2010

Not So Black and White: The Color of Perception in Corporate Layoffs

Carole A. Isom
Antioch University - PhD Program in Leadership and Change

Recommended Citation

NOT SO BLACK AND WHITE: THE COLOR OF PERCEPTION
IN CORPORATE LAYOFFS

CAROLE ISOM

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Ph.D. in Leadership & Change Program
of Antioch University
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

October, 2010

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled:

NOT SO BLACK AND WHITE: THE COLOR OF PERCEPTION IN CORPORATE LAYOFFS

prepared by

Carole Isom

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Leadership & Change.

Approved by:

_____
Dr. Carolyn Kenny, Chair   date

_____
Dr. Mitch Kusy, Committee Member   date

_____
Dr. Ancella Livers, Committee Member   date

_____
Dr. James Calvin, External Reader   date

Acknowledgement

I extend my sincere thanks and gratitude to the many people who enabled me to complete this dissertation through encouragement, guidance, support, or intercessory prayer. I am ever so grateful to the six participants of this study who trusted me with their personal experiences during, what was for most of them, a vulnerable and painful time in their life.

I am deeply appreciative and thankful for the time, guidance, and commitment of my dissertation committee: Dr. Carolyn Kenny, Dr. Ancella Livers, Dr. James Calvin, and Dr. Mitch Kusy, each of whom shared their special gifts of wisdom in their areas of expertise.

Dr. Carolyn Kenny, has been an incredible chair, and pleasure to work with. Her phenomenological insight was equally matched with her warm, patient spirit and provided inspiration over the last few years. I have learned much from her, personally, spiritually, and educationally.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my family. My overwhelmingly supportive husband, Reginald Barnes, cheered and encouraged me throughout the process, while sending up much needed prayers. The foundation laid by my parents, David and Louise Isom, of the importance of education, work-life balance, and religion centers all that I do.

I have been truly blessed. Thank you.

Abstract

      This research addressed the question of whether or not the perception exists that African Americans are disproportionately impacted during layoff periods within corporations. Portraiture was the selected method of inquiry for this research as it captures the experience of the participants and enables storytelling which is based upon perception as opposed to hard, quantitative data. Additionally, portraiture's autobiographical roots supported my autoethnographic position, encouraging the artistic process while including aesthetic aspects. Portraiture allowed for the voice of the researcher everywhere: in the assumptions, preoccupations, and frameworks brought to the inquiry; in the questions asked; in the data gathered; in the choice of story told; and in the language, cadence, and rhythm of the narrative (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 85). Phenomenological traditions and values are shared by the methods of ethnography and portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 13); this combination, in conjunction with my significant exposure to layoffs in corporate America, successfully captured the perception of the six participants and transformed their experiences within corporate America culture to interpretive life. Four concepts were considered as relevant dimensions of the perception: education, discrimination, marginalization, and work performance. The electronic version of this dissertation is at OhioLink ETD Center, www.ohiolink.edu/etd.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter I: Introduction

"Look, what do you want, Carole?" I now sense he is embarrassed and he should be. I remain calm and focused despite the dismissive tone. He wants to know, so here goes: "I want a role with visibility, commensurate with my capability and experience . . . a stretch opportunity, one that lets me showcase my skills, but allows room to develop new skills. I want a job with some depth that, once done extremely well, leads to a promotion. I want to be treated and assigned roles as if my skills and contributions are valued." So there, in case you did not know before, now you do. If looks could kill, I would be flat lining, right now. His stare is one of disbelief and my comments yield him momentarily speechless.

Was this White, male corporate leader really oblivious to what I wanted in corporate American as an African American, or did his privileged existence create a veil blinding him of the realization that I wanted what he and every other employee desired? The constraints of the experiences which led up to that moment lead me now to my dissertation. That was the past. My dissertation opens the door for a new beginning—a beginning that cracks the door on the impact of race in layoff decisioning.

Statement of the Problem

I have witnessed many restructurings, reorganizations, and mergers, resulting in corporate layoffs, over the last 25 years in multiple organizations. My first layoff experience was as a human resource manager of a Fortune 500 organization where 17% of 2,500 operations employees lost their jobs. Excerpts, such as above, are presented and italicized throughout the dissertation, from my in-the-moment autoethnography, *Moving Boxes* (Isom, 2009a), which captured data and metaphorically aligned the constraints of my corporate and layoff experiences with the confines of physical boxes during times of organizational change. As a senior corporate

leader in the financial industry, I have watched, from a front row seat, the banking industry

evolution. As an employee, I have the benefit of observation within this culture during one of

the most challenging times (recession) in the industry and in the United States. I have the

supreme benefit of connecting to a culture (and now workplace norm) that is in the midst of

change, fear, angst, and survival, while members, at the same time, are grasping hold of what

makes them feel safe and comfortable.

I would suspect that the past year has been a very challenging year, economically,

emotionally, financially, and spiritually for many workers in the United States. My unscientific

gut feeling leads me to believe that many citizens of the U.S. experienced unemployment directly

or indirectly, via a close friend, family member, neighbor, loved one, or favorite merchant that

went out of business. It has no doubt been a difficult year for all.

Those of us who were fortunate to survive the unemployment lines were not spared the

hardships of the recession either. I reflect on my own experience throughout the year, as my

emotions spiraled out of control, sometimes elated to be employed, others times wishing I had

received a severance package so I could be relived of the survivor pain and excess work brought

on by too few workers remaining in the workplace.

If there was but one bright spot (outside of collecting a paycheck and having financial

fluidity), it would be my ability to capture, first-hand, data on my research topic, which was to

examine the role of race in corporate layoffs. Specifically, I wanted to address the question of

whether or not the perception exists that African Americans are disproportionately impacted

during corporate layoffs, (*layoffs* are defined as the involuntary separation from one's employer,

resulting from layoff decisioning). This had been my sneaky suspicion, although my preliminary

research, with fewer participants, did not confirm this. The preliminary research did, however,

open the door for future research topics. My research focus continued via my dissertation and more diverse participants.

The latest statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor (2010a) reflect unemployment rates for African Americans twice that of White Americans. Over the last year and half, many corporations made drastic cuts to their personnel and my place of employment was no exception. As a witness to the displacement process within a large organization—which affected employees of all races—I can confirm the need for transparency as, typically, employers share minimal details of the reasons any particular employee has been laid off, even to the individual who has been severed from his job. If asked, the many of employers and human resource leaders will often reply that the process was done with due diligence and was fair. But, contrary to the statement above, I have encountered perceptions of racial differences in the layoffs within the African American workplace community.

There is limited research on the role of race and layoffs, yet historical review of labor force statistics from the current population survey of the U.S. Department of Labor (2010b) reveals African Americans consistently have significantly higher unemployment rates than other groups. The search results for peer-reviewed, scholarly work was scarce, and statistical data did not have credibility due to lack of organizational compliance and reporting. Early research of Fairlie and Kletzer (1998) indicated that very few studies in the job displacement literature examined whether the incidence and consequences of job displacement differed by race (p. 460). Later, the 2006 research of Hargis, Baltes, Fried, and Levi revealed that little empirical attention has focused on the relationship between an employees' race and employment termination, although the literature did contain evidence supporting the relationship between race and employment (p. 589). Elvira and Zatzick (2002) also found there was little empirical research

examining the effects of race on layoffs for minority employees (p. 330), and much to my
disappointment, I was not able to identify any qualitative studies on this topic. Numerous
quantitative studies documented ascriptive inequalities in workplace power, but none adequately
accounted for factors that ethnographic research contends are important and relatable to
particular individuals, according to Elliott and Smith (2004, p. 365). Additionally, the U.S.
Department of Labor (1989) Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act (WARN),
which requires employers to disclose job cut details, lacks enforcement, rendering the
information useless in tracking layoff data. Consider that, in January 2009, 17 companies filed
WARNs with the North Carolina (NC) Department of Commerce, representing 3,711 layoffs.
The NC Employment Security Commission estimated that North Carolina shed more than 10
times that amount in January 2009, some 38,000 jobs (Rexrode, 2009, p. 9A). Two-thirds of
companies that should have reported layoffs did not (Ranii, 2009, pp. D1, D3). Such lack of
information makes it difficult to understand the true layoff experience and impact.

My primary findings from the literature search revealed research on this topic within
various industries, such as academia, manufacturing, and private and public industry. There
were more ex post facto, longitudinal studies than I anticipated with many researchers relying
upon data provided via the government or other nonprofit sources. The approach most often
used was correlational. This research design was beneficial, from a quantitative perspective,
because I was able to see the relationship between multitudes of variables. However, the
corporate underreporting made the data less credible.

Much of the research I found focused on blue-collar workers where workers typically
lack educational attainment. I would have preferred to review more studies from a professional
population where the number of African Americans in the role may be fewer, but they most

likely have secured higher educational attainment, which is usually a requirement for the role.

Nonetheless, in just about all of the studies I located, the researchers proved their hypothesis and

concluded that African Americans were laid off disproportionately to Whites. The research was

supported by recent findings from Goldman (2009) who also reported that the jobless rate for

Blacks has grown much faster than for other races, and that the Black community has suffered

the hardest during the economic downturn (p. 1).

The research I found identified varying reasons for the imbalance that included location,

education, (lack of) networking, economics, and positioning. None of the results conclusively

indicated that discrimination, defined in this study as explicit prejudice (Flabbi, 2010, p. 190),

was the culprit; such evidence was difficult with quantitative data.

The quantitative approach, while statistically-based and easily transferable to numerical

form, fails to provide an in-depth picture of the layoff experience and root causes. I surmised,

from my preliminary research efforts on this topic, that a qualitative analysis would potentially

reveal more of the culture and process prior to and after a layoff than a quantitative approach.

