

UNDERSTANDING RELATIONAL AGILITY  
EXPLORING CONSTRUCTS OF RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP THROUGH STORY

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## Acknowledgements

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

Lao Tzu

As I reflect upon the completion of this doctoral dissertation, I do so with a grateful heart. Not because this is an ending, nor because it is a beginning, but rather because the research in this dissertation is meaningful to me, and because its inspiration grew out of experiences with those, who both intentionally and not, influenced my lifestory.

I thank my mother, Ailsa Fiander-Morris and my dad, Robert Fiander for providing me with both a moral compass and a tenacious spirit that served me well in my career to know that which is right and to stand in its defense. Indeed, it was this grounding that fueled my desire to correct the wrongs I have witnessed in workplaces, making them more humane in the process. And it was this passion that led me to Antioch University and to this work.

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And for nurturing my poet heart, and agreeing years ago to walk with me on this journey of a thousand miles, through its peaks and valleys, thanks are insufficient for my best friend and wife, Joanne.

For you, my love, I can only offer you this: I am complete.

## **Abstract**

Organizational storytelling was used within Tri Fit, a Canadian health promotion and fitness company, to explore relational leadership practices. Through 27 confidential one-on-one interviews and an interview of the four-person leadership team, the research attempted to examine how relational agility, a new leadership construct, exists, how it is defined, and to describe its organizational impacts. Two hundred and forty unique stories were shared through this process, out of which nine storylines emerged. The distillation of these revealed three cultural themes: a culture of relational connection; a culture of nice and a culture that values positivity. Demonstrations of transformational leadership, authentic leadership, aesthetic leadership, emotional and social intelligence, servant leadership and stewardship were frequent amongst many of its members. Four leaders were described by their colleagues as being relationally agile, as demonstrated through the application of a unique collection of relational qualities. This research has also established evidence that relational agility can be learned, and when present, confers positive benefits to the organization including enhanced loyalty, commitment and productivity. Developing relationally agile leaders will therefore likely serve organizations as they navigate change. Furthermore, this may be the first empirical description of relational leadership as a triadic experience where the relationship is personified as a unique product of leader and follower co-development that ultimately serves the higher purposes of the organization. The electronic version of this dissertation is at OhioLink ETD Center, [www.ohiolink.edu/etd](http://www.ohiolink.edu/etd) This dissertation is accompanied by two mp4 video files.

## Table of Contents

|  |      |
|--|------|
| Acknowledgements .....                           | i    |
| Abstract .....                                   | iii  |
| Table of Contents .....                          | iv   |
| List of Tables.....                              | viii |
| List of Figures .....                            | ix   |
| List of Supplemental Multimedia Files.....       | x    |
| Prologue: This Life.....                         | xi   |
| Chapter I: Introduction.....                     | 1    |
| The Research Question.....                       | 3    |
| Philosophic Grounding.....                       | 4    |
| Positionality of the Researcher.....             | 5    |
| Empirical Benchmarks .....                       | 6    |
| The Approach.....                                | 9    |
| Chapter II: Literature Review.....               | 10   |
| Relational Leadership.....                       | 10   |
| Leader-Member Exchange, LMX. ....                | 12   |
| LMX and Trust.....                               | 13   |
| LMX and Commitment.....                          | 14   |
| LMX and Climate.....                             | 15   |
| LMX and Mentoring .....                          | 15   |
| Transformational Leadership .....                | 16   |
| Authentic Leadership .....                       | 17   |
| Aesthetic Leadership .....                       | 19   |
| Servant Leadership and Stewardship .....         | 20   |
| Organizational and Leadership Agility .....      | 21   |
| Relational Agility.....                          | 23   |
| Agility, Emotional and Social Intelligence ..... | 28   |
| Relational Agility and Positive Psychology.....  | 29   |
| Positive Affect.....                             | 29   |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Positive Relationships in the Workplace..... | 30 |
| Positive Identity.....                       | 31 |
| Chapter III: Method.....                     | 33 |
| Cultures of Inquiry .....                    | 33 |
| Method of the Study.....                     | 37 |
| Selection of the Organizational Setting..... | 38 |
| The Research Environment .....               | 40 |
| Participants .....                           | 41 |
| Interviews .....                             | 41 |
| Thematic Analysis.....                       | 43 |
| Ethical Considerations.....                  | 45 |
| Chapter IV: Findings.....                    | 47 |
| Storytellers and Storylines.....             | 47 |
| Wonder Woman .....                           | 48 |
| Jane.....                                    | 49 |
| Kermit.....                                  | 50 |
| Skinny Cow .....                             | 51 |
| Lentil .....                                 | 51 |
| Broccoli .....                               | 52 |
| Wanda.....                                   | 52 |
| Pumpkin Spice.....                           | 53 |
| Jordan .....                                 | 54 |
| Harmony .....                                | 54 |
| Marty .....                                  | 55 |
| Princess Diana.....                          | 56 |
| Murdle .....                                 | 57 |
| Sedona .....                                 | 58 |
| Becky.....                                   | 58 |
| Bionic Woman.....                            | 58 |
| Blake.....                                   | 59 |
| Haley .....                                  | 60 |



|   |    |
|---|----|
| Jennifer .....                                  | 60 |
| Kaitlynn.....                                   | 61 |
| Tom .....                                       | 61 |
| Molly .....                                     | 62 |
| Joanne.....                                     | 62 |
| Mary .....                                      | 63 |
| Phyllis.....                                    | 63 |
| Luke.....                                       | 64 |
| Critical Events .....                           | 64 |
| Emergent Themes.....                            | 66 |
| Family.....                                     | 68 |
| Connection and Relational Resonance.....        | 70 |
| Establishing a Relational Culture.....          | 72 |
| Developing Relational Muscle.....               | 75 |
| Service.....                                    | 76 |
| Exceeding Expectations .....                    | 78 |
| Authenticity and Alignment.....                 | 79 |
| Adaptability.....                               | 81 |
| A Culture of Nice.....                          | 82 |
| A Female Organization .....                     | 84 |
| Return on Positivity.....                       | 85 |
| The Organizational Culture .....                | 88 |
| The People’s Perspective.....                   | 88 |
| Through the Researcher’s Eyes.....              | 89 |
| Chapter V: The Voice of the Researcher.....     | 91 |
| Emotionally Charged.....                        | 92 |
| Grinding the Lens.....                          | 92 |
| Connection and Relational Resonance.....        | 96 |
| Fostering Connection Amongst Remote Staff ..... | 97 |
| Authenticity/Alignment.....                     | 98 |
| Exceeding Expectations .....                    | 98 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Service .....   | 99  |
| Adaptability .....  | 101 |
| A Female Organization .....   | 103 |
| Family.....   | 104 |
| A Culture of Nice .....   | 105 |
| Return on Positivity.....   | 106 |
| Three Cultural Themes: Connection, The Shadow, and Return on Positivity ..... | 108 |
| Relational Connection .....   | 108 |
| Relational Agility .....  | 108 |
| Organizational Leadership: Tri Fit and Beyond.....                            | 109 |
| Chapter VI: Discussion .....  | 111 |
| A Culture of Relational Leadership Practices .....                            | 111 |
| Individualistic Expressions of Relational Leadership.....                     | 117 |
| Dyadic Perspectives of Leadership Within Tri Fit.....                         | 124 |
| Triadic Expressions of Leadership.....  | 129 |
| Organizational Implications of Relational Agility .....                       | 133 |
| Relational Agility at Tri Fit.....  | 135 |
| Enabling a Culture of Relational Connection.....                              | 141 |
| The Shadow Side of the Family .....   | 142 |
| A Culture That Values Positivity .....  | 143 |
| The Future of Leadership at Tri Fit.....                                      | 145 |
| Chapter VII: Future Research, Conclusions, and Implications .....             | 147 |
| Future Research.....  | 147 |
| Conclusions and Implications .....  | 149 |
| Appendix: .....   | 154 |
| Appendix A: Consent and Waiver for Videotaping .....                          | 155 |
| Appendix B: Participant Consent.....  | 156 |
| Appendix C: Sample Interview Questions .....                                  | 157 |
| Appendix D: Permissions.....  | 158 |
| References .....  | 163 |

## **List of Tables**

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Table 4.1 List of Participant Pseudonyms.....                              | 48 |
| Table 4.2 Most Common Descriptors Used for the Culture of Leadership ..... | 88 |

## **List of Figures**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Figure 4.1 Network Map of Emergent Storylines .....                          | 67  |
| Figure 4.2 A Word Cloud Describing the Culture of Leadership at Tri Fit..... | 89  |
| Figure 6.1 Relational Tools Available to the Leader .....                    | 130 |
| Figure 6.2 Leader-Member Exchange.....                                       | 130 |
| Figure 6.3 Rudimentary Depiction of Relational Agility.....                  | 131 |
| Figure 6.4 Network Map of Relational Agility .....                           | 138 |

## List of Supplemental Multimedia Files

| <b>File name</b>                                    | <b>Type</b> | <b>Duration</b> | <b>Size</b> | <b>Page with link</b> |
|---|-------------|-----------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Media_Clip 1.01- Introduction</b>                | mp4         | 2:53            | 32,679KB    | 3                     |
| <b>Media_Clip 6.01-Relational_Agility_Animation</b> | mp4         | 2:59            | 10,643KB    | 133                   |

These files accompany the PDF and are also linked to from within the text.

**Prologue:**

**This Life**

At the center of this life  
There is a man I want to know again.  
He has a new house,  
a clear view of the mountain  
and hidden in the close grained wood  
of his desk  
a new book of poems.

He has left the life  
he once tried to love  
now it is only a shadow  
calling for another shadow

and this shadow  
wants to become real again

it falls against walls  
and fences  
and stairways

the dark penumbra of my belonging

now let me cast my shadow  
against life

before the specter haunts me to my  
grave.

By David Whyte  
from the book, "Everything is Waiting for You"  
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## Chapter I: Introduction

Change is a reality of our lives. Whether in our organizations, our neighbourhoods, or on a global scale, change constantly challenges us to adapt, and our skill in doing so is a yardstick of our resilience. The past decade, however, has seen change occurring at levels unrivalled in history. We live in the digital era where there are more devices connected to the internet than there are people on the planet (Bennett, 2012), where 20% of couples meet online (Rosenfeld & Reuben, 2012), and where 40% of people spend more time socially online than they do in person (Bennett, 2012). This theme of unprecedented change is profoundly captured by Eamonn Kelly (2006) in his book, *Powerful Times*, wherein he describes how we are not in an age of change, but rather in a change of ages. He describes this point in history as the greatest period of social change since the Renaissance. As change is disruptive, can evoke feelings of loss, and is often phenomenally unsuccessful when implemented at an organizational level (Burke, 2011), navigating such change requires our leaders to thoughtfully consider those actions and ways of being that facilitate trust, connectedness and loyalty. Latham (2013) agrees, suggesting that the challenges of the 21st century requires our leaders to hold both an understanding of the diversity within our organizations as well as engagement with that diverse workforce in the form of forging strong connections. Miller (1976) sits among the first to propose that the way to achieving such trust and connectedness, and indeed psychological well-being, is through mutually empowering relationships. Developing this theme, Uhl-Bien (2006) has argued that “human beings are by their very nature gregarious creatures for whom relationships are defining elements of their identities and creativeness. The study of such relationships is, therefore, the study of human nature itself” (p. 660). Considering the relational dynamics of leadership, it is held that embracing the inter-relatedness of all will prove necessary

if we are to be successful in navigating such change. Kouzes and Posner (2003a) show in their research conducted over the past twenty years that we expect our leaders to have vision, confidence, courage and knowledge. However, it is not these traits alone that inspire us to follow. Rather, it is who our leaders are as people which attracts us to them. It is the relationships they create with us, and it is our sense of their authenticity that secures our loyalty to them. Siegel (1999) suggests this is explained by attachment theory which describes “an innate system that evolves in ways that influence and organize the motivational, emotional and cognitive processes we hold towards significant caregiver figures” (p. 67). As one enters adulthood and the mind develops, our managers within the workplace can serve as surrogates to those caregiver figures we had developed attachments to as children. The resulting bonds can create the opportunity for establishing deep connection and trusting relationship.

The capacity of an individual to reflect upon the mental state of another person may be an essential ingredient in many forms of close, emotionally engaging relationships. This reflection on mental states is more than a conceptual ability; it permits the two individuals’ minds to enter a form of resonance in which each is able to “feel felt” by the other. This intense and intimate form of connection is manifested both in work and in the nonverbal aspects of communication: facial expressions, eye contact, tone of voice, bodily movement, and timing of response. (Siegel, 1999, p. 89)

In this dissertation, I explore that energy existing within the relational resonance of leaders and their community of practice. It is illuminated through the intersection of various relational leadership constructs such as transformational leadership (Burns, 1978), authentic leadership (George, Sims, McLean, & Mayer, 2007; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008), servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970), stewardship (Hernandez, 2008) and aesthetic leadership (Hansen, Ropo, & Sauer, 2007). Experience, anecdotes and a single case study (McLean, 2011) also provide preliminary evidence of a relational construct that is characterized by a leader’s ability to establish and nurture deep inter-connectedness, respect and



trust with others throughout the organization with each relational encounter. Moreover, observations from the field of positive psychology over the last decade reveal that the creation of the type of high quality connections described by this construct can engender trust (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003), and the follower's sense of self, thereby fostering loyalty and productivity (Roberts, 2007). Fredrickson (1998) adds that the positive affect created within such relational dynamics can contribute to the establishment of a relational trust account which can be accessed by the leader in times of need, either imminent or future. With such endorsement, it is held that leaders who express this type of relational practice may in fact be predisposed to navigate the 'change of ages' described above more successfully than those who do not, through their unique capacity to withdraw from the relational trust account during times of organizational need.

This ability to create highly relational cultures that enable one to successfully lead through change, is described visually in the following demonstration. To launch, please click on the link<sup>1</sup>: <http://youtu.be/sNVux8THTvE>

If resiliency can be described as the capacity of the organization to successfully navigate change while delivering positive shareholder results, it is out of an interest to uncover a leadership roadmap for resiliency that this dissertation will seek to identify and define this construct.

### **The Research Question**

This research project therefore seeks out evidence from a community of co-workers for the existence of that aforementioned construct of relational leadership, the very construct that

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<sup>1</sup> A consent to be videotaped and waiver of rights was used with each actor in this video presentation, a copy of which is found in Appendix A. A Creative Commons License Deed for the music that accompanies this video is included in Appendix D. The original song was abbreviated to suit the duration of the video. The song can be found at the following url:

[http://freemusicarchive.org/music/Derek\\_Clegg/Head\\_Down\\_Sunrise\\_1110/Derek\\_Clegg\\_-\\_Head\\_Down\\_Sunrise\\_-\\_01\\_Dock\\_1990](http://freemusicarchive.org/music/Derek_Clegg/Head_Down_Sunrise_1110/Derek_Clegg_-_Head_Down_Sunrise_-_01_Dock_1990)

may create a sense of resonance between leaders and their communities of practice. I call this construct, relational agility. Specifically, I seek to answer the following research question:

How does relational agility exist as a distinct and recognized leadership behavior, and what value, if any, does it confer to the organization?

I believe that such evidence is contained in the social fabric of collegial inter-dependencies that make up an organization, and is revealed in the day-to-day interactions of leaders and their teams. These interactions are the myths, legends and stories of the organization, archived in the hearts and minds of their protagonists. To honour these stories, their authors, and the contribution of this wisdom to society, consideration of the appropriate epistemological tradition is essential.

### **Philosophic Grounding**

A deeply introspective process is undertaken to address the research question. In this contemplative work, I question whether or not my interest is simply to explore the presence or absence of specific leadership qualities. If so, a quantitative approach could be considered. Challenging that position, I recognize that using a quantitative approach would be far too confining, and would in fact dismiss the richness of the respondent's experience. I also reflect on my intended relationship with the research and its participants, acknowledging that I see myself in an intimate exchange with them, in a privileged place of hearing their stories, and witnessing their vulnerability as they reflect and analyze them. It is clear to me that I seek a methodological approach that Bentz and Shapiro (1998) would describe as "a sort of intellectual x-ray vision" (p. 97) that reveals how the mind is interpreting the most mundane experiences of the workday. I wish to reveal the lived perspectives or phenomena experienced by colleagues, and to make meaning of them. Rehorick and Bentz (2009) describe phenomenology, or the

study of such occurrences, as a means of uncovering the phenomenon's essential structures, and in their telling, to "reveal the meaning of lived experience within the everyday lifeworld" (p.3). This lived experience is conveyed through a sacred passage in stories. It is for this reason that I believe organizational storytelling is the ideal method through which to come to know those stories. Gabriel (2000) concurs. He writes,

Many organizations are not generally pleasant places in which to live or work. They place severe restrictions on the individual's rights and freedoms and allow little room for those aspects of the human soul that are not directly relevant to the organizational objectives. Emotion, spontaneity, and play are largely disenfranchised, as is, in any meaningful sense, the pursuit of pleasure and happiness. If vast areas of the human soul are systematically excluded from the organization, is it not possible to argue that stories represent attempts to gain readmission in surreptitious ways and diverse guises? (Gabriel, 2000, p.57)

Naturally, in the recounting and analysis of another's story, the investigator's subjectivity cannot be overlooked. Taking an interpretive constructionist approach, I acknowledge each participant is responding to my questions from his/her own perspectives, informed by his/her unique backgrounds, cultures and communities of influence. Similarly, I, as the researcher, come to this research with my own cultural baggage. As Rubin and Rubin (2005) argue, this is both understandable and acceptable, however, it also necessitates that researchers be able to divorce themselves from their own cultural assumptions to ensure they understand those of another. Although a disciplined process of reflection and reflexivity is demanded of the researcher in this approach, it enables a co-creative process of meaning making and an ideal vantage from which to address the research question.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

In essence, the opening poem, *This Life* by David Whyte aptly describes my intellectual and spiritual dance with this subject. With a twenty-five year work history in a variety of complex organizational systems, I acknowledge having observed many leadership styles. I have

been inspired by some and led to a place of fear and self-doubt by others. With age and experience comes an understanding that leading complex social systems requires, above all, an acute understanding of humanity and a desire to find connection amongst those within one's community of relationships. In my experience, it is those leaders who demonstrate such connectedness and vulnerability in relationship that are most successful at achieving high performance through times of change. I am motivated to describe that unique set of qualities that enable exemplary leaders to successfully build trust and commitment with an objective to aid organizations in their leader development efforts, to address the toxic leader profile, and to contribute to organizational healing.

**Empirical benchmarks.** Embarking on this research journey, I do so informed by the contributions of the relational leadership literature. Figuring prominently in this research is the theory of the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) and its constructs including trust, commitment, and climate. The Leader-Member Exchange or LMX describes the dyadic relationship that exists between the leader and follower. Relative to other leadership theories that seek to define specific behaviors or traits of the leader, the LMX defines the quality of the relationship from the perspective of both leader and follower (Uhl-Bien, 2006), with a high LMX being described by behaviors that go above and beyond the expectation of the employment contract, and a low LMX exhibiting work behaviors that are as expected of the role, but nothing more (Brower, Shoorman, & Tan, 2000). Exploring the LMX and trust in the relationship, Brower et al. (2000), and Scandura and Pellegrini (2008) offer important insights into the dynamics of mutual trust building. Werbel and Henriques (2009) add to this conversation through their work surveying 33 Portuguese firms for both the supervisor and subordinate perspectives on trust in the LMX. Organizational commitment, measured as a product of the quality of the LMX in over 200 R&D

professionals in Singapore also informs this dissertation research (Lee, 2005), as has the work of Ford and Seers (2006) examining team climate as a product of the relationship quality.

Furthering our understanding of the quality of the LMX relationship, Chang and Johnson (2010) explore leader relational identity as a dimension of the LMX.

Of course, those leadership theories describing specific leader traits and behaviors also figure prominently in this research. Included in this body of work is the seminal work of Miller (1976) which describes relational cultural theory, and that of her colleagues at the Stone Centre, who further develop this theory of relational practice and the gender implications inherent within including the work of Fletcher (1998,1999), Fletcher, Jordan, and Miller (2000), Jordan, Walker, and Hartling (2004), and Miller and Stiver (1997). Trust and transparency (Jahansoozi, 2006) and commitment (Hadjikhani & Thilenius, 2005; Landry & Vandenberghe, 2012) feature prominently in this body of research each of which inform this construct. Walumbwa et al. (2008), who offer valuable contributions on authentic leadership theory and Walumbwa and Hartnell (2011) who expand upon Burn's (1978) work on transformational leadership is also referenced. Describing the manner in which leaders use sensory knowledge and aesthetic practices such as visioning and storytelling, Hansen et al. (2007) propose aesthetic leadership as a further construct of relational practice. Clearly, this informs the work herein. Similarly, other leader qualities such as emotional and social intelligence (Goleman, 1995; Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008; Salovey & Mayer, 1990), which describe a set of interpersonal competencies vital to relational practice and authenticity (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; George et al., 2007) are key constructs adding to the conversation. Additional constructs informing this research include servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970) which highlights the leader's focus on serving

others, and stewardship (Hernandez, 2008) which describes the leader's intentions to endow followers with a sense of responsibility for the future of the organization.

The dyadic and leader qualities mentioned clearly inform relational practice, however it is the product of their being animated in practice, as documented by the school of positive psychology, that underscores their potential organizational impacts and resulting value to this research. Figuring prominently in the literature is the work of Fredrickson (1998) and Fredrickson and Losada (2005) examining positive affect and human flourishing. These data speak to the capacity for positive emotions such as joy, contentment, love and interest to blossom within organizational settings and infuse relationships with an evolved sense of friendship or familiarity. This relational intimacy is an enduring resource that can serve the organization in times of need. Confirming the value of these high quality connections within the organization, Dutton and Heaphy (2003) propose that such connectedness permits the exchange of "vital, life-giving nutrients that strengthen the bond making it healthy, flexible and resilient" (p. 263). Further, Roberts (2007) asserts that such bonds exude positive emotions that "can inspire individuals to enact their reflected best-self" (p. 33).

The trail of evidence supporting such benefits of relational development as strong connectedness, a positive sense of self and an enduring source of social and intellectual capacity serves as ample justification to better understand the construct in question.

Within the empirical research identified, the culture of inquiry, as described by Bentz and Shapiro (1998), transcends methodologies including both quantitative designs, and a range of phenomenological inquiries. Noteworthy, is the fact that a relative dearth of empirical data is archived, encouraging one to add to the conversation. This is the intent of this dissertation.

## **The Approach**

This dissertation attempts to introduce the reader to the rationale for the research question, and the approach used in its address. It is, in effect, a story, and as is true of any good story, it has a well-developed plot. This has been achieved by elaborating upon the context of the research question by first offering a comprehensive review of the literature, grounding the constructs of relational leadership, followed by framing those constructs in the context of positive psychology from which its organizational benefits are derived. This comprises Chapter II of this dissertation. Exploring the epistemology of the chosen method, and the research design forms Chapter III, while Chapter IV contains the results found. In the case of this dissertation, these include stories shared over the course of the research. Chapter V is dedicated to an analysis of the results and a discussion of their meaning in relation to the experience of the researcher, while Chapter VI grounds the findings in the empirical literature. Chapter VII offers suggestions for future research, conclusions and their implications. The story unfolds with intentionality and an eagerness to share the wisdom of the participants as it relates to their experiences with relational leadership. I welcome you to join in on this journey.

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

To best understand the aforementioned research question, it is first critical to consider the empirical context within which it is grounded. This research review therefore focuses on relational leadership, the constructs that inform a leader's relational practice, and the commensurate outcomes experienced both within the relationship and the broader organization. Emergent themes of leadership have been identified and what follows is a review of those themes including descriptions of Relational Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Authentic Leadership, Aesthetic Leadership, Servant Leadership and Stewardship.

### **Relational Leadership**

Relational leadership describes a way of engaging with one's community of practice wherein the leader holds oneself in relation with, and accountable to, others. One of the first to contribute to our understanding of relational leadership was Miller (1976) who articulated a theory of counseling and development that diverged considerably from the widely-held notions of development of the day which focused on individuation, separation and autonomy as markers of growth and development. Examining the relational experiences of women and marginalized cultural groups, Miller concluded that healing takes place in the context of mutually empathic, growth-fostering relationships (Comstock et al., 2008). Subsequent work by Miller and colleagues led to the characterization of Relational Cultural Theory, or RCT, and its core assumptions of growth through connection, mutuality, empowerment and authenticity (Comstock et al., 2008; Jordan et al., 2004; Miller & Stiver, 1997). Expanding on these themes, Jordan et al. (2004) introduced the concept of relational awareness, wherein the individual is attentive to self, others and the relationship. They have described this level of empathic understanding as "enormously complex" as it requires one to be aware of how they are being in



relation both with self and with others, and in so doing “moves one toward greater clarity of what actually exists in the relationship” (Jordan et al., 2004, p. 54). Clearly, these contributions have been fundamental to our subsequent understanding of the necessary conditions for human growth and development and have fostered exploration of the tenets and consequences of leading in relation.

Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) are among those who have explored this notion of connectedness within the workplace. Proposing that relational leadership is embedded within the everyday interactions and conversations of one’s network in a non-hierarchical, distributed manner grounded in collaboration, trust, empathy and empowerment, they cite their case study findings with Federal Security Directors of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA). This research highlights the intimate reflections of interviewees who profess their leadership to be more “a way of being in relation with their communities and within their conversations” (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 1431). Uhl Bien (2006) would agree with this description of relational practice as she suggests it “puts the emphasis of study squarely on human processes of how people decide, act, and present themselves to each other” (p. 663). Within the work world, this theory is animated in the day-to-day engagement of work teams, and the migratory patterns of leaders within them, where the performance of the team is dependent upon the effective interaction and engagement of a community of contributors and the dissemination of knowledge amongst them. Observations from an extensive action research project that followed the daily work experiences of a group of female engineers highlight the fact that fundamental to relational theory is an understanding that growth and development are optimized in a context of connection (Fletcher, 1998,1999). Empathy, vulnerability, emotional expression, the development of others and an expectation that the relationship will provide growth opportunities

for all involved were found within the research to be key to developing relationally (Fletcher, 1998,1999). Leadership in this context is fluid and founded on “a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow. Success in leading is wholly dependent upon the capacity to build and sustain those human relationships that enable people to get extraordinary things done on a regular basis” (Kouzes & Posner, 2003a, pp. 82-83). Such leadership clearly is a more evolved system than that of mere leader and follower. A fluid symbiosis of interaction is observed that holds at its centre a healthy respect for the interdependencies which serve as the lifeblood of the relationship. It is at this centre of the relationship where the real work of organizations occurs (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000).

**Leader-Member Exchange, LMX.** With relational leadership fundamentally grounded within the interdependencies of relationships, it is not surprising that leader-member exchange (LMX) theory emerged as a theoretical proposition to explore those differences that might exist between the leader and follower (Northouse, 2007). Proposed by Chang and Johnson (2010) as a dyadic approach where leadership effectiveness involves high quality relationships between leaders and followers, leader-member exchange (LMX) describes how leaders and followers develop successful relationships and how these relationships lead to favorable individual and organizational outcomes. “As the exchange relationship grows, a high LMX characterized by mutual trust, respect and loyalty develops. Conversely, low LMX would evolve from unfair or rude treatment, overwork or limited resources” (Chang & Johnson, 2010, p.797). Key to LMX theory is the notion that there is an exchange in the relationship, that is, with a high LMX, the resulting trust and loyalty serves the follower through greater scope of work and independence, while the leader enjoys less turnover and greater productivity. As Chang and Johnson (2010) confirm, “LMX is thought to impact job performance because employees who perceive high

LMX try to ‘pay back’ their leaders by engaging in effective task and citizenship behaviors while leaders place a premium on the relationships they form with followers” (p.797).

Constructs such as these observed in the LMX along with others such as trust, commitment, organizational climate and leader mentoring are key to understanding the mutual development of relational leadership and warrant further examination.

***LMX and trust.*** Reviewing LMX and trust, Brower et al. (2000) describe how the LMX relationship is built through exchanges in which parties evaluate ability, benevolence and integrity in one another. Leaders differentiate between followers, giving those with higher exchanges (i.e., greater productivity, performance, and connection) greater negotiating latitude relative to those with lower exchanges. They describe a high LMX as one with behaviors extending beyond those expected in the employment contract, whereas a low LMX is one where only the basic expectations of employment are performed and nothing more (Brower et al., 2000). In a quantitative evaluation involving 228 employees, Scandura and Pellegrini (2008) describe how the leader-member exchange is a trust building process. As leaders offer their followers greater amounts of latitude in the type and scope of work assignments, they assume greater amounts of risk in the process. Mutual trust is built as a consequence of this risk-taking. The authors add that the leader’s role is not simply about building trust, but also its sustenance which involves an ongoing process of communication, judicious sharing of workload, and amelioration of stress in the relationship (Scandura & Pellegrini, 2008). The establishment of trust is not unidirectional, however. Werbel and Henriques (2009) examined both the leader and subordinate perspectives on trust. Findings indicated that the leader is more likely to trust if the follower completes requested tasks, whereas the follower will reciprocate with a show of trust when interactional justice, or the judicious assignment of work occurs. Practically speaking, the

presence of trust within the relationship is a necessary condition for achieving productive and positive workplaces. This was observed in a phenomenological study of organization-stakeholder relations (Jahansoozi, 2006). Here, trust was identified as a critical characteristic for positive relationship development, with transparency being an essential precursor. Followers expect their leaders to be open and transparent about changes in workload expectations or systemic organizational changes, while leaders share expectations of transparency as they relate to the employees capacity to complete assigned work in the allotted timeframe. The absence of such openness can compromise the development or retention of a trusting environment (Werbel & Henriques, 2009). What appears clear is that leaders should be aware of their responsibility to not only cultivate a relationship of trust, but also endeavor to sustain it, as Scandura and Pellegrini (2008) found that even in high quality relationships, increased workload, additional obligations and stress could undermine otherwise trusting relationships among followers.

