout their tenure in the department, while one has remained consistently in the role for 19 years. Occasionally a participant would joke about
being in the role for life because “no one else wants to serve.” Only two persons identified that they enjoy being in this leadership role and others would say that there are parts of the role that they enjoy, but also parts that they really do not like.

The number of persons supervised within each mid-level leader’s respective departments/programs varied from four to seventeen and the meeting frequency together as a staff varied from once a week to once a month, with additional meetings as needed and occasional retreats at the beginning and/or end of the year. The Dean’s Office also offered to fund a conference opportunity at the annual Department and Division Chairs Workshop in various locations throughout the U.S., specifically geared to strengthen leadership at the department level. Three of the participants mentioned attending the workshop recently and found it to be very helpful for their role.

Participants

After receiving approval from the Human Subjects Review Board of my institution and the Institutional Review Board of the participant’s institution, I sent an email invitation to fifteen potential participants who fit the criteria for the study. Eight participants responded to the email within one week of receiving the invitation, and all were open to meeting within a two-week time block. The interviews were scheduled for five different days, within three weeks following the initial email invitation. Participants were also contacted via email for additional feedback on the themes and then again for the final overarching statement.

Interview Setting

Participants were individually interviewed in a setting of their choice. All but one participant requested to meet in their office at the university, with the remaining meeting being at the participant’s home. Since the interview period happened during the summer session, each
participant was kind enough to participate on their own personal time. This timeframe over the summer also allowed for a more relaxed atmosphere without a pressing agenda for which they needed to rush off to. Potentially this timeframe in the summer also deterred some from participating due to vacation schedules and other commitments.

Each participant chose to close their door or be in an empty room, giving the sense of privacy. After reviewing the Informed Consent information together, each participant willingly signed the document and agreed for the session to be digitally recorded. The setting was relaxed and rapport was established quickly, as all the participants seemed to easily settle into a conversational mode.

**Participant Profiles**

The participants are introduced below using numbers as identifiers, with specific academic departments/programs intentionally being omitted. In exploring their experience as a mid-level leader, my particular interest was in their leadership, dialogue, and the environment for conversations within their department/program. Based on the interview conversation, the following section introduces the co-researchers, with each person reviewing their own profile description and giving their approval.

Participant #1 has worked at the university for 37 years. This is her third, non-consecutive time as department chair in her current department. She has served in other administrative positions within the departmental setting, as well as representing her department on numerous committees over the years. As a leader, she is an advocate for her department, faculty, and students, while emphasizing the importance of the greater good of the whole, not just the individual. She feels that people need to be valued and cared for, and wants to work to build bridges with other departments and divisions on campus where there is an “us versus them”
environment. She has recently become chair again and identified one of the most difficult tasks ahead as working to make significant changes in the department, requiring the faculty to work together to create a department that is valuable and effective for the students and the university.

Participant #2 has been at the university for 20 years. She has served as the department chair for 19 of those years since there is no one else in the department who wants to fill the role. She is an easy-going leader who does not focus on the negative but maintains a good perspective on situations. She is a liaison for the university on different boards as well as other university programs. In addition to the full-time faculty in her department, she also provides leadership to an additional twelve adjuncts. With her varied experiences at different universities and a personal interest in the psychology of people, she recognizes that each person will have their own opinions from their background, and makes an effort to engage in conversation so that once a decision is made, all can move forward. Ultimately, to be a good department chair she said the goal is keeping what is good for the students at the forefront and to focus on relationships.

Participant #3 has been at the university for 10 years. He has served now as department chair for three years and is starting his second term. This leader is humble in his leadership, is willing to admit mistakes and ask for forgiveness, and is perceptive in knowing how to support and engage his colleagues that he supervises. His recent colleague review indicated that he handles interpersonal conflict well and reduces anxiety within the department and with administration. He is very articulate and capable, involved in other faculty groups on campus, and is engaging in valuable and necessary conversations. He recognizes that in this role he is given a lot of responsibility but also feels that he is not truly an administrator, functioning without much authority. He puts a lot of time and energy into his role and is honest in
identifying that there are many challenges he faces, particularly in what it means to lead
colleagues, knowing that one day one of them will be in the department chair role leading him.

Participant #4 has worked at the university for nine years. He has served as a graduate
program director for five years and is beginning a term as undergraduate department chair. He is
articulate and carries good perspective not only about his program and department, but also the
university, asking good questions regarding faculty sustainability, program effectiveness, field
currency, trends in higher education, and comparative advantage for the university. He desires to
have open communication while also emphasizing an outward focus to improve the lives of
others, the community, and humanity.

Participant #5 has worked at the university for six years, serving as program director for
all those years. She has worked to build bridges with others on campus and has grown the
program in numerous ways by increasing enrollment numbers, transitioning staff from part-time
adjunct positions to half or full-time lecturers (therefore eligible for benefits), and building a
stronger link with admissions. This leader emphasized the importance of relationships with
colleagues and students, identifying a family feel with strong collegiality and genuine respect for
all whom she works with. She identified that she has incredible people to work with and
emphatically stated, “I love my job.”

Participant #6 has worked at the university for 24 years and has been in the department
chair role two terms prior to this one, for a total of seven years. Even in the midst of
disagreements, her colleagues are not threatened by each other and are very supportive and
willing to share ideas together. As the department leader, she described her desire to hear other’s
thoughts and to listen deeply, functioning more as a facilitator rather than a leader. She also
stated that the department chair responsibility has grown exponentially compared to her earlier terms, making it a role that she sees as simply serving her time until it is the next person’s turn.

Participant #7 has been at the university for nine years and served his fourth year as department chair. He is very involved throughout campus, serving on a number of committees. He is calm, perceptive, and honest. He works with faculty in his department who have a long tenure at the university and, although he described his department as very collegial, he also would not want to appear as if he was their leader. Throughout his tenure he has experienced the shift from discontent, mistrust, and unhappiness among faculty on campus towards more collegiality and trust, although some recent tensions around hiring and enrollment have impacted the university climate. Although not initially, he does now recognize the significance of leadership and the importance of trust for moving processes and conversations forward.

Participant #8 has worked at the university for 27 years. He has served as the department chair for a total of 13 years. He is a very capable, humble leader who recognizes the vast wisdom within his department. He has a lot of respect for his colleagues and has an open door for anyone seeking advice or wanting to talk about their experiences. Diversity of opinion is something he values, which he recognizes results in the optimal decision. Throughout his tenure at the university he had been heavily involved in governance, yet in recent years he has grown weary and withdrawn, feeling that he is not being heard and has little influence or impact beyond his department. He now has ended his term as department chair.

In exploring the conversational landscape and practices of dialogic leadership with these mid-level leaders, particular care was made to listen deeply to their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and knowledge of their experience. The following section describes the data analysis process for this phenomenological study.
Methods and Procedures for Data Analysis

The analysis of interview transcripts, field notes, and reflective memos was based on an inductive approach to identify patterns within the data. Maxwell (2013) emphasized that reading and thinking about the interview transcripts and notes, writing memos and developing codes, analyzing narrative structures and contextual relationships, and creating tables are all necessary and important forms of data analysis. A well-known approach to analyzing the data is Moustakas’ (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis for phenomenological data. Creswell (2013) also identified a simplified version of this same method. Following are the common steps identified by both Creswell and Moustakas, which I applied in the organization and analysis of the gathered data:

1. Obtain a full description of the researcher’s experience in order to bracket, or set aside their own experience, in an effort to focus on the experience of the participant;
2. Develop a list of significant statements of how the participant’s experienced the topic, also called horizonalization of the data, treating each statement with equal worth, removing repetitive and overlapping statements;
3. Group the significant statements into larger meaning units and then cluster into essential themes;
4. Write a description of what the participants experienced (textural) and how the experience happened (structural), including verbatim examples;
5. Write an overall statement describing the essence of the experience and “represents the culminating aspect of the phenomenological study,” reflecting both the textural and structural descriptions (Creswell, 2013, p. 194).
Bracketing Researcher’s Experience

In an effort to address validity threat (Maxwell, 2013), I began with bracketing my own experience where I transcribed what I experienced as a mid-level leader in higher education, specifically focusing on conversation and qualities of dialogic leadership. This step created a helpful awareness as I worked to set aside my own bias and assumption going in to this study. I also understood that during the data analysis process I needed to exercise caution regarding bias in order to implement consistent and non-judgmental descriptions. Following each interview, I compiled field notes and wrote reflective memos as I listened immediately to the digital recordings, paying attention to what was new, what surprised me or struck me as interesting or important with this contact, as well as what disturbed me. These notes were invaluable as I created an individual contact summary form, summarizing the information I received during each interview (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

In order to focus on the experience of each participant, I spent time over the next two months doing a rigorous review and analysis of interview transcripts, field notes, and memos. By listening and re-listening to the digital recordings along with re-reading the written transcriptions and field notes, I was soon able to hear significant statements in my memory, remembering the voice, the setting, and mannerisms used by each participant, helping to gain a general sense of the whole.

Extracting Significant Statements

In this stage of analysis, I created an Excel spreadsheet to organize the significant statements and phrases pertaining to and relevant to the meaning of conversations and leadership experience of mid-level leaders. I referred to Moustakas (1994) and Miles, et al. (2014) texts to help organize and make sense of the data. Taking all of the interview transcripts and merging
into one document, I then utilized my understanding of the literature and identified what was considered to be essential horizons or significant statements, revealing the co-researcher’s experience with leadership and academic conversations. Sample horizons or significant statements included:

“I have been involved in a lot of really good conversations...I liked where we ended up and how we got there.”

“I have certainly sat in a ton of meetings where people rehearse what they already had, and a lot of us are sitting there thinking, ‘who cares, you say this at every meeting.’”

“For some reason you trust that person, for some reason their tone is different, for some reason that person is making an offering that can further things, where the other person is trying to make sure they win.”

“We are not threatened by each other. We can positively criticize each other, but also say what we like. And we disagree, but it is okay.”

“The Provost did ask to come and visit with each department last year. When he was in our department meeting we raised some of these very hard questions.”

“At our best we get to [dialogue and presencing], when we get scared we stay more in [downloading].”

“I am not sure where we are going to end up, but we need to talk about it.”

“I try to let people say their opinions, be heard, to know they are respected, to know they are on equal footing.”

“It can turn in a heartbeat if people start looking too much at what they want, and not what is good for the greater good.”

“I have a lot of respect for my colleagues and so I feel like my role is not to come up with the best idea but to enable the best idea to emerge, and then have discussion around it; and then guide that towards consensus and confirm this is what we want to do.”

“I don’t really feel like I am being heard.”