The gap between quantitative and qualitative methodologies supports a gap in the literature. The

lack of qualitative research leaves the discussion on race and layoffs to numbers. It fails to

identify the experience of those who have been laid off and the damaging perception of those

who have exited or remained behind with the corporations.

My study will increase knowledge about the role of race and layoff decisioning. There is

an opportunity to learn something we did not know before. Narrowing the gap to any degree

helps solve a problem that exists within the organizational culture. There is something to be

learned that helps us understand the complexities and dynamics of the issue, which may result in

discovery that can create government or organizational policy resulting in organizational change.

Concepts to be explored within the dissertation will include educational attainment, discrimination, work performance, marginalization, and historical relationships. Most importantly, the dissertation will explore the impact of perception against reality. As the adage goes, perception is reality. The damage resulting from perception demonstrates that truth is not a requirement. Perceived truth is as damaging as truth. Merleau-Ponty (1958) offered that my reality, my truth, slips spontaneously into the other's world and they are both brought together in the one single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception (p. 411). Merleau-Ponty also theorized that, as a result of such introductions, we subsequently interpret others behaviors by analogy with our own and through our inner experience, which teaches us the significance and intention of the perceived gesture (p. 406). The impact is that the perception ceases to become solely mine, but feeds off other perceptions and everyone else I draw into my world, my truth. Our perspectives merge into each other and we co-exist, lending and reciprocating thoughts (p. 413). Data from my prior research revealed that those who are laid off perceived the process as unfair. Such negative perception in a corporate environment can make or break a company in challenging times as those laid off or layoff survivors merge experiences and influence others with their unfavorable perceptions of reality.

Where Merleau-Ponty (1958) addressed the intersection of our perceptions of reality in each other's world, Schein (2004) discussed the impact of our interactions in cultures. In our day-to-day lives, we create culture in our own experiences and interactions we have with others, where we share and bring culture with us from our past experiences and we are constantly reinforcing that culture, or building new elements as we encounter new people and experiences (p. 63). As employees develop patterns of shared assumptions, based upon their experiences

with corporate layoffs and the slippage of truths from one's world to the other's emerge to develop culture, the organizational impact, as seen in this study, can be great.

These so-called truths have been captured via a diverse sample for greater depth into the perception of layoffs as unfair, especially pertaining to African Americans. Conclusions have been drawn from data from a specific racial composition and a mix of decision-makers who were laid off or layoff decision-makers.

While there is very little research and literature on the subject of the role of race and layoff decisioning, defined here as the selection process within corporations to identify employees for involuntary severance from the organization, the current economic conditions have highlighted the statistics revealing higher unemployment rates for African Americans, especially African American males (see Figure 2.1). Minorities and the less educated have always suffered more during downturn, but the disparity has become more stark (Karabell, 2009, p. 31) and I consider my research very timely and applicable to current social ills, such as the relationship between the increase of the population without health insurance to higher unemployment. The gap between the what (higher unemployment) and the why needs further research and my research opens the door to provide greater exposure on the gap and current knowledge of the impact of the perception of the why. Given our current economic environment, and the potential for African Americans to be disproportionately laid off, the opportunity may be ripe for new studies that build upon previous research.

Scope and Limitations

Interviews, conducted with specific open-ended questions, allowing room for additional questions (see Table 3.1), were the primary data collection method for six participants, followed by sorting, grouping, and analysis of themes. Although previous experience in identifying

participants who met the research criteria was difficult for me, I was able to secure the ideal participants with experience as Fortune 500 senior leaders who encountered layoffs as either severed employees or decision-makers (of severed employees). I approached the study seeking a sample-size of six diverse participants, with three women, three men, at least two African Americans, two Whites, and two members of another group. I wanted a balanced sample to provide a well-rounded perspective and enhance the study, especially considering the nature of the dissertation which examined the role of race in layoff decisioning.

Criticality remained with the diversity of the participants. I was cognizant that failure to secure a diverse sample of participants would affect the study results.

Situating the Researcher Within the Story

The best boxes are those that are sturdy, able to hold and transport that which we deem important. A good box can travel great distance without falling apart, despite a heavy load. Boxes can sit in corners of attics for long periods of time, storing unused items waiting for us to return and blow the dust off of our great covered possessions.

But, boxes also have boundaries, taking up much space and limiting what can be carried and stored. As a senior African American leader in corporate America, I can provide a great account of boxes that satisfactorily contain, but have limited capacity and defined space. I can better relate to boxes that withhold rather than those that hold. I am familiar with boxes that remain immobile, as opposed to those that are mobile.

As an African American leader in corporate America, I am constantly aware of these limitations. In times of restructuring, change, and layoffs, I become defined by the box in which I am placed, not just on hierarchy charts, but also in the minds of dominant leaders who can stymie my success. My story in corporate America is shared via italicized excerpts within this

dissertation during a sensitive time when most employees, especially in financial services, were struggling to hold on to their job and most corporations were struggling to stay afloat. It is when things are most intense that the make-up of people becomes clearer. I captured a particular week to share (in the autoethnographic excerpts), because it was a very intense week in the financial services industry all around the world.

I share my story through my lens as an African American leader throughout my dissertation. Though I realize race and gender are usually connected, for this project, I deliberately focus only on race. As an African American, I sit at the corporate table as a senior leader and count the people who look like me on one hand, with unaccounted fingers remaining. As a woman, I peruse the corporate room and am privy to significantly greater representation. All toes and fingers are accounted for as a woman. Neither demographic has proper representation, but there are greater gaps to plug for African American representation. I feel more marginalized in this corporate space as an African American than as a woman.

Purpose of the Study

As previously noted, my dissertation addressed whether or not the perception exists that African Americans are disproportionately impacted during corporate layoffs. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to capture the perspective of a diverse group of individuals, in various industries, who have experienced being laid off and/or made decisions to lay off employees. Storytelling serves as the method to capture the perspective because it provides the reader with a true voice that is beyond the numbers within government, corporate, and other social organizations. As an African American corporate employee, I often hear and participate in conversations where the apodictic perception is that as a group, we are hit harder than other groups during times of mergers and restructurings, which usually results in layoffs due to overlap

of work processes and cost reduction efforts. The study provides a diverse view on whether groups, including African American participants, consider African Americans to be disproportionately impacted compared to other groups during times of layoffs and offers a balanced perspective as to the reasons why (or why not).

The study provides information beyond monthly Department of Labor statistics where unemployment data has historically shown higher job loss rates for minorities, but includes the reasons for such greater impact and the outlook for change, socially and corporately. Additionally, the purpose of the current study was to open dialogue on an area where very little has been researched, especially via a qualitative method. Such open dialogue may begin to peel back layers and offer opportunities for correctness.

Criteria to be Judged Upon

Gadamer (as cited in Schwandt, 2007) identified "disabling bias" (p. 21) as prejudice we cannot eliminate due to our understanding of the world. This "prejudgment" (p. 21) alters our ability to understand and is inescapable, but the separation of enabling and disabling bias is necessary to achieve understanding. The success of my dissertation depended upon not only the diversity of the participants, but my ability to mitigate my personal bias, separating enabling and disabling biases, and not providing greater credibility to data which supported my view while not rejecting data which did not.

Researchers have suggested that people tend to discredit or reinterpret information counter to a hypothesis they hold (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Ross & Lepper, 1980). The study of Klayman and Ha (1987) on the confirmation and disconfirmation of hypothesis testing, addressed "confirmation bias" (p. 211), a term with different meanings to different researchers, but one supporting theories of researcher tendencies to conduct biased tests

to confirm desired results. I am cognizant of confirmation bias and expect to be judged on the proper application of the storytelling methodology to capture the participant's perspective, and successful data extraction and shaping of the story. Following the tenets of phenomenology will separate enabling and disabling biases, as I identify emerging patterns in the data collection based upon participant responses to the open-ended participant interview questions which are not structured to verify my current beliefs and do not address or lead the participants to any of the relevant dimensions, identified via scholarly literature. The four dimensions of perception are education, discrimination, marginalization and work performance.

I realize that total objectivity is not achievable and I am not convinced that doing so is optimal to this phenomenological study, where the researcher and subject connection is critical. I share the human experience of corporate layoffs via my autoethnography and that experience aids in the creation of the portraits and interpretation of data.

Chapter II Summary

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis (1997), in *The Art and Science of Portraiture*, suggested a shared set of relevant dimensions as a way to establish a group voice that is manifest both in its disposition throughout the process of data collection and its articulation within and across a number of portraits (p. 118). As the goal of any phenomenological study is to shed light on direct experience and perception, key factors as identified via research—educational attainment, discrimination, work performance, marginalization, and historical relationships—are the relevant dimensions of this research. Additionally, a critical analysis of the literature that supports the dimensions, as well as theories, has been analyzed, compared, and contrasted. Chapter II provides a detailed description of the

general concepts of each of the main categories pertaining to the role of race and layoff decisioning.

Chapter III Summary

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) presented portraiture as a method which supports capture of the direct "human experience" (p. 14). Portraiture and autoethnography were the two best methods to be used within the study because they enabled the capture of the character and quality of such experiences via storytelling. Portraiture was the method utilized for study participants via interviews and observations. The nature of portraiture for organizational storytelling best captured the perception of corporate employees as they experienced layoffs. Similarly, my experience during a week of layoffs was captured throughout the chapter via autoethnography. Both qualitative methods supported and enhanced the dissertation and brought the participants, perception and experience to life. Chapter III describes the participants, criteria for selection, and data gathering.

Chapter IV Summary

Chapter IV provides six individual portraits, details of the study findings, and supporting information. The portraits were created based upon the participant responses to the interview questions.

Chapter V Summary

This chapter provides an analysis and interpretation of the data and portraits, as it related to literature and theory. I interpret the findings, using my personal experiences, as evidenced via my autoethnography for sense-making. Chapter V demonstrates the study's contribution to future studies, offers how it complements current studies, and fills a gap via qualitative research studies—which currently do not exist or are limited on this topic.