***LMX and commitment.*** A further construct evaluated in the dyadic relationship is commitment, described by Hadjikhani and Thilenius (2005) as the sacrifices that are made to remain within the relationship. With the relationship between trust and commitment being significantly related, Hadjikhani and Thilenius examined through a quantitative analysis the impact of business connections on trust and commitment within the relationship. Examining 230 business relationships, the authors found that business partners who learn to trust one another through ongoing exchanges realize what Dutton and Heaphy (2003) describe as high quality connections that ultimately serve to strengthen the relationship through enhanced commitment. A quantitative study with 201 professionals similarly revealed a positive association between high quality relationships and organizational commitment (Lee, 2005).

More recently, these findings were confirmed by the work of Landry and Vandenberghe (2012) who researched mutual commitment among 300 dyads. Those that were characterized by high quality exchanges developed relational commitments that reflected a willingness to further develop the relationship. The authors added that such positive commitments should therefore prove beneficial to the organization.

***LMX and climate.*** A further examination of the quality of the relationship system was undertaken by Ford and Seers (2006) who examined measurements of performance, positivity and team spirit, otherwise referred to as team climate. Using five scales that assessed senior management effectiveness, supportive management, contribution, recognition and challenge, data were aggregated to produce an average within-group measure of climate. In this quantitative study, the authors reported team effectiveness, member involvement, effort and performance were related to the level of team agreement which in turn was a product of both the quality of each member's relationship with the leader (LMX), and the quality of the team relationship as a whole with the leader (TMX). The team perception of climate was also impacted by the intra-team heterogeneity including age, experience, culture.

***LMX and mentoring.*** Given that mentoring of followers is associated with a variety of favourable behaviours, relational, motivational and career outcomes, Lapierre, Naidoo, and Bonaccio (2012) explored its impact on the quality of the leader member exchange, and the leader's sense of self. Assessing 137 dyads, the authors found that leaders with a greater sense of self were more apt to mentor followers, especially if those followers exhibited high levels of performance. This is consistent with the fundamentals of exchange theory which suggest that if an individual perceives the relationship will net greater returns than costs, (i.e., the follower performs well thereby enhancing the leader's ego) the individual will be more amenable to

developing the relationship. These data are supported by the work of Ann and Carr (2011) who through case study demonstrated the effectiveness of coaching within the relationship as an opportunity to develop employees.

In summary, relational leadership is focused on developing the quality of the relationship and LMX theory explores this from both the perspective of leader and follower. In so far as the social exchange is positive, a high LMX will be observed and trust, commitment, high quality connections, greater self- image, positive climate and higher performance will characterize the relationship. But how does a leader create the environment for a high value social exchange within the relationship? This is more fully appreciated through an understanding of the nuanced expressions of relational leadership constructs including transformational leadership, authentic leadership, aesthetic leadership, servant leadership and stewardship.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Burns (1978) defined transformational leadership as a practice holding an implicit expectation of trust and morality within the relationship. Ushering in what Sinclair (2007) described as the “new leadership era” (p. 21) in the early 1980s, transformational leadership provided an opportunity for psychology and psychological testing methodologies to find a place in the leadership discussion. Sinclair (2007) added that transformational leadership “was effective because of its explicit ethical component and its capacity to convert leaders into moral agents” (p. 23). Northouse (2007) elaborated on the concept of transformational leadership describing it as

a process that changes and transforms people. It is concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals and includes assessing followers’ motives, satisfying their needs, and treating them as full human beings. Transformational leadership moves followers to accomplish more than what is usually expected of them. (pp.175-176)

In a quantitative study of employees within a retail operation, evidence confirming the connection between transformational leadership and success was observed (Duckett & Macfarlane, 2003). Standing in contrast to the long held tradition of transactional leadership, wherein the leader transacts with followers a certain quid pro quo arrangement giving or promising something in exchange for certain behaviours or work products, transformational leadership concerns itself with developing strong relations with others that engender deep connection. Northouse (2007) suggests that it is from this connectedness that motivation and commitment are raised. Indeed, this is precisely what Walumbwa and Hartnell (2011) observed in interviews with 426 leaders and followers. Transformational leadership develops trust and commitment among followers, creates relational identification with leaders and results in a greater sense of self-identity and performance. Ospina and Foldy (2010) shared similar findings in their narrative analysis of 38 organizations where transformational leadership qualities were found to be responsible for the creation of interdependencies, a process they describe as ‘bridging’ that facilitates trust, communication and success.

### **Authentic Leadership**

Central to each relational construct is trust. If the veracity of one’s motives is questionable, then the relationship is undermined. Such is the thesis of authentic leadership. As a construct, authenticity is defined as owning one’s personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, preferences or beliefs and behaving in accordance with one’s true self (Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011; Walumbwa et al., 2008). When a leader animates authenticity in practice we see they “demonstrate a passion for their purpose, practice their values consistently and lead with their hearts as well as their heads. They establish long-term, meaningful relationships and have the self-discipline to get results. They know who they are”

(George et al., 2007, p. 130). Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, and Walumbwa (2005) continue, “thus authenticity involves both owning one’s personal experiences and acting in accordance with one’s true self” (p. 344). “Authentic leaders actively and continuously model for followers, through their words and deeds, high levels of self-awareness, balanced processing, transparency, and authentic behaviour” (p. 347). When this is not the case, or when the perception created is one where those who lead appear less than genuine, or behave in a manner that leaves a distorted representation of them, our level of trust plummets and relationships are compromised. We need to know that our leaders are being honest, truthful and forthright in what they are telling us, in their expectations and in their promises of reward. Kouzes and Posner (2003b) have researched those traits which followers most admire and expect within the relationship. Twenty years of feedback has consistently demonstrated that honesty is the most important.

People want leaders who are credible. We want to believe in our leaders. We want to have faith and confidence in them as people. We want to believe that their word can be trusted, that they have the knowledge and skill to lead, and that they are personally excited and enthusiastic about the direction in which we are headed. Credibility is the foundation of leadership. Credibility is the foundation on which leaders and constituents will build the grand dreams of the future. Without credibility, visions will fade and relationships will wither. (p. 262)

Further support of Kouzes and Posner’s (2003b) work comes from extensive empirical evidence collected by Walumbwa et al. (2008) who determined in a quantitative analysis involving 478 employees from 11 different workplaces that followers who experienced authentic leadership had greater job satisfaction and work performance. Clearly, organizations with authentic leadership would be well positioned to face the challenges offered by today’s rapidly changing business environment.



## **Aesthetic Leadership**

The focus of aesthetic leadership as presented by Hansen et al. (2007) is to draw from one's experiences those aesthetic processes that can be used to interpret or inform organizational life. Aesthetic leadership is a tributary of transformational leadership theory and informs charismatic, authentic and visionary leadership through its description of sensory experiences that are used by leaders in service of creating connection with their communities. For example, transformational leadership describes a relationship between the leader and the led as one that inspires performance beyond expectations. Often the leader uses stories to create a vision of the future which "can make the follower's work more meaningful and provide them with a deeper sense of purpose" (Hansen et al., 2007, p.549). These stories or visions are future-focused, they excite within us the possibility of what is achievable, and they are aesthetic experiences. With the charismatic leader, stories draw one's followers closer. With authenticity, a greater sense of trust within the community is engendered. With aesthetics, "the leader is concerned with the knowledge that is created from our sensory experiences, which includes a connection between our thoughts and feelings and how our reasoning around them informs our cognitions" (Hansen et al., 2007, p. 552). Joy, laughter, fear, anxiousness, pride, excitement; each of these emotions are aesthetic experiences and inform how we in turn view our leaders, and our readiness to impart them with labels such as trusting, charismatic or visionary. Goleman and Boyatzis (2008) concur: "Humankind's original leaders earned their place in large part because their leadership was emotionally compelling" (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2003, p. 46). It is this exploration of sensory and emotional processes that is the fuel for engaged leadership and business success.

## **Servant Leadership and Stewardship**

Aligned with the spirit of connection and trust found within the other relational leader styles, the servant leader is one who seeks to improve through self. “If a flaw in the world is to be remedied, to the servant the process of change starts in here, in the servant, not out there” (Greenleaf, 2002, p.132). In practice, the servant leader sees his/her role as one designed to facilitate greatness in others through responding to their unique needs. Using a critical incident technique to examine whether this was observed cross-culturally, 116 interviews were conducted in China in both the private and public sectors (Han, Kakabadse, & Kakabadse, 2009). The evidence not only confirmed the existence of the construct in China, but also found it to exist in both the private and public sectors. The research went on to suggest that servant leadership, as exemplified by qualities such as putting others first, being dutiful, ethical, moral, leading relationally and with humility are each important to attracting, retaining and motivating employees in China. It is important to note, that although the term, ‘the servant leader,’ was originally enlisted to draw attention to a set of virtuous qualities, it has also come to be associated by some cultures in a marginalizing way, evoking images of colonialism and oppression. Within this study, however, this was clearly not the case as great care was taken to formulate culturally appropriate definitions that borrow from both Confucianism, Daoism and Community ideology. Despite this, it is of value to hold that cross-culturally, the connotations ascribed to servant leadership are not always seen as positive.

Stewardship has been described as “the attitudes and behaviours that place the long term best interest of a group ahead of personal goals that serve an individual’s self- interests” (Hernandez, 2008), and as such shares a strong homology with that of the servant leader. Hernandez adds, “stewardship is not created through formal rules but rather is facilitated

through organization structures that help leaders to generate interpersonal and institutional trust, clarity regarding organizational strategy, and intrinsic motivation in followers which, in turn, encourages followers to act with moral courage in service to the organization or cause” (p. 122). As with other constructs of relational leadership, stewardship replays themes of connection, trust, commitment and exceeded expectations—each in service of the organization and its goals. Depree (1998) would go one step further in suggesting that the leader, acting in service of others, has an opportunity to not only create impactful results, but to endow the organization with a legacy. “The art of leadership requires us to think about the leader-as-steward in terms of relationship: of assets and legacy, of momentum and effectiveness, or civility and values” (Depree, 1998, p. 66).

### **Organizational and Leadership Agility**

A further leader prototype that has recently been reported is that described as agility. This concept first emerged as manufacturing organizations began producing increasingly complex products and faced the need to be flexible and responsive to continuous and unexpected change. Agile manufacturing has since been defined as the capability of an organization to thrive in the competitive environment of continuous change and to respond quickly to markets driven by customer based valuing of products and services (Vinodh, Devadasan, Reddy, and Ravichand, 2010). Central to the concept of agile manufacturing are the concepts of lean manufacturing and flexible manufacturing systems. Emerging out of this concept and extending more broadly within the organization have been concepts of agile supply chains, agile production, and agile information technology (I.T.) deployments. Indeed, the empirical literature has seen an increasing body of quantitative study measuring each of these areas of production management (Vinodh et al., 2010; Vinodh & Prasanna, 2011; Yaghoobi &

Azadikhah, 2011). In a review of enterprise agility, Sherehiy, Karwowski, and Layer (2007) identified those global characteristics of agility that apply to all aspects of the organization. These include among other traits, flexibility, responsiveness, speed, and having a culture of change. Empirical evidence of the value of agility to achieving project performance was articulated in a recent case study (Oliveira, Valentina, & Possamai, 2012). Noteworthy is the lack of empirical evidence relating to the agile workforce. One case study analysis of a large healthcare network (Shafer, Dyer, Kilty, Amos, & Ericksen, 2001) highlighted specific human resource strategies that enabled organizational agility, however such strategies did not speak to qualities of the workforce, per se.

There has also emerged over the past few years a growing number of publications, particularly in the trade press, that reference the term leadership agility (Cashman, 2008, 2011; Joiner, 2009). Described by Joiner (2009) as “the ability to lead effectively when rapid change and uncertainty are the norm and when success requires consideration of multiple views and priorities” (p. 29), leadership agility essentially speaks to the leadership qualities desired to successfully make decisions amidst an ever-evolving landscape. Again, very little empirical evidence for leadership agility is available. One exception was the use of grounded theory to examine the leader qualities necessary for success in extreme firefighting situations where ambiguity was high (Baran & Scott, 2010). Here, the authors were able to point to agility as a key structure found among successful leaders in this crisis environment. Defined in this research as the way in which the firefighter “rapidly adjusted behaviors due to changing conditions” (p. S52), the author’s description is aligned with that presented above describing leader agility. What is clear, is that leadership agility, as referenced, holds no pretense of being a construct of relational practice.

What appears to be missing in the literature therefore is a description of what I would describe as agile relationships. These would be demonstrated by the leader's capacity to invite those within his/her social networks to be engaged in intentional acts of vulnerability, sharing and co-creation that evoke trust, high quality connection, and positive affect. Such mutual exchanges hold the possibility to generate an energy of positivity in the relational space between the leader and follower. The leader who demonstrates a capacity to create such a space with each interaction, and in so doing, to permit this resonance of energy between leader and follower to occur is hereafter being referred to as relationally agile.

### **Relational Agility**

Having overviewed a collection of relational leadership constructs enlightens us to what has been named and described as well as that which has not. Sometimes when we hold tight to the vision of something we believe to exist, we possess greater sensory perception when it is conspicuously absent from discussion. Like viewing a deck of cards displayed on a table in front of you. You can observe each of the four suits and their numerical sequence. Scanning the cards you note the ace through ten, then the Jack and the King, but what of the Queen? Fifty-one cards are present, but without the missing one, the deck is incomplete. This seems to be true when viewing the literature for a description of the relational resonance observed in leadership dynamics. We bear witness to the various constructs of relational leadership, yet are left wanting for an explanation of this intimate exchange and its organizational impact. What follows seeks to address this void.

Each of the relational leadership constructs discussed thus far focus on the relatedness, humanness, and connectivity of people in community. This is their common ancestry. Each concept serves to describe the manner in which leaders choose to interact with their

communities. Leaders may be transformational with their followers seeking to weave a new moral tapestry for their teams where each member is inspired to go above and beyond what they believe to be expected of them. Alternatively, principles of servant leadership or stewardship may serve as the leader's guide. The aesthetic practitioner may use stories or visioning to engage colleagues. Each practice is not mutually exclusive. One may co-exist with another with each leader leaning on his/her own personal style to deliver his/her own unique brand of leadership.

This review of research has sought to examine relational leadership and its constructs to empirically understand how organizations can effectively respond to profound change. When these constructs of relational practice are exercised in a social exchange with followers, the relationship evolves to one characterized by trust, commitment and connection. As defined earlier, this would be an example of a high leader-member exchange, LMX. In the absence of such constructs, a low LMX may result. In as much as the literature describes such structures, it also reveals a deficiency with respect to examining and qualifying that resonance which is occurring in the relationship between people, in the relational interstitial space. Relational awareness, described by Jordan et al. (2004) introduces into the dialogue an acknowledgement that those who practice in relation with empathy towards both self, other and relationship are immensely more successful at building connection and averting harm. Their work supports the argument that one's capacity to lead others from a position of vulnerability within this relational interstitial space, holding each where they are in the moment, is both a challenging and supremely beneficial relational construct. I hold that it is within this space that relational reciprocity occurs amongst each of those within the relationship. The term *relational agility* has been offered as a way to describe how the leader orchestrates this intimate relationship with

others. Relational agility describes the intentional act of interpreting and responding to the energy between oneself and each member of one's community of practice in a way that is honoring and catalyzes relational growth, positivity and connectedness. In relationship systems coaching, this 'energy' would be described as *the third entity* (Fuller, 2009); the space between one individual and another, the space that describes the relationship. When relational leaders extend an invitation of reciprocal engagement to each of their followers, responding authentically and without judgment in precisely the manner that is dictated by the resonance of the relationship at that moment in time, it is believed that such leaders create trust, high quality connection, and positive affect. The followers within this community realize an opportunity to develop a positive sense of self and are motivated to contribute at their best. Followers are developed by the relationally agile leader during this engagement to focus their energies on the co-development of the relationship. The groundwork is created to experience the highest levels of creativity and productivity with a sense of ease, an experience Csikszentmihalyi (1990) would describe as flow. Moving nimbly through his/her work day, interfacing with each of those within his/her community of practice with intentionality and connectedness, the leader demonstrates what could be described as relational agility.

How relational agility is animated in various circumstances becomes more obvious given specific circumstances. Take for example, situational leadership, as characterized by Hersey and Blanchard (2003), which is focused on a leader's approach to a specific issue or situation. Leaders balance the amount of direction they feel they need to give their colleagues, the amount of emotional support required and the perceived level of skill available to respond to the issue. The emphasis here is on how the leader alone responds to the specific situation using the resources they have at their disposal. There is no consideration, however, for the reciprocity in

the relationship, and for how the energy of that relationship informs the leader's subsequent actions. A relationally agile leader responding to a specific issue may rely on the deep connections nurtured in each relational encounter to mobilize capabilities in the organization to assist in addressing the specific issue, and would adjust their response accordingly based on the energy emitted from the relational space.

Similarly, within the framework of adaptive leadership, where the leader is looking beyond the relationship to the larger picture of organizational change, relational agility may co-exist as a relational muscle that can be relied upon during times of change. Change necessitates new processes and strategies. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) argue that leading through change therefore requires an astute capacity to distinguish what should be preserved from the past relative to what needs to change in order to succeed in an evolving world. The adaptive leader seeks to lead individuals iteratively through the tough challenges necessary in service of organizational change. Again, in paternalistic fashion, the leader is responding to the change based upon their perceptions and skill, rather than through a process of mutuality. If the leader acts with relational agility, resources may be available to enable the change efforts that otherwise may not be.

As human beings, we bring our diverse selves to our relationships and to our workplaces: our passions, our private lives, our dreams and aspirations, and our emotions. On any given day, at any given moment, our moods may cover a spectrum from being joyful to being angry. We may have just hung up the phone after arguing with a spouse or been informed of a sick parent. Or we may be lost in thought over the vacation we hope to take in the near future. Whatever thought or emotion we are experiencing in the moment, it may be with us for a time, and then be replaced by something entirely different. Imagining the interplay of such



emotion and its impact on our beliefs and actions within an environment of change, one can relate to Anderson's (2012) description of the organization as a social construction of immense complexity, where chaos is the prevailing climate experienced when leading organizational change. This is where the relationally agile leader truly shines. They honor the individual by tuning into where they are in the moment, without judgment. They then hold the relationship where it needs to be, co-creating a path of future focus which will facilitate alignment, growth in the community, and achievement of common goals. Hallowell (1999) would describe this as the human moment.

The human moment is an authentic psychological encounter that can happen only when two people share the same physical space. It has two prerequisites: people's physical presence and their emotional and intellectual attention. The human moment can be brisk, business like and brief. A five minute conversation can be a perfectly meaningful human moment. To make the human moment work, you have to set aside what you're doing, put down the memo you were reading, disengage from your laptop, abandon your daydream, and focus on the person you're with. Usually when you do that, the other person will feel the energy and respond in kind. Together, you quickly create a force field of exceptional power. (Hallowell, 1999, pp. 3-4)

The relationally agile leader is one who is profoundly sentient, using intuition and sensory cues to illuminate the temper of the relationship. Moved by the energy of his/her interdependencies and intuitively aware of each other's needs, the relationally agile leader co-creates responses to those relationships using those structures that serve the relationship in the greatest way in the moment, all in service of advancing organizational performance and the personal evolution of others. Wheatley (2003) suggests that to be successful in navigating change, we must learn to work in the "real" organization which is defined by "a dense network of interdependent relationships" (p. 505). The relationally agile leader recognizes this network and responds by embodying much of the relational practice previously described including transformational leadership, authenticity and stewardship. "Nothing lives alone. Everything

comes into form because of relationship. Through these chosen relationships, we co-create our world” (Wheatley, 2003, p. 505). In short, it is held that the relationally agile leader is one who is uniquely well-prepared to successfully co-create, through meaningful encounters, a world capable of addressing the evolving challenges it presents.

**Agility, emotional and social intelligence.** Relational agility requires the leader to exhibit a high degree of self-awareness, self-motivation, empathy, and relationship building capacity, skills that are typically ascribed to emotional intelligence (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Ashkanasy and Humphrey (2011a) would agree suggesting that effective leaders are those that are able to regulate emotional levels with their followers in service of enhancing their relationships with them. One of the main ways this is done is through a process of emotional contagion whereby the emotions of one are spread to others (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011b). Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) suggest that it is through this infectious process that leaders and followers develop a sense of emotional synchronization or resonance with one another. Indeed, more recent neuroscience research has led Goleman and Boyatzis (2008) to characterize a set of interpersonal skills built on specific neural pathways that inspire others to be effective. Holding that such skills are essential to lead effectively, they refer to this relationship construct as *social intelligence* and suggest “it is about developing a genuine interest in and talent for fostering positive feelings in the people whose cooperation and support you need” (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008, p. 76). As such, social intelligence would be a necessary condition for agile relational practice but insufficiently describes the intentional practice of agility and its reciprocal commitment to the relationship. It is with the relationally agile leader that each relationship within the leader’s community of practice is honored as mutual energy, where cues revealed through sentience and intuition guide

precise leader responses. The potential benefits of relational agility and its' contributions to organizational resiliency are clear when viewed through the lens of recent contributions in the field of positive psychology.

**Relational agility and positive psychology.** The last decade has seen an emergence of empirical data from the field of positive psychology in support of the creation of the type of high quality connections described by this construct. What follows is an overview of that evidence and its observed benefits to the organization.

*Positive affect.* The practical value of relational agility within an organizational framework may be argued. Does it matter that one's manager is empathetic to issues at home or that she takes the time to engage managers in other parts of the company? Fredrickson and Losada (2005) would argue yes, it does matter. Examining positive affect, or in other words, the range of positive human emotions and attitudes such as gratefulness, appreciation and joy, they determined that as the ratio of positive affect to negative, otherwise known as the positivity ratio, passes a certain threshold, the individual achieves a state of flourishing. The benefits of this positive affect are real including improved attention, intuition, creativity as well as documented physiologic benefits such as strengthened cardiovascular and immune systems (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). As flourishing is associated with optimal human functioning and resilience, it clearly impacts individual performance and behavior. Fredrickson (1998) takes this notion further by adding that shared positive emotions create "enduring alliances, friendships or family bonds...social relationships that become enduring resources that individuals can draw on later in times of need" (p. 311). By extending these findings to relational agility, one can understand how relationally agile leaders who contribute to a positive organizational culture and the flourishing of their colleagues, are, in effect, building physical,

intellectual and social resources that can be accessed to address imminent challenges or that can be called upon at a later time if and when the need necessitates. Here, the contribution of the relationally agile leader is to the fostering of a culture conducive to generating positive affect amongst colleagues. Roberts (2007) offers that this, in turn, facilitates discovery and experimentation by expanding one's thought-action repertoire, leading one to consider a wider range of possibilities for what may occur and whom one can become—positive emotions can inspire individuals to enact their reflected best-self, employing their strengths in a way that creates a positive experience for them and a constructive experience for others. (p. 33)

***Positive relationships in the workplace.*** Positive relationships are particularly valuable in contributing to positivity and productivity in the workplace. Indeed, Dutton and Heaphy (2003) argue if organizations encourage the establishment of positive relationships,

Employees may be able to display authentic identities more often, engage others more fully, be more vulnerable in the process of learning and experience more interpersonal valuing through positive regard, each of which cultivate positive meaning about being a member of the organization. (p. 276)

Although the organization can create the environment that enables positive relationships to develop, Quinn (2007) believes that, people discern the degree to which their interactions with other people are positive based largely on the energy (positive affect) they feel as they relate with those people, and people build positive relationships, in part, as they repeatedly experience energy in their interactions with other people. (Quinn, 2007, p. 73) Moreover, as Dutton and Heaphy (2003) note, when people experience this energy in engagement with their colleagues, they report feelings of vitality and aliveness, a heightened sense of positive self-regard and a greater sense of mutual connection and engagement. In addition, “physiologic impacts including longer life span, lower blood pressure and a stronger immune system are observed

amongst those in such relationships” (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003, p. 267). Through positive interaction and relationships, a sense of connectedness is created.

The quality of this connection is defined in terms of whether the connective tissue between individuals is life-giving or life depleting. A high quality connection between two people allows the transfer of vital nutrients; it is flexible, strong and resilient and allows for the co-constructions of identities that are valued by organizational members themselves. (p. 268)

**Positive identity.** When our work environment is pleasant and honoring, and our relationships with others are positive and affirming, who we perceive ourselves to be as both a colleague and contributor is validated. Dutton and Heaphy (2003) concur: “Other people are active players in the co-creation of who we are at work. Our work identities and selves more generally, are created, deployed and altered in social interactions with others” (p. 270). When these interactions are positive, Roberts (2007) notes,

People learn more about themselves and are provided the inspiration and social support to achieve fulfilling, identity-congruent outcomes. Such identity enhancement may be a powerful mechanism for transforming relationships from a state of damaging disconnection to one of growth enhancing connection. (p. 30)

From an organizational perspective, the relationally agile leader who creates an environment of trusting, authentic interaction serves both the development and growth of their colleagues and of their teams. The positivity in these teams is enduring and can be accessed either immediately or into the future when the need to respond to change may be greater. The energy of connectedness experienced by colleagues within such an environment is positive, validating, and can facilitate their engagement to a state of high productivity, a state Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes as flow. It is this presence of high quality connections in positive relational environments that endow the organization with a resiliency to change that enables success. And it is the relationally agile leader, through adept intuition and sensory prowess, who enables positive relationships to flourish into high quality connections.

Relational agility represents an understanding of the mutuality of interaction that exists in relational leadership and that is yet to be described in the literature to date. With the benefits offered in terms of productivity, positivity and performance as suggested by positive psychology, it is a construct worth validation through empirical research. To this end, various epistemological traditions could be used. Chapter III will highlight those philosophies and define that which has been proposed for this research.

### **Chapter III: Method**

Research is conducted to satisfy a hunger for knowledge, to answer a question that plagues us, or to address our curiosities. Approaching this dissertation research, I have reflected deeply on that for which I wish to make meaning. I have come to formulate my specific question from a position that celebrates the many aspects of my being: professionally, as an experienced corporate executive, a trained coach, a published author, and a student of leadership and change theory and practice; and personally as a husband and father with a poet heart and a haunting passion to make a difference. I have had a limited opportunity to examine this unique theoretical construct of relational practice, which I am describing as relational agility, through both a small case study, and through a review of the relevant empirical literature. The distillation of this experience has led me to my question:

How does relational agility exist as a distinct and recognized leadership behavior, and, what value, if any, does it confer to the organization?

That my background and previous research has informed my methodological approach is clear, however, less obvious is the rationale and scholarly work that has come before me that has made this choice possible. What follows is an overview of that process.

#### **Cultures of Inquiry**

Although there are a multitude of epistemologies subscribed to in the conduct of empirical research that I have considered to explore this question, broadly speaking, two paradigms, quantitative and qualitative, have emerged with prominence. Each is described by both a common ancestry and by unique differences.

Although taking different philosophic approaches, both quantitative and qualitative researchers begin with a question. Reflection upon the question through the lens of their unique philosophy yields a method that is designed to produce empirical data, or that produced through

experience. Both traditions collect data, describe their data, interpret their data and postulate as to why the results obtained were as they were. Steeped in traditions, both methods when applied in social sciences research, attempt to describe humans and the environments in which they live. So, clearly, similarities are observed. It is the philosophic basis underlying the method that distinguishes one from the other.

Quantitative research has emerged from what has commonly been referred to as the positivist philosophy which holds the researcher is removed and objective from the experience being measured. Emerging from the work of Auguste Comte in the nineteenth century, positivism embraces more than a theory of knowledge, stretching itself into political and cultural arenas as well (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). The positivist mind supposes that social observations be treated as distinct entities in much the same manner as phenomenon in the physical world (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Consequently, it is held that such social observations can be determined reliably and validly.

Furthermore, the quantitative researcher holds that research is an objective undertaking designed to confirm or deny a given hypothesis. Deduction is the central focus to this method. As Creswell and Clark (2007) suggest, quantitative research is designed to test objective theories by examining the relationships that may exist among variables. Since these variables can be measured, such as in surveys or in experiments, where various instruments can be employed, numeric values can be assigned and statistical analysis on these data can be performed. With these points in mind, strengths of the quantitative method include that relatively large numbers of people can be studied, data collection and analysis can be relatively rapid, and quantitative predictions are possible. Conversely, research questions and design could be misconstrued by participants, and the researcher could overlook phenomenon that are



occurring due to their focus on proving a hypothesis, rather than on theory generation (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Examination of my research question reveals it to be one for which an objective evaluation is not feasible. Rather, it is held that the true richness of data will be found within the subjective interpretations of study participants, and it is through their exploration of the social phenomenon around them that will illuminate, if present, the concept of relational agility. Indeed, this is a qualitative approach where the belief is held that the research and the researcher are indistinguishable. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) suggest that in this way what is known is only so through the eyes of the knower. There are multiple realities and it is impossible to distinguish fully between cause and effect. Creswell and Clark (2007) add that qualitative research is a means for exploring and measuring the meaning that individuals or groups place on a particular social problem, event or phenomenon. Data gathering and analysis typically consists of building from specific elements to the emergence of general themes. The researcher then interprets the data. As such, they become inextricably connected with the research. An inductive approach, wherein the investigator works back and forth between data elements and themes is central to the approach. The focus of the researcher is to make meaning out of the thoughts and experiences of the participants.