In the end, fifty-two codes were given to the significant statements that pertained to the phenomenon under study.
Formulating Meaning Units & Clustering into Essential Themes

After removing and combining redundant and overlapping codes, these organizational categories (Maxwell, 2013) emerged as being essential to the study (a) conversational landscape, (b) creating the container – environment, (c) dialogic leadership, and (d) mid-level leadership. As I pondered the significance of the horizons and clustered them together, eleven meaning units (Table 1) and descriptions rose to the top. Over time I revisited these meaning units as I re-listened to interviews, being sure that meaning and underlying information was accurate without distorting the experiences of the co-researchers. Some examples of significant statements and the associated meaning unit include:

Example statement: “Everyone had their voice heard. There was open communication, everyone felt comfortable saying what they thought, we were able to come to a solution that no one had thought about before...those are the kind of positive experiences that make you feel like everything is working the way it should.”
Meaning Unit: At Our Best

Example statement: “I can’t imagine not respecting these people. They are really amazing.”
Meaning Unit: High level of respect

Example statement: “Honestly, that is one of the most stressful parts of my job—how much controversies, connections, hurts, continue outside these walls. It never ends...Feeling like I can never turn it off. I know things that affect my relationships with people in and outside of the department.”
Meaning Unit: Challenging Role

The intent of this study was to ascertain from mid-level academic leaders how they attached meaning to and experienced the qualities of dialogic leadership, as well as their own experience and description of conversations within higher education. Utilizing the Stevik-Colaizzi-Keen method required the grouping of the formulated significant statements and interpretative meaning units into clusters that represent the essential themes. This step involved
re-reading each of the interpretive meaning units and assembling them according to similar categories. After reflecting on the meaning units, the following four themes were identified to represent the broader areas of significance: Conversational Landscape: Engaging Important Conversations; Creating the Container – Environment: Valuing People; Dialogic Leadership: Listening and Respect, Foundational Qualities; and Mid-Level Leadership: More than Paperwork, Leadership Matters. The eleven meaning units, represented in Table 1, were clustered in the following way:

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Significance</th>
<th>Meaning Units</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conversational Landscape</td>
<td>Engaging issues that matter</td>
<td>Engaging Important Conversations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tensions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conversations on campus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating the Container – Environment</td>
<td>Strong relationships</td>
<td>Valuing People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>At our best</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogic Leadership</td>
<td>Feeling valued &amp; heard</td>
<td>Listening and Respect, Foundational Qualities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High level of respect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asking questions that matter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and lots of listening</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-level leadership role</td>
<td>Leadership matters</td>
<td>More than Paperwork, Leadership matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenging role</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student focused</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Addressing the validity threat of bias, I utilized peer debriefing where my expert dissertation advisor verified consistency and accuracy in the analysis process for generating the meaning units and emergent themes, ensuring that the themes extracted were not simply what I wanted to emerge.
Textural and Structural Description of Themes

Textural and structural descriptions were developed based on the horizons/significant statements, meaning units, and themes. I again reviewed each co-researcher’s interview transcript and individual summary form to consider their lived experience of conversations and leadership. Throughout this process I relied on my understanding of dialogue and dialogic leadership from the literature and my experience as a mid-level leader, to aid in synthesizing the significant statements into meaning units. In addition to the coding and synthesizing, I also used peer review and member checking processes to verify these four themes as capturing the experience of mid-level academic leaders at this small, private, liberal-arts university: (a) engaging important conversations; (b) valuing people; (c) listening and respect, foundational qualities; and (d) more than paperwork, leadership matters. Sample evidence for developing and organizing themes is depicted in Table 2.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>SAMPLE EVIDENCE (HORIZONS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engaging Important Conversations</td>
<td>“have had many good conversations”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“broad university has times of breaking through—going beyond rules and niceness”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“department experiences a lot of dialogue”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“when at our best we get to collective creativity and when we are scared we stay in downloading”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“THE conversation was …took an extraordinary amount of time. I wanted to hear from everyone, we asked deeper questions together, wanted to understand”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“we need to be talking about it”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“want more than just talking—we are good at that, need to move towards action”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“had a generative feel when talking about…was a collective effort, we wrestled together, was exciting”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuing People</td>
<td>“most important thing is the relationship”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THEMES</td>
<td>SAMPLE EVIDENCE (HORIZONS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“camaraderie and fun together [in department] is unparalleled”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“very fortunate to have quality people to work with”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“family feel”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“differing viewpoints without getting angry; they still care about each other”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“a lot of wisdom in the department”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“in each other’s offices daily; not threatened by each other”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“[staff] new I was really fighting for them…it made a huge impact on them”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“he took time, didn’t jump to conclusions; he listened”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“need to respect each person’s expertise and not tell [colleagues] how to do things”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I need to listen a lot. When I put aside my own agenda a new outcome emerges”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“okay to disagree and bring diverse opinions”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“not difficult to respect my colleagues”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“not sure where we will end up but we need to talk about it”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“want to hear from everyone”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“we felt listened to [by administration]”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“good give and take in the department; we have a good level of respect and trust”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“we listened to each other; she wanted to hear what I thought. I felt heard.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“when we understand each other we allow something to emerge”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I have made mistakes, need to ask for forgiveness”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“managing people is hard – I have a lot to learn”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“need to carefully walk between faculty egos and doing what is best for the department and students”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“advocate for my colleagues—they are great at their jobs; people thrive when they are doing what they are passionate about”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“don’t want to give the impression that I am [my colleagues] leader”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“not afraid to ask questions—the harder the question the better”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“do not feel that as leader I have the best idea—I value the wisdom of colleagues”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“trust in leadership is a big deal—it matters if you trust someone”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“He [administrator] is not defensive”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Just by sitting at a round table doesn’t make good conversation”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“for some reason you trust someone—their tone is different and conversation is furthered. It is not about winning”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Throughout the conversations with my co-researchers, conversational and leadership experiences were described. For the co-researchers, the mid-level leadership experience was a challenging role that required them to engage in more than just administrative paperwork, maintaining a delicate balance of what it means to lead their colleagues in a way that values and respects their expertise and individual egos. The co-researchers described their best conversations and what it meant to engage in conversations that matter on their campus. Conversations happen all the time, but how well someone felt about the conversation often depended on whether they felt heard and respected.

What the co-researchers experienced (textural) as a mid-level leader with conversation and dialogic leadership had a unique relational blend that set the stage for the structural context for how conversation was played out. Although the co-researchers often identified most conversations on campus as dialogue, there was a strong connection to respect, trust, and feeling heard, that impacted how they felt not only about conversations but also about administration and their colleagues across campus. Another relevant structural issue identified by the co-researchers for how they felt conversations happened was dependent on the leader, the purpose of the meeting, or the issue involved. After considering what and how the co-researchers experienced conversations and leadership in their context, written themes and descriptions were sent back to the co-researchers for their review and additional feedback.

Overarching Statement of the Study

Following this feedback, a fundamental structure or overarching essence emerged and was again sent to the co-researchers for verification of the findings with their lived experience. To be sure, this process of analysis was rigorous, time-consuming, yet invigorating as I began to
see with fresh eyes what emerged in the process. The themes painted a complex picture of what it means to serve as a mid-level leader and to lead in a dialogic way. Mid-level academic leaders in this study described navigating the balance between being a colleague and administrator; aiming to create respectful departmental environments, listening deeply to others, engaging in important conversations, valuing people, and embracing difference and ambiguity as significant components in their experience.

While there is a time and place for passing on information and expressing one’s own views or opinions, shifting towards a dialogic way of leading seemed to open the space for generative potential to emerge. Collectively, the meaning that the participants attached to the conversational field of dialogue revealed the impact that conversation had on their academic environment.

**Essential Themes**

This section is broken into segments to further construct the conversational landscape and how the co-researchers engaged in important conversations that mattered to them. Before looking closely at the emergent themes identified in Table 2, Table 3 identifies the four levels of conversation that help differentiate each conversational field (Scharmer, 2009) and was instrumental in helping the co-researchers articulate their experience with conversation in their academic setting. Each participant explained which of these fields they most experienced within their department as well as other contexts within the academic setting.

Table 3

*Structure of Conversation Fields (Scharmer, 2009)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Download:</th>
<th>Speaking from what they want to hear</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Talking nice, Conforming</em></td>
<td><em>Polite routines, empty phrases; habitual self, thinking from habitual patterns</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question 1: Conversational Landscape

The first research question sought out how mid-level leaders described the types of conversations experienced in the academic setting. By providing the following thick, rich descriptions, dependability is established in the data. Of course, not all of the co-researchers described their experience the same, yet the description of theme 1 acknowledges that they were engaged in important conversations at various times and places.

**Theme 1: Engaging important conversations.** The four levels of conversation (Scharmer, 2009) were identified by the participants to happen at a variety of times, yet they described that there were many times when they engaged in dialogue and collective creativity, particularly within the departmental context. Recognizing that time is a factor for engaging at the deeper levels of conversation, the co-researchers acknowledged that there are certain meetings and times where the factual, passing on of information was prevalent. The contrast of these fields of conversation was articulated well by one researcher stating, “At our best we get here [collective creativity], when we get scared we stay more here [downloading].” Here are a few examples of how the co-researchers described some of their conversations in this academic setting:

*In various roles here I have seen all of these [levels of conversing]. We do a lot of dialogue in our department. P#3*
I have experienced some [collective creativity] in department meetings…Sometimes in some other committees there was real dialogue, and occasionally I have seen people stand up and debate, but mostly I see [downloading] in faculty meetings…although we are trying to get away from this sense of having meetings to pass on junk information. But we have a lot of faculty meetings where you think, why not just send an email. It is much better than it used to be, we do a better job of listening, of giving everybody a voice. P#1

Dialogue would describe the good conversations we have, but I’ve certainly sat in a ton of meetings where ideas and perceptions—people are rehearsing what they already have. P#7

How well a meeting goes is dependent on leadership and purpose of the meeting…it is easier to reach dialogue with eight or nine people, rather than 130. P#8

I would say that in our department we engage at all levels. I mean, a lot of times it’s easy to take care of stuff and everybody is in agreement, but there will be other things that come up and we will go through all levels…[reflecting on a really good conversation in the department] where everyone had their voice heard, there was open communication, everyone felt comfortable saying what they thought, we were able to come to a solution that no one had thought about beforehand, and by hearing everybody’s input we were able to come up with something we all agreed on…Those are the kind of positive experiences that make you feel like everything is working the way it should. P#2

This university, like other higher education institutions, experiences challenges. Some of the various tensions and issues that were identified in this academic setting involved feeling pulled in many directions and pressure for more research, lack of resources and money, increasing tuition rates, divide between faculty and enrollment, faculty exhaustion, and the complexities associated with growth and becoming a larger institution. What seemed significant though, was the willingness of the co-researchers to still ask hard questions and wrestle together as colleagues with these on-going tensions and important issues on campus. The following examples exemplify some of the relevant issues these mid-level leaders described (departmental and personnel concerns, teaching challenges, student needs) and the importance of engaging in conversations that matter:

One of the things I am going to have to work on is the “us versus them” environment…I find myself thinking about how to build bridges…Also, we need to look at the numbers
and what is going on in the department before we ask for changes with courses and number of sections...Are we asking if it is for the greater good or is it just for me? P#1

Faculty will come to me often when things aren’t going well and say, “Do you have any ideas,” and I will do the same with them. I have found that even really good faculty will have classes that just don’t go well and we’ll talk about that. I think they welcome the chance to just say, “Ah, it’s horrible and I can’t totally figure out why.” P#8

We have limited resources and who is going to get it. In that kind of a meeting when you are making decisions on who gets more money to hire someone or have more classes...those are tough meetings...for the most part faculty really want what’s best for each other, you will always have some though who aren’t that way. P#6

The Provost came to a department meeting last year and we raised some of these very hard questions [what kind of university are we, can be, want to be; how to measure currency in our field; expectations for teaching/research/service; expensive hub and spoke model—expecting everyone to come to campus]. P#4

THE conversation within our department took an extraordinary amount of time this year...I wanted to hear from everybody, we asked the hard, deeper questions together...I wanted to understand...we needed to trust each other to say when we felt hurt. P#3

Even though there were these tensions and difficult situations, the co-researchers identified there were times when they wanted to reach below the surface, shifting away from shallow niceness, habitual responses, or distinct sides in order to reach a deeper understanding.

Some students have accents that are almost impossible to understand. One lecturer is working to develop a curriculum to help with diction...there are programs for 1-1 work but how do you deal with that in a class? And, coming to a new culture is a form of trauma for students, so we are doing training in trauma awareness and resilience...we are trying to teach but there is a whole lot more to the student that we need to understand. P#5

Speaking more broadly, within the university, we break through the [downloading/debate] in some of our table discussions when in large faculty groups, where there are some honest conversations that go beyond the niceness or rule stuff...Senate acts at its best when going below the surface, bringing important things to the surface. P#3

[meeting environment] A lot of us are sitting there thinking, who cares—you say this at every meeting. So the energy of difference is used to push individual agendas and undermine collective wisdom; and makes the human relationship shallow. So when some people speak, people tune out, yet when others speak, it moves the conversation towards dialogue. P#7
As I attempted to understand the conversational landscape, I particularly was interested in the shift from the rational thought towards the relational, deeper level that occurs in dialogue. When the co-researchers reviewed different levels of conversation (Appendix D), there was definitely a connection they felt to dialogue, as something they had experienced. One person stated that the dialogue description resonated with her experience “to a T,” others named that they had many conversations like this. The generative feel that one co-researcher experienced kept him engaged in meaningful conversations as they “dreamed and strategized together about how to do education,” while another described the collective wisdom that came out of wrestling together, putting forth their best effort in the creation of a new program, stating “it was exciting” to be a part of the process. People need to express what they really think in order to move away from the downloading and debate fields, “if everybody just agrees, then only one person is needed; the diversity of opinion results in the optimal decision.” There was also an expressed desire to move conversations beyond talk towards action, “We are really good at the dialogue stuff. We realize that we all have pieces to put it together, although sometimes it can be negative because we just talk. Sometimes it feels like—let’s just make a decision. Dialogue takes longer.”

Research Question 2: Dialogic Leadership Practices

Recognizing that the co-researchers resonated with dialogue on this campus, I was curious about how this might impact their way of leading. Isaacs’ identified a dialogic way of leading as embracing the practices of listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing first within their own experience and then modeling these qualities with others (1999b). The following themes emerged as significant when exploring the second research question of how mid-level leaders described their experience with the practices of dialogic leadership in the context of
leading their colleagues and engaging in conversations within their department and across campus.

**Theme 2: Valuing people.** Strong relationships stood out as significant for each of the co-researchers. These relationships seem to have provided the foundation for building trust with colleagues, as a genuine valuing of people and honoring of wisdom that each person brought to the department. They had much to say about their colleagues and described their environment as being very collegial. One leader described her department as functioning more like a family, another described the university as generally feeling less polarized, with more collaboration and listening, and another named an incredible amount of collegiality and confidence on campus.

The co-researchers described the work relationships and departmental climate in this way:

*We have a high level of collegiality...the faculty in this department are excellent...we have a history of discussing issues amongst ourselves, coming to what I think is the best solution in a consensus building way. For the most part, everyone does well, everyone works hard, and everyone is committed to what they are doing...we have a lot of wisdom in our department. P#8*

*With the new people I try to let them say their opinions, be heard, to know they are respected and on equal footing—I try to go to lunch with them once a month and just be sure we are on the same page, talking about what is going on. The most important thing is the relationship. P#2*

*We start our meetings with going around the circle and just check in with everybody and see what is going on. P#3*

*There are people I can go to if an issue comes up...in our department we get along very well. It’s always been very supportive, I can say, “I really screwed up. What do you think?” I feel very lucky...we are not threatened by each other, we disagree, but it is okay. P#6*

*Relationships and trust were built with people I have served on committees with, I know how they work. P#7*

Allowing differing viewpoints and disagreements to be voiced was also an area that stood out as the co-researchers described their working relationships. One described strong
disagreement on who to hire and how her department needed to work through that challenge, yet in the end, they made a decision that they were able to embrace. Some of the co-researcher’s identified some faculty who did not remain a part of the community after some conflicting values regarding university decisions, but in general this was on the edges and that a valuing of people and relationships seemed to be maintained, even in the midst of controversies or disagreements, desiring instead to make things right if harm was done.

*I’ve had colleagues leave on either side [of the LGBT conversation] on where they came out in terms of worldview...so not everyone has felt welcomed or felt they could be a part of the conversation anymore. P#3*

*We have really solid relationships, so it’s good to know we can disagree and it is not a big deal...Everyone is going to make mistakes, none of us are perfect...we need to forgive and move on, realize nobody means anything harmful. P#2*

*I personally try and assume that when somebody is acting in a way where they don’t seem like themselves, that they really aren’t…I try to not let things fester...if I made a mistake I try to own up to it really quickly, and say “I screwed up, forgive me.” P#3*

Also identified was the importance of creating a safe environment to allow for openness and greater understanding of what lies below the surface to emerge. For example, one person felt the environment was safe enough and had a good enough relationship, that she felt she was able to approach the Provost and tell him she thought something was a bad idea, voicing a difference of opinion and saying that a certain idea may work at large institutions but not for small departments. Creating this safe environment, building relationships and a willingness for give and take without needing to win was described, helping to open doors for something new to emerge, something that was not expected.

*Sometimes, even when everybody appears to be getting along there may be things beneath the surface or somebody might not really be willing to say what is on their mind...People may not want to talk about it in a meeting but maybe they will 1on 1. P#8*
At first there was some kick back [to a decision], and in less than a semester the person most offended came to me and thanked me for it, said he is a better teacher now...he said that to me, but also in front of everyone else. P#5

I operate under the assumption that everybody wants to arrive at the optimal decision and in order to do that, everyone needs to hear everyone else...to be more flexible and give up ideas...to understand that something is emerging which is not what we came in here with, but it really is the best solution. P#8

Overall the co-researchers described the camaraderie, wisdom, and support for each other as being significant in their departments. Being an advocate was more than just wanting what was best for the department, but for their colleagues as people. One co-researcher described the camaraderie and fun together in the department as being unparalleled. Another described a significant change for the program where she “fought tooth and nail” to move the staff from an adjunct role to being lecturers with benefits and a yearly contract. After having listened to the needs, this director showed value and respect to the instructors as persons and advocated for them in a way that acknowledged what they contribute to the university. These were some examples of how these co-researchers created the container for strong relationships to be built and modeled a valuing of each person.

**Theme 3: Listening and respect, foundational qualities.** The phenomenon of dialogic leadership became amplified through these mid-level leaders who carried a sense of responsibility for building and deepening relationships, desiring to listen deeply and engage below the surface, and evoke sentiments of trust and respect, while giving voice to all persons. When considering the four practices of listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing that Isaacs (1999) identified as core to a dialogic way of leading, the co-researchers readily named having a high level of respect for their colleagues and emphasized the importance of listening a lot, giving space for voices to be heard, as well as feeling heard themselves. One co-researcher reflected on
how significant it felt to have a former department chair always take time to listen and not jump to conclusions, which she identified as something she was not currently experiencing.

Listening and respecting seem so basic, yet as the co-researchers described their experiences with leading, it was evident how foundational these qualities were in order for conversation to move into the relational fields of dialogue and collective creativity. The following phrases are examples that indicate how the co-researchers experienced and embodied qualities of respect and listening, which seem significant within a dialogic way of leading:

*Each person in our department has an area of expertise...you have to respect each person, you can’t get in the way and tell them how to do it. P#2*

*There is a good level of trust and respect...you don’t realize how good it is until you talk to others...I want to hear their thoughts. P#6*

*I have a lot of respect for my colleagues and so I feel my role is not to come up with the best idea, but to enable the best idea to emerge, and then have discussion around it. P#8*

*I was in a listening mode...I did think about creating this space where they could say what they wanted...and in the end I didn’t feel like my agenda wasn’t met. P#7*

*People need to be valued and cared for. P#1*

*I can’t imagine not respecting these people [colleagues], they are really amazing! P#5*

*I needed to put aside my own agenda and listen, because I feel like the people that are on the ground in a particular discipline know it the best. P#3*

Letting go of one’s own agenda allows the suspension of biases and certainties, opening the space for voices to be heard, and the possibility for collective wisdom, new perspectives, and new understandings to surface (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999a). The co-researchers described how they created space in their meetings to hear from all, to listen deeply and share back what they heard emerge; and while they may have had an idea going into the meeting, the collaborative effort and collective wisdom shaped something new that was not expected. Some also had
experienced a leader who was able to hold the differences in a way that moved the conversation forward, along with building a foundation for trust and respect to grow.

*She [former Dean] really wanted to hear what I thought...she would take into consideration what I said and even though it might not have been what was decided, she at least heard me, and she respected me...It didn’t take much to trust her; maybe because I had seen her make good decisions.* P#6

*For some reason you trust that person, for some reason their tone is different, for some reason they make an offering that can further things; where the other person is trying to make sure they win. One person may be able to say some controversial kinds of things but in a trustworthy way...not necessarily his own views/assumptions/biases, but just trying to help everybody see something they missed...I trust he has the common good in mind.* P#7

*We [in the department] all bring something different. We are willing to lay it aside for the good of the whole.* P#1

A perspective on difference as not bad or something to be avoided, but rather as a needed part of the conversation to enhance decision-making, was identified by some of the co-researchers. While many of them identified some of the difficult conversations within their department or on campus, their willingness to engage the different perspectives evidenced an intention to bring understanding, and in many ways normalized difference. In contrast, when people did not feel valued, respected, or listened to, they disengaged, invested energies elsewhere, or left.