Chapter VI Summary

Chapter VI provides implications for leadership and change in corporate America. Furthermore, I hope the current study opens the door for more dialogue, not just within corporate America, but also within government and social justice organizations to ensure accountability with large employers.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The role of race in layoff decisioning is complex. There are no right or wrong answers that support the complexity, but I do believe there are variables and factors that have significant impact in the midst of organizational change, that determine who is a keeper and who is one to be severed. African Americans share a different work experience within corporate America than most, and as such, layoff decisions have not been advantageous to this group.

As previously mentioned, I framed my literature review with excerpts from my own autoethnography, which was entitled, *Moving Boxes* (Isom, 2009a). Autoethnography, as a method of research, provided a level of knowledge and understanding that is rarely offered and greater depth to statistical data which revealed that African Americans are disproportionately unemployed. Autoethnography provides the platform to learn previously unspoken and unknown aspects about culture and communication, according to Ellis (2004). The statistical data tells one story, but firsthand knowledge adds a humanistic perspective, revealing the people and the experiences behind the numbers.

I had the opportunity to observe the employees and their experiences as my autoethnography was completed during a layoff period. Though I was not laid off myself, I observed many of my co-workers' layoffs in a time of dramatic economic downturn in the United States and in the global economic environment. The data gathering and research process included taking daily field notes during the workday over a period of four months. Occasionally, this was difficult, as the setting for this research was a fast-paced corporate environment. But, to have the best self reflexive critique of myself, I felt it was necessary to capture my experiences, thoughts, and responses in real time. Additionally, I kept a journal and wrote a summation each evening, creating an opportunity to make personal sense of my experiences throughout the day.

My preliminary review of relevant research on race and layoffs identified reappearing factors. As such, additional literature was reviewed to address those relevant dimensions considered significant in layoff selections. Those factors are education, discrimination, marginalization, and work performance. Notwithstanding the complexity of layoff decisioning, I take the position that the combination of these four factors help to enable the perception of disproportionate layoffs of African Americans.

Autoethnography

Anne Lamott (1994) provided research styles in *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, which aided my approach to research. Lamott indicated that the reader is a person who is standing apart. This resonated with me because, although I am inside the corporation, as an African American leader, I simultaneously feel outside of corporate America; this dual role enabled me to see things more closely and to go in and out as a participant and as an observer as I gathered field notes for my autoethnography.

At times, giving from the deepest part of myself as I wrote *Moving Boxes* (2009a) was painful, but I knew that the giving was going to be the reward. Literature, such as Foster's (2007), *Communicating at the End of Life: In Finding Magic in the Mundane*, demonstrated successful methods to bring painful subjects to life. Foster's research centered on her involvement with hospice and dying patients. Writing about an emotionally and morally complex subject, was an essential part of her process, allowing her to identify and reveal her own responses to the story she was telling. Similarly, my story is an emotionally and morally complex subject. Race as a topic, especially when linked to inequality, has moral implications and certainly can affect emotions. I found Foster's work to be very supportive in the completion of my autoethnography.

I was most captivated by Ellis' (2004) *Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography*, which, similar to Lamott (1994), addressed truth in autoethnography. Ellis presented a story of "something made" (p. 332) via interpretation, which, altered my interpretation of truth. Through the readings and mentoring (from author Carolyn Ellis), I discovered that writing autoethnography is judged by narrative truth rather than historical truth, which means that the experiences it depicts are believable, lifelike, and possible. Unlike other research methods, which are rigid science, autoethnography allows room for fictionalized accounts that portray truth. Unlike other methods of research, where one must meet structured criteria, autoethnography allows room for flexibility and creativity and mirrors reality. I discovered that a lot of truth can be learned from fiction.

Finally, it is because of this literature research that I posit, through my story, that African American leaders face a higher risk of job displacement due to organizational changes typically driven by factors, such as unmet organizational needs, pressure, and crisis, resulting in involuntary employee severances. The negative situation exacerbates already existing systemic injustices and the impact damages the leader-organization relationship, producing long-lasting repercussions to African American leaders and the organization itself.

Bruner's (2002) *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*, was one of the most enjoyable pieces of literature I had the opportunity to experience. Bruner identified storytelling as a way to give shape to things in the real world and bestow a level of reality upon them. The narrative approach of my research, via storytelling, gives meaning to the corporate layoff experience via perception. According to Bruner, narrative has the power to change our habits of conceiving what is real and what canonical (p. 94) and the power of strong form to shape our conceptions of reality and legitimacy (p. 111). These are critical components of understanding and grasping the

true realities of the layoff experience as told by participants who have either been laid off or layoff decision-makers.

Education

I blatantly refused. Yelled. Cried. "There is no way," I screamed back, "No way I'm doing that. That is not me, I have a right to be me." That I had a right to be "me" was the only position I could rest upon. But in the end, I had to recognize that there was a difference between rights and choices and right then I did not have the choice to decide my future—I had to succumb to my mother's mandate/dictate that I go to a "good" school and get a "regular" job, because, as she so clearly stated, she wasn't paying for me to draw pictures. I stormed up the carpeted staircase without regard to the sharp left turn that led to my bedroom, almost crashing into the wall, bumping into the bookcase, and barely stepping over my younger brother's toy cars. I mumbled back something in a barely audible voice about being an artist—loud enough to express anger, but quiet enough to not be accused of disrespectfully talking back. But it didn't matter; it was a self-assigned title that she didn't recognize.

The challenge that African American parents face is the task of socializing their children to be competent and function within an oppressive society (Thomas & King, 2007, p. 137). As such, many African American parents believe that obtaining a good education can prepare their children for success in an oppressive society and help present opportunities that would otherwise not be available to their children. Statistics indicate that the unemployment rate for African Americans is consistently higher than the national averages. In 1980, the national unemployment rate was 7.2% and the rate for African Americans was 14.3%. In September, 2003, the national rate was 4.0% and 7.6% for African Americans (Lewis, 2003, p. 30). The U.S. Department of Labor (2009a) reported the March 2009 seasonally adjusted national

unemployment rate to be 8.6%, while the rate for African Americans was 16.5%. Considering

that African Americans are historically unemployed at a rate of almost twice that of the national

average (see Figure 2.1), obtaining a solid education is a key message that African American

children consistently hear—to at least have a chance of competing for opportunities in the

corporate world.
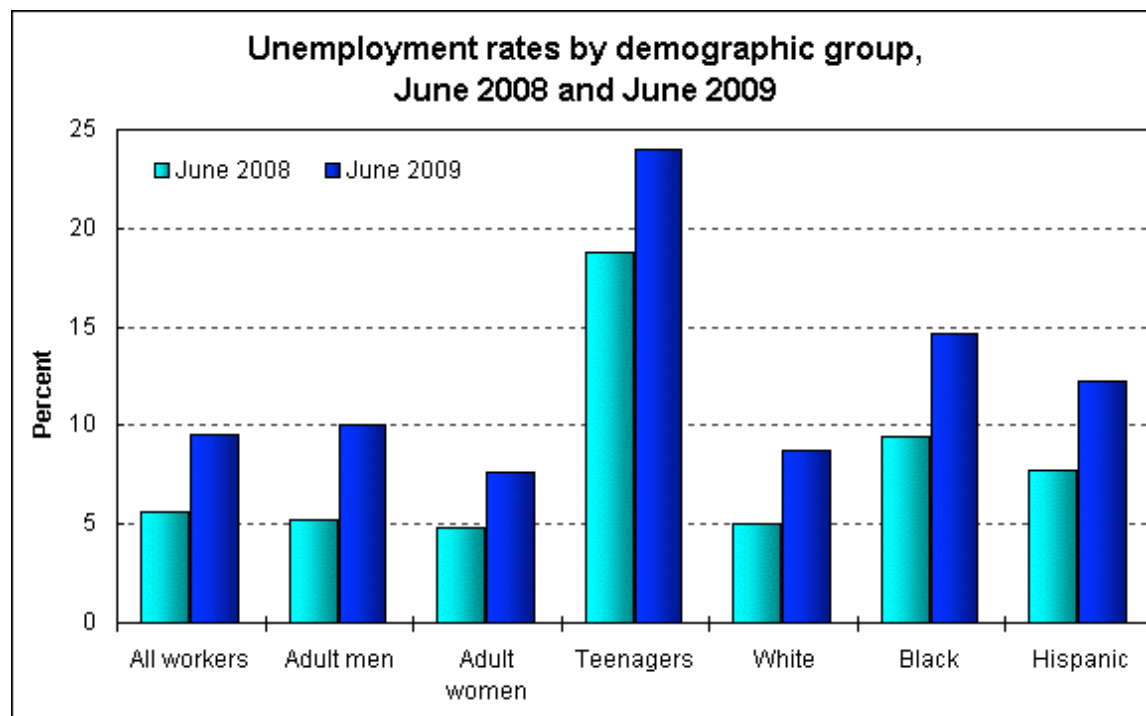
Figure 2.1. Unemployment rates by demographics in June 2009 (United States Department of
Labor Statistics, 2009b).

Economic differences are also considerable between African American and White

families: 22.5% of Black families live below the poverty line, compared with 8.4% of White

families. The research of Clay, Ellis, Amodeo, Fassler, and Griffin (2007), in *Black Women and*

White Women: Do Perceptions of Childhood Family Environment Differ, revealed that the

median income for Black families is two-thirds that of White families (p. 2). Education, as a

socialized message, has great meaning beyond simply functioning within the oppressed corporate

society; the message is also rooted in economic survival and the ability of one to provide

financial resources for self and family, in the midst of functioning in an oppressive society. In more recent research, Suizzo, Robinson, and Pahlke (2008) confirmed that African American parents have very strong beliefs about education and their children.