It is this approach, phenomenological in its focus, which is held to offer the most revealing testimony of the lived experience of participants. Navigating those methods best designed to give voice to the actions, beliefs and perceptions of a group, I believe a form of narrative method, specifically organizational storytelling, offers the greatest promise.

To begin to understand the epistemological roots of this method, it is first necessary to deconstruct what is meant by the word, story. As innocuous as it may seem, scholars practicing

in this method hold disparate views as to the meaning of story. Boje (2001) holds that stories are random, fragmented, sometimes polyphonic recollections of events, devoid of plot or coherence. In contrast, he holds that narratives have both plot and coherence. Suggesting that narratives are indeed superior to story, Boje prefers to think of story as ante-narrative or a telling of events or incidents that come before narrative, and only graduate to narrative after being endowed with the virtues of coherence and plot. Holding an opposing view, Czarniawska (1998) believes that stories consist of plots comprising causally related episodes that culminate in a solution to a problem. Gabriel (2000) too, views stories as greater than narratives, given their capacity to generate emotion from an audience. In this research, story is being held from an inclusive perspective to mean that collection of thoughts and ideas, whether embellished with plot or not, that describes the lived experience of the storyteller. As such, this interpretation of story would include both that described as narrative and as ante-narrative.

Despite the scope of opinions as to its meaning, it is generally agreed that story has offered humankind a means to share knowledge and experience over the millennia. Stories have served as the guardians of our history as they can transcend culture, age and language, and are often highly memorable. As Boje (2001, p.126) writes, “stories are exemplars of the messy process of human sensemaking” (p. 126). Within organizations, this remains true, as does the reality that organizational storytellers offer insights into both their own lives as well as their context on temporal and systemic matters. Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett (2008) would agree,

Individual life stories are very much embedded in social relationships and structures and they are expressed in culturally specific forms; read carefully, they provide unique insights into the connections between individual life trajectories and collective forces and institutions beyond the individual. They thus offer a methodologically privileged location from which to comprehend human agency. (p. 3)

Storytelling has long been held as an authentic expression of one’s lived experience.

Within the organization, storytelling is approached as a structure that can serve as an effective

catalyst to reveal the unconscious, yet projected thoughts of its members (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Through stories, the perspectives of the teller are revealed. These may not necessarily represent the facts of events, but they do present the truth from the perspective of the teller (Gabriel, 2000). It is precisely this subjectivity which has brought criticism for the method from social scientists over the years, and dismissive glances by the positivists (Maynes et al., 2008). And yet, the subjectivity of the storyteller, and the inter-relationship of her story with that of the greater system, reveals elements of the human experience that may otherwise be mute. I believe it is this interplay that is critical to an understanding of those constructs that have been engaged in the creation and sustenance of relationships, and how these contribute to organizational success.

Storytelling was therefore chosen as the methodological approach to my research question. I believe it has been a powerful tool through which I, along with the storytellers themselves, have co-created meaning of observations of relational leadership and its impacts on outcomes within the organization. Czarniawska (1998) describes this use of story as sensemaking, or the act of making meaning out of previously meaningless cues. It is held that throughout the narrative of our everyday lives exist subtle reference to the gentle yet profound ways in which we create and nurture communities of trust (Gabriel, 2000), cues to the constructs of our relational resonance. Through the natural process of storytelling, and a disciplined application of reflexivity, I have set out to uncover those cues.

### **Method of the Study**

Specifically, I have conducted an iterative series of in-depth interviews with a select group of participants guided by the organizational storytelling method. Each of these participants have been employees of the same organization, a national personal and

organizational health promotion company in Canada employing approximately 200 permanent and contract employees across the country.

**Selection of the organizational setting.** Selecting the organization with whom to conduct this research involved a few criteria. First, personal experience over a career spanning 25 years in eight organizations of varying size and complexity leaves me to believe the unique collection of qualities attributed to relational agility are not frequently found. Consequently, the opportunity to witness participants describing the construct would very likely be much greater either by starting with a very large population and distilling from within, or starting with a smaller organization that had already been qualified, by a third party, as having a culture of positive relational behaviors. Second, I presumed consideration by an organization for involvement in this research would be more likely if I had some level of connection with an executive within the organization who would be prepared to champion my request. This limited the sphere of candidate organizations considerably to approximately ten, each of which received a written briefing of the research along with a request for a discussion. Third, the organization would have to be predisposed to the research topic, the timing of the research would have to be such that it dovetailed well with existing organizational commitments, and they would need to agree to the time requirements being asked of their staff to participate. And finally, given my lengthy history in corporate environments and my experience with factors that heavily influence their culture including corporate hierarchy, tenure, and organizational change dynamics, I intentionally invited only private sector corporations to participate.

Of the organizations approached, eight were large corporate entities, each with thousands of employees, and each with whom I had key connections with senior executives. Six of these declined to participate due to time considerations and competing commitments. Two

did not respond. Of the two smaller organizations, one was ambivalent to my chance of success in getting approval. The other, thankfully agreed. This organization is distinguished for its being recognized three years in a row by Canada's Great Place to Work organization. Canada's Great Place to Work is an organization founded in 2005 in Canada with roots dating back twenty five years in the United States. It hosts a national program focused on annually recognizing organizations that are held, largely by their employees, to be great places to work. Research conducted by Great Place to Work over the years has led them to believe that being included on their list is not the consequence of "delivering upon a prescriptive set of employee benefits, programs and practices, but rather the building of high-quality relationships in the workplace — relationships characterized by trust, pride, and camaraderie" (Levering, 2013). With this in mind, candidates for consideration in this national competition must complete two components in their application process: first, the Great Place to Work proprietary Trust Index and second, a Great Place to Work culture audit. With respect to the former, completed by the organization's employees and comprising two thirds of the weighting of the evaluation, Great Place to Work characterize the tool as follows, "the assessment asks employees about behaviours that measure the way in which credibility, respect and fairness are expressed in their workplace. It also collects data about the levels of pride and camaraderie in their environment" (Levering, 2013). The culture audit, which comprises the balance of the evaluation, is completed by the human resources department or senior management and includes open ended questions on organizational demographics, diversity, turnover, tenure, history, and policies, practices and philosophies on a variety of workplace matters. All applications are assessed by Great Place to Work relative to a standardized, global index.<sup>2</sup> There is no application fee required to participate in the Great Place to Work assessment.

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the proprietary nature of this standardized, global index, it is not available for inclusion in the Appendix.

The organization that agreed to work with me on this research project, Tri Fit, has been awarded by Great Place to Work a position on the list of the top 50 organizations (50-1000 employees) in Canada for the past three years. They are a national provider of innovative solutions designed to enhance personal and organizational health and wellbeing. Given Tri Fit's recurring success in being recognized for its internal pride, camaraderie and relational aptitude, I presumed it to be an ideal organization in which to search for evidence of relational agility and its corresponding impacts.

### **The Research Environment**

Tri Fit maintains a permanent staff of 77 people, 67 of whom work in geographically dispersed client sites. Ten hold management positions, each of whom operate out of home-based offices. In addition, the organization draws upon a network of approximately 125 fitness instructors who serve the organization's clients under contract. As I believed that the contracted employees would have a superficial understanding of the culture of the organization, they were excluded from this research as were six individuals who were on maternity leave at the time the research was being conducted. With respect to gender, of the 77 permanent staff, nine are males, one of whom is on the leadership/management team. Staff is situated in 15 cities across North America, the majority being clustered in cities surrounding Toronto, Ontario. There is a single employee located in each of two cities in the United States. With respect to racial and ethnic diversity, the senior leadership of Tri Fit declared it to be predominantly Caucasian. They elaborated stating that approximately 15 employees had parents whose birthplace was in another country. Since the birthplace of a parent is not a clear determinant of one's race or ethnicity, the actual degree of diversity within this organization remains unclear.

**Participants.** To alert employees of the possibility of being invited to participate in this research project, the Director of Operations sent a corporate-wide email communication which explained the nature of the project, ensured participant confidentiality and encouraged participation. Following this, I was provided a complete phone directory of all permanent employees from which I chose an initial sample of six candidates. Having a contact list comprised simply of names, email addresses and phone numbers, I was able to determine an individual's geographic location and usually I was able to determine their gender, based upon their name (a few times, however, I was surprised in this regard). Race, religion or ethnicity was unknown to me based upon this limited data. I began the interview process contacting six individuals, located in four cities, by phone with an invitation to participate. I assured each individual invited to participate that their invitation to participate, and their ultimate decision regarding participation, would be held in confidence so as not to impact their decision making process. All individuals who I contacted over the phone and invited to participate consented to participating.

**Interviews.** I prepared an initial sampling from the organization comprised of five to six individuals at various levels and within various departments including one member of the four-person senior team. After I had scheduled interviews, each participant was asked to read and a participant consent (Appendix B) in advance of the interview. This consent was either signed and returned to me or, in the case of the phone interviews, was consented to verbally. I also made each participant aware that the interview was to be digitally recorded to ensure accuracy in transcription, and that the research data would be securely stored for this academic research. I endeavored to schedule each interview in person, wherever feasible, for 60-75 minutes

duration. A prepared series of open-ended questions was used as a guide from which I prompted stories from the participants (Appendix C).

Although the preference in hosting interviews was to do so in person so as to collect information regarding facial and body expression, and any other non-verbal data such as lucidity, attentiveness, and engagement, this was not always possible due to geographic locations or schedule availability. I conducted twenty seven one-on-one interviews, twenty-two of which were in person and five over the phone. Twenty six of the participants were Caucasian and one was African-American. Each interview took approximately 60 minutes to conduct and ten city locations were included in the interviews to ensure the voices of those in various locations, including those more distant and removed from the Toronto cluster, were heard. In addition, I held an interview with the four members of the senior leadership team, in person. I invited each participant to provide a pseudonym of their choosing to whom their comments would be attributed in the research findings. All interviews were digitally recorded to ensure accurate data capture, and later transcribed for purposes of analysis.

From the first group of interviews, I expected that stories capturing the respondent's experience with leadership would emerge. Names of colleagues would be raised, either in praise of their virtues or in recognition of their limitations. This was indeed the case, prompting me to further probe during the interviews to uncover those stories describing relational leadership practices and the presumed impact of these practices on the organization. Stories that were shared from one interview to the next were mindfully noted for repetitive themes and names. From this initial series of conversations, I noted that several names of co-workers, who demonstrate relational leadership in their daily work lives, were volunteered. I scheduled follow-up interviews with these individuals, their peers, followers and managers to further



illuminate the stories. These conversations pointed to additional candidates that warranted an interview in service of embellishing the various storylines. I continued with the interview process until a point of saturation was achieved wherein there was no further development of the storyline. For purposes of clarification and to ensure my analysis of the participant's story was an accurate reflection of the intended meaning, follow up discussions were conducted where necessary. I conducted these follow up discussions over the phone by reading the transcribed passage to the storyteller and requesting his/her confirmation of its intended meaning.

### **Thematic Analysis**

I engaged the services of a third-party transcription service (New England Transcription Services) to prepare transcripts from each interview. A random sample of five of these transcripts was assessed for accuracy relative to their original recordings. Confident they accurately reflected the recordings, I read and re-read the transcripts seeking out common storylines. Gabriel (2000) argues, "If vast areas of the human soul are systematically excluded from the organization, is it not possible to argue that stories represent attempts to gain readmission in surreptitious ways and diverse guises?" (p. 57). With this in mind, I held that within the transcripts there would be stories from relational leadership exemplars and their communities of practice elucidating beliefs, experiences, and relationships. To make meaning of these, I analyzed the stories, first for overall themes, common storylines and perspectives. Boje (2001) would propose at this point in the narrative analysis, that network mapping be used to visually depict story fragments or nodes and to understand the dynamics of storytelling amongst the people. This structuralist approach is used to better understand the architecture of story construction relative to a social network, but, as Boje cautions, is not in any way intended to distance the analysis from the humanity of the embedded relationships depicted. Martin

(1990) also offers a series of techniques to assist in the interpretation of organizational stories.

These include the following:

- 1) Dismantling dichotomies, or seeking out false distinctions;
- 2) Examining silences or absences in the text;
- 3) Examining disruptions in the text;
- 4) Interpreting metaphors and double ententes;
- 5) Examining the most unique or alien feature of the text.

Although Gabriel (2000) agrees that such approaches inevitably aid in the interpretation of stories, he cautions that it is the touchstone with humanity that must be central to one's analysis. He suggests that for as much interpretive value that is offered by structuralist approaches such as coding and network mapping, interpretation of stories can never be reduced to application of uniform rules and procedures. Rather, analysis is as much about gut instinct and 'rules of thumb.'

In this research, I made analytic interpretations to "unlock the inner meaning of stories" (Gabriel, 2000, p. 43). This analysis involved my coding for specific constructs and their inter-relationships as well as the use of a psychodynamic approach to the interpretation of stories. A measured reliance on 'gut instinct' was also used to identify recurring themes, as well as to understand metaphors, and double ententes. As much as what was being said was reviewed, so too was the negative space in the text. That is, I sought out that which was conspicuously absent, or that which was not being said. Latham (2013) suggests that in such arts-informed research, the opportunity to engage in reflexivity and to co-create meaning with the storyteller is presented. I found this to be the case, engaging a disciplined approach to ensure I stayed true to the narrator's meaning and to the humanity of the story. I also ensured the participant's words

and intent were accurately portrayed in the analysis, by taking an opportunity to discuss and elaborate upon these with participants, where necessary. I did this by reading the passage in question to the storyteller over the phone and requesting clarification of its intended meaning. Through this process, I sought to arrive at an honest understanding of the relational leadership constructs observed in every day organizational practice and their implications for organizational resiliency.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Whenever conducting research with human participants, one must be aware of, and advocate for, the rights of those participants. Considerations must include the risks associated with involvement by the participant either physically, mentally, or emotionally. In addition, reputational risks, risk of job loss and/or social risks, such as being ostracized by one's peers must also be contemplated within the research design.

Within the research contemplated in this dissertation, I used an organizational storytelling interview design. Participants were made aware by a senior leader of the company that the research was endorsed by the leadership of the company, and that each was encouraged to provide thoughtful feedback throughout the process. I ensured this was done to prevent any sense of stigma from arising associated with participation. I also had made it clear that involvement in the research was entirely voluntary on the part of all participants, and I assured each participant that his/her contributions would be confidential and not personally identifiable in any report shared with the organization, nor used in any manner for performance management purposes. Little stress or other risks were associated with involvement, and no physical or mental harm was foreseeable from any involvement in this research.

It was also my responsibility to be cognizant of any population marginalized by either the research, or by the system within which the research was being conducted. With respect to the former, I gave consideration to controls designed to ensure that no participant was overlooked due to race, ethnicity, cultural origin or gender. Regarding the organizational system within which the research was conducted, it was a Canadian wellness and fitness company with approximately 200 permanent and contract employees. It was expected that participants would be located in regions throughout the country and reflect the diversity present within those regions. I have offered commentary in the results with respect to this aspect of the data.

I captured each of these ethical considerations within an Institutional Review Board (IRB) submission made to Antioch University's IRB committee prior to the commencement of data collection. Following approval of the IRB submission, I commenced data collection.

## Chapter IV: Findings

### Storytellers and Storylines

Evidence exists that the creation of positive relationships and deep connectedness within organizations serves both to engender positive identity amongst the relationship partners (Roberts, 2007) as well as to contribute to enhanced organizational productivity and goal attainment (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Fredrickson, 1998). Earlier research (McLean, 2011) introduced a new theoretical construct of relational leadership, referred to as relational agility, which by means of a case study, examined the construct for its unique qualities and its lineage within the relational leadership literature.

As an extension of that earlier work, this project examines relational leadership practices within Tri Fit, a Canadian health promotion and wellness company, to seek evidence for the presence of relational agility, to delineate how it exists within the organization, to further define its qualities, and to explore its value to the organization.

What follows is a presentation of the results of this research study. Included within these results is a brief précis of each storyteller followed by critical events in his/her collective work lives that served as containers for story, the emergent themes of those stories, and my own researcher observations that informed my interpretations of this organization.

I intentionally designed the semi-structured nature of the interview questionnaire to elicit story without directly probing for relational leadership qualities or their impacts on the organization. This is characteristic of the chosen method and encourages a natural, authentic conversational style on the part of the storyteller. As the story unfolded, I asked supplemental questions for purposes of clarity and understanding. With respect to the organization under study, the method was very successful in eliciting story as was evident in the 240 stories shared. By way of an introduction to each storyteller, each chosen pseudonym appears in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

*List of Participant Pseudonyms*

|              |               |                |
|--------------|---------------|----------------|
| Becky        | Wonder Woman  | Molly          |
| Sweet Pea    | Haley         | Jennifer       |
| Bionic Woman | Blake         | Murdle         |
| Harmony      | Pumpkin Spice | Lentil         |
| Luke         | Mary          | Skinny Cow     |
| Broccoli     | Joanne        | Princess Diana |
| Jordan       | Tom           | Jane           |
| Wanda        | Kaitlyn       | Kermit         |
| Phyllis      | Marty         | Sedona         |

To put in context the stories of those interviewed, I believe it is necessary to understand the unique experiences, biases and perspectives of the storytellers. Observations of the way in which the storytellers presented for their interviews also can inform the disposition of their stories. For these reasons, I have provided a brief overview of each storyteller. To do so without violating the trust that had been placed in me necessitated that a few liberties be taken with respect to the reporting of tenure, gender and other specific identifying information. Tenure has therefore been classified as follows: fewer than 2 years tenure—new recruit; 2 to 5 years tenure—sophomore; more than 5 years tenure—experienced. The gender of the storyteller is that of his/her chosen pseudonym. Where a pseudonym is not gender specific, the researcher has randomly assigned one.

**Wonder Woman.** I met with Wonder Woman at her place of work. An experienced employee, she greeted me with a pleasant disposition explaining she was intrigued with the research project and interested in having her voice represented. She exuded confidence, likely the product of her years of experience, and approached each question with care and genuineness.

Wonder Woman declared the organization was supportive, fun and a very positive place to work. Stories were shared of connecting at the quarterly management meetings, of the fun and sense of connection that was made possible through the annual adventure day, and of employees supporting one another online with respect to sharing information and experiences. The discussion included ten stories, four of which focused on creating connection and relationships with those within the company, including with managers past and present. Pride in the company's sense of civic-mindedness exemplified by its leadership through numerous voluntary activities was evident. Being of service to those within the company and to the outside community resonated with her. For each of these reasons, Wonder Woman could relate to the metaphor of family, however when asked to describe the organization, she preferred to think of it as a tree. Starting as a seed, the company provided opportunities for new employees to put down roots and to develop and blossom over time. Wonder Woman was particularly impressed with the development opportunities availed to employees at each stage of their experience in the company. Despite the positives experienced, two stories highlighting low points were recited. Frustration that these issues were not addressed, and could potentially erode Tri Fit's reputation was voiced, and yet, when contextualized within the broader, very positive experience, she elected to be more tolerant, and less vocal.

**Jane.** When first introduced, Jane appeared confident in her role and very connected to her colleagues at Tri Fit. Words like integrity, passion, care, trust, and supportive were among those used to describe her relationships with those with whom she has worked. Open, balanced and adaptive were descriptors chosen to characterize the culture of the organization. Clearly, her sense of place was positive and this was reflected in her stories.

An experienced employee, Jane introduced eleven stories, four of which described specific relationships and a sense of connection made with colleagues. Relational resonance was acknowledged within a subset of her relationships. Although proposing the metaphor of the body to describe the organization, with the leadership being the legs and the coordinators, like herself, being the heart, she could also relate to the metaphor of family. Indeed, she expressed the importance of family to her, personally. It was therefore not surprising that it emerged as a storyline on a few occasions. Also noteworthy was the emergence of negative stories that were not addressed. When asked to explain why, she felt there would be reprisals, and that overall, those events represented “miniscule little things” relative to the rest of the job. In that regard, she shared a story of the impact of her work, and that of her colleagues on those that they serve, clearly outlining a positive feedback loop beginning with the positive work culture, translating to more positive, productive and creative staff who enable their customers to realize their personal goals translating to better outcomes for their employers, Tri Fit’s clients.

**Kermit.** Kermit is a new recruit to the Tri Fit organization, with his shorter tenure and age likely responsible for his initial timidity and reserved responses. He also shared fewer stories, six in total, with half of these focused on describing relationships he had developed. Feeling a strong sense of connection with his mentor, Kermit declared that this relationship was one of a profound feeling of connection or being understood at his core. He shared his observations of colleagues helping one another, being in service to enable each other’s success, as well as being of service to the broader community in which Tri Fit operates through numerous charitable teams. This seemed to evoke a sense of pride and reverence towards the organization, both for the sense of caring as well as for the opportunities presented to each employee to develop themselves through participation in these teams. Although Kermit also



raised an anecdote relating to a negative experience that was not given a voice, he felt on the balance, the positive experiences were far more plentiful, citing occasions of positive feedback, recognition and reward as motivators to excel.

**Skinny Cow.** An experienced team member, Skinny Cow declared her interest in the research immediately and asked questions relating to its origins and scope, questions which seemed genuine. Meeting at a coffee shop early one morning, she was unfazed by the traffic in and out of the store, maintaining her focus on each question. Her repertoire of story reflected her years at the organization. Fifteen stories were recounted with those relating to perceptions of Tri Fit as a family being a repetitive theme. Even more so were those that described connection and relational resonance within her relationships with others in the Tri Fit team. When describing feedback on her own leadership, she attributed the acknowledgements to that which she had learned from her managers and other influences in her life, admitting that she had developed her leadership practice by emulating that which she so admired in others. Deepening her description of her experience of leadership within the organization, Skinny Cow shared three stories of the genuineness and authenticity of leaders. She also added her own impressions of the organizational benefits including loyalty, reduced turnover and improved productivity that are realized as a result of the positive culture in the organization. Other stories that focused on exceeding expectations, leading in a predominantly female culture, and service within and external to the company also emerged.

**Lentil.** Again, with experience come stories, and with Lentil there were many stories to tell. Lentil was engaged and genuine with her remarks which were measured out with precision and care, with attention paid to ensure fairness and balance prevailed. Lentil was generous with her praise of other's leadership describing it using words like caring, personal, relational,

valued, nurturing and trusting. She suggested that developing others was a key attribute of the culture at Tri Fit. Intuition and agility were words used to describe admired leaders, and she likened the culture of leadership of the organization to a bee, who busily moves throughout its day with intent and grace. The metaphors continued with reference to the Care Bears, and to family, with the staff meetings serving as the family reunions. Of the fourteen stories authored, Lentil shared eight that were focused on her observations or experiences of connection or resonance in relationship with others on the team. Perhaps not surprising were repetitive stories relating to perceptions of family. Describing genuine or authentic leadership in action, citing leaders who went above and beyond in their roles and noting the dominance of the feminine culture in the organization comprised the balance of her stories.

**Broccoli.** Broccoli presented herself to this research as a positive and engaged participant interested in sharing her experiences through story. Inspired by the company, and declaring it to be the ‘cream of the crop’ in its industry, Broccoli was obviously moved by her experience with Tri Fit. As an experienced contributor, themes of close connected relationships, exceeding expectations and authentic, genuine leadership styles were pervasive in her responses. Seven stories were shared, three of which focused on the type of close connections that engendered the positive culture that Broccoli witnessed each day. A further three stories related to service, to one another, and to the broader community. This was a sense of pride for Broccoli. She shared that she was motivated, inspired and moved by the continuous and heartfelt generosity of her colleagues. In her words, it created a climate that exceeded expectations and made for a wonderful workplace.

**Wanda.** As an experienced team member, Wanda displayed a quiet confidence throughout the interview. When the subject of low points was broached, however, an emotional

overtone coloured the conversation and resided with the storyteller for the balance of the interview. Apparently, amidst the positive work environment, a challenging situation emerged that continued to be very real and raw for Wanda. Her capacity to resolve this was limited and as a result, it remained an issue and in turn, seasoned her perceptions of the organization and its culture of leadership. That said, this did not diminish Wanda's capacity for praise. Using words like open, transparent, communicative, authentic, demonstrative and inspiring to describe its culture of leadership, Wanda clearly retained a sense of connection with the organization and its leaders. Of the eight stories shared, two described relational connections and a further two elaborated on experiences of authenticity or genuineness. Stories of service and exceeding expectations also emerged in the conversation.

**Pumpkin Spice.** Meeting with Pumpkin Spice outside at a café on a sunny day presented opportunities for distraction and mental wandering and yet Pumpkin Spice was focused and intentional. When in discussion, her remarks were on topic and well-conceived. While in the interview, she was in the moment, sharing story and creating connection. Pumpkin Spice has been with Tri Fit for many years and as such is an experienced contributor. Before sharing story, she saw fit to share her perceptions of the culture of Tri Fit. She shared how the company believes in the growth and development of its people, how they take a personal interest in every employee from the moment they sign the employment agreement, and how the organization is characterized by its openness, honesty, trust and genuineness. Family emerged as a theme as she shared a story of the organization's culture, and five of her eight stories dealt with relationships where close connection and relational resonance was central. A further story centered on a point of disagreement that she chose to suppress in service of maintaining positive relationships. Electing to do so would emerge as a common theme amongst several colleagues

as well. When asked about what informed her own leadership practices she shared that she was mentored by others within the company and would adopt those practices learned through the experience of others. Noteworthy was her recognition that those of her qualities that were the focus of recognition previously, were relational practices that were learned from others in the organization who were greatly admired.

**Jordan.** An experienced team member, Jordan shared through story how leaders intentionally build ‘conscious connection’ with others throughout the organization. Being approachable, supportive, encouraging, flexible, credible and authentic were further descriptors he used to describe the culture of leadership within Tri Fit. Meeting in his office, it was clear he was deeply committed to his role, and to the service of others, as was evident in his surroundings. Being recognized was a source of pride, and was a theme that flavored his stories. He spoke of relational connection and family, and how leaders, through their personable and supportive ways, were like siblings to him. Amongst the nine stories he shared, additional themes included those of service, authentic leadership, and going above and beyond expectations. He also shared a story relating to the relative paucity of men in the organization, speculating as to why that is, and highlighting how accommodating the company is for women. That the same was not voiced for men, raises the question as to whether this was a simple oversight or carries greater meaning. Overall, Jordan was genuine and engaged in the conversation and very positive with respect to the company’s leadership and direction.

**Harmony.** A very experienced contributor, Harmony appeared somewhat distracted throughout parts of the conversation despite having the sanctuary of a quiet office to conduct our conversation. It was later revealed that an upcoming discussion, that promised to be challenging, was to blame. The quality of engagement and contribution was remarkable given

the circumstance, a fact that was not lost on the interviewer as he acknowledged Harmony's contributions at the conclusion of the meeting.

Harmony spoke of a culture of mentoring, coaching and of healthy relationships. She believed it to be an environment that is accessible, participative and focused on developing others in service of them realizing their best selves. These themes broke through in her stories of relational connection as well. Four of ten stories involved such content. As family was a strong metaphor that she used to describe the organization's culture, it was not surprising it would emerge in her stories as well. Authentic leadership was a recurring theme as well as was story speaking to the adaptability of the organization, and the unique capacity of certain leaders to adapt to the needs of staff or of clients. Finally, although Harmony was very positive regarding the overall climate in the company, one low point shared through story continues to evoke an emotional response. Although she cleared the air at the time of its occurrence, she believes there are those who would be less comfortable in doing so. This raises the question regarding the voices that have remained silent with respect to negative perceptions in the system.

**Marty.** Marty is a sophomore at Tri Fit. Through his honesty and genuineness a culture of leadership described by openness, ethics, acknowledgement and recognition was revealed. Marty spoke of freedom in his work, and the culture of trust that is necessary to sustain such freedom. Within the nine stories he shared, several focused on accounts of authentic leadership where colleagues 'walked the talk,' did as they promised to do, or were genuine in their actions and remarks. Creating connection represented another recurring theme, as were stories of family. Marty felt an emotional connection to the organization and its people. He related clearly to the metaphor of family. Reciting stories of the Christmas party or adventure day were

akin to describing family reunions. And evidence of adaptability amongst members of the leadership team, and how this served to honor the unique needs of staff in emerging situations, was highlighted as well. He was not alone in his assessment of the benefit of this positive culture to the company. Evident in his logic was the understanding that a positive workforce would be more engaged, productive and creative resulting in a better performance at client locations. He concluded that better performance must positively impact the customer experience, and the resulting client results.