*There are definitely wounds that develop, especially when people feel they are not heard or valued.* P#3

*I don’t really feel like I’m being heard. I’ve stopped going to a lot of things. When you don’t feel like you are heard, then you don’t speak...I don’t feel like my voice matters.*

*There are other places I can invest my energies.* P#8

*Once we hire someone or admit a student to the university [regardless of religion, gender, ethnicity, etc.], I want them to really be a part of us, not a tangential part.* P#3

*I don’t want to back away from someone who feels really bad about something. I just want to keep the lines of communication open. Let’s keep talking, let’s keep processing.*
That is easier for me to do professionally than personally. Knowing we have to work together, day in and day out, year in year out. P#4

Of particular importance to understand is what happens when persons do not feel heard and valued, and the impact this has on their desire to stay engaged, to use their gifts, and to stay at the university. At times throughout the interviews the co-researchers would identify the lack of engagement by some faculty, or those who have recently left the university due to no longer trusting administration. Specifically, though, when persons perceived that administrators are not listening to the voices that present a differing perspective or suggestion, there was a detrimental impact upon on-going participation and the conversational climate:

The failure of a leader to act upon, or at least acknowledge alternative ideas, simply shuts down meaningful participation by members of the team. This, then, limits the flow of dissenting viewpoints and leaders will only hear affirmation—or silence—when they articulate plans, thus diminishing what members of the team have to contribute. P#8

One area that the faculty feel like we have not necessarily been heard [by administration], is the state of our facility. We keep getting lip service but yet we can’t even get storage units… P#2

Listening to and acknowledging voices in a way that evokes confidence is a difficult aspect of leadership, confirming the significance of the practices of dialogic leadership. When some of these co-researchers identify that they don’t feel like a leader but rather as a facilitator, emphasizes how this fresh, dialogic way of leading encourages a valuing of people, seeing self as a part of the whole, and embodying the common good, rather than trying to win. This leads one then to wonder if traditional models of leadership today recognize the importance of these dialogic leadership qualities of respecting others, listening deeply, suspending judgments and certainties, and speaking from genuine voice.

**Theme 4: More than paperwork, leadership matters.** This final theme emerged when looking more closely at the mid-level leader role and leadership qualities of the co-researchers.
During the interviews I was able to understand more about the role of department chair and program director, and as the literature acknowledged, bridging between what faculty want and meeting the expectations of the administration does prove to be challenging. The co-researcher’s lived experience indeed revealed that the mid-level leadership role was challenging, and each embraced the role to varying degrees. Some identified wishing for more training and having a lot to learn, while others said there was so much expected of them that they would not want more meetings, longer days or weekends away, and essentially that one course release per year was not enough time to adequately do the job. Managing people and conflicts, walking carefully between faculty egos, doing what is best for the department and students, and feeling at times like a sell-out to their colleagues, were some of the additional challenges named. Even so, each of these leaders appeared to be working to create an environment in their department that emphasized a respect for others, and keeping the common good in mind.

A typical way for engaging people in meetings is to sit at round tables, yet as one co-researcher stated, “Leadership is real. You can have a round table, but you still need good leadership; and it really does matter if you trust someone.” When considering then what it means to be a leader at the mid-level, the following leadership qualities of these mid-level leaders stood out as significant: (1) humble – “I don’t always get it right,” needing to hold egos at bay, and not feeling like the leader but a piece of the whole, (2) capable – an ability to lead in difficult situations, asking deeper questions, (3) advocative - keeping the greater good in mind for faculty/department/students, (4) not defensive - even amidst disagreements, (5) ambiguous – okay with not knowing where things will end up; wanting to talk and think together.

*I try to think about what’s good about what they are doing, what strength they have, what we have in common, what are the things that can bring us together...I want to help you as much as I can...there is a point where I have to stand up for my department* P#1
Faculty can have big egos so you have to walk a fine line between trying to deal with that and yet doing what is best for the department and students. If you are always thinking about students and what you do is going to benefit them, then you can’t go wrong. P#2

Most faculty really want what’s best for each other. P#6

Of course I am not 100% successful. I have been trying to not be defensive…I am not going to always get it right…I’m not sure where we’re going to end up, but I feel like [diversity in hiring] is one of the things we have to be talking about…this exclusionary, “other than” language wouldn’t fly in any other context. P#3

I don’t want to give the impression that I am their [colleagues] leader. P#7

I ask everybody’s opinion, trying to make sure people can say what they think, and ask questions. I ask how that would impact this, or what do you think about that, or what is your response to what he said. P#6

Trust in leadership is a big deal—it matters if you trust someone. For some reason you trust them – their tone is different and conversation is furthered. It is not about winning. P#7

[regarding the identity of the university] I just want to make the conversation more explicit so we can actually name it and talk about it…I am not sure where we are going to end up, but I feel like those are the things we have to be talking about, what we organize around, and how to be more diverse. P#3

Mentoring and advising students is what matters, not a published article. P#4 It is important that students see me every day. P#5 We need to provide a home for students, they need to feel cared for. P#1 We can’t be thinking about self and career; we need to do what is best for students. P#2 I think about how dialogue fits in the classroom, it is about building trust. P#7 Our ultimate responsibility as a department and institution is to the student. P#8

The co-researchers articulated that while at times it feels that there are differing goals and challenges between faculty and upper level administrators, there was recognition that in comparison to the majority of universities, the challenges are not nearly as difficult, for which they are grateful. One identified the scary stories she heard at the department chair conference she had attended and the difficult issues others deal with that she hopes to never have to encounter. Another identified this same conference as helping her to gain perspective when comparing her experience to other schools and situations. Additionally, when asked if they felt
support, many co-researchers named feeling supported, not only by other colleagues, but also by
the dean or other person’s in administration, exhibiting confidence in their own leaders,
although, not all felt this way about all administrators.

*I think of my friends at big state schools, I know it’s not as bad as there, even though our
departments are fighting for academic load.* P#1

*There are other universities that have horrible reputations for the way faculty work
together, back stabbing...one of the reasons why I have stayed here—because it has been
a very pleasant work environment, even though I have to deal with egos and other things.*
P#2

*I would say there will always be a faculty/administration divide...but it’s probably better
than 99% of the other colleges out there. I recognize this and most faculty recognize that
there are inherent conflicts between what faculty want in terms of teaching loads,
salaries, adding courses, and what the administration has to do to maintain sound
finances.* P#8

*I have a dean that is incredible, everybody should have her as a dean. When I couldn’t
figure out my budget, the VP for Finance came to my office and helped me...this is a
university like no other! That’s how I feel.* P#5

*We are asking these questions campus wide. Our dean is concerned and looking for
resources and thinking about how to tackle [impact of devices and the sociological
changes occurring in society] as a possible theme for a year.* P#4

The experience of mid-level leadership is unique to each person, but just as these leaders
described the importance of valuing those they work with, they also wanted to be valued and
trusted, and know their effort and voice is valued. How well these leaders feel about their role is
dependent on their energy level, whether they feel valued and respected, and the level of trust
they have in others. In a time where expectations and responsibilities are growing, a recognition
of the significant work that is being done and the impact that the mid-level leader has within the
department or program goes a long way in building bridges.
**Exhaustive Descriptions that Form the Universal Essence**

From the individual textural-structural descriptions of all co-researchers’ experiences, Table 4 depicts the composite descriptions representing the essential themes (Creswell, 2013).

The following four descriptions were generated from the data collected in this study.

Table 4

**Textural-Structural Composite Descriptions of the Essential Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential Theme</th>
<th>Description of the Essential Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1: Engaging Important Conversations</td>
<td>The four levels of conversation were identified by the participants to occur at different times, yet they described that there were many times when they engaged in dialogue, particularly within the departmental context. Even though there are inherent tensions within the institution, it seemed that participants still engaged with issues that mattered to them and were willing to ask hard questions to get below the surface. This helped shift conversations away from shallow niceness, habitual responses, and distinct sides. There was also an expressed desire to move conversations beyond talking towards action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2: Valuing People</td>
<td>Strong relationships are very evident and have provided the foundation for building trust with colleagues, allowing differing viewpoints and disagreements to be voiced, as well as a genuine valuing of people and the wisdom that each brings to the department. Creating this safe environment allows for openness and understanding of what lies below the surface to emerge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3: Listening and Respect, Foundational Qualities</td>
<td>The mid-level leadership role is challenging, yet participants named having a high level of respect for their colleagues and the need to listen a lot. Letting go of one’s own agenda and biases, while giving space for each voice to be heard opens the possibility for collective wisdom and new perspectives/understandings to surface for the common good. When people do not feel valued, respected, or listened to, they disengage, invest energies elsewhere, or leave.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following leadership qualities of these mid-level leaders stood out as significant: (1) humble – “I don’t always get it
**Statement of Overarching Essence**

The mid-level academic leader in this study carries much responsibility for handling numerous administrative details, engaging in visionary work in the department, leading and participating in a variety of meetings, managing interpersonal challenges, navigating the tricky balance of being both a colleague and administrator, and espousing an overarching ownership for the department and support for the university. These humble leaders identified the impact that conversations have on the academic environment and attached significant meaning to engaging in respectful dialogue and building trust with their colleagues, thus experiencing more of a dialogic culture within their department as they articulated having engaged in many generative conversations. They also articulated experiencing disengagement, mistrust, and hurt when others, or themselves, did not feel valued, listened to, or respected.

By reflecting on all of the essential themes, I further synthesized the mid-level leaders experience into a concise statement, integrating the components that stood out as significant. It is challenging to consider that all of the experiences of these leaders could be reduced to a single statement, yet each of the co-researchers verified that this statement encompassed the essence of their experience:
Without explicitly naming the importance of a dialogic way of leading, these mid-level academic leaders engaged in meaningful conversations and important issues when they felt listened to, respected, and valued; while not always getting it right, they humbly attempted to lead in a way that genuinely respected and valued people, listening to all voices—not just those who supported their way of thinking; asked questions in search of deeper levels of understanding, embraced difference and ambiguity of not knowing, and suspended their own ideas and certainties to allow room for collective wisdom to emerge for the common good.

The final member checking contact with the participants occurred via email. Each of the co-researchers affirmed the overarching statement as reflecting their experience with one stating, “Today I needed to read this final overarching statement again…what an affirmation of what I have been trying to do.”