Mothers have also expressed the importance of preparing their children for school because they had to be more advanced than their peers upon entering school and to maintain good academic standings as African Americans. The study of Suizzo et al. (2008) supported the fears expressed by mothers that their children would be labeled deficient if they were not properly prepared (p. 306). Instilling the value of educational achievement is, therefore, an important socialization goal for these African American parents (p. 290).

Recent studies, such as that by Hargis et al. (2006) on 548 employees from a large hotel chain, addressed education as a factor in continuous employment. The goal of this study was to explore the role of general education, a central component of human capital, in explaining differences in employment termination between African American and Caucasian employees. The primary question they sought to answer was, "Does an employee's race affect whether they will be terminated or not?" The authors hypothesized that (a) race will be related to termination (specifically, African American employees will be more likely to be terminated than Caucasian employees), and (b) termination will be robustly tied to level of education, and including education will eliminate the relationship between race and termination.

The results of the hierarchal regressions, also conducted using logistic regressions, revealed that African Americans tended to be less educated than their Caucasian counterparts. Additionally, Hargis et al. (2006) observed correlation that suggested educational level, race, sex, and age are all significantly related to termination in the expected direction (p. 592).

Furthermore, as hypothesized, the correlation between race and termination was significant and indicated that African Americans were more likely to be terminated than Caucasians.

George Wilson and Deborah Branch McBrier (2005), in *Race and Loss of Privilege: African American/White Experience Difference in the Determinants of Job Layoff from Upper-Tier Occupations*, took a different approach than Hargis et al. (2006) in reviewing race and layoffs. This correlational study also did a logistic regression (multivariate) analysis concerning the determinants of job layoffs. This study goes deeper than the Wilson and McBrier research with focus on variables such as time with employer, hours worked, labor force experience, human capital such as college, post college and job commitment, and job labor market status, such as, union, public, or private sector. Unlike Hargis et al.'s study, this study included determinants among African Americans and Whites who worked in middle-class service and non-service occupations. Wilson and McBrier controlled for seniority.

Wilson and McBrier (2005) utilized longitudinal data from the 1994 to 2001 waves of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). This data helped them to assess racial differences in the determinant of job layoffs over five years of the work career among relatively occupationally privileged African American and White males (p. 306).

Wilson and McBrier (2005) posited, based upon review of numerous studies, that the private sector is not responsive to the success of African Americans, primarily because of the narrower reach and less stringent enforcement to legislation. Furthermore, the backdrop of this study aligns itself to the minority vulnerability thesis, which details recent case studies and survey-based analysis that address race patterns of layoffs from upper-tier occupations and firms that are predominantly owned and managed by Whites to elucidate the race specific determinants of those layoffs (p. 303). Data from the PSID supports predictions from the minority of

vulnerability thesis, which also maintains that African Americans are more likely to experience layoffs from upper-tier occupations than Whites, even when the two groups have similar background socioeconomic statuses, have accumulated similar human-capital credentials, such as educational attainment and commitment to work, and have similar jobs/labor-market characteristics, including union status as well as economic sector of employment (p. 304). As a result of the previous research, Wilson and McBrier utilized the longitudinal data from the probability sample to assess predictions from a theoretical perspective that identified differences in the reasons for layoffs among a cohort of African Americans and Whites who occupy privileged positions in the American occupational structure (p. 303).

The results of Wilson and McBrier's (2005) study revealed that the percentage of layoffs for African Americans at 31% was nearly twice that for Whites at 16% in the entire sample. In addition, racial differences appear in the percentages of dismissals across segments of the private sector: in manufacturing firms more than twice the percentage of African Americans (41%) as Whites (17%) experienced layoffs, while in service firms, the percentage of African Americans experiencing layoffs was less than twice that of Whites (37% vs. 22%) (p. 309). The study also revealed that, among the entire sample, as well as across segments of the private sector and in the public sector, the mean socioeconomic status scores among African Americans and Whites who are laid off are statistically indistinguishable. Additionally, in the service model, two variables that measure human capital credentials—job commitment and having a college degree—reduce the likelihood of experiencing layoffs for both African Americans and Whites.

Consider a recent government-issued report, "Good for Business: Making Full Use of the Nation's Human Capital—The Environmental Scan, A Fact Finding Report for the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission" (James-Hughes, 2003). The commission studied five target groups:

African American, American Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Hispanic American and concluded:

> At the highest levels of business, there is indeed a barrier only rarely penetrated by women or persons of color. Consider 97% of the senior managers of Fortune 1000 industrial and Fortune 500 companies are White; 95-97% are male. In Fortune 2000 industrial and service companies, 5% of senior managers are women—and, of that 5%, virtually all are White. (James-Hughes, 2003, p. 40)

A U.S. Department of Labor (as cited in James-Hughes, 2003) report also identified three major barriers that minorities encounter. The barriers included (a) societal barriers, manifested in the conscious or unconscious which include stereotypes; (b) internal and structural barriers, which include lack of mentoring, lack of management training, and placement in staff roles; and (c) governmental barriers, which include not enforcing and monitoring established laws and inadequate reporting and dissemination of information relevant to the glass ceiling (p. 41).

The conclusions of the two government reports hardly suggested that, once a good education is obtained—the Holy Grail of success tools that cannot be taken away from you—the playing field is level and ripe with equal opportunities. Perhaps, the socialized message needs to be supplemented with another message as suggested by Livers and Caver (2003)—create opportunities to build diverse relationships outside of your comfort zone, find commonalities, and forge meaningful alliances (p. 107).

Discrimination

In the midst of yet another reorganization, I receive a frantic call from my direct manager, a young, White male, about 30 years old, with a high-school diploma and extremely limited experience. Even he acknowledges that he is egregiously under-qualified for the role, periodically asking me, "Why are you reporting to me? I should be reporting to you?" I am reminded of how Arthur and I first came to work together. He was placed in this capacity within

the last year (during a reorganization) by the White, male senior executive of the unit. The rationale for Arthur being my manager—"We needed to give him a shot at leadership"—was supported with other bullshit-I-am used-to-hearing-as-an-African American-comments. I found the reasoning more demonstrative of poor leadership than the actual placement itself. Is he [division executive] really that ignorant? I conclude he is not that ignorant, but rather feels entitled as a White male to do whatever the hell he wants to do in a system that enables him.

In *The Impact of Corporate Downsizing on Employees*, Richey (1992) examined layoff perceptions and stated that an important factor in the downsizing process is the perception (by survivors in particular) of how fairly laid off employees have been treated (p. 11). When leadership decisions are determined without regard to qualifications because "we need to give him a shot at leadership . . ." it is easy to feel devalued, and lack trust of the leaders, process, and organization. The foundation has already been set by the time layoffs and other changes occur, such that there is little to no expectation of fair treatment in conjunction with the process. According to Bies and Shapiro (1998), people's need for justice relies on both voice and explanations, or justifications, provided by the decision-makers. Poor justifications only agitate an already fueled (historical) experience and decrease the feeling of belongingness to the group.

Although I personally have not experienced being laid off, I have witnessed numerous African Americans who were severed, over their White peers, who had less educational attainment and experience. Such inequalities are reminders, to me, of historical patterns of unfair, unjust treatment, and can add to the psychological devaluation.

My feelings of disappointment related to unfair (role) positioning are consistent with the research of O'Neill and Lenn (as cited in Benson, 2002), which found distrust, disloyalty, frustration, anger, anxiety, cynicism, resentment, and a desire for retribution as layoffs' impact to

survivors. Relative to my White peers, the fewer returns on my human capital credentials resulted in failure to trust or believe in the presence of a fair system. Rousseau (1995) identified trust as an integral component of the psychological contract (p. 95). Robinson (1996) defined as "one's expectations, assumptions, or beliefs about the likelihood that another's future actions will be beneficial, favorable, or at least not detrimental to one's interest" (p. 576). Trust is forward-looking; it involves predictions or expectations regarding another's behavior and calls into question positive expectations about an employer's future action (Pugh, Skarlicki, & Passell, 2003, p. 202). My personal corporate predictions forecasted unfair treatment, inequality, and poor decisioning based upon previous patterns of inequality and review of numerous restructurings and layoffs.

Essed (2004) found that managers seek successors in their own image, in terms of social background or organizational experience, as a way of dealing with the insecurities of managerial positions (p. 115). Similarly, Cornfield (1983) confirmed particularistic criteria are used to select employees for layoff, such as personal compatibility and subjective appraisals of competence, especially in nonunion environments. Employees who share social characteristics tend to befriend each other and such emotional cohesion in work groups hinder the capacity for expelling members. The internal, structural, and societal barriers encountered by minorities in corporate America (James-Hughes, 2003, p. 41) can negatively impact already tender relationships between African Americans and Whites. Such inverse relationships are a carryover, from years of oppression and imbalance of power where African Americans were considered unequal to Whites and the bonds of social compatibility failed to exist.

I reflected upon my previous (pilot) research, which included interviews of African Americans who had experienced corporate mergers resulting in layoffs. I noted the unconscious

historical relationship between African American leaders and dominant White leaders that the participants drew upon. They commented that the leaders in the organizations are primarily White decision-makers and they felt that the White leaders would not make decisions in the best interest of African American leaders during merger/acquisition times, unless there was a compelling or conscious need to do so. Superior performance and/or relationships were not considered compelling enough.

The feelings of discrimination, loss of control, and the inability to impact one's situation as an African American leader at the hands of a dominant White leader can be analogous to the Jim Crow era. In this era, mobs ignored due process, taking matters into their own hands, and Southern Blacks were in a weak position to confront the racist culture of Jim Crow.

Consider lynching, which was a form of killing another person by a mob. A reasonable consensus exists that between 1882 and 1968, there were 4,743 reported lynchings, 3,444 of whom were Black victims. In *Evidence on Discrimination in Employment: Codes of Color, Codes of Gender*, Price, Darity, and Headen (2008) provided a controversial perspective on the relationship between lynchings and employment in the United States—the legacy and history of lynchings, being one where White mobs lynched Blacks (p. 170). The lynchings were used to preserve White hegemony and the caste boundary that existed between Whites and Blacks to maintain dominance.