**Princess Diana.** Another sophomore with respect to her tenure with the company, Princess Diana believed the culture within the company to be acknowledging, appreciative, caring and focused on the development of each of its own. A bit guarded in her disclosure initially, she subsequently shared seven stories. Relational connection and family were acknowledged, as was a story of disappointment and her choice to keep it to herself so as not to compromise her relationships in the company. She felt the family metaphor a strong one to describe her feelings about the company as she didn't feel that she knew many in the company to that level. Team was a descriptor she felt understated her experience of the organization, and marriage an overstatement. A fraternity or sorority were apt descriptors as they conveyed for her a sense that 'someone has your back.' Princess Diana went on to share a story of striving to be her best. She suggested that the positive work environment has made her want to be better than she had been before: more productive, creative and resourceful to each of those she serves, who in return experience a better quality of life. She added that fewer sick days, and a lowered incidence of musculoskeletal injuries amongst members were measurable benefits experienced with her clients. This could only serve to improve client retention for Tri Fit.

**Murdle.** Her years at Tri Fit have qualified Murdle as an experienced team member. Upon meeting, we scanned the room of the popular coffee shop at which we had agreed to meet to find a suitable table where we would be uninterrupted. With coffee in hand, we found an unoccupied table on the outside patio. The occasional road noise of trucks on the nearby highway did not seem to distract Murdle from the task at hand. She was intent to share her experiences and to volunteer her voice to the conversation. She did so with openness and thoughtfulness, choosing her words carefully as she navigated each question. Throughout the meeting, ten stories were told speaking of fairness, trust, respect, integrity, patience and genuineness. She revered the close network of relationships that had been given the opportunity to grow within the organization as was reflected in five of her stories. She shared decisions the company had made that highlighted both the organizations' and people's adaptability, and repeatedly, themes of authentic leadership, 'walking the talk' or being genuine entered the conversation. When asked as to what informed her own leadership, family was a focus. This came through in story as well when describing the organization's culture, as did the metaphor of a tree. When asked what type of tree, she reflected for a moment and said, "a redwood tree" as it puts down roots, grows to impressive dimensions, and is flexible to move with the "winds of change." This metaphor prompted a question relating to her observations of flexibility in the system. Murdle offered that she had witnessed this in the organization in response to business, but moreover had observed leaders being adaptive and flexible with others, honoring staff where they are in the moment and meeting them there. When asked whether she saw this as an intentional response by the leader, she confirmed that it was. When asked if she displayed such intentional adaptability and responsiveness, she said yes, believing it to be a quality she had learned over the years.

**Sedona.** Another experienced team member, Sedona was reached over the phone and came to the interview with a very positive disposition, apparently excited to share what she experienced on a daily basis in terms of the culture and leadership at Tri Fit. She was effusive with compliments comparing her work experience at Tri Fit to that in previous employers. Trusting, nurturing, helpful, generous, sharing, acknowledging, and genuine were some of the adjectives that peppered the conversation. More than half of the nine stories she shared related to developing positive connection with colleagues. As with others, there were those relationships that were most special to her. It was in these relationships that leaders demonstrated deep connection, trust and adaptability to the needs of each employee. She believed this behavior to be intentional and felt relational resonance or a strong level of interconnection with these individuals. Sedona also described Tri Fit as a family, and considered the quarterly management meetings and the annual adventure day as reunions of that family.

**Becky.** Due to her geographic location, Becky participated in the interview process over the phone. A new member to the team, Becky was nonetheless moved by her experience at Tri Fit. Describing the culture as a team, she felt it to be honest, encouraging, motivational, and she felt inspired by the leadership example. Four stories came to mind reciting relational connections made, going above and beyond expectation, and one commenting on her assessment of the impact such a positive environment had on both the employee and the clients they serve. Better programs, increased productivity, creativity and performance stood out as clear consequences of a more engaged, positive workforce.

**Bionic Woman.** New to the team at Tri Fit, Bionic Woman met over the phone to share her experiences to date. Encouraged by the trusting, open and supportive environment, she



found this culture to be such a stark contrast to others she had experienced in her career in the past. Serving others was a theme found in one of her six stories. Observations of authentic, genuine leadership, and leaders who adapted to staff needs were additional stories as was that of creating connection. So impressed with the manner in which she experienced the company, and how comfortable she feels as a team member, Bionic Woman shared that coming to work for Tri Fit was “like coming home.”

**Blake.** Although also a new member on the Tri Fit team, Blake presented with confidence and ambition. He seemed to be one ‘on the move’ in the organization. Characterizing the culture he experiences as trusting, positive, supportive and acknowledging, Blake was a vocal proponent of the company and the way in which it treats its employees. Whether sharing a story of how the company co-presidents welcome a new hire into the organization with a personal note and gift card, or how it invests in the development of its people, Blake has been a supporter. Eight stories were authored by him, four of which spoke of relational connection with leaders and colleagues in the company. He shared stories of service both to others in the company, and to the surrounding communities, citing examples of his manager and praising that manager for such a caring disposition. Going above and beyond was the focus of another story where evidence that colleagues routinely did so to ensure no one was let down was offered. Although he could relate to the metaphor of family, Blake suggested a team better captured his experience of the organization suggesting everyone on a team is equal. Everyone pulls their own weight, offers their unique skills and works together in service of a common goal. To Blake, family was too hierarchical and didn’t reflect the level of diverse skills that he found on a team, such as that at Tri Fit.

**Haley.** Meeting with Haley in the privacy of her office, she presented as an experienced Tri Fit team member who was bright, articulate and honest. In her years with Tri Fit she developed many close connections which she shared through story. Indeed, five of the nine stories featured this theme and illuminated a culture that was found to be empowering, compassionate and educational. Haley noted that she has always been “treated as a human being” and felt that her “whole self is respected.” She shared her impressions of the impact of such a culture on improving loyalty, commitment and productivity, and elaborated, through story, how the positive culture and resulting positive behaviors would translate to a more positive customer experience. Delivering upon a peak customer experience, where weight loss goals, fitness goals and overall health were improved was paramount to Haley, as she believed that is why she does what she does. Haley also mentioned a negative occasion which she never raised with the leadership. When asked why, she explained that it wasn’t ‘that important’ and she didn’t want to be perceived as one who would upset others in the ‘family’ environment at Tri Fit, clearly resounding the theme of suppressing one’s voice.

**Jennifer.** An experienced team member, Jennifer seemed somewhat nervous, less energetic and, at times, distracted in the conversation. As she shared five stories, four of which focused on relationships with leaders in the organization, her level of engagement seemed to dissipate. Clearly, Jennifer felt connected to the organization, describing its culture as trusting, autonomous, connected, and balanced. She shared a story of a situation that caused her duress some time before, which although addressed, was not handled the way she would have liked. Similar to the actions of several of her colleagues who experienced negative work experiences, she elected to not share this with others. Despite this, she added that 95% of the time, the work makes her happy.

**Kaitlynn.** Kaitlynn could also be described as an experienced contributor to the success at Tri Fit. Meeting at a popular coffee shop, distractions were plentiful, however she remained focused. Kaitlynn shared the importance of family to her which likewise emerged in story as she described the organization. Adaptability of leaders to both their relationships and to business needs was also witnessed in story. Kaitlynn described this adaptability as a key aspect of the culture of leadership at Tri Fit using the metaphor of a butterfly to describe the company's development from larvae to adult and to underscore its ability to respond to the changing business needs of clients. Seven of nine stories shared were those featuring descriptions of relational connection, deep trust and resonance with leaders throughout the organization. Words such as open, trusting, authentic, dependable, caring and connected recurred throughout her narratives.

**Tom.** An experienced team member, Tom's greeting was enthusiastic and welcoming. Entering his office, the conversation began with Tom seeming to be very engaged in the conversation. His comments were articulate and thoughtful. As each of his eight stories unfolded, recurring themes of connectedness, trust, genuineness and care emerged. Five stories of relational connection and resonance were shared. When probed about the intentionality of leaders who created such connection, Tom felt it was absolutely intentional. He also spoke of the visionary and somewhat anticipatory or intuitive sense of certain leaders observed in their interactions with him and with others. Family and exceeding expectations were the focus of two additional stories, with the final story being one of a low point with the company. This related to a missed opportunity for advancement. Although disappointing at the time, Tom quickly turned the low point into a positive experience, based on the fact that he was able to advance to

another role subsequently where he felt he was able to achieve more. This seemed to capture well his optimistic and positive disposition.

**Molly.** With Molly, an experienced member of the Tri Fit team, her commitment to the organization was palpable. Meeting in a local coffee shop, we sought out the quietest table in the establishment and once found, proceeded to sit down with our beverages. Molly is a company evangelist. She is engaged and interested in its success. Describing the culture of the organization as a family, it is not surprising that her vocabulary include adjectives such as accessible, authentic, caring, humane, compassionate, engaged and connected when describing Tri Fit. Of the nine stories she shared, five focused on the relationships she developed with others in the organization. She would characterize some of the leadership as being intentional in their development of deep connection with others. Going above and beyond was a further theme raised, as was a moving account of one leader choosing to be in service to another in the organization. And although rare in her experience in the firm, Molly shared a negative memory that remains raw for her. When asked how she dealt with the issue with the leadership, she responded that she never shared it with the leadership as she felt it did not warrant the attention.

**Joanne.** A sophomore with energy who left the impression that she was ‘on the move,’ Joanne agreed to conduct the interview at her place of work. Impressing her most about the culture of the organization was how it left her with the impression that “they want to know who you are as a person.” The leadership was described as being acknowledging, empathetic, helpful, trusting and genuine. Each of her five stories focused on relational connection with colleagues within the organization, and when she was asked to use a metaphor to describe her experience of the organizational culture, she suggested it was like a net. Explaining this metaphor, she stated that everyone was equal and that there were interconnections across the

organization with relationships being forged throughout. Although only meeting a few times a year, Joanne shared, “It’s really weird, like I only see these people three or four times a year but I feel like I know them.”

**Mary.** An experienced team member, Mary came to the interview with a very upbeat demeanor, interested to share her experiences of connection, acknowledgement, sincerity and trust. “I want to be like that,” she offered as she described a leader that inspired her. “She really gets me”. When asked to explain her sentiments further, Mary felt one leader was completely attuned to her, in a state of relational resonance where the leader was intentionally focused on her, and what she needed from the relationship in the moment. Not surprisingly, six of her nine stories were of relational development and connection. She also spoke of Tri Fit as a family unit, although preferred the metaphor of team herself as it suggested less hierarchy than family, but the same type of tight knit community. Service was another theme that Mary raised, finding the level of social engagement within Tri Fit an inspiration to her and other employees. She also spoke of an occasion which she would describe as negative, and which she never raised with others. She dismissed this as being for the better given the benefit of hindsight. Finally, Mary also provided a story sharing her perspective on the feedback cycle of positivity initiated through a positive culture for employees, and translating to positive experiences for both customer, client and Tri Fit.

**Phyllis.** A sophomore at Tri Fit, Phyllis joined the company with work experiences that would serve as benchmarks of comparison for her. Friendly, responsive, encouraging, respectful, open and authentic were words she used to describe her experiences within the company. The positive culture was seen to engender greater productivity and creativity with employees, translating to wins for Tri Fit’s clients. This return on positivity formed the theme

of one of her stories. Seven of ten stories focused on relational connections made within the organization, with specific attention paid to a few very close relationships that had been forged. The final recurring theme was that of service. Phyllis shared how the caring, compassionate qualities of leaders could be witnessed both with colleagues as well in the voluntary efforts of the company. It was the sum of each of these experiences that led her to declare the organization to be such a positive work environment, especially relative to that of former employers.

**Luke.** Luke is an experienced team member at Tri Fit and as such has much to say about the culture of the organization and its leaders. Service is a dominant theme in his stories, and Luke shared during the interview the pride he has in working for an organization where there is such a commitment at all levels to serving those both within the company, and the communities in which the company operates. Five of the fourteen stories authored focused on relational development and connection, where descriptors such as authentic, close, caring and an environment of growth and development were used. Being genuine or authentic in one's leadership was also important to Luke and framed the outline of another story as did adaptability on a few occasions. Finally, Luke shared his perspectives on the benefits, or positive feedback loop, he perceived relative to the positive culture at Tri Fit. Feeling a tight family connection with those in the company, he chose this as the metaphor he used to describe the organizational culture.

### **Critical Events**

Within each of the 240 stories shared, there have been events, including those benign and routine happenings of everyday work-life, that have been described as key to the individual and to the relationships they nurture. These informed the organizational culture and included

both rituals, such as the quarterly meetings or adventure day, as well as the unspoken, yet lived, thoughts and plans that make up the story of those working within this organization. The critical events of note include the following:

- 1) **Quarterly Meetings.** Without exception, staff, management and the leadership of this organization shared their enthusiasm for the quarterly staff meetings wherein staff are provided opportunities to develop themselves, to showcase their unique talents, and to network with their colleagues. All stories included reverence toward the senior leadership, their authentic and engaging manner and how these events were much like family reunions. Joy and gratitude were common descriptors of these events.
- 2) **Monthly Leadership Team Meetings.** At a management level, the monthly meetings were seen as an opportunity to learn from the leadership, to share the wonderful things happening, and to be in community with others.
- 3) **Adventure Day.** Described by some as an unbelievable benefit offered by the company, and by many as a fun way of staying in connection, the Adventure Day was an annual day of recreational activity that served to enhance connection with one another.
- 4) **Leadership Team Vacancies.** With few leadership team opportunities available, and many tenured staff seeking new opportunities for advancement, vacancies represented a chance to fulfill a dream. As such, managing the process around filling vacancies and addressing the disappointed is a notable event.
- 5) **Development and Succession Planning.** From the onset of the project, the need to identify prospective managers and leaders and to develop them to ensure

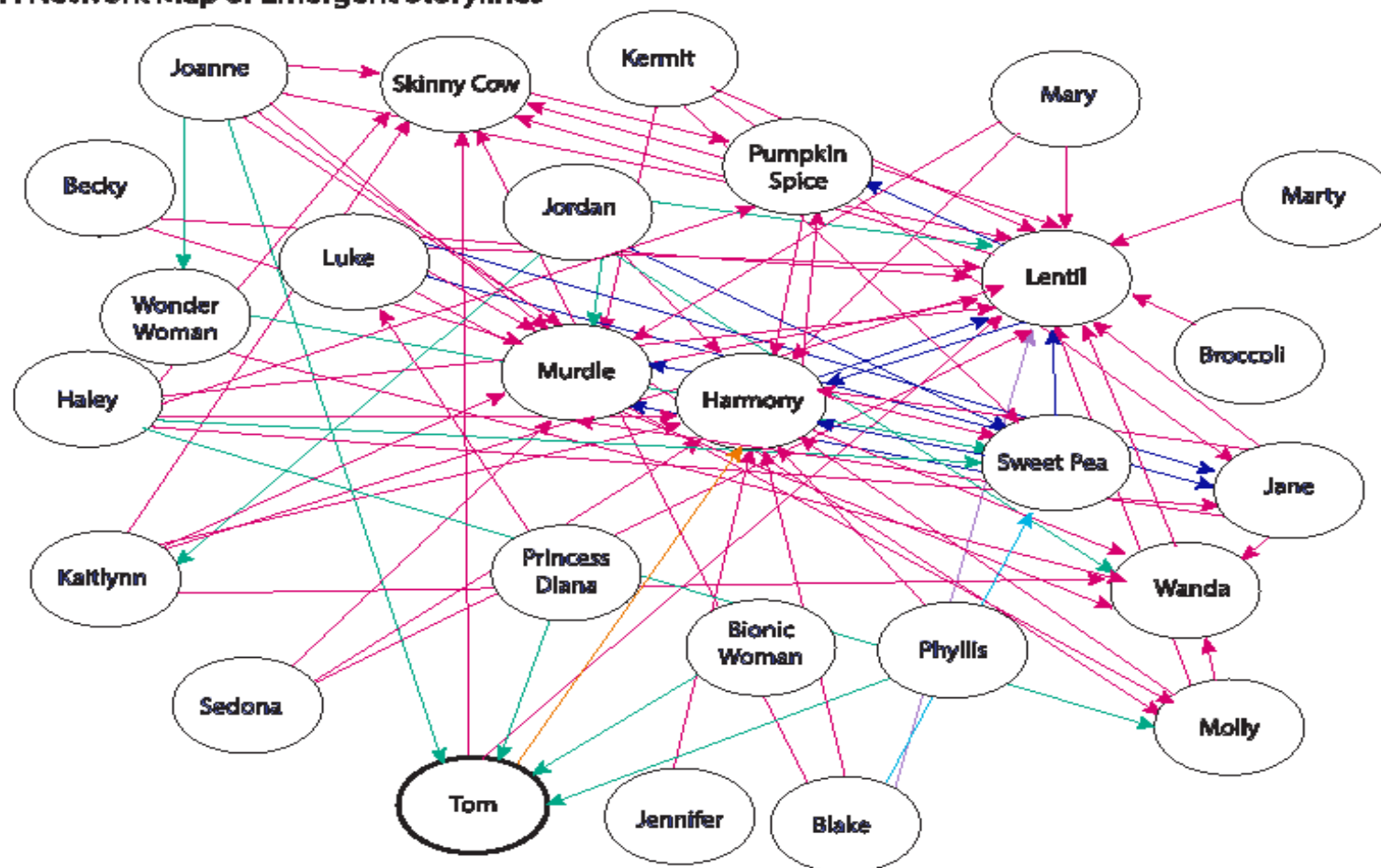
resiliency has been declared as an area warranting attention. Development opportunities within the organization abound and take the form of voluntary activities, public speaking, certifications, additional training and mentoring. Those in management and leadership roles attest to advancing after proactively requesting of the senior leadership that they be given a roadmap that would lead them to that destiny. Recognizing the desires and strengths of each employee and charting such a roadmap for them is necessary.

### **Emergent Themes**

Using a traditional approach to analyzing the transcript data was employed following the wisdom of Boje (2001) relying on the use of highlighted text, markers and chart paper to organize the transcripts, supplemental interview observations, and margin notes. Within each relationship, the storyteller, depicted in Figure 4.1 by the node from which the storyline emerges, may have recounted several stories of various themes. Indeed, in total, 240 distinct stories were shared by the 27 storytellers. From these storylines, common observations were recorded, and these reconciled into common emergent themes in the narrative. In this manner, a network map could be developed of relational interconnections. Figure 4.1 displays those interconnections and the primary storyline that emerged in a specific relationship. The theme of the storyline is captured by colour.



### A Network Map of Emergent Storylines



1) Connection/Relational Resonance; 2) Family; 3) Service; 4) Authentic Leadership/ Alignment; 5) Return on Positivity; 6) Feminine Culture;  
7) A Culture of Nice; 8) Adaptability; 9) Exceeding Expectations

Figure 4.1. A network map of emergent storylines.

Although detailed, Figure 4.1 enables one to get a quick overview of the nine emerging themes and the relative frequency of them as the dominant theme in story. Each of these nine distinct themes is described below:

**Family.** In general, each respondent was overwhelmingly positive with respect to the culture within his/her workplace. Fifteen of the 27 participants attributed this to a family-like atmosphere that pervades their work-life from the moment an individual joins the company. Skinny Cow shared, “they took time out of their schedules to come and visit you, or to call you to introduce themselves, and it was never meant to feel like a hierarchy, or like a person in a position of seniority. It was more, “Welcome to our family.” In speaking with the company founders, they admitted that developing a company culture that reflected simple values of openness, accessibility and nurturing was sub-consciously deliberate in so far as they believed the culture emerged organically as a product of their beliefs and values. Jordan shared similar sentiments, “when I started working for Tri Fit it was like all of a sudden I had this whole group of people that very quickly felt like a family. They’re very good at integrating you as quickly as possible into that family.” Others, including Pumpkin Spice, Marty and Lentil, testified to their own experiences of working within this environment of relatedness.

By extension, employees have been endowed with familial personas, such as mother, grandmother, aunt and sister. This is evident within Harmony’s response, “we call her the den mom because she’s so—she knows everything.” Wonder Woman added to the conversation with her own perspective, “she would always remind me of my own mother every time she would come into a meeting. When we talk about family and a sense of comfort, when I would be hanging out with (her) I would feel the most comfortable because she would just remind me of hanging out with my mom.” And the adoption of familial roles was not unique to staff,

indeed within the management circle, Murdle acknowledged her matriarchal role, “I just can’t help but think sometimes these staff do sort of feel like your other children, and as a parent, your hope is that you can help them, groom them, to be great citizens, to have fulfilling lives and to be happy when they do.”

Clearly, in this most profound of relationships, there are implications to those within the organization. Many remarks were shared as to how the family-like culture was positive, enriching their lives with deep relationships, connection and a sense of belonging. For example, Marty suggested, “so all of these people inspired me to be with the company because I felt part of a little family. Luke added, “you’re at a good place in your life and it’s all because of who you work for” and Skinny Cow offered that the employees, “really feel that they have this bond that connects us all beyond our individual workplaces.” Bionic Woman went so far as to say that the work environment was such a perfect complement to her personal values and beliefs that when she was at work she felt “at home”. The bottom line shared by Sweet Pea is that, “Goals are important. Achieving goals are important. But at the end of the day they understand that we’re all human.” Connecting the humanity of all within this familial ecosystem reverberated clearly amongst many interviewed.

Another dimension that emerged as a consequence of this tight-knit system was shared by Wanda, “sometimes it’s difficult when you are so open and transparent and personable with your staff to do business in that context and to sort of put on the business hat and separate your personal side, it can be difficult... it’s not as easy to make those decisions and those steps that you feel you need to take to further a career or perhaps to go in a different direction.”

Furthermore, those employees who considered the organizational environment as something other than a family, perhaps those who were less emotionally attached, more guarded, or those

who had yet to develop close relationships with others in the company might find the culture isolating. If this were the case, it certainly was not voiced. Indeed, the most distanced perspectives still found the culture refreshingly open, sincere and accommodating.

Factors that may have enabled the evolution of this family-like culture might include the organization's size, its relatively flat structure, its privately-held ownership, or the fact that it was owned and led by two relational women. Each of these will be analyzed at a later point. Nevertheless, the theme of family, and the positive qualities associated therein including openness, respect, care, compassion and inter-relational growth and development was pervasive within the stories shared. Perhaps Sweet Pea summarized the prevailing sentiment best when she volunteered the following, "I really do feel like we're family. We all have our different roles within our family. And even though we've got the parents or the grandparents, at the end of the day we are all sitting around the same table with the same common goal."

**Connection and relational resonance.** If the metaphor that is most frequently used to describe this organization's culture is that of a family unit, then creating deep, sustainable connection with its family members, its clients and its community is one of its most dominant attributes. Originating with the founders, the intentional creation of connection with each employee is recounted throughout the ranks with glowing admiration. Becky notes, "they actually wrote out a poem displaying how much they appreciated them and what they had done while they were here, and they just made it fun." And Becky was not alone in her admiration for the relational commitment the owners of the company make to each employee as Broccoli aptly described, "they do an impeccable job of putting together poems and reading them out as part of the recognition of the individual's success in working with the company as long as they have. So when we reach those milestones, they put together a beautiful poem that reflects the

individual so you know that they took the time to extract that information about them and part of it has a lot to do with the relationship that they have developed with that individual as well. I have my very own and I treasure it.” Skinny Cow was also clear in sharing the impact the leadership has had in creating connection, “they want to be chatting with you; it doesn’t come across as, “Okay, we’ve been chatting for two minutes; let’s move on to the next person,” kind of thing. They would bring more people into the conversation, rather than turn their back on you.” Taking advantage of the opportunity to connect with all staff at each of the five staff meetings each year was a common remark, “they’re always interacting with the staff. That’s probably the biggest thing that comes to mind. They’re always trying on a personal level to also get to know everyone... creating those relationships beyond just a work colleague... I think they genuinely are interested in getting to know everyone and building those relationships beyond just work related conversations. This sentiment by Kermit was echoed by all participants. Indeed, when challenged as to whether they perceived the dialogue to be genuine or authentic, they resoundingly replied that it was. Haley added, “the fact that we can have that human emotional connection when I speak to them, I look forward to speaking with them. On our anniversaries they write poems that explore the lives of the person, getting input from people that they know they are close to in the company. They deliver this poem in front of everyone at our staff meetings. I don’t know very many other presidents that would be able to do that.” Dissecting the nature of this relational connection further, Luke added, “they adapt to all people... like I said, everyone has a different story. So with someone, you know, going through one thing, and someone going through another, someone’s talking about work or whichever... they create relationships easily.” This capacity demonstrated by the company co-presidents of adapting to each relational encounter, meeting each person where they are in the

moment, was intimated to be one of the reasons this behavior was regarded as genuine and authentic. Although the organization only met five times each year as a collective, that did not seem to dampen the quality of connection that was experienced. Jordan and Tom expressed similar sentiments that “we’re not together that much, but yet that feeling of connection is strong” and Joanne added, “We look forward to those every few months to get everyone together... and I feel like we’re all sort of connected. Like we don’t see each other very often but every time we have a meeting we’re all—we know stuff about each other too.... It’s really weird, like I only see these people three or four times a year but I feel like I know them.”

***Establishing a relational culture.*** Creating connection was not the exclusive purview of the corner office, however, nor was it limited to the five annual staff meetings. Indeed, from the moment a new employee is welcomed into the organization, that person is partnered with a more senior mentor; a staff person in a similar role who has the experience and confidence to assist the new hire in acclimating to his/her new role. “Senior Buddies are those individuals who have demonstrated strong leadership skills and that ability to coach and mentor newer staff.” As explained by Harmony, this structure was commonly referred to in the stories as an immediate opportunity to create connection. Such was the experience of Bionic Woman, “they match you up with a senior consultant, someone who’s been with the company for a longer period of time... so I felt that connection with her.” As Kermit explained, this opportunity to create connection upon joining the company was a very positive experience, “So in your first year of employment they set you up with somebody who is close by and kind of acts like your mentor because we’re all so dispersed, so it’s nice. That was a huge support for me coming in, having her.”

As Broccoli attested, “the opportunity to develop a close connected relationship with senior leaders in the company is very motivating,” and it doesn’t end there. In fact, Harmony pointed out, the organization lives its value of creating healthy relationships with all of its employees, “we have our Tri Fit values, one of them being—the one that really stands out for me is the healthy relationships.” Building these relationships is the ongoing product of the entire organization, facilitated and nurtured by the management and senior leaders. As Phyllis shared, “It’s very easy for them to just engage people and start them talking, bringing out something in them and then having them open up a little bit and connect. I think they enjoy meeting people and knowing that about them, establishing those connections... I think just developing the relationship is something they enjoy and something that does come very naturally.”

Remarking on how that sense of connection with one another translates to improved success with his clients, Jordan offered the following, “they are very good at placing personalities with clients... And after talking to me I realize that yes, I probably wouldn’t have been happy there, so they’re very good at that—telling you okay, well hang on or you’re not ready to make that move... they’re very good at saying “we don’t know if that’s going to be the right fit for you... they are well aware of our individual personalities and our strengths... they basically knew personality wise and demographics wise the membership here, that it might not be the right fit... intuitiveness?, I’d say so for sure, and knowing their employees well. They take the time to get to know their employees.” And the benefits do not stop there. Wonder Woman commented, “It seems like a lot of really good, successful companies recognize the value of their employees and go out of their way to help to make their lives positive and make their work experience positive... Everyone really connects ... meetings every two or three months where there is that opportunity to reconnect and share ideas. They always provide opportunities for us to be better

people, exposure to new and better things, lots of education.” Mary agreed, suggesting the sense of connection facilitates, “bringing out the employee’s perception of their best self” and Luke suggests, “they make us feel good. They make us better people.” Creating a culture of relationship that honors each person, and enables each to realize their greatest sense of self, is attributed to both management and the senior leadership. Mary put it this way, “I think it’s just because of the way she deals with people and makes everybody feel, and I’ve seen this with other employees, like she makes all the people she supervises feel like they’re her friends, etc. and they can come to her with anything.” She went on to add, “It just always amazes me no matter the situation, how calm, how present they are.” And this sense of relational connection and friendship has created loyalty and encouraged employee retention as Kaitlyn described, “they don’t want to leave because the work-life, balance and the enjoyment of their job is great... and because you feel connected, you don’t want to let somebody down, so I think it makes you do your best.” Wonder Woman concurred, “I think it is actually difficult for people to leave Tri Fit if they want to because it is never about his/her experience as an employee or his/her engagement with the other consultants or with the management team or whoever his/her manager is. I think people always leave because there is just a different opportunity outside of Tri Fit that gives them an opportunity that Tri Fit can’t give. I am sure there are people that have left because they are unhappy with Tri Fit. I just wouldn’t understand why that would be.” Beyond loyalty and retention, Tom suggested the sense of connection furthered the development of trust-filled relationships, adding that, “if you can see the people that you can trust and let run with something, they will usually come back with something pretty good rather than if you don’t trust them and you make them feel like they are not competent then they usually show you that they are not and they don’t really step up.”



*Developing relational muscle.* This sense of connection extended beyond the internal community of the company, to include the civic communities within which the respondents live and work, and the relationships within their community of practice, including their clients. The former will be reported on during the examination of another theme. With respect to building relationship with clients, several respondents referenced occasions when they witnessed the management of the organization engage clients in conversation about leisure or personal pursuits in service of creating connection with them, rather than simply discussing business. When questioned about why this was the case, respondents felt it was natural as it was an extension to the ‘family’. As one leader put it, “I wouldn’t want too much time to pass without having some sort of connection with our clients.” This was not the practice of a single leader, but rather was the way in which each employee sought to create meaningful relationships with those within each of their communities of practice. They witnessed the behavior in the organization’s leadership and wanted to create similar relationships for themselves, in effect emulating their leadership.