**Summary**

Though my focus was on capturing the description of conversations and leadership, I went away feeling privileged to have learned from these capable leaders regarding their varied encounters with colleagues and administrators. I found that I could identify with general aspects of leadership and ways of conversing, but with having never experienced being faculty, I could only hear their experiences and feelings while trying to gain greater understanding of what it means to give leadership to faculty colleagues and bridge administrators needs and expectations. Adding scholarly check points for the data quality occurred with peer debriefing of the essential themes, as well as requesting feedback from my co-researchers on these themes, and again utilizing member checking for the accuracy of the overall essence of their experience (Maxwell, 2013). The following chapter will further reflect on the findings.
CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Background for the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the mid-level academic leader’s conversational and dialogic leadership experience in higher education. The central research questions focused on how the mid-level leader described conversations within the department and across campus, and how they attached meaning to a dialogic way of leading. Narrative descriptions in Chapter Four helped to provide insight into the co-researcher’s experience as a mid-level leader, illuminating the quality of conversations and the dialogic leadership practices of listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing when engaging with colleagues. Data was collected through in-depth interviews of eight mid-level leaders at a small, private, liberal arts university. The phenomenological methodology allowed the focus of the study to not be on the individual leaders but rather on the essence of dialogic leadership and the conversational experience as a mid-level academic leader.

Mid-level leaders have many opportunities for engaging in conversation, whether it is in the formal setting of the classroom, departmental meetings, university committees and forums, or informally with students, colleagues, and administrators. Regardless of where or with whom the conversations occur, Scharmer’s (2009) four conversational fields of downloading, debate, dialogue, and presencing help give language for articulating and understanding the conversational experience. Whether conversation is generative or remains stuck in opposing sides or shallow niceness, understanding the necessary movement towards the generative field of dialogue, helps to shed insight into the meaning of a dialogic way of leading. Dialogic leadership practices identify the need for colleagues to engage in meaningful conversations and the ensuing value attached to voicing, listening, respecting, and suspending. Thus, it is my hope
that investigating the phenomenon of dialogic leadership among mid-level academic leaders will not only raise awareness of the varied aspects of the conversational fields, but also create an awareness of the collective collapse that can occur when absencing and dysfunctional behaviors take hold in conversation and relationships (Scharmer, 2009). Recognizing the impact of dialogic leadership and the mid-level leader role, this chapter discusses findings from the data and provides implications related to leadership and higher education, along with suggested recommendations for further research.

**Significance of the Study**

Dialogic leadership and ways of conversing among academic professionals have limited acknowledgment in the literature; therefore, this study has focused on gaining a better understanding of the conversational landscape within a higher education institution and the value of dialogic leadership practices by the mid-level academic leader. Building on the premise that dialogic leadership promotes collaboration and collegiality (Easley, 2008), the findings of this study highlight the value of building relationships and the importance of listening and respecting when working with others in this academic setting. In spite of the on-going struggle of fragmentation and individualism within the academic setting (Bennett, 2000), the mid-level leader in this study aimed to build a safe and collegial environment within their department or program, focusing a lot on relationships and respectful engagement. They cared about the success of the students, their colleagues, and their department, investing a lot of time into their role as they engaged in many conversations, yet also found themselves wrestling at times with setting boundaries and feeling unsure of when a situation warranted outside help for navigating challenges. Combating the academic culture of individualism and fragmentation, these leaders knew the value of listening, valuing others, embracing difference and ambiguity, and engaging in
meaningful conversation together. The participants in this study were also the first to admit that they fall short as leaders, not always responding well to colleagues or experiencing negative conversations in the academic setting, yet they still desired to stay in relationship and reach below the surface in order to create greater understanding.

Building relationships emerged as a significant theme as the mid-level leaders described the importance of valuing people, genuinely listening and respecting others, and attempting to think and talk together in meaningful and relevant ways. Communication and leadership efforts by the co-researchers appeared to play a significant role for building a climate within the department that aimed to engage people in collegial and dialogic ways. Additionally, the expressions of these mid-level leaders showed the significance of what it means to be heard and feel respected, acknowledging that trust plays an important part of being able to let go of certainties, opening the space for something new to emerge. Listening to the energy in the mid-level leaders’ voices when describing a trusted leader or colleague definitely made an impact on me. As I consider on-going ways to build relationships and trust with those I interact with, I also recognize the significant efforts needed for creating an environment that works to build bridges, validate voices, and genuinely respect others. A dialogic way of leading is not an easy endeavor and as this research identified, leaders need to be present, taking time to listen deeply, to be humble and self-reflective, and to be open to difference and ambiguity, ultimately focusing on what is good for the whole.

Building on the literature of dialogue, dialogic leadership, and mid-level academic leadership, this study extends understanding of how the fields of conversation identified in Theory U (Scharmer, 2009) are experienced in a higher education context, as well as naming the significance for a dialogic way of leading in this setting (Isaacs, 1999b). The findings bring to
the forefront the importance for mid-level academic leaders to understand ways of conversing that go beyond downloading and debate, encouraging that mid-level leaders should in fact see their role as greater than administrative duties, acknowledging the potential for offering significant leadership within the department. A dialogic way of leading is a change in mindset for how one shapes the environment, builds relationships, and advances conversations, thus, building a foundation for when issues arise and communication is needed, people are better able to discern a way forward together, offering a sense of feeling valued, heard, and respected.

**Discussion of the Findings**

The conceptual framework identified in Chapter 1 lays out the premise for this study, exploring the potential connection to dialogic leadership in higher education. Figure 1 illustrated the U movement and depth in conversation that occurs with the practices of listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing as a dialogic way of leading is identified to reach below the surface where deeper understanding, connection, and awareness can emerge. Considering how dialogic leadership can impact relationships and the work environment is evidenced in the dissertation research findings of Boorgard (2000) which indicated that when people are led and lead dialogically, they learn to trust and appreciate relationships with their colleagues, they get more satisfaction out of their work, energy is generated rather than depleted, the environment is physically and emotionally healthier, there is less absenteeism and burnout, and greater worker and leader retention. Building on these findings regarding dialogic leadership, this study draws a connection between dialogic leadership and the mid-level academic leaders experience as listening and respect were identified to be foundational qualities for leading, along with the importance of building strong relationships and engaging in important conversations in the academic setting. By using a phenomenological approach, I aimed to gather data from a location
that had an affinity towards dialogue, allowing for a better understanding of how dialogue may impact the climate in higher education and its influence on the quality of relationships and conversation.

Specifically focusing on the conversational experience, this study identified an overarching statement indicating that the mid-level academic leader engaged in meaningful conversations and important issues when they felt listened to, respected, and valued. While not always getting it right, the participants humbly attempted to lead in a way that genuinely respected and valued people, which was evidenced by their desire to listen to all voices—not just those who supported their way of thinking; asked questions in search of deeper levels of understanding, embraced difference and ambiguity of not knowing where things would end up, and suspended their own ideas and certainties to allow room for collective wisdom to emerge for the common good.

**Research Question 1: Quality of Conversation**

So much of “talk” today tends to be a conversation stopper rather than conversation starter, as negative rhetoric produces harmful, disrespectful, and aggressive language, and is not compassionate or curious for the other. In this environment people seem to have forgotten how to engage together in healthy conversation and interact in ways that bring out the best in each other. These negative tones and challenges are just as evident in academia, and when looking specifically at the quality of conversation in higher education, it is only fair to acknowledge that faculty and administrators are trained to be critical evaluators (McCambridge, 2003), often functioning in the rational mind, and not moving beyond the downloading and debate ways of conversing (Scharmer, 2009). Yet in this study, there is evidence that when dialogue is understood and embraced, a climate is created for valuing people, where listening and respect are
the building blocks for trust, and people are encouraged to bring their best self to the table. The following discussion highlights the significance for how dialogue and a dialogic way of leading can impact the conversational landscape in higher education, particularly as the mid-level academic leaders in this study identified numerous times when they felt they had engaged in the deeper level of conversation known as dialogue and engaged in dialogic leadership practices.

**At our best.** Even though people often identify conversation as dialogue, there seems to not be an understanding of the unique opportunity that emerges out of this deeper level of conversing. As literature identified, when a person has experienced dialogue there is a sense of moving to a new conversational level (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999a). Interestingly, each time during the interviews when the description of dialogue (Appendix D) was viewed, there was a connection made to this level of conversing. In fact, one of the co-researchers wanted to take a picture of the descriptive words: a thinking and talking together that surfaced ideas and understandings that people did not already have, using the energy of difference to enhance collective wisdom, being reflective and generative with a sense of the whole, and the creating, deepening, and building of relationships and understanding, as a reminder of the importance of dialogue in her work.

There is not a perfect formula or strategy that helps move into the generative and transformative experience of dialogue, yet one co-researcher said it well when he described that “when we are at our best, we move into dialogue and collective creativity, and when we get scared we stay in downloading and debate.” I believe this is something significant to ponder. If dialogue is considered the best in conversation, how do we create the environment for this to occur more often? What does it mean to be at our best and what causes one to be scared? At our best individually can be identified as being self-aware, practicing humility and compassion,
being courageous and curious, being passionate, but should not be associated with perfection. Fear, ego, hurt, mistrust, being over-extended, and not valued were identified in this study as factors that could cause one to be scared and remain in the habitual and defensive ways of responding, blocking dialogue from occurring. This dialogic way of conversing recognizes the importance for how one enters the conversation, the posture, the tone, the ability to speak with passion, but also requires an ability to listen deeply, being reflective and speaking from one’s heart rather than a focus on the outcome of a decision.

Being aware and present are necessary for being at our best. This awareness allows for greater likelihood of suspending one’s agenda, biases, and assumptions that one often is unaware of without the intentional inner work and awareness of self, thus helping to shift away from the old ways of doing things and the fear that holds people captive to negative rhetoric and judgment. Creating the environment then for healthy conversation to occur and identifying the importance of personal awareness and presence one brings into conversation, is significant as the individual moves from the rational mind towards the relational heart, allowing possibilities for new ways of talking and thinking together.

**Staying engaged in conversations.** Tension occurs at all higher education institutions, and whether small or large, private or public the need for people to engage in healthy ways and build a respectful environment among colleagues is important. Literature specifically acknowledged the tension and divide among faculty and administrators, as the purpose and goals of each group seem to be in conflict (Bryman & Lilley, 2009; Flood, 2014) and dysfunctional behaviors are exhibited among colleagues (Keashley & Neuman, 2010). Within this study, the participants identified tensions throughout the campus involving concerns regarding diversity in hiring and faculty sustainability, as well as specific departmental issues involving budget and
resources, envisioning a new academic focus, and re-writing of mission statements. In spite of these challenges, the co-researchers seemed to find meaning and value in the conversation, desiring to stay engaged even when conversations were difficult. How the mid-level leaders described these valuable and meaningful conversations was not about the need to win, but rather a desire to engage in important issues that mattered to them and feeling valued in the process. This finding aligns with literature, specifically as Wheatley (2007) identified that conversations are messy at times, and that staying engaged helps to rediscover a sense of unity and collective wisdom.