> Given the dependency of Southern states on cotton crops during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, swings in the price of cotton could induce labor market competition between White and Black farm tenants/laborers. A fall in the price of cotton would increase the supply of unemployed White farm workers competing with Black farm workers for jobs in the cotton-based agricultural sector. Lynching then possibly emerges as a method by which the substitution of Whites for Black farmers is facilitated. Early analyses advanced the idea that Black lynchings are explained by such labor market competition, where an inverse relationship between cotton prices and Black lynchings has been found. (Price et al., 2008, p. 172)

The perceived pattern of probability that injustice will repeat itself creates a system that has a negative impact/perception on successful African American leadership in corporate America. The result is in-group/out-group relationships in the workplace.

Northouse (2007) defined *in-group* relationships as those which are marked by mutual trust, respect, liking, and reciprocal influence. Relationships in the *out-group* are marked by formal communication based on job descriptions (p. 154). Leaders in the in-group have a better relationship with the dominant members because they have more exposure, are privy to information related to the job and the organizational on goings, and have greater communication opportunities, all of which lead to better positioning in times of layoffs. Similar to Cornfield (1983), Fernandez and Davis (1998) showed that people are more likely to support those who are like themselves. Even though we are drawn to those who are similar to us and repelled by those who are different, such similarities and differences are relative to the meanings we attach to them, and are largely shaped by sociocultural processes (p. 35).

> A study to evaluate children's attitudes toward two teachers—an attractive but inexperienced teacher, and a less attractive but highly experienced one was recently conducted. The less attractive teacher performed objective tasks better than the attractive one; for example she was much more attentive to the children's needs. And yet, it was found that the children overwhelmingly preferred the attractive teacher, reporting that they liked her better and she more effectively carried out her work-related tasks. Even at their early age, the children had developed a stereotype: that attractive people are more cooperative, competent, and likable. The same study revealed that attractive women tend to get more job offers, and higher salaries, than qualified "unattractive" ones. (Fernandez & Davis, 1998, p. 35)

Likely, such unconscious bias—defined as individual preferences, predispositions, or predilections that prevent neutrality and objectivity (Schwandt, 2007, p. 20)—finds its way into the layoff process as same group leaders identify with other similar leaders possessing skills and characteristics they deem as more attractive. Over a period of time, the definition of a strong leader within an organization has a certain look and feel to it.

Elvira and Zatzick (2002) found that where Whites were the majority in the decision-making positions, they would be more likely to form close relationships with several others and would choose out-group members for layoffs (p. 332). Such data are important information in analyzing the role of race and layoffs. Elliott and Smith (2004) showed that White males are typically in the position to advance or promote others as they oversee more managerial roles in the corporate world. Results from Elliot and Smith indicated that 28% of White male supervisors select other White men to fill supervisor positions immediately below them (p. 380). The rate of homosocial reproduction, where people prefer and recruit others similar to them, was 36% among White women, approximately 50% among Black men, and 65% among Black women. All groups had a tendency to select similar people. However, only White men had sufficient opportunity to engage in these practices with relative frequency and this frequency increased with upward movement with workplace power hierarchies. In other words, in-group favoritism may be universal, but opportunities to practice it are not, lending the circumstances to *access discrimination*, which researchers Greenhaus, Parasuraman, and Wormley (1990) described as preventing members or a subgroup of the population from entering a job or an organization (p. 1).

Livers and Caver (2003) supported Kanter (1977) and Cornfield (1983), and stated, whether as a by-product of people's tendency to be with like others or intentional exclusion, many African Americans still find it hard to penetrate the informal groups in their workplace. I do not attribute this solely to the desires of the in-group to be with others like themselves, but also to the lack of interest of African Americans. The inherent tensions between individual lifestyle needs and the need to practice *corporate biculturalism*—the dynamics created when one must straddle different personal and professional worlds—discourages African Americans.

Other pressures stem from perceptions and standards of a traditionally White corporate

workplace that does not understand or welcome differences and that is sometimes threatened by

it (Livers & Caver, 2003, p. 104).

A capture of layoff announcements from well-known companies reveals data (see Table

2.1) on the number of organizations cutting their work-force and the percentage of employees

who will lose their jobs within the first few months of 2009. Job loss of this magnitude

continues to reveal higher unemployment statistics for African Americans. A review of the

seasonally adjusted U.S. Department of Labor Statistics (2010b) provides unemployment data

for African Americans, one year later increasing from 13.5% in March, 2009, to 16.5% in

March, 2010. The rate for Whites, also one month following the release of the early 2009

announcements, was 8.0% in March, 2009 and 8.8% in March, 2010. Table 2.1 suggests a layoff

trend as a means to straddle the current economy.

Table 2.1

First Quarter Layoffs: Selection of Job Cuts by Major Companies

Company Name	Date of Announcement	# of Jobs Cut	% of Workforce
Nissan Motor	02/08/2009	20,000	8%
Estee Lauder	02/05/2009	2,000	6%
Time Warner Cable	02/04/2009	1,250	3%
Panasonic	02/04/2009	15,000	5%
Electronic Arts	02/03/2009	1,100	11%
PNC Financial Services Group	02/03/2009	5,800	10%
King Pharmaceuticals	02/03/2009	760	22%
Liz Claiborne	02/03/2009	725	8%
SAS AB	02/03/2009	9,000	40%
Macy's	02/02/2009	7,000	4%
NEC	01/30/2009	20,000	7%
Hitachi	01/30/2009	7,000	2%
Eastman Kodak	01/29/2009	4,500	18%
Bon-Ton Stores	01/29/2009	1,150	3%
Black & Decker	01/29/2009	1,200	5%
AstraZeneca	01/29/2009	7,400	11%
Ford Motor Credit	01/28/2009	1,200	20%
Starbucks	01/28/2009	6,700	4%
Boeing	01/28/2009	10,000****	6%
Jabil Circuit	01/28/2009	3,000	4%
SAP	01/28/2009	3,000	6%
STMicroelectronics	01/28/2009	4,500	9%

Corning	01/27/2009	3,500	13%
Cooper Industries	01/27/2009	2,200	7%
Clariant	01/27/2009	1,000	5%
Texas Instruments	01/26/2009	3,400	12%
Molex	01/26/2009	9,300	29%
Caterpillar	01/26/2009	20,000	18%
Home Depot	01/26/2009	7,000	2%
Sprint Nextel	01/26/2009	8,000	13%
Pfizer	01/26/2009	8,300	10%
ING	01/26/2009	7,000	5%
Philips Electronics	01/26/2009	6,000	5%
Corus	01/26/2009	3,500	10%
Harley-Davidson	01/23/2009	1,100	11%
Microsoft	01/22/2009	5,000	5%
Huntsman	01/22/2009	1,175	9%
Intel	01/21/2009	6,000***	7%
UAL	01/21/2009	1,000	2%
Eaton	01/20/2009	5,200	6%
Bose	01/20/2009	1,000	10%
Rohm & Haas	01/20/2009	900	5.7%
Clear Channel	01/20/2009	1,850	9%
ConocoPhillips	01/16/2009	1,300	4%
Circuit City	01/16/2009	34,000	100%*
Pfizer	01/16/2009	3,200**	3%
AMD	01/16/2009	1,100	9%
Hertz Global Holdings	01/16/2009	4,000	13%
Wellpoint	01/16/2009	1,500	3.6%
Saks	01/15/2009	1,100	9%

MeadWestvaco	01/15/2009	2,000	10%
Autodesk	01/15/2009	750	10%
Motorola	01/14/2009	4,000	6%
Barclays	01/14/2009	2,100	1.3%
Neiman Marcus	01/13/2009	375	3%
Cummins	01/13/2009	800	2%
Seagate Technology	01/12/2009	800	10%
Cessna	01/12/2009	2,000	N/A
Walgreen	01/08/2009	1,000	0.6%*****
Lenovo Group	01/08/2009	2,500	11%
EMC	01/07/2009	2,400	7%
Logitech International	01/06/2009	500	5%
Alcoa	01/06/2009	15,000	14.5%
Cigna	01/05/2009	1,100	4%

Note. *Company in liquidation. **Includes announcements of 2,400 cuts on Jan. 16 and 800 layoffs on Jan. 13. ***Number of employees affected by plant closures, not all will lose jobs. ****Includes Jan. 9 announcement of 4,500 layoffs from commercial-airplane staff. *****Represents 9% of eligible positions at its corporate offices and certain field-management positions. (*First quarter layoffs: Selection of job cuts by major companies*, 2009).

A recent newspaper article (Valle, 2008) discussed the impact of the current economy to complaints to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The Director of the EEOC stated that managers have become more sophisticated in keeping people out of key jobs. One example, quoted by the Director:

> Is a situation where an African American male applies for a job and is not hired after the interview. We may hear things from the employer such as, the person did not present as enthusiastically, the person raised his voice or was inappropriately expressive. We found there are many things that go on culturally, which people tend to use as a value judgment in making employment decisions. (Valle, 2008, p. 20)

The significance of such decisioning is that, consciously or unconsciously, in desperate economic times, people seek stability and comfort; rely on familiar snapshot, subjective

processing; and reject that which conflicts, providing mental stability when instability surrounds them.

Marginalization

"I am disappointed with my assignment as a result of the restructure," I declare, looking directly at the senior executive. "I don't understand why, as an experienced and educated employee who has proven herself, I am reporting to a junior employee who lacks experience and education."

"It's an opportunity for you to assist him. We need to give him a shot at leadership," he aggressively responds with a hard blue-eyed stare.

"I am ok with helping him and getting him on his feet, but what about my career and development? The job is too light. I won't learn a thing," I assert. "Did I not perform well? Did I not exceed what was asked and expected of me?" I confidently communicate back to him, not losing any eye contact.