Deepening the connection with those within one’s workplace was a subject described by Daniel Siegel (1999) in his work on attachment theory. Within this work, Siegel described a deepening of connection between an employee and his/her manager or with another person who might serve in a surrogate parental role to the employee. Over time the relationship emits an energy or resonance where each reports ‘feeling felt’ by the other. This concept was explored with many of the participants after they volunteered their strong level of attachment towards those in leadership and management roles in the organization. This deep level of relational connection with another where a level of intimacy is achieved and a tangible energy felt is being described as relational resonance. Perhaps not surprising, many within this organization

acknowledge this sense of resonance. Phyllis described it this way, “I’d say I feel pretty close to her in that respect... we’ve confided in each other in terms of different things that are happening in our lives both personal, even more so personal than professional. We’ve supported each other in terms of that and we do have a good rapport when I see her and it’s - - I know that she knows where I’m coming from and I have a good feeling for who she is.” A few of the many others speaking to such connectedness included Skinny Cow, who described her relationship in this way, “It goes beyond that; it goes deeper than that.” Similarly, Broccoli described the relationship in this way, “it was a very good energy” and Haley shared, “I am always treated as a person and as a whole self,” and Jordan emphatically explained, “something else is not on their mind. They’re with you.” But it was perhaps Murdle who summarized it best, “We know how each other’s going to respond, it’s that level of intimacy.”

As intimated above, developing such connection is not contained within the company, nor is it reserved only for clients. Indeed, this organization is founded upon a culture of service to both those within, to clients, to club members, and to the greater social communities of which it is a part. It is therefore not surprising that service has emerged as a dominant theme within this research.

**Service.** Much has already been noted about the ways in which the themes of family and connection serve the internal community of this organization. Clearly, Molly captured the delight each employee expressed in being of service to their colleagues, and rejoicing in their colleague’s success, “just the fact that I was able to do that and was so happy for that person that they’re doing such a great job. So that also was like wow and again that’s a little bit of a happy dance.” Beyond the way in which the culture has served its employees, they, by extension, have recognized their roles to serve within their individual client workplaces. “Our very first job

responsibility is customer service... If someone comes in, and they want to talk, you better believe you're going to them, and talking. You're not saying, "Oh, I need to put together my budget spreadsheet." In this statement, Skinny Cow aptly captured the impression of many respondents. Mary was like-minded as is evident when she offered, "you're working in almost a customer service role which is essentially what we're doing, we're doing a fitness and wellness role, but it's also customer service." Blake added, customer service-wise, people will come in, she'll know their first and last name. She knows how many kids they have. Like, she just remembers a lot of stuff and she really cares, and it shows. You know, the members really gravitate to her and they really respect her. I don't know. She just has made this environment so positive and so exciting and welcoming."

And beyond their client relationships, the theme of service to the broader communities in which they work and live is repeated often as a source of pride, respect and gratefulness. Luke and Becky commented in much the same way as Skinny Cow, "We have lots of different committees within Tri Fit, as well. We have a committee that's called the Tri Fit Cares Committee, and so, yeah, they organize doing different volunteer days, Habitat for Humanity, Soup Sisters, Ronald McDonald House cooks, and that sort of stuff, and Tri Fit does help to support that from a financial standpoint." Becky added that these endeavors were "very motivating and receive a positive response," and Jordan added that the leadership are starting a new chapter of a charity called The Shoebox Project from the ground up, and are bringing Tri Fit into it." Luke also mentioned the organization's work on environmental issues, "Joining the Go Green committee has been a challenge, you know, but it's a challenge that where in a sense you're learning along the way. You know, not everyone knows about being eco-friendly and stuff like that." Skinny Cow elaborated on this initiative, "it works from more like an

environmental, sustainability standpoint, and we produce monthly publications that we send out to all staff to use as part of our resource package, and yeah, there's hot issues, and topics, and stuff that are going on these days...it's Saturday, Sundays; it's completely voluntary." When invited to share the extent of participation in these initiatives, Wonder Woman clarified, "there is usually one if not most of the management team that participate. I think having a management team member like that actually participating like that just encourages everyone else to do it as well. Everyone in the company is active and they like to do things like that anyways, but I just really think that having a member of the management team participate like that is special. And it's year after year. They never miss a year."

**Exceeding expectations.** When one has served others beyond any established expectation, they are often described as 'going above and beyond' what was required. This phrase was recited on numerous occasions as participants described the efforts of co-workers, and consequently represents another core theme that has emerged from the story. Examples of such acknowledgement included that from Kermit who shared the impression made by one colleague, "I don't believe that was actually part of his job. So he kind of was going above and beyond," or Pumpkin Spice sharing, "it's doing the job and going above and beyond in some cases," or Lentil describing one of the organization's leaders, "So she does things like that, like she goes above and beyond. She keeps in touch with people after they've left. She takes them out for dinner after they've left. So the relationship that she has with people isn't just—if you work for Tri Fit, I'll enter into this type of relationship with you. She still cares about them afterwards." Wonder Woman agreed, sharing this about the management team, "they have always acted as leaders always going above and beyond," and Skinny Cow shared her own evidence of exceeded expectations, "one staff was on vacation, but she's the chair of this

particular committee, and she was on vacation, and forgot to reschedule the meeting, so she phoned in from her vacation, and sat on an hour-long conference call, and did that because, (A), she's passionate about the topic, and (B), because she made a commitment that she forgot to change, so instead of just not fulfilling her responsibility, she called in from where she needed to, and yeah, that's above and beyond right there."

**Authenticity and alignment.** Walking the talk, leading by example or being aligned with other's expectations are some of the many euphemisms used to describe authentic behavior, and each of these appear with regularity in the participant descriptions of others within the company. When describing her own persona, Harmony offered, "this is who's sitting here, that's who you get all the time. I really pride myself on being genuine, and me at work is the same as me at home... So I am who I am and that's who you get and I try to be that sort of genuine person that you feel you can be open with, be comfortable with, but at the same time, feel you can trust and respect." Phyllis, too, intimated that "we establish our relationships on a slow basis and we try to permeate and sort of lead by example as well as provide the immediate services day to day." Luke expressed similar sentiments, suggesting this to be a quality learned from within the organization, "you can't just tell someone – go work out because this will happen, or go do this, and meanwhile you're there doing the total opposite. So they've kind of taught us to be people that, you know, talk the talk and walk the walk. Like that's the easiest way to put it, you know." Haley expressed her acknowledgement of the leadership's role in cultivating this culture of authenticity in the following manner, "I fully believe that all of the leadership team live and breathe what the company represents in the way that they live, the way that they direct us as staff and I feel that the true values are always represented in our Leadership Team." Commenting on one of the leaders, Murdle added, "I think she's a strong

role model in terms of setting leadership direction, practicing what she preaches, taking action when action is required, and asking questions that make others think about their actions and the role that they would take.” Jordan commented too on the leader’s impact on the culture, “I like how they’re still practicing what they preach, and not just in fitness but in wellness too... So they are role models.” Wanda felt that was appropriate for leaders of the organization, “I’m big on sort of demonstrative leadership in action. So I think all of us probably do that on some level, but I like to see the leaders get their hands dirty a little bit and demonstrate that they still have it, sort of, to the front line employees.” When challenged to cite examples of authenticity in action, Wonder Woman rose to the occasion, “they are also engaging in things that the rest of us would engage in. So we have let’s say team building events and stuff like that. They are always there. They are always participating. They do volunteer work with the rest of us. It’s like they jump in and they become one of us and I think that’s a major leadership quality because they are one with us.” Similarly, Blake recounted experiences of this culture of genuine engagement, “it felt so personal, when you go to the meetings and you get to interact with them. And they get involved—like for Adventure day, they were involved in all the games and having a good time. It’s rare and it’s fantastic because it makes you feel good.” Kaitlyn explained that being authentic was “kind of like Tri Fit’s philosophy, that they’re actually doing as they say they’re going to do,” and Marty offered that it was “a motivation tool” to see others do as they profess.

Perhaps the most demonstrable examples of authenticity and alignment with professed company values were shared in the stories of Marty and Sweet Pea, stories that clearly exemplified the organization’s commitment to this core value. As Marty put it, “They just cancelled the contract and they backed me up ...they stood up for the values of the company and

they put the ethics of the company in front of whatever. The money's an issue and they lost the contract but yeah, so they decided that's not the way that Tri Fit wants to do business. In another story along the same theme, Sweet Pea shared, "there's that whole thing, the client is always right. The customer is always right. Well I don't know—are they? But at some point, when your staff is being affected by this person, you have to stand your ground and protect your staff and that's what she did... So, she wanted me to feel safe, and she wanted me to feel good about going into work. And so she made me feel like that was more important than anything else."

**Adaptability.** A further theme emerging from storytellers in this organization speaks to both organizational and personal adaptability. Evidence of the organization's malleability to respond to customer needs came from Kaitlynn who suggested, "Tri Fit can adapt to any business culture..., we can act like IBM and we can also act like a really small mom and pop little business." And when referring to the organization's adaptability following challenging times, Murdle suggested Tri Fit "manages difficult times effectively, but is able to move away from those times as quickly as possible."

At an individual level, commentary regarding the manner with which individuals addressed presumably negative situations was abundant. One frequent demonstration of adaptability voiced by those throughout the organization involved viewing a negative situation in a more positive light. For example, Harmony suggested, "so in hindsight I'm so glad that it happened." Phyllis shared similar sentiments, "It's a slow process but yeah, I do feel like there's some progress being made. Nothing ever gets completely shot down but it just takes some persistence to kind of make things happen" and when asked to do something unfamiliar, Blake added, "That was a big challenge for me, something I had never really done before... it's

definitely given me a lot more confidence in myself.” Tom told a similar story, “(I was) drilled with questions and I didn’t end up getting the job. So that was pretty tough.... It all worked out so it was fine but at the time it was crushing,” and Joanne likewise shared a story of adaptability to a changing work situation, “that was really unfair that they were cutting the contract short, so I think it would still upset me, but I’m happy now where I am because I know that if it didn’t happen that way, I wouldn’t be here.” Lentil shared a story relating to an employee challenge, which could have been simply dismissed as an unfortunate hiring error, but was morphed into a more positive outcome, “but I believe that the way I handled the situation and made it as positive as I could, the employee, now ex-employee, came back to me and actually thanked me for letting her go and saying how—what a valuable conversation we had. And we actually stayed in touch for quite awhile afterwards.”

This capacity to adapt, or to be flexible in the moment as the situation changes has been observed by storytellers as they recount their experience with others in the organization. “This ability to transfer from different skills with ease and with coordination is amazing. So I can see her as doing that and she reads different people in their own way and connects with them in a way that they feel comfortable.” In this comment, Haley was speaking to the grace and agility the protagonist in her story exhibited in responding to other’s needs in the moment. Tom recites a similar experience, “So she is very good at knowing how to manage different people and how to give them what they are looking for...she’s always several chess moves ahead... she is taking us and our personalities into consideration ... she is always thinking ahead about how she can be ready for those things.”

**A culture of nice.** Found within the transcripts of story, as well as within the negative space, or unspoken word, was a culture of politeness where employees seek to avoid conflict



and confrontation. At its most benign, it was revealed through storytellers as a conspicuous absence of anything negative to say of their experience within the organization. One-half of those interviewed were unable to share any negative event occurring within the organization during their tenure. Luke put it this way, “So I honestly can’t think of any setbacks or anything like that within the company.” At its most profound, it was witnessed in behaviors that suppressed the voices of those in the system. Subordinating her own feelings or thoughts, Wanda shared the following, “I haven’t had the opportunity to share that with anybody and I don’t think it would be good for me to do so.” Haley remarked, “I thought what is this feedback going to get? What is going to result from this feedback? I realized that it wasn’t anything the leadership team could do” and Pumpkin Spice voiced the following, “I just felt that I think my idea is really good and I think we could make some advances there, but that’s really in any job, so I don’t even know if I can pick that apart too much.” On this theme of striving to be ‘nice’ or to not upsetting others in the organization, Kaitlynn added, “I might be doing them a disservice... but I feel badly because in some ways I think well, I really felt this person was really good,” and Molly offered, “It makes you a little sad but you get over it... it still resonates ... so you always think of the positives... and no, I never brought it up.” A final testament was contained in one of Wonder Woman’s stories, “I feel a lot of the times that the message goes out but nothing is ever really done about it, and I know that Tri Fit is very sensitive to keeping people’s positions and not ruffling feathers and that might actually be one of their downfalls.” Here the storyteller shared a belief that, despite work performance that could be viewed as damaging to the organization, the leadership does not take the appropriate action to remove people from their positions.

**A female organization.** Whether by design, or a product of its evolution, a culture of women has underpinned the stories shared throughout the organization. With only 9 of 77 or 12% of the permanent workforce being male, this is not surprising. However, the fact that it was clearly in the minds of storytellers does ascribe to it a distinct thematic position. Lentil shared that Tri Fit is, “a very female friendly organization. So I think, I don’t know why I thought of that, but I thought it was just like a turning point for us in terms of being a really great place to work as women.” As a place to work, many offered their reverence, such as found in Skinny Cow’s words “Absolutely, 100 percent. It is absolutely intentional. She knows how to lead women... She knows what it takes to show leadership to a predominantly female staff. She understands how emotions are involved, and she understands what women value out of their jobs. Let’s face it, women like recognition, right? Women fish for compliments a lot. Women fish for answers, even without sometimes intending it... I think it comes across as caring, and very, very real...Absolutely genuine, yeah, very genuine” or Jordan who expressed her endorsement in this way, “they’ve been great in being flexible with those of us who have had children... they’ve actually allowed contracts to be split in two... So they’ve given that flexibility to retain the good employees... been creative in terms of retaining employees that they want to retain.” Kermit offered this, “the fact that two women lead the company, which I think, is still relatively rare, maybe not as much as it was 20 years ago but I think it’s still very rare. So that’s an admirable thing for them to have kind of built this from the ground up and being women that are leading in that role.” Becky echoed these sentiments, offering, “I just think they make good leaders for women and men as well.”

When sharing perspectives on their male counterparts and the reasoning for their minority position, Harmony had this to say, “he’s clearly outnumbered by women and maybe

that's partly his personality," and Jordan offered men in the industry tend to go toward the personal training and in this type of environment we don't really get to do any of that... men that do come into the company tend to leave quickly." Murdle acknowledged that, men are "outnumbered from a gender standpoint and Harmony pointed out that "we haven't tapped into his potential as much as we should have or could do. That's a whole other set of questions." Having shared a final note in this regard, Jordan summed up his experience at the company by saying, "it is one of the best places for women to work."

**Return on positivity.** In the balance, the storylines shared of work experience at the company were overwhelmingly positive with few negative experiences recalled or recited. Animating a culture of such profound positivity year after year revealed an organizational system with numerous stories of consequential benefits. Stories noted tangible returns on the investments made by the company in creating this positive culture. The term 'return on positivity' or ROP, has been coined to capture the storyteller's perspectives on this theme. Becky's story on the return on positivity is captured in the following, "The more positive an environment you are in, the more you are able to focus on your work... they will be more excited and they are more apt to come back and we're more apt to see results... in fact, one of our members even emailed myself and copied my supervisor saying how much of a difference we have made in his life; he lost over 50 pounds. And it is very motivational coming from the members because that is who we are here for in the first place." Jordan could relate, and shared this story, "his wife called me and she said "I want to thank you." I said "for what?" And she said "for changing my husband's life." I'm like "what are you talking about?" She said, "have you not realized the impact that you've had on him? He's like a different person. He was depressed, he was overweight, he had no energy, all he did was work." And she said "he's like

totally into running, he loves it, he's got energy, his whole eating habits have changed, he's different... And I thought—okay, I guess I'm doing the right thing.” Phyllis had this to add, “It seems like a lot of really good, successful companies recognize the value of their employees and go out of their way to help to make their lives positive and make their work experience positive... I think the fact that they support us and do go out of their way to make us feel valued and appreciated just makes people want to work that much harder and make sure things get done... Obviously happy employees are going to be productive employees and it creates loyalty as well. So I think definitely you're going to—a positive environment is only going to create an employee that wants to work hard and wants to do a good job... The more successful Tri Fit is the more opportunities there are for us. So the more security there is for us... So they're definitely working to make it a positive place.” Haley agreed, “if I feel confident and competent to be able to do the work then I'll be able to do it the way that I need to do it. In general when I'm a happier person I tend to want to get stuff done... when everything is quite positive and easy to go through then things get done and I've noticed that even just over the last couple of days where things have to get done and when it's pleasant to get done all of a sudden I've gotten fifteen things done in one hour. Now I can go and work on the next thing so I do find that it makes me more productive when I'm at ease with those relationships... it allows me to put more effort into what I do which ultimately makes these employees healthier in the long run ... That's what we're doing here, to get people to stay in the gym so that the retention is quite high. To get them in and out of our classes, maybe to help them lose weight, maybe to help them get off their blood pressure medication, maybe to help them be stronger so they can run their marathon next year. Whatever their goals are that's what we exist for.” Mary shared her own story on the return on positivity, “I think the employees try to work better and to do better work because it's

like this person has this trust that I'm going to do a good job so I want to try and do a good job and it really at least for me makes me take pride in the center and want to do as good as I can for the center but then I think also even the members at the gym see that because within the gym I try to create a very positive, encouraging environment..., it's a benefit for the employees and for Tri Fit I think it helps them retain their employees," and Marty added, "it's better for you and it's better for the client overall to have this kind of positive environment for your work."

Wonder Woman shared this, "It gives me the confidence to show up to work, to do my work, to enjoy my work, to want to be a better employee... So it just really makes coming to work so much better, so much more enjoyable every time." Sweet Pea offered her own story on the benefits of a positive work environment, "At the end of the day when we're all doing our job and we're all making our clients happy and our members happy it benefits everyone meaning everybody's happy, everybody's achieving their goals which makes everybody more productive and it benefits everybody, not necessarily the bottom line in terms of money - I mean in terms of health and fitness....They're productive in their client locations which means the people who are in turn paying us let's say are happy with that. So everybody benefits...I think they're ultimately getting what it is that they want from our services and yeah, for the most part of course, we always get really good feedback from our clients, and for a lot of our clients it is the bottom line, right? Are they taking a lot of sick days, are they off because they're feeling anxious or low about themselves? It all affects that bottom line for the clients. It does. So, absolutely when they have more productive staff and happier staff and active staff, then I think it benefits everyone." From a measurement perspective, Luke pointed out, "when you're in a positive mood it just makes everything else better... within a two-year period we've had a huge increase in people that have signed up and it's been staying consistent." And Molly shared this

epiphany, “they say the positives, like oh my god, you did an amazing job! That’s not too much or too difficult to actually say. So my ah-ha moment is when she actually did that to me. I’m like wow, and so I started doing it to my peers and to people. You don’t need credit, you don’t need those little things but they’re nice. So my ah-ha moment would be, oh my god if I give it more, I feel good.” Skinny Cow put it this way, “Would working for an organization with a less positive culture have an impact on my work satisfaction? It would from the standpoint that I would be much more bitter... Would it then lead me to want to go to a different company who had their stuff together? Yes.”

### **The Organizational Culture**

Throughout this research project, perspectives on the culture of the organization were shared by each of the storytellers. These insights were augmented by my own observations which informed my personal conceptualization of this organization. What follows is a presentation of those data through both the lens of the people, and that of myself.

**The people’s perspective.** Reviewing the transcripts from each of the 27 interviews revealed key words or phrases used to describe the organization’s culture of leadership. Many words were used repeatedly. The twenty six most common words used appear below in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

#### *Most Common Descriptors Used for the Culture of Leadership*

|             |                    |            |               |
|-------------|--------------------|------------|---------------|
| Developing  | Genuine            | Open       | Respect       |
| Intentional | Leading by Example | Team       | Heart         |
| Supportive  | Trust              | Accessible | Relational    |
| Encouraging | Empowering         | Inspiring  | Collaborative |
| Fun         | Connection         | Authentic  | Family        |
| Caring      | Balanced           | Agile      | Acknowledging |
| Generous    | Valued             |            |               |

To capture and display the relative frequency of these descriptors, a ‘word cloud’ was prepared (Figure 4.2) using the freeware, Wordle (Feinberg, 2013) which displays those words that occur more frequently with greater prominence.



Figure 4.2. A word cloud describing the culture of leadership at Tri Fit.

**Through the researcher’s eyes.** In addition to the storyteller’s feedback, and recorded observations of storyteller’s attentiveness, body language and tone, I also took an opportunity to interview the senior leadership team at the beginning of the data collection period. From this vantage, an independent perspective of the organization was possible. The following data informed that story:

- the company was co-founded thirty years ago by two women;
- those two women continue to lead the organization as co-presidents;
- their values have informed the culture from an early stage;
- Many employees have tenure far exceeding expectations for the role;

- the culture has consciously supported women in the workplace;
- there appears to be little racial diversity based upon the sample of 27 comprised of 26 Caucasians and one African-American;
- only 12% of the workplace are men;
- the culture is very positive, with many struggling to recall a negative experience;
- it is viewed as a family-like atmosphere;
- it has developed a 'culture of nice' where the needs of some are subordinated to ensure a general state of harmony;
- relational leadership is evident with several leaders including constructs such as transformational leadership, authentic leadership, servant leadership, and stewardship;
- relational resonance, intentionality and agility co-existed in the descriptions of a few leaders;
- an evolutionary process described the development of these qualities in these leaders suggesting the qualities can be learned;
- the 'return on positivity' has been declared by many respondents.

Clearly, the storytellers hold a very complimentary image of Tri Fit. I, too, have been impressed with the abundance of positive imagery shared and the level of relational practice witnessed. However, those stories also contain themes of silenced thought and opinion, and of a dominant female voice. It has been the sum of these observations that has informed my own impressions of the culture of leadership, and specifically, of the relational practices of those within Tri Fit. These thoughts will be examined next.



## Chapter V: The Voice of the Researcher

True of any phenomenological research is the fact that the researcher is intrinsically connected to that being researched. The researcher's socio-economic position, culture, gender, experience, position and assumptions are brought to the research, becoming enmeshed with the dialogue of the participants. What results is a co-creation, a blend, or to use a term in wine-making, a meritage of human experience. With the best of intention to honor the authentic voices of each storyteller in this work, and to present the findings objectively, I am humbled by the impossibility of this act. Being no more able to attribute the taste of a wine to terroir, grape or vintner alone, the results presented cannot be disassembled as to their origins or respective influences. Consequently, a reflexive examination of the data is warranted.

True to the meaning of the root of the word, reflexive, which is to bend back upon oneself, I have been mentally contorted with the results over the past months. I have reflected on my method of participant selection and wondered if I lost relevant information through exclusion of contract employees or those on maternity leave? In a similar vein, I question whether the results were distorted through the participant selection process? I have pondered my personal impact as a male executive with over twenty-five years of experience on the participants, predominantly young females, many of whom are starting their careers. Was my age or experience intimidating to any of the respondents, and if so, did that impact the veracity of their story? Or has authority or power been imbued upon me as a consequence of my position as a doctoral candidate by the respondents, and that have an effect on their responses? Did my questions limit the scope of the respondent's feedback, in effect, providing me with the answers that I was seeking?

And with respect to the analysis and reporting of the data, with so much to choose from, am I sure that what I deemed of importance was objectively the case, or was it only important to me? Do I trust myself to explore various structures of the results, and to present those structures in ways that are genuine reflections of stories told?

These are placed among the many questions upon which I have critically reflected, but perhaps that which has given me greatest pause has been the emotional connection that I have had with the data, its roots, and its impact on their interpretation.

### **Emotionally Charged**

With each reading of the Tri Fit stories, I find myself gripped with emotion. I have spent months with these feelings, unsure of their origins, and unclear as to the emotions themselves. Reflection has given me the opportunity to open up doors that contain the memories of my corporate misadventures, doors to my spiritual self wherein I believe the answers may be found.

**Grinding the lens.** Coming to this research project, I do so holding firmly to those demonstrations of leadership that hone the lens through which I interpret leader behaviors in my life. Those experiences are varied, grounded in many different organizations, both large and small, and having public, private and charitable accountabilities. Seemingly, the size or structure is less a predictor of my experience of leader success than is the culture of the organization within which the leader is immersed, and the personal values and beliefs held by that individual. What follows is an attempt to explain, through my experiences, that which has informed my view of leadership, in an effort to contextualize those findings which I have observed at Tri Fit.

In the first corporate position I landed, early in my work life, I was led and evaluated by a manager who I soon learned wrestled with alcohol addiction. For the most part, his martini

lunches and carefree ways were innocent. Over time, however, they escalated in significance, revealing decisions being made outside of his authority, decisions that were potentially troublesome for the company. The impact of his behavior on a young professional attempting to excel was compounded by a leadership team that failed to establish adequate controls designed to insulate staff from the inappropriate actions of such a manager.

Turning the clock ahead one year, that same young professional found himself in a new organization faced with a manager who held the belief that personal and professional aspects of one's life should never mix. He declared that the workplace was not one for friendships or for discussing one's family or personal issues. Rather, he believed an iron curtain must be pulled across our lives when we step into our professional role each morning, shielding us from our complete selves, not to be drawn back until we leave the building at the end of the day. Leading from a place of scarcity and fear, this manager elected to berate rather than to develop, to trivialize accomplishment rather than to enable its celebration.

Leading with intimidation and fear was an approach encountered far too frequently in the years to come, whether in smaller entrepreneurial organizations, or global multinationals. Leaders who took liberty with their interpretations of the truth were also far too common.

These were not the only leadership experiences I encountered in my career, however. Standing in stark contrast were those leaders in my life who elected a different approach, leading in relation with those in their communities of practice. Empowering followers, demonstrating trust and building high quality connections through their leadership was their chosen approach. These leaders highlighted the marked difference in both approach and affect on those being led. It is within this context that I have undertaken an examination of the Tri Fit story of leading.

Contextualizing my professional story, I believe, with few exceptions, it to have been one characterized by a series of traumatic experiences from one employer to another. I have lived with the disappointment of narcissistic leaders who demonstrated they were prepared to act unethically in service of their own objectives. I have felt the loss of unrealized goals and dreams when toxic leaders left me little choice but to resign. I have felt forlorn at the contributions made by myself and others in service of bettering an organization through relational leadership only to have those efforts at building connection, trivialized. I hold regret for not giving due consideration, at times, to the culture of the organization I was joining. The ‘what if’ question seems a useless sentiment now, and yet it still finds its way into my thoughts. What would one’s career prospects have been had they been mentored? What if managers were committed to the development of their people? What if leaders subordinated their own ego in service of organizational goals? What if leaders were committed to the truth and exercised courage in its pursuit?

At times, I have harbored anger and resentment towards others who I hold responsible. And, I am ashamed of my own failings and weaknesses that enabled these disappointments. Perhaps I could have performed further research on the organizations I was considering joining rather than considering title and compensation as much as I did. Could I have spoken up earlier when faced with bad behavior? That I am complicit in that which I experienced, is a reality I hold, and this reality adds to my sense of disappointment.

These emotions are with me when I read the stories that have emerged about Tri Fit and its culture of leadership. They co-exist with others, such as joy. I am joyful that the leadership qualities and experiences observed at Tri Fit, which are being characterized here as relational agility, are present, and that they are attributed to such a positive work environment. I am

holding hope as well, a sense of hopefulness that leaders will see there is another way to lead that can be so positive to those who experience it that they look forward to their work, that they consider their colleagues to be friends, and that they are prepared to go to great lengths to ensure the organizational goals are achieved. The leadership of Tri Fit has authored a culture of relational connection that has been responsible for a web of interconnectivity involving each member of the organization. It is one for which hope is justified. It is one in which I feel I would find a community of like-minded souls, wherein I could thrive. And within that community, where such a great sense of hope emerges, I find a new possibility for workplaces.

When I contemplate this, I often get emotional. I have had to stop myself on a few occasions in the retelling of these results as I have been moved so deeply that further intelligible speech was not possible. I spoke earlier about finding the answers behind the door to my spiritual self, and I believe it is in that place where explanations to this phenomenon exist, if we are sufficiently courageous to venture there. I hold my spiritual beliefs, although informed by years of exposure to organized Christian religions, to be non-ecclesiastical in design. Rather, I lean towards a belief in the virtue of a diverse global community animating values of forgiveness, honesty, peace, love and morality in all aspects of their lives. My mother's voice is prominent in this place. She lived these virtues well and expected the same of her children. This is the place that I come from when sharing the failings of many of the workplaces in which I have had experience. And it is the place that grounds me when I read the stories of those within TriFit. It is my sensitivity to both that stirs the emotions of which I speak.

If hopefulness for other organizations is contained within the wisdom of leadership at Tri Fit, then those specific elements that enable such a culture to flourish must be uncovered. In doing so, I turn to the nine dominant storylines.