Staying engaged is not easy and requires a commitment to others and the greater good. These leaders were not under the illusion that mid-level leadership was just a matter of doing necessary paperwork and attending extra meetings, but that leadership was important, particularly as they encountered difficult situations and plenty of uncertainties that had the potential to cause tension and division among faculty and administrators. I believe what made this institution stand out from others is that these mid-level leaders had a strong commitment to their colleagues as they described the need to practice listening, respecting, and suspending in order to build relationships and an environment for the difficult conversations to occur. Even though these leaders knew the importance of listening, they still wrestled with the amount of time that was required to do the job and the heaviness and tension that occurred in relationships, particularly when issues were presented in ways that emphasized either/or thinking, resting on one right answer or aligning with one side or the other.

The mid-level leaders in this study fully acknowledged that they mess up, but they also acknowledged the importance of asking for forgiveness. As the quality of conversation varied, based on the purpose, those involved, and commitment to the greater good, there was an
expressed value and respect for all voices, with the intent to invite many to the table for engaging in conversations that mattered, ones that went beyond the typical nuts ’n bolts routines of meetings, all while aiming to create a safe environment for people to bring their authentic self to the table.

**Research Question 2: Dialogic Leadership**

Working amongst colleagues within a department that does not see the value in collaboration or collective wisdom can be difficult and makes it challenging for anyone in leadership. The higher education culture where self-focus and individualism are prevalent, conversations have the tendency to get stuck on defending rather than trusting in the wisdom of the whole; creating an incredible obstacle to dialogue and collegiality. Moving beyond one’s own perceptions and biases requires a desire to look inward, to pay attention to what is emerging within (Scharmer, 2009) while also listening with the intent to understand. This mindset would require a desire to put in the hard work of being in relationship with and believing the best in others, while listening deeply and letting go of certainties in order to be open to what is not known.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of setting aside one’s own agenda and assumptions (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999a), making an effort to seek greater understanding of the whole (Scharmer, 2009). The mid-level leaders in the study talked about needing to let go of their own ideas in order to listen to others perspectives, opening the space for new understanding and opportunities to surface. Embracing ambiguity and humble inquiry changes how one engages others and potentially offers insights into ways of creating an environment where deeper questions are asked and collective wisdom is sought (Schein, 2013). The co-researchers found this to be true, particularly when recounting their positive leadership experiences where they
engaged and led in such a way that they knew they did not have all the answers and truly valued their colleagues, knowing they were better together than as individuals.

**Knowing your people.** Relationships are foundational when leading others. Senge, et al. (1994) tell of the significance of *ubuntu* among tribes in Africa which describes the mutual respect and openness that is evident in relationships as each person is greeted with “I see you,” followed by a reply of “I am here.” Prior to any accomplishment or work emphasis, this simple greeting indicates that each person is acknowledged and respected first and foremost. This frame of mind brings an understanding of the importance of knowing those you lead, “bringing them into existence,” being called by name (Senge, et al., 1994, p.3). Acknowledging the spirit of *ubuntu* when leading others is essential to building relationships and for coming together to engage in meaningful conversation. Each of the mid-level leaders in this study understood the importance of healthy relationships, first placing value on the care and commitment to each other, nurturing their relationships as they informally engaged together in the coffee area and in each other’s offices or in departmental meetings each month. Knowing the people one works with takes time and effort, and as the leader is intentional about getting to know those they supervise, they not only recognize the unique gifts that each offers, but also the importance of having each voice at the table. Keeping communication open and engaging each other in meaningful ways, lays the foundation then for building trust.

Within the departmental community, and even more broadly on campus, it was evident that the mid-level leaders in the study had spent time getting acquainted with colleagues and that people were valued as they built and maintained relationships sometimes for many years. The amount of care and respect they exhibited for their colleagues was impressive. Throughout this study it did not seem that respect was equated with being the same or homogenous in thoughts
and personalities—instead the co-researchers described times of differing opinions and difficult conversations with their colleagues, normalizing difference and acknowledging the value of their relationship.

**Differences that enhance.** Allowing people to struggle together to overcome collective pain and differing perspectives, Isaacs (1999a) described the very important need to create the container to hold the space for all voices to speak from their experience, even when there are disagreements or uncertainties. While the co-researchers in this study may not have articulated a purpose of “creating a container,” their own awareness and experience helped them to recognize the importance of feeling heard and having the courage to speak, particularly when there were differing opinions or backgrounds. Changing the mindset that charges ahead against opposing views or avoiding conflict altogether, is a necessary shift for recognizing the value of difference and allowing the opposing voices to help bring a stronger solution. These mid-level leaders seemed to embrace difference, speaking of valuing those opinions and viewpoints that were different from their own and the significance of not being defensive in their responses.

When considering how people respond to decision making, reviewing David Kantor’s four-player model helps identify the importance of each player: the mover, the follower, the bystander, and the opposer (Isaacs 1999b). As each player is validated, their voice actually becomes a necessary component for the optimal outcome. Typically, the opposing voice seems to be a thorn in the flesh, bringing much dissention and division to group decisions. When this voice of dissent is silenced it “finds its own power by mustering subcultural factions of resistance” (Beatty, 2007, p. 331). Conversely, when the opposing voice is seen as needed and valued, the leader realizes they bring greater understanding through correction and challenge to what is being said; just as movers help give direction and initiation, followers offer support and
help bring completion, and bystanders offer perspective on what is happening (Isaacs, 1999b). This model was not identified in the interviews but could be used here to build on the co-researchers’ perspective of how difference is approached. Disagreement or difference was not avoided, but normalized and seen as enhancing, not something to push away. This significant mindset is not often found in groups, begging to ask why difference is seemingly embraced here. The co-researchers would not have identified that there was no disagreement or difficult conversations, but it seemed that the shift came in not being shut down by the disparities in thinking, acknowledging that there was more to understand, and recognizing that when “things are working the way they should” as one co-researcher said, that the difference or disagreement brings something that was not understood before, creating a container big enough for holding the difference.

Not surprising then, was the high respect that was displayed for others. When acknowledging the significance of each colleague, the desire for the co-researcher to stay engaged and maintain collegial relationships was in part due to their keen awareness that these were colleagues who they work with every day (and one day may be in the mid-level leader role), but also a recognition that each person could offer something the others did not. This expertise and wisdom that their colleagues brought to the department also prompted some of the co-researchers to acknowledge that their role as department chair or program director felt less like being a leader and more like facilitator.

**Paying attention below the surface.** As basic as it may seem, another significant finding was when people did not feel listened to or respected, they became disengaged, cynical, or judgmental, identifying a shift towards investing energies elsewhere. Similar behaviors are found in Scharmer’s (2009) antithesis of the U where he identified absencing behaviors such as
manipulation, holding on, us versus them, silencing, and bullying, all leading to a collective collapse. Recognizing when this dysfunction is present clues the leader to pay attention to what is going on below the surface. Might there be feelings of not being heard or respected that are instigators to the silencing or holding on? The co-researchers articulated times when they or others disengaged, became cynical, or moved on to something or somewhere else. These behaviors seemed to occur at times when they did not feel valued, heard, or respected. Conversely, when people felt valued by administrators or peers, their confidence grew as they saw the leader making sound decisions, not being defensive, and listening to understand. When respect was felt and capacity was demonstrated, the mid-level leader in this study in return respected the leader and trust was built. Again, even as basic as it may seem, listening and respect are foundational qualities to remember in all relationships and leadership roles, and helps to be more in tune with what is happening below the surface, leveraging an authentic way of engaging and building trust.

In summary, the findings of this study suggest that engaging in dialogic conversations requires a valuing of people—where there is careful listening, respect for others, space for voices to be genuine, and suspension of one’s own ideas, perceptions, and certainties. This study also identifies the importance of how one leads amidst the inherent challenges in the academy, with potential to bridge the divide between colleagues and administrators, opening possibilities for a dialogic culture that supports collegiality and collaboration. The department chair and program director are leaders in the trenches, aware of needs and wants of students, colleagues, and administrators. They keenly feel the impact when colleagues, and even themselves at times, do not feel heard or respected by others in leadership. All of these factors helped to shape not only how they led and the environment which they created within the department, but also reflect who
they are as leaders. This study helps address the gap in higher education mid-level leadership research, identifying the value of a dialogic way of leading, emphasizing the importance of listening, respecting, and a genuine valuing of people, as well as the significant impact the mid-level leader can have on the departmental environment.

**Limitations and Lessons Learned**

A phenomenological approach aims to understand the lived experience of the participants with a phenomenon. The number of co-researchers in this study falls within the suggested number of participants for this methodology, and an overarching essence was articulated that represented each mid-level leader’s experience. One limitation could be identified as the research was collected at only one institution. Extending the research beyond one institution would allow an exploration of a broader picture of the conversational landscape in higher education. Even though the participants did not identify an explicit connection or understanding of dialogic leadership prior to the study, another limitation was that those who responded to the research invitation may have been those drawn to the study’s emphasis on dialogue and conversations in higher education, therefore may not have been a true representation of the typical mid-level academic leader and may be indicative as to why this university and the mid-level leaders seemed like they were so good at this way of conversing and leading.

Lastly, being a novice researcher presented its challenges as I learned to ask questions in a conversational manner, listening carefully without interrupting thoughts, and allowing the participants to become co-researchers as we discovered together about mid-level leadership and the quality of conversations in higher education. I would be remiss to not acknowledge that as I listened to the digital recordings I wished I had asked questions differently at times and allowed more silence for new thoughts to emerge. At times I experienced a generative, reflective
dialogue with the participants, yet I wonder what I may have missed by not always allowing myself to relax and let go of thinking about the next question, thus, not always fully engaging in their experience.

**Reflections and Implications**

The four conversational fields in Theory U and dialogic leadership are the foundation for which the following reflections and learnings from this study are based. Isaacs (2012) suggested the need for understanding dialogue in order to become more proficient in the ability to talk and think together in significant ways, particularly when the stakes are high (http://dialogos.com/files/6713/4851/1672/dialogos-watercooler.pdf). As people understand, teach, and model dialogue and dialogic leadership in settings throughout the university, the resulting implications could be widespread for how students, future leaders, and professionals learn about and experience healthy ways of conversing and engaging together with the potential to extend greater understanding and efforts when addressing the complex challenges throughout society. As this study focused on the mid-level academic leader, the following reflections aim to address the individualism and isolation in higher education, acknowledging the mistrust, “absencing” behaviors, and disengagement that has been identified to hinder collegiality and collaboration.