"Yes, you did. There are no performance issues. You have exceeded and demonstrated next level executive work. You are detailed-oriented, responsive. You always deliver and you are well-liked. I have no issues with your execution. I gave you a raise, didn't I?"

I refuse to respond to the ridiculous "raise" comment, choosing instead to hold him accountable with a direct question. "Why didn't you give the role to me?" I really want to scream, "Do I hear you right? I performed at next level up, but you assign me to next level down? My White junior manager has to come to up my level, bypassed it, and then gone to the next level—all in one swoop without experience or any credentials. And did you say raise? Am I supposed to roll over for a few coins while you violate my rights?" I check my emotions and wait for his response.

The minority vulnerability thesis distills case studies and survey-based analyses that address race-based patterns of layoffs from upper-tier occupations in firms that are predominantly owned and managed by Whites to elucidate the race-specific determinants of those layoffs (Boisjoly, Duncan, & Smeeding, 1998). The thrust of the Boisjoly et al. (1998) post facto perspective is that layoffs, typically occurring due to downsizing, mergers, or restructuring, may be an organizational necessity; however, research such as that from Pettigrew and Martin (1987), posited that employers make layoff decisions which reinforce existing patterns of racial exclusion and modern racial prejudice which is characterized as situational, ostensibly nonracial, and institutional in nature. Fernandez and Davis (1998) agreed and stated that business and organizational practices are commonly premised on the notion that, we humans are rational creatures, able to keep our thoughts entirely separate from our emotions. Such a model would have us believe that success in human enterprises derives solely and strictly from the use of rational processes in the service of building up institutions, laws, and organizations. Continuing in the same sphere, the minority vulnerability thesis reveals data indicating African Americans in upper-tier occupations are expendable, relative to Whites, because they are placed in jobs that generate relatively low levels of revenue and are considered marginal to long-term trajectories for the economic value of the firm (Wilson & McBrier, 2005, p. 303).

Earlier, Fairlie and Kletzer (1998) closely analyzed the economic restructuring that occurred in 1980s, revealing that Black men were nearly 30% more likely to have experienced permanent job loss. A possible explanation for the high displacement rate among Black men relative to White men is that Black were more likely to have held the types of jobs (measured by industry, occupation, or skill requirement) that were hit hardest in the 1980s by plant closings and mass layoffs (p. 464).

Corporate executive participants in my unpublished research and pilot, on the role of race and layoffs, entitled *The Color of Perception* (Isom, 2009b), referenced lack of educational attainment, resulting in unskilled or labor-type roles for African Americans, rendering the group to customer care roles. The roles are high-target areas in the midst of organizational change when considering layoffs due to the large number of employees in these divisions. The participants of my pilot study indicated that 75% of organizational costs in the manufacturing industry were people. If looking to consolidate roles and reducing cost, divisions will target unskilled roles, such as those in customer care, where advanced education is not needed. There is a high concentration of women and minorities in these environments, which increases the opportunity to be laid off, as the unskilled workers are some of the first to be severed from the organization.

Companies reorganize, that is, they shuffle the management deck, seeking to find the best structure for organizational success. But reorganizations—whether launched for the right or wrong reasons—can put a company into shock. They also tend to bring out people's ambition and competiveness, throwing kerosene on already existing personal relationships (Ross, 1997, p. 17). Oftentimes, leaders rely upon those whom they trust and are loyal to in the midst of change to hang onto any sense of safety and familiarity, as there is usually much positioning and jockeying for roles. Organizational values, such as doing the right thing, being inclusive versus exclusive, and sustaining optimism, become values reserved for those who were connected to the in-group. Out-group members are left on the cutting floor of layoffs or relegated to roles of no import.

Some leaders take advantage of the change and place less qualified associates, with whom they were most comfortable, in key roles over associates who are more qualified. My

experience with layoffs has revealed enhanced negative in-group behaviors identifying a total disregard for the tools (360-degree feedback, talent planning, etc.) designed to identify, reward, and promote talented associates. There are so many distractions during these organizational changes, that adherence to corporate values become secondary, if not tertiary. The layoffs can bring out the worst in some leaders as they elevate trusted members of their in-group, perceived by the masses as more suited for increased responsibility and career development, and marginalize others (out-group).

Performance

I don't like his disposition because I think he is an arrogant, narcissistic user who pretends to care for people, but really doesn't. I think he is the typical White, senior corporate male who feels he is superior to others and fails to recognize his prejudices and the luxuries afforded to him as a White male in corporate America. If he has to make the final decision regarding my employment, I may be gone. If it is a business decision, I will still be here—I am very professional and smart; he knows I will get the job done and he can set his watch by my execution. But he also knows I am outspoken, hip to the system and will seek justice on that which I deem important. If it is a personal decision, he will eliminate me in a second. Severance due to layoff is a good and easy opportunity to get rid of a person who challenges the systemic process of injustice and forces you to look at yourself when you don't want to. In this state, you can fire at will without an explanation and chalk it up to "the role" was eliminated. Firing without just cause is easy because there are no tangible criteria in deciding who stays or goes. So no one is held to any accountability for doing the right thing, right now.

People are only human and disabling individual biases and beliefs may influence the decision-making process beginning with the performance reviews. Even though many corporate

reviews today are metric based, identifying the number of widgets completed for example, there is usually room for subjective criteria. Participants of my previous (pilot) research stated that they began their layoff process by looking at the bottom one-third of employee performance assessments, which included metrics to identify successful or poor employee performance. As they reviewed the assessments, they focused on answers to such questions as, "Is this individual adding value?", "Why do we keep this particular individual, who harms our image?", "Why do we keep this employee, who consistently does not deliver?", "Can we combine two roles?", and "What is the impact of eliminating this particular role?"

They also took into consideration strong performance reviews as an identifier for those who had the greatest potential, and because the reviews were 80% quantitative, they were able to do some *forced ranking*, an employer performance intervention process whereby employees are stack-ranked against each other to identify the best and worst performers. Additionally, they considered role consolidation, an employee's ability to multitask and get along with others. As noted earlier, there is also a level of homosocial reproduction occurring in the workplace, and the findings extend into the performance evaluation process, creating favorable metrics, selection, and comfortableness of people who think, act, and look like the decision-makers.

Kraiger and Ford (1985) found considerable evidence that raters evaluate the job performance of Blacks less favorably than job performance of Whites, especially when the raters are White (p. 59). Elvira and Zatzick (2002) controlled for performance ratings and tenure, with the results identifying Whites as receiving the highest ratings. A simple comparison of means in the Elvira and Zatzick research revealed that Black's ratings are significantly lower and White's ratings are significantly higher than those for all of the groups (pp. 337-342).

Greenhaus et al. (1990) studied relationships among race, organizational experiences, job performance, and career outcomes and found that Black employees were rated lower on job performance than White employees. Significant race effects were observed for both job performance dimension of the study: supervisors rated Blacks lower than Whites on both the relationship and the task components of performance (p. 79). The remarks were consistent with the results of Kraiger and Ford's (1985) meta-analysis.

This information is unsurprising to me. Although speculative, it would follow that, if discriminatory practices existed within the workforce, the performance of minorities would be judged more harshly than that of Whites. Studies have shown that individuals who are in the out-group are perceived as less attractive (Northouse, 2007, p. 158). Those who fail to have this similar attraction would most likely suffer from lower performance ratings than those who share common life experiences. Where Whites are the majority in the decision-making positions, they would be more likely to form close relationships with several others and would choose out-group members for layoffs (Elvira & Zatzick, 2002, p. 332). Elvira and Zatzick (2002) also conducted separate analysis by occupation to assess whether any occupation, accounted for the effects in the entire sample. Results for each occupation—manager, professional, supervisor, and clerical—were similar: Whites were less likely to be laid off than non-Whites, except for clerical workers, where there is no difference. Regardless of how the researchers combined the variables, the main results held (p. 350). Ultimately, Elvira and Zatzick (2002) thought that a likely explanation for the racial differences found lies in an organizational factor: managerial discretion in personnel policies.

Historical perceptions of White individuals in leadership positions reinforce the assertion that being White is a primary improbable characteristic of leadership, and consequently, leaders

who are racial minorities receive worse performance evaluations than White leaders because White leaders are perceived to be more similar to the leader prototype according to the Rosette, Leonardelli, and Phillips (2008, p. 10). Additionally, disparate treatment that results in fewer and less favorable opportunities for minorities with regard to sponsorship, supervisory support, job discretion, and acceptance can affect the his subsequent performance in a number of ways, per the research of Ilgen and Youtz (1986).

For example, the assignment of routine, non-challenging tasks, the lack of supervisory interest in a subordinate's career aspirations, and the infrequent provision of performance feedback are likely to stunt a manager's professional growth on the job, as found by Greenhaus et al. (1990), where an attendant decline in the manager's job performance was likely to occur (p. 68). Moreover, a manager with little job discretion or economy has few opportunities to exercise decision-making skills that promote effective job performance, may display low levels of work motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, p. 276) and may be seen by the organization as ineffective (Kanter, 1979). Accordingly, Page (2007) posited that differences in preference can also cause differences in interpretations (p. 77).

America and Anderson (1996) found that the effect of perception becomes one where lack of decision-maker awareness of such factors interferes with educated, objective, fair decisions, and ultimately influences or taints the layoff process. Not fitting the company image is another basis for bias. If the work is technically solid and the employee is productive and shows results that meet objectives, and the employee still does not fit in, they will be downgraded in subjective appraisal (p. 47). As African Americans are often defined with the phrases "just not fitting in" or "there is just something about her/him," this form of bias can also

impact the layoff process and lead to a higher number of African Americans involuntarily exiting an organization.