**Connection and relational resonance.** The most prominent theme emerging from the Tri Fit storytellers related to creating connection with others within the organization. Many storytellers shared how the organization and its leadership facilitate connection and the development of relationships from the moment an employee joins the company. The initial connection is made by the co-presidents in the form of a welcoming letter and gift card. Following this, a mentor or buddy is introduced to the new hire to facilitate his/her introduction to the company and to his/her new role. The mentor continues to support the employee for a year, answering questions, making introductions, providing resources and serving to remind the new hire that they are not alone, that the entire company is behind them and wants for them to be successful. Many Tri Fit employees shared that these initial connections served to allay fears and make their transition into the organization more welcoming and productive. Indeed, most declared that these initial connections evolved over the years to become strong friendships. Curious how employees, both new and experienced, perceived this process of creating connection, I posed the question to staff, managers and the senior leadership. Without question, creating structures and processes that would encourage the development of relationship was regarded as genuine and intentional. Most respondents regarded the intent to be motivated by the leader's genuine desire to know their staff. This demonstration of care, compassion and sensitivity lies in stark contrast to that which I have experienced where employers hold the perspective that the employee is resourceful and capable of navigating their own way. In several workplaces I entered as a new recruit, relational development was left to the initiative of the new, often reserved and naïve employee. If for no other reason than enhancing productivity, the Tri Fit on-boarding process would no doubt be the more successful approach.

*Fostering connection amongst remote staff.* And relational development does not stop there. Due to their geographic separation at client locations in each of fifteen cities, employees are encouraged to connect through the company intranet site and blog. Managers, responsible for a group of staff, remain in contact with each of their charges ensuring their needs are addressed to ensure their success. Creating deeper connections is a clear product of this interaction, as evidenced by the stories shared. Quarterly staff meetings are described by each storyteller as highly anticipated events that offer wonderful opportunities to further establish relationships and create connectedness. New employees are invited to introduce themselves at these meetings, and those celebrating milestone anniversaries with the company (e.g., 5, 10, 15 years of service) are honored through the presentation of a poem, written and presented uniquely for them by the co-presidents. Several individuals shared their incredulosity that a president would invest the time to do this, adding that they saw this as an authentic expression of the company's desire to deepen relationships. These displays of familiarity are obvious enablers of relational development as are the ongoing notes of recognition from managers and leaders for great performance, and the personal calls or notes from the co-presidents recognizing major events in the lives of their staff such as engagements, births, or anniversaries. When asked to describe the effect of these acts on staff, the overwhelming sentiment was one of connection with experienced staff sharing a familial bond with the leadership, describing the leader's behavior as being an intentional catalyst of deep, trusting connection. Relational resonance, or the palpable energy of mutual understanding and connection that is experienced between two individuals, was a term that aptly described the profound connection many experienced with these leaders. The reaction of new team members varied in intensity from that of resonance to a more reserved sense of comfort and place. Age and prior life experience seemed to be a

predictor of one's reaction as those who were older and presumably more experienced with other workplaces, tended to more deeply connect with others in the company relative to the newer, younger, and less experienced staff.

Irrespective of the degree of connection, the success of this culture has, in part, been attributed to the fact that the relationships are grounded in mutual trust and respect, values made possible through authentic relationships.

**Authenticity and alignment.** In my experience in work and life, trust is fundamental to the success of any relationship. Many of those interviewed shared similar sentiments in their recounting of story. Indeed, on the few occasions when trust was not volunteered as a quality key to relational development, I asked where it ranked in importance relative to those that were offered. The responses were consistent: it was such a fundamental element that it was simply presumed to be present. This reaction could be attributed to the fact that these were a subset of younger individuals who had the good fortune of not having experienced anything less in their workplace relationships. Nevertheless, if we assume trust is fundamental to positive relational development, then authentic leadership, that creates the opportunity for trust-filled relationship, must emerge within the system. Certainly, this was the case at Tri Fit where specific leaders were described repeatedly as being genuine or authentic.

**Exceeding expectations.** I believe that it is an inherent part of our nature as humans to do our best at our chosen professions and upon doing so, to hold a hope that we will be recognized accordingly. Going 'above and beyond', 'the extra mile' or 'exceeding expectations' are colloquialisms used to describe that truth. Within Tri Fit, this theme was recurrent, being used to describe individuals at all levels of the organization. Reflecting on my own work experience, I would suggest that a subset of employees would give every assignment



100% of their effort regardless of how they felt about the culture, their managers or organizational leaders. It is simply their way of acting with integrity in their work. I would have considered myself to be included in this group. There are others, however, with whom I had direct experience, whose feelings toward managers or leaders would offend them so much so that they would strike back at them by doing less than that for which they were capable. Even worse were those who performed sub-optimally yet created excuses for their failings, such as process inefficiencies, system issues, or deficiencies with other employees. When considering the Tri Fit experience, the reasoning for such widespread high performance is found in the words of the storytellers. Each employee feels a sense of responsibility to the other and to the organization. Like a living organism, Tri Fit's employees are akin to a group of distinct, inter-dependent systems that deliver one another vital resources. To ensure the organism's success, there is a widespread belief that doing more than expected would offer that assurance. And recognition of effort at every turn is given by managers and the leadership in the form of verbal commendation, written endorsements and small acknowledgement gifts. Other successful organizational systems with which I have had experience emulate, to some degree, this sense of mutual inter-dependency and responsibility. And, of course, they too recognize accomplishments. Not surprisingly though, with ego and internal competition a common feature in many organizational systems, such an expression of interdependency is often a foreign concept.

**Service.** For too long, my experience of leadership was one colored by perceptions that leaders believed their career accomplishments awarded them the right to demand followers serve them and their needs. I always considered this hierarchical model to be flawed as the authority to act and organizational power was needed by those doing the work, not by those

simply taking credit for its completion. During my first leadership experience fifteen years ago, I had an opportunity to put alternative approaches into practice. As a president, my leadership approach was participative and largely based upon building consensus. I would not ask anyone to do anything I was not prepared to do myself. I considered my role to be an enabler for those within the organization. Thereafter, as I moved from one company to the next, I continued with this philosophy. When recruiting, I would share a drawing of an inverted pyramid with each candidate explaining that I saw my role as the leader at the bottom of the pyramid, prepared to serve each of those in the organization in any way that was needed. If they encountered a technical issue with their computers, I would get them the appropriate support to resolve it, if there were interpersonal issues, I would bring all parties together to address them, and if they required skills to advance in their roles, I would ensure they were given opportunities for training. I believe this approach to leadership is what Greenleaf (1970) had intended in his description of servant leadership. Over the years, I have witnessed others leading in similar fashion. Within the storytellers' descriptions of events at Tri Fit, servant leadership is animated in the daily relationships of those connected to the organization. As a service-based business, Tri Fit's employees are predisposed to be considering the needs of others. As a privately held company, Tri Fit is not driven by quarterly results, as would be a public organization, nor is it driven by profit at all costs. Indeed, stories were shared rebuking the notion of profit at all costs where the leadership essentially fired a client as it was toxic to Tri Fit's organizational culture. Client satisfaction, and internal employee satisfaction are key indicators of success, however, and are imbedded in the DNA of the organization. It has therefore come naturally to Tri Fit employees to expand upon this theme of service to include themes of being of service to one another within the organization as is observed when a

coordinator offers to share his/her unique talents or knowledge throughout client locations. It is also evident in service to the broader communities within which employees live and work. Civic mindedness is witnessed through the plurality of volunteer efforts, by creating awareness of social issues, such as community hospice needs and the plight of women in shelters, and through intentional programming directed at global challenges such as the environment. When I questioned the leaders as to why the company has taken such strides to serve others, it was described as a natural extension of their work and of the values held by the organization. The consequence to the organization has been the creation of a community of practice, proud and grateful by association, whose connection is strengthened through a shared common system of beliefs.

**Adaptability.** A further relational theme described repeatedly by the storytellers focused on leadership adaptability. Leaders were seen as being adaptive as they responded to unique client program needs and to clients of varying sizes and complexities. Moreover, they were adaptive or agile in their relationships. Described by a number of storytellers, this quality was characterized by a genuine, intentional engagement with another individual, honoring the other as was necessary in the moment in service of developing the relationship. My experience would suggest this to be a rare quality. I believe adaptability demands of leaders that they subordinate their ego in service of diverse ideas. It necessitates that leaders accept they do not necessarily have all the answers, or that their answers are not always the right ones for a given situation. Far too frequently I have witnessed those in leadership positions, who dismiss the contributions or perspectives of others, believing their positions grant them a pardon for arrogance. And far too infrequently, have I experienced leaders humble themselves before those they lead by honoring the relational needs of their followers beyond those of any other in the

moment. Having witnessed such behavior years ago in one leader to whom I had been introduced, I explored the elements of this practice through a case study. What was described was a unique set of qualities I referred to as relational agility. And this is what I hear within the stories of Tri Fit.

Within these stories are words of reverence for a group of leaders. These leaders set a moral compass for their actions that serve the growth and development of their followers enabling those followers to realize their best selves. Rather than fearful that one of their followers would have ambitions or successes that overshadow their own, they celebrate such accomplishment. Courage is their companion. They lead by example, building trust in the ‘doing of leadership’. They create high quality connections built upon foundations of trust that inspires their followers. The authenticity of their leadership, and quality of connection they have cultivated, serves relationally agile leaders in times of both positive and negative exchange. Because it is only realistic to presume that one’s work life is continuously affronted with negative or challenging news, relationally agile leaders must be prepared to contend with challenging conversations including disciplinary action, dismissals, or simply providing feedback to encourage changes in employee behavior. By drawing upon the equity they have amassed in their relationships, the leader is able to navigate such conversations with grace and mutual respect, rather than confrontation and resentment. This was clear in the stories of those within Tri Fit who exhibit the qualities of agility. Whether it involved navigating the relationship with toxic clients and in so doing further demonstrating their sincerity and authenticity to their staff, or ending an employment relationship yet preserving the friendship for years thereafter, relationally agile leaders repeatedly demonstrated their ability to serve during challenging times.

**A female organization.** Founded, owned and led by two women, Tri Fit today consists of 78 permanent staff. Eighty-eight percent of the workforce are women, and by admission, the staff are proud of the policies that have been implemented in service of its female workforce. Included amongst these is the ability for those returning from maternity leave to do so on a part-time basis through a job sharing initiative. Although this admittedly is more time consuming and expensive for the company to manage, it enables those staff who have been with the company for many years to return to work gradually, a benefit that is greatly appreciated by staff.

As noted earlier, I come to this work as a male executive, co-creating the meaning of stories shared. From this position, I find there to be a counter-balance to the aforementioned benefit that holds such a lack of gender diversity to potentially limit the organization's perspectives on challenges they face. The male voice is limited to a single member of the leadership team. Stories have been shared that intimate that such a gender discrepancy is the norm for the business as men don't tend to stay. Others have suggested that the relative paucity of male voice in the system is a product of the fact that men tend to keep things to themselves. This may be true. And it may also be true that the male voice is subordinated in the system, due to the sheer dominance of the female. To determine whether this has been the case, one must look to measured effects on the system. The culture of the organization does not appear to have been impaired, as storyteller's reveal it to be overwhelmingly positive providing for work/life balance, flexibility and harmony. In terms of business success, the organization performs well in its space and it has implemented innovative products and services over the past several years. Whether this performance would have been enhanced with a stronger male voice and more diverse thinking is open to conjecture. On the balance, I believe that diversity of thought,

experience and perspective can only serve an organization and enable its resiliency through times of change. For that reason alone, I would argue that Tri Fit is unnecessarily exposed at this time, and would benefit from additional male presence.

That noted, a female-dominated organization is also one poised to establish a highly relational culture. Indeed, the literature expounds upon the gender bias associated with relational practice, clearly intimating it to be one held more by females than males (Fletcher, 1999). This has served the organization in its creation of a highly connected workforce that is animated day to day in a relational system much like that of a family. I question whether a more balanced gender representation on the leadership team would, in effect, lead to an unfortunate distortion of the very positive relational climate that has been created. Nevertheless, balancing the male and female voices in this family will most likely better serve its longer term success.

**Family.** Many have described the culture of Tri Fit to that of a family, with most attributing only positive emotions to that metaphor. The pre-eminent descriptors used to justify such a comparison were those of relationship, friendship and connection. The benefits to the organization of creating and supporting such a culture are many and have already been discussed. Of course, families are not necessarily ideal social systems, with some being quite dysfunctional. Peculiarities of each individual, and the dynamics amongst individuals can create strained relations. Family systems can also serve as the ideal environments to foster the use of relational ‘masks’ or counterfeit personas that are ‘put on’ in service of keeping harmony with others in the family. When a family member feels particularly challenged, communicating those challenges to other family members can be so difficult, that rather than doing so, the issue is suppressed. This was indeed the case with Tri Fit, where several individuals described

subordinating their own needs so as not to create rifts with others in the family. This theme has been described as a ‘culture of nice’.

**A culture of nice.** With the proliferation of stories expounding on the very positive culture at Tri Fit, one might conclude it to be ideal. I have found evidence to the contrary, however. This may have emerged as a consequence of my holding onto those negative, fear-invoking work experiences of my past giving me cause to be cynical of their absence in other organizations. This may have prompted me to rigorously pursue evidence of such a darker side at Tri Fit. Irrespective of the prevailing thoughts that may have guided my analysis, I have heard recurring voices of those who admitted to silencing their ideas or needs regarding specific issues that arose for them. I have referred to this voluntary act of self-censorship as a ‘culture of nice’. Several shared how, in response to specific events that challenged them, they chose to keep their dissatisfaction to themselves, suggesting that to do otherwise would upset others in the ‘Tri Fit family’, be perceived negatively, or simply that their issue was not worthy of mention. As the culture enables submission or subordination of personal needs, a darker sub-culture emerges which may be referred to as a shadow system. Given that, over time, employees may develop feelings of inadequacy or insufficiency that translate to negative impressions of the company, overlooking the shadow system gives it power which could possibly erode the positive that has been created. The shadow system is distinguished from those day-to-day grievances that emerge in all cultures by the fact that the challenges or unresolved angst existing in the shadow system is contained in the shadows. It is not spoken. The organizational culture has uniquely enabled the creation of the shadow system, and due to the fact it is not communicated, can be the source of negativity that can pervade the entire organization over time if left unchecked. In this analysis, I am holding that my desire to find

evidence of positive relational qualities, and by extension hope for future leadership development strategies, does not obscure or limit my investigation into this darker aspect of Tri Fit. Indeed, I hold the challenge to the organization, perhaps greater than any other, exists in the fact that when we wear masks that obscure our true thoughts and feelings, the shadow system is sustained.

So, how do we open the doorway to the shadows? Although an anonymous staff feedback process is in effect, this obviously has not addressed the shadows. And focus on the otherwise positive aspects of the culture, without due attention to the shadow system, exposes the organization to a silent poison. In my experience, this is frequently the case as organizations become enthralled with that which they are doing right, and are blind to their failings.

My approach to shadow systems in my past would lead me to believe there is a need for a disciplined process of intentional communication that invites opportunities for tough conversations. Tri Fit could address this shadow system and the resulting ‘culture of nice’ through a proactive coaching process that encourages staff to open up and to engage in dialogue.

**Return on positivity.** Each storyteller, including those illuminating the shadow system, has proudly shared their perspective on the organization’s culture, describing it with overwhelmingly positive language. With the benefit of my own corporate experience, upon hearing these stories I had an intuitive sense that such positivity must translate to having positive affect on measurable aspects of the business. This curiosity was addressed by some who volunteered they were more productive and creative in their work and consequently offered their clients more impactful services. To determine if this were a commonly held belief, I questioned other storytellers as to whether they believed the positive culture had impacts on any dimension of their business, and if so, what those impacts might be. The results were



compelling. Each of those storytellers who responded spoke of personal impacts on their productivity and delight in their work. Most translated that to improved customer experiences, better customer outcomes and exceeded client expectations. Completing the feedback loop, the storytellers suggested further client opportunities and client retention were benefits for Tri Fit. So, by virtue of a positive organizational culture, employees are more positive, productive and creative. They are more loyal to the organization and turnover is reduced. Customers enjoy a more positive experience, and meet their health and wellness goals. As the level of client satisfaction is optimized, the client continues its productive relationship with Tri Fit. I have coined the term, 'return on positivity' or ROP to capture the resulting benefits of this culture on this organization.

Observing the organization objectively, it would appear that this feedback is grounded in the empirical findings. Although not universally measured, some storytellers cited improvements in customer enrolment in employee fitness centres, improved retention of customers, reduction in musculo-skeletal injuries, and anecdotal evidence of weight loss, improved energy, and customer medication elimination. Looking at client retention, Tri Fit has an enviable track record with many clients renewing their agreements with the company year after year. Story has suggested this may be attributed to staff loyalty and low turnover, as clients are very pleased to have the same fitness and wellness coordinator retained year over year.

To speak to the enduring impacts of their culture on clients, consideration of client surveys and a more disciplined process of documentation of customer goals could also be considered.

### **Three Cultural Themes: Connection, The Shadow, and Return on Positivity**

Reflecting on each of what I believe to be the nine key emergent storylines, three cultural themes appear for me: those speaking to connection, the shadow system and the return on positivity. The latter two have been explored. That of connection, the elements that have been described to define it, and the emergence of a new relational construct, relational agility, warrants elaboration.

#### **Relational Connection**

Most of the nine emergent storylines converge on a cultural theme of connection. Family, connection, authenticity, service, exceeding expectations, adaptability and a feminine culture have each been analyzed and their common lineage described. Clear inter-connection of these storylines has been voiced by the storytellers. Tri Fit is described in story as a highly relational organization wherein leaders create deep, high quality connection built on trust. Servant leadership, authentic leadership, exceeding expectations and adaptability have been the relational structures described as having been the instruments collectively responsible for engendering and nurturing such connection and trust over the years amongst the workforce.

**Relational agility.** Through story, numerous individuals were singled out repeatedly by others as being relational leaders. Qualities of authentic leadership, servant leadership or transformational leadership were attributed to a number of leaders in the organization, many of whom are currently managers or leaders of the company, and a few who are not. Wanda, Skinny Cow, Tom, Sweet Pea, Molly and Jane were each described as relational leaders exhibiting these qualities. A few were described by these qualities as well as with relational resonance and that intentional quality of holding each of their relationships in an adaptive or agile manner as each relationship requires in the moment for the sole purpose of deepening the

relationship. Included amongst this group were Pumpkin Spice, Lentil, Harmony and Murdle. It is these individuals who would be described as being relationally agile.

Noteworthy is the observation in both the stories of these exemplars, and those with whom they work, that their leadership approach was the product of an evolutionary process over the years. This would suggest that relational agility has been learned through the triumphs and failings encountered in relationships over the years. Considering the stories of each of the four, and their common leadership foundation, it would seem that being a relational practitioner, or one adept at building relational connection, is a necessary condition for subsequent development as a relationally agile leader. This will be elaborated upon in the chapter to follow.

### **Organizational Leadership: Tri Fit and Beyond**

Tri Fit operates within an industry that is inherently positive. The storytellers shared that people pursue careers in this field out of a love for fitness and out of an interest for helping others achieve their health and wellness goals. For the most part, employees are happy about the work they do and its value to customers. This is in stark contrast to that which I have experienced in many other organizations where employees are often frustrated, question their value, and where occasions of positivity are the exception. As a result, one would expect that Tri Fit, and others within this industry, are naturally more positive places to work. The collection of stories shared describing the culture of leadership at this organization cannot be explained as a simple by-product of its industry, however. Indeed, stories that drew comparisons of Tri Fit with other companies in this industry clearly revealed their beliefs that Tri Fit is the best company in the industry. The co-owners have developed and nurtured a culture of positive relational connection that has proven to be highly positive for staff and has rewarded the organization with employees who are committed, loyal, energized and creative.

This has translated to a host of organizational benefits including more productive employees and clients whose expectations are exceeded. This speaks to a clear return on positivity.

Amidst the glow of the positive, however, a shadow system has been described. As observed with other organizations, this can undermine the good that has been developed over the years and necessitates interventions aimed at opening up the staff to tough conversations.

The culture at Tri Fit has supported the development of relational leaders over the years yielding four who would be defined as relationally agile, and a further six that have been repeatedly acknowledged as strong relational practitioners. Relative to other organizations with whom I have had experience, this is an extraordinary testament to the value of relational development. It is this relational strength that has served to keep a geographically dispersed workforce connected, and the same strength that must be accessed to address the shadow system.

## **Chapter VI: Discussion**

Throughout modern history, social systems of all design and complexity have sought to advance their objectives in the midst of change. With the introduction of technology in contemporary times, those changes have been accelerated. Because the financial and human implications of successfully navigating such change are significant, identifying those qualities of leadership that may enable greater success during times of change stands as a noteworthy pursuit. This has been the driving motivation of this research project. The data that has emerged as a consequence will be examined through the lens of those relevant empirical contributions that have come before. Attention will first be paid to evidence of those individualistic relational leadership constructs that were previously described including transformational, authentic, aesthetic, and servant leadership as well as stewardship and emotional and social intelligence. The analysis will then focus upon the dyadic perspectives of leadership described in leader-member exchange theory. This will provide the necessary grounding to introduce a new theoretical proposition that is defined by a triadic experience of leadership. Finally, how that triadic expression is animated within Tri Fit and its impacts on the organization will then be explored.

### **A Culture of Relational Leadership Practices**

Examination of the nine emergent storylines revealed three dominant cultural themes experienced by the employees of Tri Fit, the most prominent being that of relational leadership and connection. From the roots of relational practice, Miller (1976) proposed a new model of counseling and development focused on individuation, separation and autonomy. While working with women and marginalized cultural groups, she found development and healing occurred when people are in community, within mutually empathic relationships. Miller named

this relational theory of human growth and development, *growth-in-connection*, the central tenet being that growth is not so much a process of separating and individuating oneself from others, but something that occurs in a context of relational connection with and to other people. In the years that followed, she and her colleagues at The Stone Centre built upon this model ultimately leading to the description of relational cultural theory (RCT) which describes how individual growth occurs through relationships offering connection, mutuality, empowerment and authenticity (Jordan et al., 2004; Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Clearly, the co-presidents at Tri Fit are disciples of this work. Over the years, they have consciously designed a culture of inclusiveness, connection, openness and respect, where in the words of one of the presidents, they have created “a culture where we treat our team the way we want to be treated.” Indeed, as one of the co-presidents volunteered, “when a birthday announcement is sent out, we will always send that person a personal note, “How’s so and so? Are they off to university next year? How’s your daughter? What are they doing?” One might assume such probing to be the privileged domain of the senior executive who use their position of power to intrude upon the lives of their followers. This is not the case, however, as is evident in the stories shared. Rather, the senior leadership are welcomed participants in this mutual exchange, sharing personal anecdotes with the staff, as those on equal footing do also. This demonstration of connection and familiarity is but one small example of the systemic practices that have been implemented to honor each employee and to demonstrate authentic dialogue, deep connection, and accessibility to the senior leadership. Another example is found in the seating arrangements at each quarterly staff meeting where the organizer intentionally creates the seating plan to ensure the leadership is seated with different people at each meeting to facilitate interaction and relational development. Going above and beyond, welcoming new

members to the team and recognizing milestone anniversaries with the company are additional occasions used to make, what one storyteller called, “a conscious connection.”

Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) recounted a similar experience to that at Tri Fit, while describing their experience of relational leadership at the Transportation Security Administration, or TSA. Here the authors shared how being in relation was embedded in the everyday interactions and discussions of participants in a non-hierarchical, distributed manner. Their case study design enabled Cunliffe and Eriksen to gain a perspective of this interaction that revealed the relationships to be grounded in trust, empathy and empowerment. The Tri Fit experience of relational leadership would also be consistent with that described by Uhl-Bien (2006) who intimated that this approach to leading is characterized by the way in which people make decisions, how they act and how they present themselves to one another. In so far as such interactions focus on the growth and development of followers within a web of inter-connectivity, Fletcher (1998, 1999) would argue that this leadership is clearly relational. Within a large action research project with a group of female engineers, Fletcher (1999) described the relationships she examined as having empathy, vulnerability, emotional expression, an interest in the development of others and a clear expectation that the relationship would provide growth opportunities for all involved in the relationship. These qualities were found to be key to developing relationally within Fletcher’s (1999) experience. This has been found to be true at Tri Fit as well. One senior leader, for example, shared the following about her team, “you find out what they’re doing, and what they’re passionate about, and when you know their passion, then that creates the relationship-building opportunity...and a lot of them do share a lot of things with us, and with their manager, and look for support, both in their professional role, and in their personal life.”

Kouzes and Posner (2003a) propose, “success in leading is wholly dependent upon the capacity to build and sustain those human relationships that enable people to get extraordinary things done on a regular basis” (pp. 82-83). At Tri Fit, evidence of their adeptness in this regard is observed from the very beginning of the employment relationship. Each team member is made to feel welcome as part of a warm, supportive community, much like that of a family. Indeed, the metaphor most commonly used in stories to describe the culture is that of family. The senior leadership encourage this feeling of close connection through their accessibility, a hallmark of their leadership which they exemplify in many ways including through personal welcoming letters, performance acknowledgements, site visits, and luncheons. As Skinny Cow shared in speaking of the senior leadership, “they took time out of their schedules to come and visit you, or to call you to introduce themselves, and it was never meant to feel like a hierarchy, or like a person in a position of seniority. It was more, welcome to our family.” Jordan, too, intimated that “when I started working for Tri Fit it was like all of a sudden I had this whole group of people that very quickly felt like a family.” Lentil, Marty, Pumpkin Spice and many others shared similar experiences, often endowing team members with familial roles, such as that of mother, aunt or grandmother. Harmony described one team member as the “den mom” due to her intimate knowledge of everyone, whereas Wonder Woman shared that when she was in the presence of one specific leader, that “I felt most comfortable because she would just remind me of hanging out with my mom.”

The descriptors used from story to story almost universally included reference to such positive qualities of openness, respect, care, compassion and investment in the growth and development of each employee. Embellishing the relational connection, the co-presidents write and recite, at quarterly staff meetings, bespoke poems that honor tenure milestones. Although



considerable effort is invested in such activities, the impact has made legends out of the authors. In Becky's words, "they actually wrote out a poem displaying how much they appreciated them and what they had done while they were here" and Broccoli noted "they do an impeccable job of putting together poems and reading them out as part of the recognition of the individual's success in working with the company...it reflects the individual so you know that they took the time to extract that information about them and part of it has a lot to do with the relationship that they have developed with that individual as well. I have my own and treasure it." Clearly, demonstrating such an interest in their people has created a strong sense of connection with the senior leadership. If I allow myself to reflect upon my own experiences of leadership and the divisiveness that clearly existed between the leadership and staff as a result of feelings of disconnection, I can relate to how the opposite would be warmly received. Nowhere is this witnessed more than at the quarterly staff meetings where, without exception, storytellers shared the profound level of physical and emotional connection exhibited by leaders in the organization, especially the co-founders. Kermit put it this way, "they're always trying on a personal level to get to know everyone...creating those relationships beyond just a work colleague...they are genuinely interested in building those relationships beyond just work-related conversations." Skinny Cow reverberated these sentiments on creating connection in the following words, "they want to be chatting with you; it doesn't come across as, okay we've been chatting for two minutes, let's move on to the next person, kind of thing. They would bring more people into the conversation rather than turn their back on you." Haley and Luke offered a deeper perspective on this theme, adding the observation that some of the leaders also exhibited an ability to respond to each person where that individual is in the moment. Luke put it this way, "they adapt to all people. Like I said, everyone has a different story. So with

someone, you know, going through one thing, and someone going through another, someone's talking about work or whatever...they create relationships easily.”

As effective as the senior leadership are at creating connection, it is not their sole purview. Indeed, it has been observed throughout the organization. Jordan, Tom and Joanne each commented how connection was systemic to the organization. In Tom's words, “we're not together that much, and yet that feeling of connection is strong.” Also contributing to the culture of connection is the buddy or mentor system that enables new recruits to be partnered with a more senior staff person in a similar role to aid in the acclimation process. Harmony described this structure as one that enables, “an immediate opportunity to create connection.” As a newer member of the team, Bionic Woman spoke to the feeling of connection she had with her mentor, as did Kermit who shared, “so in your first year of employment they set you up with somebody who is close by and kind of acts like your mentor because we're all so dispersed, so it's nice. That was a huge support for me coming in, having her.” The organization has established processes and structures to enable connections to form and to develop from the moment an employee joins the company and throughout his/her tenure. This has translated into deep emotional bonds and trusting relationships, akin to those described by Holloway (2006).

Creating such bonds necessitates a level of self-awareness, self-motivation, empathy and relationship building capacity, qualities referred to as emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Distinct from one's intellectual prowess or cognitive abilities, emotional intelligence refers to our aptitude to interpret or understand emotional cues and to act in socially appropriate ways to those cues. With the help of more recent neuroscience research, a description of social skills that have been built upon specific neural pathways has been characterized (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008). These skills are described as social intelligence and refer to an individual's

ability to develop positive relationships with those whose support is necessary to accomplish specific goals. Stories of relational encounters that illustrate these qualities have been abundant within Tri Fit.