**Trust**

Building trust in a time when people are fearful, judgmental, and self-focused, is not only difficult, but necessary. There are many challenges that need people to come together in order to find a way forward. Yet when so many of the words that are spoken are meaningless or defensive, people would rather walk away than subject themselves to the empty phrases or combative environments. As this study identified, trust and respect are important for moving
processes and conversations towards dialogue. One participant described the difference when one person focuses on their own views and biases, with a need to win, versus another who brings a different tone, that even though they may say a controversial thing, it is done in a way that helps others to see something they may have missed. Participants in the study also acknowledged that it was much easier to hear some of these difficult comments or decisions when there was already a relationship established where there was mutual respect and the person had displayed character and the capacity for making such comments or decisions.

Higher education has a strong culture of individualism, yet when the strength of the people come together in meaningful ways, where respect and trust for the other are displayed, new possibilities have the potential to emerge. Breaking down walls and silos, reaching to the depths of the heart where compassion and courage flow, rather than the old patterns of the “us versus them” mindset, keeps people and conversation from being stuck in old patterns of thought and repeating the same actions. Setting aside ego, responding in ways that do not raise up the guards of others, taking on a posture of curiosity rather than certainty, listening and speaking out of respect and valuing of others, are necessary for leaders today. The mid-level leaders in this study displayed humility as they described the importance of not being defensive, of asking for forgiveness when they made a hurtful comment, and of seeing self as part of the whole.

**Community**

When connected to a strong community, people develop a sense of true self, and can exercise a healthy give and take, where there is a good balance of listening and speaking, being and doing (Palmer, 2004). The participants in this study embodied this giving and taking, listening and speaking, being and doing; they understood the importance of what it meant to value others and to focus on the common good. Living in community represents a commitment
to each other, a valuing and validating of the wisdom that each can bring, while offering the space to wrestle together with the difficult challenges. Communities are not perfect, and mistrust and broken relationships do occur.

Within the higher education community, mistrust continues to be voiced about leadership or administration, at times rightly so, and other times feels to be a blanket statement for which to place blame. The institution within this study is no exception, mistrust exists, people do not feel heard and are maxed out, there are divides between groups, yet these mid-level academic leaders identified the significance of what it means to listen and respect those around you. They aimed to value people, deepen understanding, and speak words that were restorative rather than divisive. They knew the importance of inviting voices into the conversation, even when they did not agree, and, it seemed that the nurtured relationships were the source for allowing the energy of difference to enhance the collective wisdom rather than build walls between people, creating a sense of community among colleagues.

Time

Within this study, the faculty leaders described the significant increase in responsibility and expectation in their role. They described how the campus community was talking about faculty sustainability, recognizing the feeling of being maxed out. Sustainability though is not just a concern for faculty, it is the same struggle that students and administrators face. It feels as if there is just too much. Time is often identified as an issue when something feels like a waste or meaningless, suggesting there are better things to do with one’s time. Students do not like to feel that there is just busy work or that expectations are unreasonable. Faculty and staff in this study did not like to sit in meetings where the information could have been communicated in an email or when the same people brought up the same issue or said the same thing again, making
one to feel like their time could have been better spent elsewhere without the need to listen to more information or people that they did not connect to.

Administrators spend so much time in meetings and have too many things happening at once that there is no time for creative thought or space for meaningful collaboration. When a person gets too close to a situation or feels overwhelmed, there is value in shifting to the balcony, taking a step back in order to see the way forward. Stepping back is not easy, particularly when there is so much to do. But stepping back is also a self-reflective practice, allowing for a listening to the inner places of oneself in order to bring the best self to the table. When someone pays attention to what is occurring within the inner self, clues can be identified as to what is causing fear or judgment. This balcony view also allows the space to breathe, opening the space to be in touch with core values and purpose, and observing the situation in fresh ways so that new questions can emerge. The leader needs to keep the perspective from the balcony, but also needs to be in conversation with and understand the voice of those who know it best, the ones in the trenches. Seeking the view from many perspectives—the marginalized, the workers on the ground, the ones who are most impacted by decisions—is the way to understand the depth of what is being experienced, and brings greater clarity to the whole, while exemplifying equal respect and value.

Dialogue

There really are no step by step directions and rules that guarantee movement into dialogue, instead it begins with seeing the value in giving space for each to talk, where there is no pressure to agree or disagree, yet there is deeper connection made and mutual participation. Bohm (1996) identified when there are defensive attitudes, intelligence is limited, suggesting the significance for finding ways to talk and think together where collective wisdom flourishes.
Dialogue is one avenue for reaching greater understanding, connection, and relationship as this respectful and open-minded inquiry opens doors for collaboration and collegiality. Embracing a dialogic way of leading is particularly needed in the academic setting, as leaders who aim to build bridges and connections, span the boundaries and divides among stakeholders. The findings of this study identify that the department and program levels are significant places for where dialogue can occur, particularly as colleagues engage together in meaningful conversations that require going below the surface. This depth occurs as people ask hard questions that require thinking together and searching for shared meaning for the common good. As people gain a better understanding of dialogue and can begin to articulate what happens in conversations, there is a raised awareness that helps shift away from downloading and debate, identifying what is truly valued in conversation.

A theme identified throughout this study was the need for common language to help articulate the conversational experience. The language of the conversational fields proved to be important for myself as the researcher, the participants in the pilot interviews, and for the co-researchers to articulate meaning to the lived experience. Once people were able to make a connection with the absencing behaviors and the downloading field of shallow niceness and speaking only what one thinks the other wants to hear (Scharmer, 2009), there was greater clarity for giving voice to their experience. The language presented in the conversational fields helps to build new capacity for understanding conversations, while also acknowledging the importance of awareness for the critical point where suspending rather than defending certainties and biases moves towards dialogue rather than debate (Isaacs, 1999a). As the participants in this study indicated, when they were able to let go of their own agendas, modeling a posture of listening and respect, what emerged was something that they did not expect, exemplifying the collective
wisdom of the whole. As people aim to understand the deeper, more relational levels of conversing, the greater the chance is for conversation to not get stuck, allowing the movement away from the typical ways of downloading and debate towards generative dialogue and collective creativity.

**Launch**

The challenges of today are many, and difficult. No one wants to repeat past mistakes or fall into habitual patterns. Even when persons identify conversation as a good exchange of ideas, there is no guarantee for generative dialogue to be experienced, leaving one to feel as if there was good talk and ideas, but then no action. In Theory U, Scharmer (2009) described the “letting go” that occurs at the bottom of the U as necessary for launching into the “letting come” where space opens for something new to emerge. Dialogue is meant to be an avenue for birthing new possibilities, but so often the ideas only stay at that, ideas. And as one participant in this study described, dialogue takes a lot of time and sometimes seems like just talk, and no action. When that action should take place is unknown, but in order to not be paralyzed by perfection, embracing a 0.8 perspective (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013), where one does not have to have all the answers before launching, allows for mini launches to occur as a way of testing and trying, knowing that in the process, refining and learning will happen. Paying attention to what is happening below the surface, cultivating the environment so that healthy things can grow, and encouraging curiosity, wonder, and connection versus the often felt judgment, cynicism, fear, and self-preservation, all help for staying present with the difficult spaces and conversations that are needed for new growth to spring forth, shifting into the launch, from talk to action.

These reflections of trust, community, time, dialogue, and launch, have an underlying value of commitment. This commitment rang true as these mid-level leaders described their
relationships, their willingness to stay engaged in important conversations together, and was also evident in their desire to listen and respect. This level of commitment, not only to their colleagues but also the institution, suggests that commitment is a significant component of dialogic leadership and the value of engaging in authentic voicing, listening, respecting, and suspending when interacting with and leading others. Whether commitment is a necessary component for being a mid-level academic leader first, or the role helps to solidify that commitment is unknown, but what is known is that a break in that commitment comes when persons do not feel heard or respected.

**Implications for Leadership**

One implication for leadership in higher education is understanding this significance for building relationships, for listening and respecting each other, and for nurturing a commitment and culture of dialogue and trust in the academy. Recognizing the rapidly changing environment, the many exterior and interior voices that steal one’s attention, the tendency for decisions to be made at the top in a command and control way, the uncertainty and anxiety present in many institutions challenges leaders today for knowing how best to discern what is relevant and needed, seeking a way that values people, and builds trust aimed for the common good. This study impacts leadership practice and policy, particularly in higher education, as the mid-level leader has the potential to bridge an “us versus them” environment, emphasizing the importance of building relationships and valuing the wisdom and expertise that each person brings to the table, creating the opportunity to move from the typical isolation towards a collaborative and collegial emphasis within the department and university. Showing value for departmental and program leadership suggests the importance for the mid-level leader position and how the faculty leader is supported in their leadership role. This study encourages the
understanding of a dialogic way of leading, emphasizing the significance of listening and respecting as the starting point for building trust and focusing on the common good.

Also evidenced throughout this study was the need for language in articulating what is experienced in conversations today. This study draws attention to and introduces the structures of conversations—giving leaders language for articulating what is experienced at the different conversational fields and raising awareness for what is occurring below the surface in conversations (Scharmer, 2009). People spend a significant amount of time in conversation, yet “talk” is often a neglected discipline and by changing the nature of conversation towards generative dialogue, a different stance from the leader is required, where one is “aware of deep connection between what is in them, and what occurs outside of them” (http://dialogos.com/cultivating-leaders/overview/). Acknowledging, and practicing, the simple gift of listening and respecting along with the value of building relationships, needs to be in the forefront of leadership practice. When creating an environment that values people and offers a safe place for all to be genuine and authentic, new voices and thoughts emerge that are needed in decision making, moving people past the old ways of thinking and habitual ways of responding. Suspending one’s own preconceptions, judgments, and certainties, help also to create an awareness of what it means to enter in to and understand the other’s experience, something that takes intention and self-awareness.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Many scholars and practices have influenced my research interest in this area of dialogue and leadership. The work of Otto Scharmer with Theory U, the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, World Café, Art of Hosting, Kettering Foundation, Circle Process, and Restorative Justice have significantly shaped my insights and understandings, encouraging fresh
ways for bringing our best selves to the table and engaging in conversations that matter. While this study focused specifically on the conversational landscape within higher education and dialogic leadership practices at one institution, future research is encouraged to extend this study to the experience of the people being led, reflecting on the follower’s experience where there is an affinity to dialogue, and the impact of the dialogic leadership practices of voicing, listening, respecting, and suspending.