Proper and fair employee performance assessment is needed prior to layoffs. Wilson and McBrier (2005) maintained from the minority vulnerability thesis that African Americans are disproportionately vulnerable to layoffs resulting from evaluation processes. African Americans lack the opportunities to demonstrate to employers the informal or formal particularistic characteristics such as loyalty, trustworthiness, and leadership potential that are crucial for employers' decisions regarding layoffs, per Kluegel (1978, p. 304).

A participant in my previous (pilot) study, *The Color of Perception* (Isom, 2009b), spoke of scenarios where husband and wife teams worked in separate divisions within the organization. As the Human Resource Director, he made a decision that he would not lay off a husband and a wife because of the financial impact to one family. Such decisioning does not take performance into consideration. Members of the organization could easily perceive such a strategy as unjust, despite the color blindness of this approach, especially if the employment of a coworker of the husband or wife was severed as a result of lessening the impact to one family. This policy could serve as an advantage or disadvantage for African Americans. An African American husband and wife team could also benefit from only one of them being severed; however, if African Americans are routinely the recipients of lower performance ratings, the practice lends itself to the perception that African Americans are substandard performers, which places African Americans at risk when factors such as the family scenario above come into play during forced-ranking.

The forced-ranking requirements (at the participant's firm) were that 10% of the employees would be top performers, 25% were in the bottom and should have been severed long

ago, leaving 65% of the workforce in the middle. The top 10% still risked being severed, but were most likely automatic keepers. For the top 10%, they looked at specific competencies, teamwork, and whether or not the individual was action-oriented. The bottom 25% was not necessarily automatically severed, as a poor performer could be adjusted in the forced-rankings to accommodate factors such as diversity or length of time with the organization. Similarly, the remaining 65% were subject to the same criteria such as skill, teamwork, results, diversity, length of time, and the forced rankings. Often times, the deciding factor was whether or not the individual had an advocate looking out for him or her at the decision-making table. Strong push from an advocate could favorably tip the scales in the direction of one person, causing the deck to shift unfavorably for another, perhaps more organizationally-suited employee lacking an advocate voice.

The perception of an unfair process beginning with appraisal heightens systemic distrust, affirms a corrupt environment, and widens the gap between the in and out-group members enabling homosocial reproduction in key roles. Why would anyone who was laid off perceive the process as a fair one, especially when no specific criterion for layoffs has been defined?

African Americans, relative to Whites, cannot utilize forms of social/cultural capital that derive from factors such as privileged class background, educational attainment, and a prestigious job title to influence performance evaluations (Wilson & McBrier, 2005, p. 304). For example, Collins (1993) and Wilson (1997) documented that the reliance of African Americans on segregated job networks rendered them susceptible to cognitive biases, referred to as *attribution bias* by Pettigrew (1985), so that they are assessed on selective bases that reaffirm negative stereotypes about their suitability for and productivity at work.

Further, Fernandez (1981) established that African Americans tend to work in roles that leave them prone to *informational bias,* a form of statistical discrimination in which their character and performance evaluations are viewed as less credible than those of their White peers (Wilson & McBrier, 2005, p. 304). Finally, Wilson, Sajura-Lemessy, and West (1999) maintained that the tendency for African Americans to be subordinated to Whites in authority hierarchies limits their opportunities to meet informal, performance-based criteria that influence layoff decisions.

Racial Bias

There are severe organizational implications of a subjective process poised as an objective process. There is much damage in the perception that leaders rely upon subjective advocates, performance appraisals, and target areas for layoff solutions. As our interpretation often depends on our place or role (Page, 2007, p. 77), the historical distrust of the so-called man and the system by African Americans due to interactions with Whites related to slavery, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights era makes a questionable infrastructure even more suspicious. The personal baggage of history can be brought into interpretation of the process and decisoning, making it easy to enhance the perception of foul play and wrongdoing.

Experience and prior research has revealed to me that the perception becomes one of unfairness, when an African American member of the organization is laid off. When asked to consider the career advancement and performance appraisal of others, many people in the United States believe they yield to principles of meritocracy, per Rosette and Thompson (2005), and practice a philosophy of color blindness according to Reitman (2006) and Wildman (1996). That is, many people believe race is not important and does not affect the workplace evaluation of

others (Rosette, 2006). A study of racial bias in leader categorization investigates performance evaluator's perceptions of leaders.

> According to the theory, evaluators compare a target person with already pre-existing knowledge structures called leadership prototypes, which reflect the average characteristic of leaders in a given context. The process of comparing a target person with a leadership prototype is called a recognition-based process and can influence evaluators' perception of targets. This recognition-based process can lead to a match or mismatch between the target person's traits and traits that are common to the evaluators' leadership prototype. With a match, the target individual is characterized as a leader, but with a mismatch, the target is not categorized as a leader. When a match occurs, targeted individuals are evaluated more favorably. (Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008, p. 7)

This recognition-based processing can filter into our attempts to be objective decision-makers. In times of organizational layoffs, the unconscious mind may identify successful, high performing leaders as White, especially considering there has been much familiarity with Whites and less with African Americans as the primary leaders of the country and major businesses. O'Callaghan (2009) studied the perception of skin color and politics and revealed that people who agreed with the complexion altered politician's views were more likely to pick lighter-skinned images of the politician; people who disagreed were more likely to pick darker-skinned images. The findings suggested that race bias was very much alive and well in the United States and more insidious than we might like to believe (para. 3).

 Greenhaus et al. (1990) posited that it is possible that race differences in job performance evaluations do not reflect differences in actual job performance, but instead indicate the presence of bias in the rating process (p. 80). Lack of evaluator awareness may lead to racially biased evaluations and decisoning in the midst of complicated, high pressure, and challenging organizational change, resulting in layoffs. We begin to learn our culture's stereotypes without questioning them, at a very early age and, because they develop early, we

access them more often, and they tend to be automatically activated whenever we encounter a member of a stereotyped group (Fernandez & Davis, 1998, p. 38).

Imagine a group of senior leaders, most likely with very little minority representation, filled with the anxiety of lower than expected revenue, loss of customers, economic downturn, and corporate shifting, sitting around a corporate table and, in the heat of it all, challenged to make rush decisions about which employees are best fit to lead the organization in the midst of all of the change. Reliance upon performance reviews and already established metrics is a logical place to begin, but if the evaluation process is tainted with racial bias, the instant perceptions formed prior to the round table moment will determine the course of the process and direct the layoff selections. How, then, does the layoff process become one of fair or perceived fair decisoning for African Americans whose historical relationship and experience with Whites can be categorized as unfair, distrustful? How does a subjective process, in light of the history and circumstances confirm fairness, compassion, and clear decisioning? None of us can hope to build trust and respect on the basis of incorrect or incomplete information about the people with which we are trying to interact (Fernandez & Davis, 1998, p. 33).

The implications of a process that identities itself as objective, yet is subjective, breeds many negative behaviors that affect the organization as a whole. We have considered corporate distrust; but low morale, lack of motivation, and lack of diversity creates perceptions of a corrupt process and one that may very well leave the survivors of the layoffs wondering if the organization will treat them fairly in subsequent organizational changes and layoffs. The systemic distrust and layoff (process) ambiguity can alter thought-processes of survivors, rendering them to think "Let me leave them before they fire me, perhaps I should look for

another job elsewhere" or "Why should I work hard, that does not matter anyway?" The very

 employees that the organization is trying to retain become critical of the system.

Perception

I am concerned about the growing list of African Americans who have been severed. In

addition to the general population e-mails and instant messages that I have been receiving, I

have also received quite a few from several African Americans announcing the departure of

another high-performing, successful African American within the organization. I don't have the

exact numbers, but proportionately it seems out of whack. Does it just seem like a lot because

there are so few of us or is it really disproportionate? The list is getting longer. I look down at

the list compiled of severed African American employees and separate them by division within

the organization. I map them to their level of hierarchy within the organization starting at the

CEO level and working my way down and across organizational charts. This is unbelievably

disappointing. The charts do not reveal any African Americans left reporting to the CEO or

reporting to those reporting to the CEO, and so on. I move down several levels within the

organization before I arrive at the first senior African American leader. This is ridiculous. Isn't

anybody paying attention? Though I feel sad, I am determined not to cry, today. The

organization has not outlined any parameters or accountability for its leaders to do the right

thing, by way of diversity or balance. I can't stand this. Selection based upon personal

relationship is so unfair.

I want to feel that somebody would do the right thing, or see the benefit of having a

balanced team—how it can make their team more effective. I wouldn't want an all African

American team or a team of people that thought and acted like me. I would want a more

effective team, one that came with new ideas and challenges because it is diverse. I'm just

floored that no one else is honing in on that perspective right now. Look, I'm a realist too, but it

doesn't mean that the systemic "dismiss" doesn't hurt, because I am hurt today.

Few companies have formalized their man-power decision-making model and fewer yet have established models to determine layoff priorities according to Ornati and Giblin (1975)*,* adding to the complexity and inappropriate selections which can accompany layoff decisioning. Consider the risk and difficulty in merger or reorganization times to verbalize perception against a system that does not place a premium on or understand the value of diverse practices and groups, especially where uneasiness may linger about the stability of one's own position. A lawsuit in the 1980s confirmed such concerns: an employee sued General Motors in a class action suit, claiming that White managers tended to evaluate Black employees in the middle range of the rating scale which impacted promotions, merit raises, and made them more susceptible to layoffs. The employee also believed that, if Black managers complained, General Motors found ways to discharge them (America & Anderson, 1996, p. 46).

The perception of the lack of importance of doing the right thing and fairness and could easily have a trickle-down effect in layoff decisoning, consciously or unconsciously. Creating the perception that racial equality enhances the organization is not only a matter of actions, but also of framing those actions for others so as to link the initiatives to meaningful outcomes. Thomas and Gabarro (1999) identified two outcome types: outcomes linked positively to task performance, and outcomes that justify or enhance members' investment in core or shared beliefs about the organization (p. 199). Without this viewpoint, the door is open for negative perceptions of the process to percolate.