For example, during the interview process, storytellers would often expand upon the depth of connection they experienced with other team members within the organization. Mary shared her perspective in this way, “She gets me. Is that going to sound weird? Somehow I feel like when I deal and work with her, she really gets me.” Tom would concur. He shared his feelings in the following quotation, “It’s a unique bond...these are people who I talk to on a very regular basis, and they know a lot of the details of my life, and I know a lot of the details of theirs.” Murdle explained the relationship as being one of profound intimacy, “we kind of know how each other thinks. We know how each other is going to respond, that level of intimacy.” Others searched for the appropriate words to describe their sentiments using terms such as ‘energy’, ‘conscious connection’ or ‘resonance’. When such qualities were volunteered, the work of Daniel Siegel (1999) on attachment theory was introduced into the conversation along with his corresponding description of a tight relationship where each person could ‘feel felt’ by the other. Those storytellers who shared their own descriptions of this relational resonance could each relate to the sense of ‘feeling felt’. Clearly, unique bonds amongst those in Tri Fit have formed and had an opportunity to flourish. Through this culture of connection several well-engrained relational leadership constructs including those of service, authenticity, inspiration, and transformative development emerge.

**Individualistic expressions of relational leadership.** Burns (1978) described transformational leadership as a structure of relational practice whereby the leader seeks to transform or to develop the follower to realize his/her greatest expression of self. Sinclair

(2007) elaborated that fundamental to this practice was an implicit expectation of trust and a moral imperative to develop future leaders as ethical stewards. Ample evidence of this practice within the leadership of Tri Fit is found. Wonder Woman, for example, shared her own experiences in that regard, “everyone really connects...meetings every two or three months where there is an opportunity to reconnect and to share ideas. They always provide opportunities for us to be better people, exposure to new and better things, lots of education.” Mary concurred, offering that the sense of connection “brings out the employee’s perception of his/her best self.” And Luke remarked, “they make us feel good. They make us better people.” Relational connection is deeply entrenched within the culture of Tri Fit, and as is evident from the words of Mary, Luke and Wonder Woman, this environment invites each member to develop themselves as well as to encourage the same in their colleagues, all in service of realizing what Roberts (2007) refers to as their ‘best self’.

Miller’s (1976) theory of *growth in connection* where the individual’s growth is fostered, not through acts of isolation or individuation but rather through the mutuality of connection with others, is abundantly animated within this collection of experiences. Northouse (2007) would suggest that it is from this connectedness that motivation and commitment are fostered. In interviews with 426 leaders and followers, Walumbwa and Harnell (2011) observed precisely this. Transformational leadership prepares the groundwork for trust and commitment to germinate in the relationship and to permit the follower’s sense of self-identity to be fully realized. Similar findings were declared by Ospina and Foldy (2010) in their work examining transformational leadership qualities within 38 organizations. Here, the creation of inter-dependencies which facilitate trust, communication and success was found as a product of this construct of relational practice. Consistently, the empirical literature describes how quality,

trusting connections within the workplace motivate followers to be more committed and successful. For example, in a quantitative study involving 235 part time students, Carmeli, Brueller, and Dutton (2009) observed such high quality connection to be important for advancing learning and for feeling safe to take risks, to speak up and to discuss issues openly. It is of little surprise then to observe that exceeding expectations would prove such a recurring theme in story at Tri Fit. In this regard, Lentil described one senior leader of the organization in this way, “So she does things like that, like she goes above and beyond. She keeps in touch with people after they’ve left. She takes them out for dinner after they’ve left. So the relationship she has with people isn’t just –if you work for Tri Fit, I’ll enter into this type of relationship with you. She still cares about them afterwards.” And when describing the management team, Wonder Woman had this to say, “they have always acted as leaders-always going above and beyond.” Kermit, Pumpkin Spice and Skinny Cow each voiced their own evidence of this type of commitment as well.

Fundamental to building this commitment, however, is trust, the absence of which poisons the connection and disables productivity. Within the relational system, there is an expectation that individuals will present themselves to the relationship in a manner consistent with their values. This is a core tenet of authentic leadership. As a construct of relational leadership, authenticity is described as the owning of one’s personal experiences, whether they be thoughts, emotions, needs, preferences or beliefs, and behaving in accordance with one’s true self (Walumbwa et al., 2008). In practice, the authentic leader, “demonstrates a passion for their purpose, practice their values consistently and lead with their hearts as well as their heads. They establish long-term, meaningful relationships and have the self-discipline to get results. They know who they are” (George et al., 2007, p. 130. When described within the workplace,

authentic leadership assumes descriptions such as ‘walking the talk’ ‘being genuine’ or ‘practicing what they preach’. This has surfaced repeatedly within Tri Fit. Luke , for example, intimated, “ I believe that all of the leadership team live and breathe what the company represents in the way that they live, the way that they direct us as staff. They’ve kind of taught us to be people that, you know, talk the talk and walk the walk.” Many others shared similar observations. Perhaps the voice of authentic leadership was most strongly voiced by Sweet Pea in her description of Harmony’s response to a toxic client, “at some point when your staff is being affected by this person, you have to stand your ground and protect your staff and that’s what she did...So, she wanted me to feel safe, and she wanted me to feel good about going into work. And so, she made me feel like that was more important than anything else.” As I hear these words, I reflect on my own, very different experiences within the workplace where a leader’s actions were often contrary to the personas they professed, and a sense of abandonment prevailed. I think of the resulting lack of trust, and how productivity was compromised when followers dismissed the notion of ‘going the extra mile’. The culture at Tri Fit stands in stark contrast, which presents to me an image of enormous possibility.

Whether it be making critical leadership decisions to ensure company values are upheld, participating in charitable events or being actively involved in company games or exercise events, the leadership are resoundingly viewed as being authentic, genuine and trusting. But what of the impact of authentic leadership to those being led? When recounting his specific experiences of genuine leader engagement, Blake volunteered that “it makes you feel good.” Adding her own perspective, Kaitlyn shared her pride in the fact that “being authentic, as demonstrated by the leadership doing as they say they are going to do, is like Tri Fit’s philosophy” while Marty suggested that demonstrations of authentic leadership to him “served

as a motivation tool” where he was prepared to do his very best for such leaders. When probed to explain this further, Marty offered that he likely would be more creative and productive in his workplace. Many intimated similar sentiments with respect to general feelings of positivity emanating from the leadership culture at Tri Fit. Such findings support that recently published by Rego, Sousa, Marques, and Pina e Cinha (2014) who found within a group of 203 followers that authentic leadership is predictive of increased creativity, and by extension, organizational performance.

A further relational construct observed at Tri Fit was that of servant leadership. Central to this theme is the belief that the leader within oneself may be the instrument of change if they so choose to indenture themselves to the challenge at hand. “If a flaw in the world is to be remedied, to the servant, the process of change starts in here, in the servant, not out there” (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 132.) Servant leaders see their role as one designed to facilitate the greatness of others by putting themselves at their disposal. For example, by addressing the issues faced by one’s staff, such as technology challenges, inter-personal conflicts, scheduling problems or knowledge gaps, the leader enables his/her followers to share their best selves as they focus their attention on the work at hand. The leader has been of service to the needs of his/her followers. Observing such practice in both the private and public sectors in 116 interviews, Han et al. (2009) characterized servant leaders as being dutiful, ethical, moral, putting others first, leading relationally and exhibiting humility. Perhaps not surprising, these qualities were replayed in the stories shared at Tri Fit where service to clients, colleagues and to the broader communities in which they work and live are dominant themes.

Similarly, stewardship, as described by Hernandez (2008) represents the “attitudes and behaviors that place the long term best interest of a group ahead of personal goals that serve an

individual's self interests." Serving as an organizational steward, the leader engenders individual and institutional trust and motivates followers to act with moral courage in service of the organization. Again, experiences of those within Tri Fit speak to evidence of stewardship emerging within the system. In Marty's recount of a toxic client that was disrespectful and demeaning to himself and to others before him, he explained how a specific leader of the company assessed the situation and acted, "they just cancelled the contract and they backed me up...they stood up for the values of the company and they put the ethics of the company in front of whatever." In this example, the leader served as a company steward, holding the best interests of the company ahead of monetary gain. In so doing, they exemplified to staff the moral compass of the organization and in the process built trust and commitment. Through my eyes, this story reiterates an organizational tradition of connection, enabled through adept relational practice.

A further construct that has teased out evidence of this culture of relational practice is aesthetic leadership which speaks to the way in which aesthetic events, such as stories, images, music or other sensory experiences are used to interpret or inform organizational life. For example, when visionary or charismatic leaders share their dreams for the future of the organization, and in so doing create images of possibility in the minds of their followers, a connection is forged between the leader and follower. These stories are future-focused and excite within us the possibility of what is achievable. As a result, they compel the follower to 'stay the course' in fulfillment of the vision. The "follower's work is often more meaningful and they are instilled with a greater sense of purpose as a result" (Hansen et al., 2007, p. 549). Our emotional response to such visions may include joy, laughter, fear, excitement or pride, each of which are aesthetic experiences and inform the measure of trust and connection we



subsequently impart to our leaders. The aesthetic leader inspires us to perform at our best. Clearly, this resonates within the Tri Fit organization. A quick glance at the word cloud (Figure 4.2) depicting the culture of leadership from the words of the storytellers reveals ‘inspiring’ to be one of the most prominent. It was a word Joanne used on a few occasions to describe leaders whose qualities instilled within her a sense of awe and excitement, such as described in this phrase, “She’s a manager that I find to be very inspiring and exciting...and I see like that’s kind of where I want to go, sort of like how do I get to where she is.” Becky, too, was inspired by the example of senior leaders, by their authenticity, commitment to the broader community and their vision for the growth of the company, “I find their personality very inspirational, admirable...always putting a lot of energy into opening up more businesses across North America.”

Thinking on inspiring leaders within the crucible of my own experience, the emotions to which I alluded earlier, return. Anxiously, I search my memory for recollections of being inspired by a leader. There were some, and they were the exceptions. Interestingly, when I think of those leaders, I am calm, holding positive feelings of nostalgia. More often than not, my experiences were left wanting for leaders who could build connection and trust and move their followers with messages of hope and purpose. This evokes feelings of personal disappointment and regret. Yet, juxtaposed to these emotions, are ones of hope and possibility that others may benefit from the leadership wisdom of those at Tri Fit. I find it is more than the qualities of specific leaders that is responsible for a culture that is inspired. Rather, it is a general sense rising from within the company, from its culture. Being inspired, through membership in this unique organizational culture, added to an underlying feeling of connection and trust with the leadership, coupled with a desire to exceed expectations in pursuit of their best.

### **Dyadic Perspectives of Leadership Within Tri Fit**

Beyond those constructs describing specific leader qualities is the dyadic perspective of leadership, or that described by the voices of both the leader and follower. Referred to as Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, this construct of relational leadership emerged to explore the differences that may exist between the leader and follower (Northouse, 2007). The LMX relationship is one built through exchanges between both leader and follower wherein each evaluate the other's respective ability, benevolence and integrity (Brower et al., 2000). Leaders and followers qualify the qualities of those exchanges as being high LMX, characterized by high productivity, performance and connection or low LMX where only the basic requirements of the employment contract are met (Brower et al., 2000). LMX represents a dyadic approach where leadership effectiveness involves high quality relationships between leaders and followers. Chang and Johnson (2010) note that LMX describes how leaders and followers develop successful relationships and how these relationships lead to favorable individual and organizational outcomes. The exchange in the relationship speaks to the consequences of the relationship quality with a high LMX characterized by high trust, respect and loyalty serving the follower with greater scope of work and independence, and low LMX, evolving from disrespect, unfair or rude treatment and overwork revealing less loyalty and minimal standards of performance. Chang and Johnson (2010) speak to the clear benefit of high LMX as "it is thought to impact job performance because employees who perceive a high LMX try to 'pay back' their leaders by engaging in effective task and citizenship behaviors while their leaders place a premium on the relationships they form with their followers" (p. 797). This mutuality of relational experience is reflected consistently within the culture of leadership at Tri Fit. Each storyteller shared his/her experience with leaders and staff alike as being

characterized by trust, respect and connection. Obviously, some of the relationships were qualified by greater degrees of connection, and on a few occasions, conflicts or disappointments that may have arisen over time between a leader and follower may have strained a connection resulting in a momentary reduction in the quality of the exchange relationship. Due to the strength of the relationship; however, such challenges or ‘ruptures’ are readily repaired. A low LMX is therefore at best a transient phenomenon.

As this relationship deepens, trust builds. Scandura and Pellegrini (2008) explain that this exchange occurs when leaders extend the scope and type of work to their followers. In so doing, they assume greater risk. When followers respond to this demonstration of trust by rising to the occasion and completing the work to the best of their ability, the leader is rewarded. Mutual trust is built as a consequence. Examining both leader and follower perspectives on trust, Werbel and Henriques (2009) offer additional evidence that the leader is trusting if the follower completes tasks as expected, and the follower reciprocates with trust when interactional justice, or the judicious assignment of work occurs. Jahansoozi (2006) noted from a phenomenological study that it is only with the presence of trust that productive, positive workplaces can emerge.

Within Tri Fit, Tom succinctly addressed this phenomenon in the following remarks, “if you can see the people that you trust and let them run with something, they will usually come back with something pretty good rather than if you don’t trust them and you make them feel like they are not competent, then they usually show you that they are not and they don’t really step up.” When describing trust in her relationship with others, Becky noted, “I definitely feel it is important...it’s more of a concern if it’s not there.” Joanne would agree, suggesting it to be a given in her relationships with others at Tri Fit, “I feel like everybody is really open with each

other and willing to share things...I haven't really considered not trusting somebody." Speaking of his manager, Luke described, "you know she was giving me a chance, you know, to show that initiative and she trusts me in that sense, that I can do something on my own as well as working within a team...they trust me to even represent the company as a public speaker." Further demonstration of the trust shared in the leader-member exchange at Tri Fit was evident in Molly's words, "So we're at home and if we're not getting that work done, I don't know...I would assume it would catch up to you, so I think there has to be that trust that the work is being done, the work is done correctly, that we're not messing up our relationships. There's a huge amount of trust given and taken with all the managers." A noteworthy caution to Tri Fit is the recognition by Scandura and Pellegrini (2008) that in addition to creating trust in the exchange, the leader's responsibility extends to maintaining the trust as they observed that even in high quality exchange relationships, increased workload and stress could undermine otherwise trusting relationships. This does not seem to be an issue at Tri Fit however, as it did not appear within the stories shared.

Commitment represents a further relational dynamic central to high performing organizations such as Tri Fit. Described as the sacrifices made to stay within the relationship, commitment was observed in a quantitative study of 230 business relationships to be the product of trust-filled connections (Hadjikhani & Thilenius, 2005). In the same year, Lee (2005) published quantitative results with 201 professionals describing a positive association between high quality connections and commitment to the organization. These empirical findings are supported by this research as well. Kaitlynn, for example, voiced her feelings with respect to the relational connections and resulting organizational commitment, "Because you feel connected you don't want to let somebody down, so I think it makes you do your best. They're

counting on me...I think the stronger the connections are with each other, the greater the whole organization is together.” Broccoli, too, acknowledged that, “the opportunity to develop close connections with the leadership of the organization is very motivating for me.” Such evidence supports the logic that with a foundation of trust in the relationship, a close connection can be established that has the potential to instill greater organizational commitment and sustained benefit.

Along with trust and commitment, the climate of the relationship plays a similar role in forging connection and advancing organizational objectives. Described by Ford and Seers (2006) as the performance, positivity and team spirit emanating from the relationship, and measured using scales for senior management effectiveness, supportive management, contribution, recognition and challenge, climate is positively associated with the quality of the relationship. In this regard, the climate at Tri Fit is, without question, positive and high performance with a measure of fun. When asked to describe the culture of leadership at Tri Fit, Pumpkin Spice declared that it was fun. “Fun really stands out for me because we do a lot of fun things. It’s one big fitness family that has a lot of fun.” With an annual Adventure Day for all staff, and planned fitness and recreational opportunities throughout the year, it is understandable why this descriptor would be used.

Additional relational constructs that have measured impact on the quality of the relationship due to their history for promoting a variety of favorable behaviors and career outcomes include mentoring and coaching. Indeed, through an examination of 137 dyads, Lapierre et al. (2012) revealed that leaders with a higher sense of self were more apt to mentor followers, especially if those followers were high performers. This is consistent with our understanding of the exchange in the relationship as high performers would, by virtue of their

performance, deliver value to the leader, and perhaps enhance that leader's sense of self.

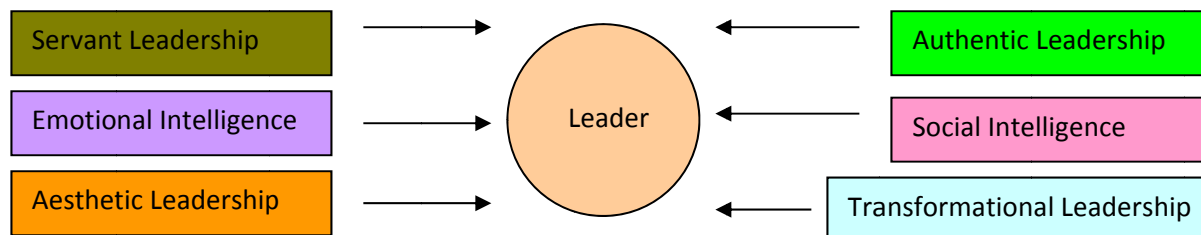
Leaders would, by extension, be prepared to develop their follower through mentoring. At Tri Fit, mentoring is a universal phenomenon. Each new hire is partnered with a more experienced colleague, who serves as a mentor or guide to the new hire throughout the new hire's first year on the job. Beyond this, examples of leaders mentoring their followers throughout the organization are commonplace. Coaching is a more infrequent occurrence, however. Given that in a case study design, Ann and Carr (2011) demonstrated the effectiveness of coaching within the relationship, this represents a development path for consideration within Tri Fit.

In summary, leader-member exchange, LMX, theory takes a dyadic approach to examining the quality of the relationship. Relative to those relational constructs previously described which represent a collection of approaches the leader may use to respond to follower's needs, the LMX represents an advanced perspective on relational leadership, bringing the voice of the follower to the equation. Here, the iterative actions and reactions of both leader and follower are examined in the context of the relationship. The relational impact of trust, commitment, climate and mentoring have each been explored and found within the culture of leadership at Tri Fit. Beyond LMX, however, there exists within Tri Fit evidence of an evolved construct of relational leadership within a subset of its leaders. In this case, a triadic expression of leadership is observed, with attention given to each of three entities: the leader, the follower and the relationship. I am referring to this triadic expression of leadership as *relational agility*. It is important to note that relational agility is clearly distinguished from the notion of triads proposed by Offstein, Madhavan, and Gnyawali, (2006). In this case, the authors offered an evolved perspective on LMX theory suggesting an exchange relationship between three distinct individuals where fulfillment of collaborative or competitive motives is central to the exchange.

Relational agility also differs from the triadic reciprocal relationships previously described in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997; Uhl Bien, 2006) wherein the social regulatory impacts of reciprocal interactions of self, environment and past behaviors are examined. In this case, triadic reciprocal relationships would describe the psychosocial processes entertained by relationally agile leaders in their approach to social interactions. What follows is a depiction of relational agility as a distinct triadic process relative to the individualistic and dyadic processes previously described.

### **Triadic Expressions of Leadership**

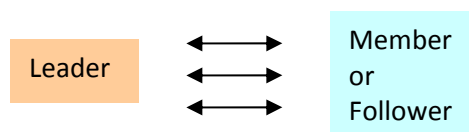
In service of presenting a clear picture of relational leadership, several of its constructs have been described. Each focuses on the relatedness, humanness and connectivity of people in community, and describes ways in which the leader may choose to engage his/her followers. A leader may animate a transformational style and in so doing develop followers into moral agents who are prepared and equipped to exceed expectations. Alternatively, acting in service to others may be the chosen expression of leadership, or displaying emotional or social intelligence. The leader may also seek to inspire his/her followers by using aesthetic practices, such as stories, to invoke the appropriate imagery. Each expression is not mutually exclusive in that the leader may relate to one follower using a particular approach, then use another within a second relationship. As depicted in Figure 6.1, these constructs are, in effect, tools available to the leader, which can be learned, and used as necessary.



*Figure 6.1.* Relational tools available to the leader.

From this perspective, their expression is focused unilaterally on the leader, defining the leader's relational presence in the process.

Within the context of leader-member exchange theory, an iterative expression of these relational tools is described wherein both the leader and follower respond in accordance to one another's prompts. Depicted in Figure 6.2, both leader and follower perspectives are heard, but again they are focused on individual actions and responses.



*Figure 6.2.* Leader-member exchange.

In effect, in the exchange, if the leader offers a greater scope to my work, then I will likely feel trusted and be pleased, and will do that additional work well in the hopes of acknowledgement and still greater opportunity. Leader-member exchange represents a dyadic interaction of individualistic perspectives. It is all about 'me', whether 'me' is the leader, or 'me' is the follower.



Standing in contrast is a triadic approach to relational practice called relational agility, represented by three distinct entities: the leader, the follower and the relationship. As depicted in Figure 6.3, relational agility is distinct from those approaches proffered previously as it insists that the leader and follower are mutually engaged in the growth and development of their relationship, for the sake of the relationship, which in turn will serve the higher purposes of the organization.



*Figure 6.3.* A rudimentary depiction of relational agility.

Such higher purposes may include the development of the follower, organizational resiliency, sustainable business, leader development, succession capacity or establishing and nurturing a culture rooted in humane practices. First characterized through case study (McLean, 2011),

relational agility describes the manner in which a leader responds to the resonance or energy that exists in the relationship between people in what I refer to as the relational interstitial space. Why the term relational agility? Simply because agility conjures impressions of graceful movement by someone practiced in their art. It suggests a fluidity of motion, and conjures the image of a swift and adaptive relational practitioner who responds uniquely to each relational encounter as is necessary in the moment. This is precisely the art of the relationally agile leader.

Relational agility is the intentional act of interpreting and responding to the energy between oneself and each follower within one's community of practice in a way that honors where the follower is in the specific moment in time. As human beings, we each bring a diversity of emotion and thought to our work representing the complexity of each of our personal and professional lives. It is therefore understandable that Anderson (2012) would view this social construction as immensely complex, even chaotic. It is in this place that the relationally agile leader truly thrives as they honor each follower by tuning into the follower's energy in the moment, without judgment. They hold the relationship where it needs to be, co-creating with the follower the future direction of the relationship. The relationally agile leader invites each follower to similarly develop the relationship with each encounter. In so doing, relational growth and development, trust, positivity and connectedness is fostered.

Due to the dynamic context in which the relationship is held, the relationally agile leader would be as apt to lead the follower through positive experiences as she is in leading them through negative ones. Regardless of the content or nature of the discussion, the relationship is held distinct from the subject of the conversation. Even if a disciplinary conversation is necessary, or a corporate downsizing initiative has necessitated the follower be dismissed from employment, the relationally agile leader is able to hold the relationship with the follower with

reverence. The relationship is regarded as distinct from the topic of conversation. As such, the conversation can be held without repercussion to the relationship. This was particularly evident with Lentil as she shared a story of a poor hiring decision that resulted in the need to dismiss someone, “I remember I had to let someone go, but I believe the way I handled the situation and made it as positive as I could allowed both of us to understand it was best. The employee, now ex-employee, came back to me and actually thanked me for letting her go and saying what a valuable conversation we had had. We actually stayed in touch for quite a while afterwards. So, you know, we try and have those kinds of conversations with people.” Harmony, too, offered her experience, “There aren’t a ton of negative things or conversations that have to happen but even if there are one or two, it’s one or two that you wish you didn’t have to do. For me personally, I show up. This is who’s sitting here, that’s who you get all the time. I really pride myself on being genuine and me at work is the same as me at home. I hope for the best. I do my homework and I’m prepared when I go into it, but I just try and be honest and genuine. I think for the most part staff appreciate it.” Organizational complexity assures us that difficult conversations will always be necessary. The relationally agile leader ensures these conversations are about the subject at hand, not about the follower or about the relationship. Holding that distinction, and drawing on the relational capital that has been amassed in the relationship over time enables the conversation to be had and the relationship to be preserved.

An animation of this process has been produced to describe relational agility graphically.

To view, please click on the hyperlink below: <http://youtu.be/PfmtiktSLoA>

**Organizational implications of relational agility.** To determine the impact of relational agility at an organizational level, one must assess whether creating positive, trusting relationships has an enduring benefit to the broader system. Fredrickson and Losada (2005)

would strongly argue that it does. In their research examining positive affect, or the range of positive human emotions such as gratefulness, appreciation and joy, they found that when the ratio of positive affect to negative, otherwise known as the positivity ratio, passes a threshold, the individual enters a state of flourishing. As one might presume, flourishing is without question a good thing resulting in improved attention, creativity, intuition and documented improvement in certain physiologic functions as well (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005).

Flourishing is associated with optimal human functioning and therefore impacts individual performance. In earlier work, Fredrickson (1998) identified that shared positive emotions “create enduring alliances, friendships or family bonds...social relationships that become resources that individuals can draw upon later in times of need” (p.311). Quinn (2007) holds that people discern whether their relationships are positive based upon the positive affect, or energy they feel as they relate with those people. Being perceptive to this energy, the relationally agile leader builds upon these feelings. Within the workplace, as the relationally agile leader develops relationships with each follower, trust emerges. Dutton and Heaphy (2003) report that when people experience such energy in engagement with their colleagues, they report feelings of vitality and aliveness, a heightened sense of self-regard and a greater sense of mutual connection and engagement. It is this perception of positivity and close relational connection with colleagues that affirms our sense of self. Roberts (2007) confirms that affirmations in one’s work and positive relationships enable us to formulate a positive self-identity. The sum of positive affect, high quality connections and positive sense of self can facilitate a state of heightened creativity, awareness and performance, a state Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes as flow.

Through adept intuition and awareness, the relationally agile leader fosters positive relationships that flourish into high quality connections. The resulting productivity, creativity, and performance gains can be realized by the organization in the moment, or as Fredrickson (1998) proposes, can be banked and withdrawn at a later date when needed. As organizations often find themselves bereft of resources when organizational change initiatives are most urgently needed, having the capacity at such times to withdraw these resources would be of great advantage to the organization.

**Relational agility at Tri Fit.** Contemplating the qualities exhibited by the relationally agile leader, evidence was sought for its presence within Tri Fit, and for elucidation as to how it shows up within this organization. The stories reveal that relational leadership qualities of one description or another are ubiquitous within Tri Fit, generating positivity, high quality connection, trust and the development of self-identity throughout the organization. Further, several storytellers could relate to experiences of relational resonance or the energy existing in the interstitial space between leader and follower, that same energy described by Siegel (1999) as a sense of ‘feeling felt’. Storytellers were succinct in identifying that group of leaders within the organization that were qualified as such. This group included Skinny Cow, Murdle, Pumpkin Spice, Sweet Pea, Tom, Molly, Wanda, Jane, Harmony and Lentil.

Examining the relational descriptors further, adaptability emerged as a key differentiator for a small cohort of leaders, specifically in reference to the manner in which the leader responded to others. This quality was described well by Tom when reciting a personal story, “So she is very good at knowing how to manage different people and to give them what they are looking for...she’s always several chess moves ahead...she is taking us and our personalities into consideration.” Likewise, Haley shared a story describing the manner in which her

protagonist responded to the needs of others, “this ability to transfer from different skills with ease and with coordination is amazing. So, I can see her as doing that and she reads different people in her own way and connects with them in a way that they feel comfortable.” These remarks speak to the way in which the leader meets each follower uniquely in the moment, being intuitive to the energy of the relationship, and responding in kind.

To distinguish whether one was a highly relational leader using any one of the individualistic styles described previously, or a leader who demonstrated relational agility, necessitated further probing into the nature and intention of each relational connection. Consistently, four individuals were noted for the manner in which they engaged others creating deep, trusting connections and for seemingly doing so for the sake of the relationship itself. Each of those who described a leader in this manner was asked whether they perceived the type of relational connection as genuine. All responded overwhelmingly positive. They were also asked whether, when experiencing one of these leaders in relationship with themselves, they believed the leader was intentional about developing the relationship. Did they as followers feel the leader was seeking, in the moment, to co-create with them how the relationship would develop? On this, Phyllis offered the following, “It’s very easy for her to just engage people and start them talking, bringing out something in them and then have them open up a little bit and connect. I think she enjoys meeting people and knowing about them, establishing those connections...just developing the relationship is something she enjoys and something that does come very natural to her. I think that it may be intentional.” Jordan had this to say, “It’s something that when they come to these events that they feel this strong urge, desire, to just connect with people and that they’re legitimately interested in that other person—the person that they’re speaking to.” Agreeing that the behavior he observed was intentional, Tom added, “it

makes people feel important, so they are probably making a concerted effort, but I don't think it's for the wrong reasons and it does come through as genuine." And Murdle had this to say, "I think absolutely there's intention...I think it's not only just a great way to be, it's a positive thing...she's just a great person, she sincerely is interested." "They adapt to all people," says Luke. "Like I said, everyone has a different story. So with someone, you know, going through one thing, and someone going through another, someone's talking about work or whatever, and they adapt to people where they are in the moment. They are genuine, and yes, I believe intentional about it."

Of course, the intentionality of a leader's behavior from the perspective of a follower is mere conjecture. It cannot be assigned to a leader with certainty without the leader's admission. Consequently, those who had been singled out as relationally agile were asked for their own perceptions of their leadership, including whether the specific manner in which they engaged followers was intentional. Each acknowledged that the act of connecting with others was in service of developing relationships and was, in their minds, something done intentionally. In Figure 6.4, a network map of relational agility is presented, clearly identifying in red ovals, the four individuals who have been attributed by each other and their peers with qualities that describe relational agility. They include Murdle, Pumpkin Spice, Harmony and Lentil. Red lines represent stories of relational agility. Their points of origins reveal the author of the story, and the individual to whom the line points, the story protagonist. In a similar fashion, green lines speak to stories of relational leadership and identify a further group of highly relational leaders, as designated by the smaller green ovals including Skinny Cow, Sweet Pea, Wanda, Jane, Molly and Tom.