In an effort to better understand a broader scope of the conversational landscape in higher education today, a comparative study at other universities may help to highlight the significance of dialogue, and how conversation is experienced on other campuses. Additionally, a phenomenological study of the administrator’s experience would also help draw a closer link to how higher level administrators experience the conversational landscape, as well their perspective of building relationships and trust among colleagues and faculty. Lastly, since valuing people, and being heard and respected was a significant finding in this study, extending these findings in a mixed methods study would help to create better understanding of how leaders build respect and genuinely listen to others while allowing differences and disagreements to be voiced, and an understanding of what helps those being led to place trust in the leaders who make needed decisions.

**Conclusion**

In the midst of uncertain times, leaders in higher education who embrace the importance of dialogue and can facilitate healthy ways of conversing, bring a much needed and fresh way of engaging the academic community. When meaningful dialogue occurs, people become engaged in ways that enhance awareness and understanding gained by the interaction with others (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999a; Scharmer, 2009). When engaging in conversation that moves from the
rational into the relational, space is opened for people to talk about things that matter, engaging in the deeper parts of who one is and their purpose (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013). Especially during challenging times of economic downturn, lack of funding and resources, ongoing tension and debates over policies, and the lack of trust in leadership; finding ways to stay engaged in the chaos (Wheatley, 2007) and bringing more voices to the table will tap into the wisdom that is within each of us for answering questions for which we do not yet have answers. Wheatley and Frieze (2010) described the importance of creating the conditions or environment for people to talk together, think together, and work together, while also providing the necessary support, resources, time, and assessment to accomplish difficult work. This study highlighted the experience of the mid-level academic leader in an academic setting that had an affinity to dialogue, and by engaging in important conversations, confirmed the benefits of dialogue and dialogic leadership.

Faculty leaders acutely feel what it means to lead in the middle and as they experience and begin to understand with new eyes the challenging dynamics that face the university, their leadership lens is broadened as they create a new understanding for the complexities and possibilities that occur within the academy, and specifically their departments. The mid-level leader has unique perspective being a faculty member first and likely returning to faculty status once a term is completed. They have a vested interest in their department or program, yet as this study revealed, being in this role at times makes the mid-level leader to feel like a sell-out to their colleagues as they now understand the broader picture, and may not feel equipped to deal with the impact of decisions or to adequately communicate to their colleagues, particularly if leadership is a new aspect of their career. This study revealed the importance of support in the departmental setting, where the leadership of the mid-level leader appeared to make an impact on
the climate within the department, and when faced with complex situations their ability to provide leadership was magnified.

A dialogic way of talking is not meant to be a way for influencing or manipulating, but for building respect and collegiality among faculty and also with administrators. The reviewed literature indicated that dialogue helps to create better understanding among people, encourages listening and suspending of judgment, strengthens relationships, holds space for differences to be voiced, and slows down the inquiry. Engaging in dialogue with others shifts from the defensive and rational mind to the relational heart that taps into the collective wisdom for the common good. This study identified that building relationships with colleagues was essential for engaging in important conversations and asking hard questions together, indicating the significance of respect and commitment to each other. This level of commitment and respect was the underlying foundation for taking the time to listen deeply and opening the space for holding the differences of viewpoints and moving past the superficial ways of relating. As people feel heard and respected, they are encouraged to bring their best self to the table, allowing for the opening of the mind and heart to engage the difficult conversations and relationships in a way that truly shows value for each other and gives courage to not have the answers but to be curious and wonder.

Dialogic leadership emphasizes respectful, open-minded inquiry as people practice listening, respect, suspending, and voicing, thus creating an environment of collegiality and collective thinking that moves beyond an individual perspective towards the greater good of the whole. As modeled by the mid-level academic leaders in this study, when leaders in higher education embrace a dialogic way of leading, there is an understanding that they do not need to appear to have all the answers, but rather facilitate important and meaningful conversations
where all feel valued and heard, where relationships are built and connections made, and where people seek a deeper way of talking and thinking together, encouraging a movement from the rational mind to the relational heart. The mid-level leaders in this study served humbly in their roles and aimed to genuinely respect and value their colleagues across the university. They aimed to listen to all voices, not just those who supported their way of thinking, they asked questions in search of deeper levels of understanding each other and challenging issues, they embraced difference in a way that did not bring about fear, and at times they needed to suspend their own ideas and certainties to allow room for collective wisdom to emerge for the common good.
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APPENDIX A. INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Project Title: Leading in the Middle: Conversations and Dialogic Leadership in Higher Education

Principal Investigator: Janine Kauffman, doctoral candidate, Leadership Studies
Bowling Green State University, Ohio

You are invited, with no obligation, to participate in a study of mid-level leaders in higher education. The information obtained from this research will be explained in my dissertation to fulfill the doctoral requirements in Leadership Studies at BGSU and may be presented in scholarly articles, books, or at conferences.

Purpose: This study is concerned with understanding ways of talking and thinking together in the academic setting. The focus of the interview is on gaining greater depth and meaning to dialogic leadership and the mid-level leader’s experience of conversations within departments and across campus, aiming to understand how meaning is attached to those group conversations and the practices related to dialogic leadership.

Selection: You were selected because you have served this academic year in the leadership role of department chair or program director, have participated in and led group conversations among faculty and/or staff, and have some level of understanding dialogue in group processes.

Participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you must be at least 18 years or older to participate. If you agree to participate, participation will include one interview lasting for approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview will be digitally recorded, with your permission, so I have an exact record of what we discussed. Prior to the interview you will be given this informed consent form to review and sign indicating your willingness to participate in this study. Following the interview you will have the opportunity to review the transcript and provide any follow up feedback that you would still like to add. After the data analysis is complete, the overarching essence that has emerged from the study will be sent to you for review.

Confidentiality: The information obtained from the study will be kept confidential and only reported in a qualitative analysis with no specific connections made to you. No identifiable personal information from you will appear in documents and a pseudonym will be assigned to you. All interview data will be transcribed by me and then the audio file will be destroyed. Transcripts will be kept in a password protected file accessible only to me, and consent forms will be stored in a safe. Analysis from the study will be presented to my doctoral committee, and findings may be viewed by journal and conference editors and reviewers if I choose to publish; and, if accepted for publication or presentation, to both academic and general audiences. Again, you will not be identified in any publication or presentation.

Risks and Benefits: The anticipated risks to you are no greater than those normally encountered in daily life. This analysis will benefit both academic and general audiences by charting practical understanding of your experience as a mid-level leader in the current academic environment. The information from this study hopes to shed light on whether dialogic leadership can shape a fresh conversational spirit within departments and institutions. Potential benefit will be to
provide any emergent information about the underlying need for modeling ways of communicating that go beyond the typical dispersing of information, talking nice; and the talking tough of debate that emphasizes sides of issues. These findings will equip future leaders in higher education as well as the academic and broader community.

Rights as a Participant: You may ask any questions regarding the research and they will be answered fully and completely. You may withdraw from the study at any point, without penalty. Your participation will not impact any relationship that you may have with BGSU.

Contact information: If you have questions about this study, please contact me directly at kauffmj@bgsu.edu or by phone, (567) 239-6947. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Paul Johnson, pjohnson@bgsu.edu or by phone at (419) 372-7369. If you have any questions or concerns about research approval or your rights as a participant, please contact HSRB (Human Subjects Review Board) at BGSU, hsrb@bgsu.edu or by phone at (419) 372-7716; or your institution’s Institutional Review Board chair, Jeff Copeland, irb@emu.edu or by phone at (540) 432-4625.

I AGREE to participate in this study:

Date: ___________________  Participant’s signature: __________________________

Participant’s name (print): __________________________
APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Welcome: Thank you for agreeing to participate and taking time in the summer for this interview. Consent Form: Here is a copy of the Consent Form. Are there any questions? Just a reminder that this is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. If you are okay with what is outlined, please sign and date the form. I will send you a scanned copy of the signed form via email.

Interview: I will start with a few introductory questions about your role and then will focus on understanding your experience with conversations, dialogue, and dialogic leadership.

Lead in Questions:
1. How long have you worked in HE? And served in your role as MLL?
2. How many people are within your department/program that you directly provide leadership for? How often do you lead meetings with this group or other group processes on campus?
3. Describe a group conversation that you felt went really well.
4. How would you describe the environment and collegiality on campus? In your department?

Possible Questions:
1. In your experience as a mid-level leader, how would you describe typical conversations in higher education among faculty and administrators?
2. How do you support communication and relationships among faculty?

Dialogue is described as an inquiry that surfaces ideas, perceptions, and understanding that people do not already have; uses the energy of difference to enhance collective wisdom (Isaacs, 1999b); is reflective and generative, seeing self as part of the whole (Scharmer, 2009); and intended to create, deepen, and build relationships and understandings (Coleman & Deutsch, 2012).

3. If dialogue is described as above, how and when have you experienced this way of bringing people together for conversations?
4. What practices/strategies do you do that supports dialogue and a dialogic way of leading? (listening, respecting, suspending, voicing)
5. Difference is a foundational and inescapable quality of our society (Shields, 2004). How do you embrace difference in conversation?
6. How do you practice suspending the voices of judgment, cynicism, and fear as you become aware of your own biases and assumption in conversation?
7. What is your experience with how respect and your ability to listen for understanding impact conversation?
8. How has dialogue impacted the environment in your department and the university?

Thank you! Following the interview, you will have the opportunity to review the themes and descriptions that emerged and once the data analysis is complete I will also send the overarching essence that has emerged from the study for you to review to see if this accurately describes your experience.
DATE: June 23, 2015

TO: Janine Kauffman
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [751472-4] Leading in the Middle: Conversations and Dialogic Leadership in Higher Education

SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: June 23, 2015
EXPIRATION DATE: May 11, 2016
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Modifications Approved:
Removed the first sentence and reshaped the first paragraph of the email invitation. Added a sentence at the end stating that both BGSU and EMU have approved the study so that it is clear that both schools are aware of the research.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on May 11, 2016. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.
**Downloading** can be described as *passively receiving or giving of information*; talking nice; not saying what one really feels or sees habitual patterns, polite routines, not seeing beyond existing behaviors and thoughts (Scharmer, 2009).

**Debate/Discussion** focuses on one’s *own views, assumptions, biases* (Bohm, Isaacs, Schein); centered on making a point, convincing others or winning a verbal battle; polarized/distinct *sides*; behavior is reactionary to the immediate need or crisis (Scharmer, 2009).

**Dialogue** requires a *thinking and talking together* in a way that surfaces ideas, perceptions, and understanding that people do not already have; uses the energy of difference to enhance *collective wisdom* (Isaacs, 1999); inquiry that is *reflective and generative*, sees self as part of the whole (Scharmer, 2009); intended to create, deepen, and *build relationships and understandings* (Coleman & Deutsch, 2012).