## Network Map of Relational Agility

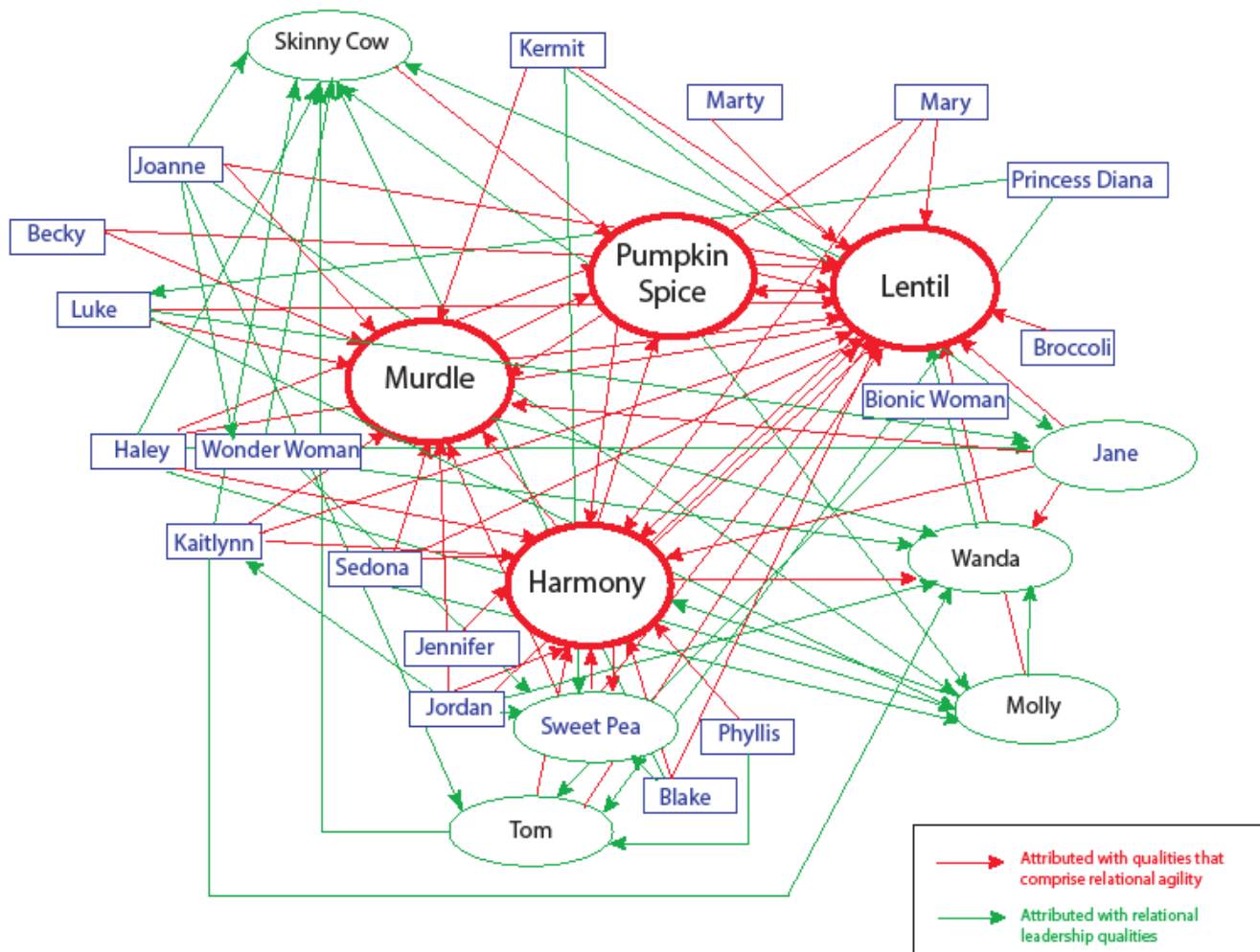


Figure 6.4. Network map of relational agility.

Within this cohort of four individuals exists a great capacity to create and develop relationships, to build trust and connection, to enable followers to realize their greatest sense of self, and to invite followers to participate as co-creators of their relationships. In effect, the relationally agile leaders intentionally seek to develop others to become relationally agile as well. One may legitimately ask, whether this is an exercise in futility, or whether there is evidence that



relational agility can be learned? Indeed, referring back to the stories, one could conclude there to be evidence for the latter. When the four, who were identified as relationally agile, were asked to describe their leadership styles and whether these had changed over time, they each acknowledged that the particular brand of leadership that they practice today has been the consequence of an evolutionary process. For example, when describing her leadership journey, Lentil shared, “ I learned by doing, making mistakes along the way, and just always looking at what could I do differently...I think it’s evolved as our team has evolved and as trust for my team has grown.” Along a similar train of thought, Pumpkin Spice offered the following, “She is the one that really helped me to grow. I think I have learned the most from her, and I think she has grown a lot over the years...she has grown a tremendous amount as a leader and in the type of support she gives us.” Harmony shared similar impressions about another, “I also feel like she has really come into her own with us. I’ve been really impressed with her, just little leadership skills that she’s developed and demonstrates, and I hope that I had a little bit of a hand in that to a certain extent.” When asked about her own leadership style, she acknowledged, “sure it has evolved. I think I probably used to talk too much and not listen enough. Now, I try to really listen more, and not, I think really not pre-judge or read a situation or be thinking as someone is talking to me...but trying to check those thoughts and be actively listening in the moment.” Murdle, too, declared about one relationally agile colleague, “She’s taken on many different roles over the years, but has really blossomed.” And with respect to another, had this to say, “I think that she has evolved in that way. I’ve seen it over the years, and it’s been a very positive thing. The staff, too, has responded to it.” So, amongst the four relationally agile leaders, each has acknowledged her own evolution of leadership, as well as that of others who are also relationally agile. The four did not exhibit the qualities of relational

agility years before, but rather grew into this way of leading. The challenges of everyday leading, which include both positive and negative circumstances, represented the development ground. Being relationally agile introduced a level of leadership maturity to their practice whereby positive feedback in the form of strong relationships and engaged followers reinforced their chosen way of leading. Otherwise, the common leadership DNA that they share is their strong belief in the necessity of relationship, authentic leadership and respect for others.

Sinclair (2007) has proposed that parents, specifically the presence or absence of a father figure, birth order and disruptions during childhood, such as family moves, can have an impact on one's subsequent leadership. Observations that include a child's feeling of greater responsibility and obligation if first born, or feeling parentified, if raised without a father figure, have been reported as impacting the child's subsequent leadership style. Similarly, family moves that introduce children to new surroundings with different language, culture or friendships can translate to feelings of disassociation or lack of community. As an adult, this may show up in one's leadership as challenging authority or having finely honed skills of observation, especially to those marginalized in a group (Sinclair, 2007). With these considerations in mind, questions relating to the leader's family background were asked in an effort to elicit story and perhaps to enlighten the data with qualities that may have informed their subsequent leadership. Common amongst each of the four was the fact that each was raised in a stable family home by both parents. None were well-to-do, by their own admission, nor did they want for anything. Each had at least one sibling, and none were the eldest. Finally, no one reported a significant family move during youth that may have dislodged them from their familiar surroundings and relationships. These data dispel the notion that any of these factors contributed to their subsequent development as a relationally agile leader. What was common,

however, was a description of a loving, caring family that was encouraging and that instilled strong moral values on each leader. This background, coupled with a foundation of relational practice and an organizational culture that encouraged the growth of connection, might therefore be the critical enablers for the development of relational agility.

### **Enabling a Culture of Relational Connection**

From the evidence above, it is clear that a highly relational culture has emerged within Tri Fit with demonstrations of transformational leadership, authentic leadership, aesthetic leadership, servant leadership and/or stewardship amongst many of its members. As found in the empirical literature, this culture has endowed Tri Fit with relationships described by high quality connection, trust, and a positive sense of self. A general air of possibility and positivity is pervasive. What has enabled Tri Fit to establish such a culture bears examination.

At the onset of data collection, an interview with the senior leadership team invited feedback on the question of culture, how it was defined, and how it evolved. One of the co-founders suggested there was no preconceived plan or design with respect to creating a specific culture at Tri Fit. Rather, it emerged organically over time and was the product of the belief in the ‘golden rule’ of ‘doing unto others as you would want them to do unto you’, and simple fundamental tenets of respect and decency. In her words, “there was never a plan; it’s sort of what’s always felt right; the right thing to do.” It is this belief system that has served as the moral compass underpinning the culture within the organization. Other elements have also likely enabled the organization to retain the tight bonds of connection throughout. For example, being relatively small with 78 employees, has enabled Tri Fit leadership to stay in connection with each employee with regularity. As the size of the organization grows, however, the frequency with which these connections occur, particularly the physical interactions, will very

likely diminish. In a similar vein, the size of the company has enabled Tri Fit to retain a relatively flat organizational structure. This too may need to change if the employee count were to grow significantly, for along with growth is the need to develop additional leaders who live this culture and who are continuously developing others in service of the relationship. The fact that the organization is privately held also enables this culture to flourish as it is exempt from external shareholder influence. The co-presidents, who also co-own the company, are able to imprint the organization with those structures and policies that they believe are in service of the culture they wish for the organization. In the case of Tri Fit, this has proven to be very successful, creating a culture that is inherently positive. The same may not be true in other privately held organizations as culture is profoundly linked to the beliefs and values of those occupying the corner office.

A further dimension to this discussion regarding the elements influencing the culture of family is the fact that the company is owned and led by two highly relational women. Fletcher (1999) writes that due to the history of the socialization of men and women, men are encouraged to devalue and desensitize themselves to relational attributes, whereas women are encouraged to exhibit them. Consequently, women become what Fletcher (1999) describes as “the carriers” of these traits. Relational practice, therefore, is seen in greater number in women relative to men. With two women leaders and an organization consisting of 88% female employees, it would be reasonable to presume that the environment for relational practice is ideal, and the consequential establishment of a tightly knit relational environment, like that of a family, be a logical outcome.

**The shadow side of the family.** Although typically described in a very positive light, these relationships, like most families, can also exhibit a more dysfunctional side at times. Indeed, within Tri Fit a second theme, referred to here as a ‘culture of nice’ was observed in

story. One example expressed by Wanda concerned the difficulty in doing business with those with whom you hold such a personal connection, whether the need related to disciplinary discussions, asking an employee to move to a different location or work in another capacity, or indeed personally considering departing the organization to further a career. In Wanda's words, "sometimes it's difficult when you are so open and transparent and personable with your staff to do business in that context." Although similar sentiments were not voiced by others, it is conceivable that such opinions were present, especially with those who did not share the type of familial bond that was so prominent in the stories.

This sub-culture of being nice to one another in service of greater 'family' harmony, creates the opportunity for one to subordinate one's own needs. As such, it describes a shadow system where the voices of those who hold contrary opinions are silenced out of fear of being perceived as different. Such difference could evoke concern of being ostracized as a loner, being held back from promotional opportunities or, at the least, having one's input discounted.

### **A Culture That Values Positivity**

The final cultural theme described within the stories of those interviewed at Tri Fit spoke directly to the second part of the research question, that being, to assess the impact of relational agility on the organization. It is clear when considering the words of storytellers, and the culture of leadership as presented in Figure 4.2, that the leadership at Tri Fit have orchestrated the creation of a culture of profound positivity that enriches the lives of each of those within. Using the words of the storytellers, the impacts of this culture on staff performance, on customers and clients, and on the consequential benefits back to Tri Fit were assessed. Becky's story typified the sentiments of many, "The more positive an environment you are in, the more you are able to focus on your work...they will be more excited and they are more apt to come back and we're

more apt to see results...in fact, one of our members even emailed me and copied my supervisor saying how much of a difference we have made in his life; he lost over 50 pounds. And it is very motivational coming from the members because that is who we are here for in the first place.” Phyllis agrees, sharing her own thoughts, “I think the fact that they support us and do go out of their way to make us feel valued and appreciated just makes people want to work that much harder and make sure things get done...Obviously, happy employees are going to be productive employees and it creates loyalty as well. So, I think definitely you’re going to see that a positive environment is only going to create an employee that wants to work hard and wants to do a good job...The more successful Tri Fit is, the more opportunities there are for us. So the more security there is for us.” Haley added, “if I feel confident and competent to be able to do the work then I’ll be able to do it the way that I need to do it. In general, when I’m a happier person, I tend to want to get stuff done...when everything is quite positive and easy to go through, then things get done and I’ve noticed that even just over the last couple of days where things have to get done and its pleasant to get done, all of a sudden I’ve gotten fifteen things done in one hour. Now, I can go and work on the next thing. So, I do find that it makes me more productive when I’m at ease with those relationships...it allows me to put more effort into what I do which ultimately makes these employees healthier in the long run...that’s what we’re doing here, to get people to stay in the gym so that the retention is quite high. To get them in and out of our classes, maybe to help them lose weight, maybe to help them get off their blood pressure medication, maybe to help them be stronger so they can run their marathon next year. Whatever their goals are that’s what we exist for.” Putting forward her own perspective on the benefits of a positive work culture, Sweet Pea had this to say, “ At the end of the day when we’re all doing our job and we’re all making our clients happy and our members happy, it

benefits everyone, as everyone is achieving their goals and is more productive. They're productive in their client locations. That means the customers are happy and the people who are paying us are happy with that. So everybody benefits. For the most part, we always get really good feedback from our clients, and for a lot of clients it is the bottom line, right? Are they taking a lot of sick days, are they off because they're feeling anxious or low about themselves? It all affects the bottom line for our clients. It does. So, absolutely when they have more productive staff and happier staff and active staff, then I think it benefits everyone." Many of these stories describe a positive feedback loop: where the positive culture translates to enhanced creativity and productivity on the part of the Tri Fit employee; these positive work behaviors create a more positive user experience, resulting in goal achievement and client satisfaction. Given that satisfied clients are retained clients, Tri Fit ultimately benefits. This result, which emanates from the positive culture established by relationally agile leaders, has been described as the 'return on positivity' or ROP.

### **The Future of Leadership at Tri Fit**

At Tri Fit, a highly relational culture has been responsible for developing and nourishing high quality connections and friendships throughout the organization. Trust is high, development is encouraged and self identity is given the environment to flourish. An overwhelmingly positive climate amongst the staff has evolved as a consequence with most employees exhibiting their own brands of relational practice and ten recounted over and over again in story for their demonstrations of various constructs of relational leadership. Four of the ten have been described by their colleagues as being uniquely adaptive in their leadership. They have been further described as engaging others intentionally in service of furthering their relationships with them, and being intuitive in their interpretation of the energy being emitted by

their followers in the moment. They have created uniquely deep connections with their followers, where each feels felt by the other. And they continuously encourage their followers to co-create with themselves, the future design for their relationship. This collection of qualities exhibited in each leadership moment has been described as relational agility. The evidence contained within the wisdom of the stories also suggests that relational practitioners who lead authentically with a strong moral compass have the ability to learn relational agility. This is heartening to organizations seeking to develop their leadership culture to one that is relationally agile and more resilient to the forces of change. As the departure of one or more relationally agile leaders could deplete the relational capital within their organization, potentially depleting the culture of connectedness and positivity, Tri Fit would be well-served to consider implementing strategies designed to encourage the continued growth and development of such relational practices.



## Chapter VII: Future Research, Conclusions, and Implications

Change has been described as one of the few constants in life. With the digital era enabling more rapid data collection and communication than ever before, the speed of decision making and change has been accelerated. Attempts to manage these changes within an organizational system have failed miserably, with leading authorities, such as Kotter (2012), suggesting the rate of such failures to be as high as 70%. Disruption and a fear of loss are amongst those factors believed to contribute to this statistic (Antonacopoulou & Gabriel, 2001). It is held that relational leaders who develop trust-filled connections with their followers may be in a privileged position to navigate such change. A type of evolved relational leadership, termed *relational agility*, described precisely this quality (McLean, 2011). The present research sought to determine how relational agility exists within an organization, how it is described, and what its impacts are on organizational outcomes. These objectives have been met and addressed. That which follows presents the reader with a series of questions that could be addressed in future research, offers concluding remarks on the research undertaken and its implications, and provides a statement on the impact of the findings on the researcher.

### Future Research

Evidence of relational agility was found in this study. As this is the first occasion in which such empirical findings have been published, an invitation is extended to the scholarly community to explore the subject further. What follows are a few recognized areas of potential focus for such future research.

It is important to note that with respect to racial diversity, that of Tri Fit is unknown. What is known is of 27 interviews, 26 participants would be described as Caucasian while one would be described as African-American. This is certainly not a representation of the diverse

city populations from which the respondents were a part. Also, having a workforce consisting of 88% women, Tri Fit's gender bias is noteworthy. Since Fletcher (1999) argues that women tend to be more relationally adept than men, the results may represent a distorted perspective of connection and positivity than that which might be experienced in a more gender-balanced organization. Both gender and race could serve as interesting lenses for future research in this regard.

From a methodological perspective, others have argued the limitations of the organizational storytelling method to report objective accounts of events (Maynes et al., 2008). Indeed, Gabriel (2000) has suggested that a storyteller's account may not necessarily represent the facts of events, but they do present the truth from the perspective of the teller. As far as the culture of leadership is concerned, I believe the way in which the storyteller experiences events and interprets them for themselves is most germane. Organizational storytelling enables one to gain precisely these storyteller perspectives. For this reason, I hold that the method served the purpose admirably.

Further, as a phenomenological study, the researcher was inextricably connected with the research. Past experiences, cultural frames of reference, ethnicity, and gender may each have colored both the data collection and interpretation of results. These findings therefore represent only the interpretation of the researcher. Another may read into the data alternative propositions, a fact that would again be revealed in future research.

The transferability of the findings represents a further consideration with respect to this research project. As Tri Fit is a small (<80 employees), privately held company owned and lead by two women, further evidence of relational agility derived from larger, more diverse organizations would be of value.

Again, from the context of the organization in which the research was conducted, Tri Fit is engaged in the business of health promotion and fitness. Arguably, this industry is an inherently positive one, in that those working within this business do so out of a passion for fitness and well-being and a desire to assist others in achieving their personal fitness and wellness goals. By nature, they are positive people, as was intimated by several of the storytellers. This may have presented a disproportionately positive picture of the culture at Tri Fit suggesting that the positivity was not completely the consequence of the culture enabled by the relationally agile leadership. Although storytellers compared the culture of Tri Fit very favorably to those of competitive organizations in this business, further evidence collected in workplaces outside of this industry would augment the picture of how relational agility exists in organizations of varying description.

This study has presented evidence of relational agility, a new construct of relational leadership, and its' presumed organizational impacts. It also offers a further evolution in the way in which we observe relational dynamics, that being from a triadic perspective. In declaring my own subjectivity and illuminating the question of transferability of this research to other organizational settings, opportunities for future confirmatory research are obviated. An invitation is therefore extended to the academy to further this exploration in service of leader development and organizational well-being.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

By using organizational storytelling within a national health promotion and fitness company, called Tri Fit, an abundance of data relating to the culture of the organization, its culture of leadership, and the qualities of specific leaders was collected. A vibrant community of relational practitioners was evident, ten of whom were repeatedly described as practitioners

of relational constructs including authentic leadership, aesthetic leadership, servant leadership, stewardship and transformational leadership. Moreover, four of these ten, specifically Murdle, Pumpkin Spice, Lentil and Harmony were story protagonists who, as authentic leaders, adeptly forged deep connection with others, establishing a bond where there was a mutual feeling of being 'felt'. I describe this level of connection as achieving a state of relational resonance. Stories revealed that these four leaders each sought to develop relationships intentionally, simply for the sake of the relationship. Bearing the other relational leadership qualities as well, they stood as a moral compass to others, they inspired through their genuineness, they served the needs of their followers, their clients and their communities, and were exemplars in their development of others. Each of the four drew upon this collection of qualities, as necessary, in response to the specific needs of each of their relationships in a given moment. As such, each were described as leaders exhibiting relational agility.

Relational agility would therefore be defined by the practice of an authentic leader who uses a depth of relational experience to intentionally co-develop relationships with followers by responding to them in a manner that is congruent with the need of the relationship in the moment. The relationally agile leader seeks to develop the relationship simply for the sake of the relationship itself, which in turn, will serve the higher purposes of the organization. Such purposes always include the development of the follower in his/her own relational practices, and may also include leader development, succession planning, the establishment of sustainable, humane work practices or organizational resiliency. In this way, relational agility is manifested in a triadic experience involving the leader, the follower and the relationship, each as unique entities. This represents the first known empirical description of relational leadership as a

triadic experience where the relationship is personified as a unique entity that is the product of leader and follower co-development.

At this point in the story, the reader may be of a mind to ask whether there is any practical application to this research. As a pragmatist, I welcome that challenge. And I believe its response necessitates exploring two questions: First, for those organizations with relationally agile leaders, is there evidence of any positive organizational outcome, and second, if there is evidence that relationally agile leaders endow their organizations with positive outcomes, can relational agility be learned?

With respect to the first question, the positive culture of leadership, which was given credit for establishing a highly relational and positive culture within Tri Fit, was attributed by the storytellers to the four relationally agile leaders, specifically. The resulting relationships and connections that were fostered, the positive feelings of self and the opportunities to flourish were seen by most storytellers to be directly responsible for improving morale and loyalty, reducing turnover and developing more creative and productive employees. These impacts were then translated onto the work performed, the customer's experience and the client's overall satisfaction. To Tri Fit, a positive customer and client experience translates to a retained client, and a client with whom they may be able to offer additional services. This positive feedback loop has been referred to as the 'return on positivity or ROP<sup>TM</sup>'. Presumably, this ROP<sup>TM</sup> would be similarly experienced in other organizations who also have relationally agile leaders.

With respect to the second question, there was evidence to support the belief that relational agility can be learned as each of those cited as being relationally agile were described by others, and self-described, as having evolved into a particular brand of relational leadership

practice. What appears to be a necessary condition for such a developmental process, however, is an authentic leader who practices relationally and is grounded in basic moral principles.

It would seem that the research question posed has been answered by the evidence. Beyond this, however, lies evidence of a shadow system existing within the organization. Seemingly, a darker perspective to the culture of family exists for some within the organization, and it would appear that holding this perspective has silenced their voices. These voices would otherwise share regrets, contrary opinions or concerns regarding a behavior exhibited by colleagues. They remain silent, however, due to fear of reprisal in some cases, or more frequently, due to the fact that they feel personal concerns are subordinate to those of the larger ‘family’, and consequently they do not wish to create animosity or strained relations with others. Although the relative frequency of this discontent is rare, it warrants attention, as personal experience would caution that negativity can have a crippling effect on productivity and organizational success. By developing leaders to be relationally agile, Tri Fit would ensure the climate of positivity in their organization is given an opportunity to thrive.

From a personal context, this research project represented an emotional journey. I have shared excerpts from the story of my work life which have been a key motivator for this research. That story has been peppered with anecdotes of leaders who abused positions of power and privilege and evoked fear and separation amongst their followers. The emotions of disappointment and loss remain with me. It is my knowledge of other, more inspiring leaders, however, that has liberated in me a desire to use that sense of loss as the inspiration for something constructive. I have therefore sought to define the qualities that I have observed a few times over my career with exceptional relational leaders, and the impacts such leadership can have on an organization.

Hearing the positive experiences of storytellers within Tri Fit was best described for me as bittersweet, as they had me recounting my own lived experience, which has been disappointing, yet also hopeful for a greater future for others. A sense of optimism pervades my approach to this work as I have witnessed the people of Tri Fit describing relational leaders who create trusting connections with their followers in service of the relationship and follower development. Moreover, it appears that these adept relational practitioners, who I describe as relationally agile, have developed this unique capacity. If I allow myself to consider the possibility that relational agility can be learned through appropriate mentorship and development opportunities, the prospect of extending the Tri Fit experience of leadership wisdom to other organizations offers the promise of greater humanity and improved organizational resiliency. A future described as such gives renewed purpose to those experiences of my past that have so clearly led me on this path. For this, I am grateful.

## Appendix



## Appendix A: Consent and Waiver for Videotaping

### Consent and Waiver

**Purpose** The purpose of this video is to introduce the concept of leadership qualities that enable organizations to better navigate change. It may appear in a doctoral dissertation, and may be used for promotional purposes.

**Expectation of Participants** Each participant will be asked to pose with a sign (s) for a short period of time (several seconds) while being video recorded. Each sign contains a word, phrase or sentence which when combined in sequence presents a message relating to leadership and change. The recordings will be merged together to create a video file with a coherent message regarding change.

Each video recording and the merged file will be stored on a password protected computer hard drive and will be copied on an external password protected memory device. Data will be retained indefinitely for future scholarly and/or promotional use.

By signing below, you attest to being over the age of 18 years and freely consent to being video recorded for the purposes noted above. You also acknowledge that you waive any rights to your image in the video file or in the merged video.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Participant Consent

**Study Purpose** The purpose of this research project is to examine perspectives of relational leadership practices of selected employees within a multinational insurance company.

**Expectation of Study Participants** Each participant will be asked a series of questions in an interview relating to experiences with leadership in relation to themselves and to others with whom they have worked. The interview will take 60-75 minutes to conduct and may be held over the phone or in person, depending on respondent availability. Each participant may elect to not answer a question or to stop the interview without any negative impact. A follow up interview will be scheduled for purposes of clarification and to confirm the researcher has accurately portrayed the participant's responses.

All interviews will be digitally recorded to ensure accurate and complete answers are recorded.

Interview data will be stored on a password protected computer hard drive and will be copied on an external password protected memory device. Data will be retained indefinitely for future scholarly use.

Each participant will be given an opportunity to create a pseudonym for the purpose of ensuring confidentiality and anonymity in the final report. Personally identifiable data will not be shared amongst study participants and individual responses will not be shared with the organization, or used for performance evaluation purposes.

**Privacy** Your right to privacy is respected. Any personal information collected for the express purpose of this academic project will be held on a confidential basis and used only for the purposes for which the information is collected, which purposes are identified above and for future scholarly use. The Investigator will disclose your information in non-personally identifiable form.

By signing below, I consent to the collection, use and disclosure of my personal information for the sole purpose of conducting this academic research project and for future scholarly work. I further consent to being contacted by e-mail or telephone from time to time by The Investigator for the above-noted purposes. I may withdraw my consent for such contact at any time by providing my request in writing to the Investigator at the email address below.

Should you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, please contact Dr. Carolyn Kenny, Chair, Institutional Review Board, Ph.D. in Leadership and Change, Antioch University, [ckenny@antioch.edu](mailto:ckenny@antioch.edu).

I consent to the collection, use and disclosure of my personal information in non-personally identifiable form.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Investigator** David McLean  
 Antioch University  
 PhD in Leadership and Change  
[dmclean@antioch.edu](mailto:dmclean@antioch.edu)

## Appendix C: Sample Interview Questions

**Preamble** This research project will attempt to study relational leadership practices within this organization through the medium of stories. With this context in mind, I have a few questions for you.

- 1) From your perspective, are there any special leaders in this organization? Can you recall any stories about them and what makes them special?
- 2) Can you share with me an incident or occasion that brought out what you believe to be the very best leadership qualities in someone? Who was the leader in this case? What specifically appealed to you in this case?
- 3) A peak experience is a pinnacle moment in our lives characterized by strong positive emotions like joy, satisfaction and accomplishment. Could you describe an event or a moment in your work that evoked such feelings? If so, what did this mean to you at the time? What does it mean to you now? How do you believe this pinnacle moment was achieved? What role did leaders play in you experiencing this pinnacle moment?
- 4) Similarly, there are times in our life journey characterized by setbacks or disappointments. These are the low points. Can you recall any events during your time within this organization when you experienced such feelings? What prompted them? How did you react? How exactly did you feel? How did you manage through this period of time? How well were you able to overcome this disappointment? Did a leader help you deal with this adversity, and if so, how did they help? Thinking about this now, how does it make you feel?
- 5) There are occasions in life characterized by crises, changes in direction or breakthroughs that we regard as turning points. With the benefit of hindsight, can you think of an occasion that you would describe as a turning point? How did the leadership help you through this turning point?
- 6) Can you recall any event or request of a leader that stretched you or challenged you beyond your presumed capacity? Could you describe how you handled this situation?
- 7) When you think of your experience with this organization from a metaphorical perspective, what would be the metaphor you would use? (eg. Marriage, family, human body, landscape, sports franchise, etc.) Why? Can you share a story that supports your use of this metaphor?
- 8) Can you recall any event that describes (name of leader) and affected you deeply which you have not had an opportunity to discuss as yet?

Thank you for your participation.

## Appendix D: Permissions

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At the center of this life  
There is a man I want to know again.  
He has a new house,  
a clear view of the mountain  
and hidden in the close grained wood  
of his desk  
a new book of poems.

He has left the life  
he once tried to love  
now it is only a shadow  
calling for another shadow

and this shadow  
wants to become real again

it falls against walls  
and fences  
and stairways

the dark penumbra of my belonging

now let me cast my shadow  
against life

before the specter haunts me to my  
grave.

By David Whyte

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