Rust, McKinley, and Edwards (2005) revealed that layoffs disrupt the reciprocal nature of the employment relationship and create unfilled obligations in employee's psychological

contracts with the most obvious unfilled obligation being the end of long-term job security (p. 74). Morrison and Robinson (1997) defined a *breach of the psychological contract* as occurring when the employee believes that the organization has failed to meet one or more of its obligations within the psychological contract.

In the investigation of the relationship between layoff victims' perceptions of psychological contract violation and attitudes towards the employer, Pugh et al. (2003) found that employees' perceptions of the psychological contract violation resulting from the layoff created organization doubt of the employer's future action. The perception of the violation was (a) negatively related to their trust in their new employer, and (b) positively related to their cynicism at their new place of employment. This suggests that the higher the negative emotional experience of the layoff, the less that laid off employees will trust and the more that they will be cynical of the intentions or the behavior of their new organization once they are re-employed (p. 208). These findings are important to the effects of race during layoffs because of the previously noted historical relationship between African Americans and Whites and the opportunity to carry baggage from one role to another.

Suizzo et al. (2008) showed that almost two thirds of African American parents report practicing some form of *racial socialization,* the process that African American parents engage in to raise physically and emotionally healthy children who are Black in a society in which being Black is perceived negatively (p. 290). Black parents may consciously practice racial socialization; that is, they choose to teach their children how to cope in a dominant White and racialized society. Parents who perceived inequities in the distribution of valued resources such as salaries, benefits, job assignments, and opportunities for promotions (institutional discrimination) were more likely to socialize their children to mistrust European Americans

(McLoyd, 2005, p. 151). If African Americans enter the workforce as racially socialized workers, expecting wrong-doings, expecting an unfair process in an oppressive culture, mistrusting Whites, the negative process can become cyclical and a double-edged sword. Whites continue to support Whites and, where opportunity presents itself, African Americans support African Americans. The downstream effect is that, during layoffs, the perception of mistrust and cynicism draws leaders to select keepers who they are most comfortable with and trust.

Leadership Impact

The senior executive boldly comes in and asks those who will be reporting to him directly to move closer to the telephone microphone so those listening via conference call can hear. He indicates that the purpose of the meeting is to discuss the final changes within his organization. He announces those who will be his direct reports—four White males and one White female. They, in turn, each announce their direct reports, which results in only one African American female (from another group) and no African American males.

I feel a tingling sensation in my nose, a sensation that typically precedes watery eyes and tears. I am not going to cry; but anger takes over as I watch under-qualified Whites assume senior positions over qualified Whites and African Americans in the room. Those who were selected for the best roles are friends with the senior executive. The decision-makers are not even trying to fake doing the right thing. Being overlooked upsets me. The blank, expressionless stare I perfected years ago resurfaces to conceal what I'm really thinking.

I have a right to be treated fairly in the organization and to be assigned to the proper role commensurate with my experience, education, and contributions. Seeking justice opens Pandora's Box and exposes me to "can't prove it" discrimination claims, resulting in a difficult organizational existence thereafter. Seniority has its privileges and knowing the consequences

of corporate actions as an African American is one of them. I privately debate seeking justice and consider the benefits of remaining idle.

What price am I willing to join this group? Where is the line between legitimate adjustment to a new culture and sacrificing my own values or identity? Why should I have to tolerate values or practices that I see are wrong or unjust? Bolman and Deal (1997) identified such questions as the price outsiders must consider for engagement and acceptance into the organizational culture. The price is usually higher for people who are different and who question or threaten existing values, norms, and patterns, as the out-group members cannot become full-fledge members of a group until they are initiated into the inner sanctum. The stronger a culture, the stronger the message, "that you are different and not one of us" (p. 226).

Offsetting such messaging, Wheatley (2005) suggested leaders forego seeking sameness, whether it is of persons or process (p. 90). She offered that leaders should seek to humanize and create effective organizations via relationships and inclusion. Her evaluation of organizations as "complex systems" included innovative opportunities for successful organizations that detailed the great learning resulting from interconnectedness and how "individual uniqueness adds to your collective ability" (p. 252).

A *cultural key* is an understanding of the meaning of a given situation from the point of view of those cultural representatives who are involved in it in any way, both those of the culture in which the situation is occurring and those of other culture (Vaill, 1996, p. 158). Thus, Vaill (1996) further explained that a cultural key to the meaning of a situation, then, is not a fact about the situation, but a perception by a participant or observer. Any perception involves both the perceived and perceiver and is knowledge of self-in-relation-to-other. The significance of Vaill's (1996) work to corporate layoffs is that our deep-seated tendency, as corporate leaders

who are drawn to others similar to us, needs to be unlearned. The question becomes, as Vaill (1996) so aptly addressed, "how do we go about accepting some other culture's arbitrary modes as having the same kind of validity as our own?" Vaill (1996) stated that acceptance requires a kind of unlearning, a look at codes, a granting that there are realities and meanings that may be quite different from those taught by our own culture (p. 160). Recognition of different realities and meanings, challenges assumptions, but opens the door to the appreciation of other's value; it enables leaders to respect the value that a diverse team can offer to changes within an organization and provide greater organization efficiency.

Challenging assumptions and unlearning deep beliefs can be difficult in a society that is *White privileged*, as referred to by Connerley and Pedersen (2005), as the invisible systems that confer dominance on Whites through being socialized in a racist society, even though none of them may have chosen to be racist or biased or prejudiced (p. 35). It is easy to assume that everyone is on the same level playing field from a perspective of advantage (p. 34). By challenging our assumptions, we can develop adaptive skills for working with a wider range of different perspectives and we can learn more about our environment (i.e., organization) from other viewpoints (p. 24).

Bushe (2001) supported the direction of Vaill (1996) and Connerley and Pedersen (2005). Bushe identified awareness as a basic skill of clear leadership due to the different experiences occurring within the organization. He posited that it is through understanding each other's experiences that leaders are able to change problem patterns. Void of understanding, we rely upon our mental maps, which shape our awareness for the better or the worse. Once we get a map that works for us, and we use it over and over again, it tends to recede into the background, out of awareness. After awhile we do not even recognize that we are operating from a map, as it

serves as the platform for our sense-making. The stories we make up about people are not random (p. 102).

Similarly, Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, and Smith (1994) identified what Bushe (2001) called mental maps as mental models. *Mental models*, as defined by Senge, are the images, assumptions, and stories which we carry in our minds of ourselves, other people, institutions, and every aspect of the world (p. 235). The dangers of the mental models are that they often remain untested and unexamined. As noted earlier in the research of Cornfield (1983), employees who share social characteristics tend to befriend each other and such emotional cohesion in work groups hinder the capacity for expelling members. The particularistic criterion that was built up over time, via mental models, becomes the criteria which define what successful leaders look like within organizations.

Additionally, previous researchers, such as Herold, Fedor, and Caldwell (2007), used concepts such as uncertainty, loss of control, fear of failure, and disruption of sense making as explanations for negative relationships between organizational change and attitudes. Changing circumstances may represent demands on the employee that are taxing or that exceed the employees coping resources (p. 943). In the midst of a corporate change, such as mergers and acquisitions, typically resulting in layoffs, there is comfort in relying upon our sense-making platforms and accepting what is familiar.

With the current recession still at full strength, impacting many workers and families, there is an opportunity for organizational transformation. There is great impact to organizations as well because any layoff methodology that is not objective creates an imbalance in the system. The far reaching implications of the imbalance is that it leads to perceptions of unfairness that

can create internal and external havoc, affecting the success of the organization during the recovery from a bad economy or simply from internal change.

Miranda Du, an employment law attorney supported transparency to offset the system imbalance, stating, "The employers . . . can communicate better so it doesn't come as a shock or [is perceived as] unfair" (as cited in Lucht, 2009, para. 17). Transparency could perhaps mitigate the perception of unfairness, but it requires the organization to have their "ducks in a row" (Lucht, 2009, para. 9). Given the predisposition of African Americans to believe that the system is corrupt and anti-Black employee, sloppy management could create lawsuits; but a well-planned strategy with layoff criteria enables transparency, adjusts perceptions, and mitigates downstream issues.

Kee and Newcomer (2008) provided transformational case studies and models for leading organizational change. Recognizing that one of the key difficulties of implementing change is the support of leaders, Kee and Newcomer suggested review of the organizational culture, assessment of the likelihood of change assessment (in identification of the level of difficulty), and addressing such obstacles via strategies to make the organization more change-centric.

The importance of top management support cannot be overstated. After analyzing three years of personnel data, Elvira and Zatzick (2002) found that employee race significantly affected layoff probabilities. They also found that when monitoring of employment decision is greater, racial differentials diminish or disappear (p. 354). Thomas and Gabarro (1999) found that diversity practices of three organizations revealed the importance of top management support. Top management's most obvious role, according to the study, was in making racial diversity part of the agenda and in authorizing action. As a result, other managers follow top

management's lead and change agents felt supported in their efforts to promote diversity

(p. 189).

Consider the example identified by Thomas and Gabarro (1999), who stepped outside of

the confines of their study and considered the career movement of a well-known figure, former

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell:

> In 1997, during President Jimmy Carter's term in office, Secretary of the Army Clifford Alexander asked the Army Chief of Staff for a list of senior officers with the potential to become generals. Alexander received a list that included not a single minority candidate. Alexander told his Chief of Staff that unless the Army's top brass were prepared to publicly state that no military officer of color met the selection criteria, then the list would be rejected: no list, no promotions to general for anyone. Whether unwilling or unable to declare that there were no qualified minorities, the brass developed a new list, which included the name of Colonel Colin Powell. Colonel Powell had served two combat tours in Vietnam, amassed a chest full of decorations for valor in the service, held an MBA, had spent a year as a White House fellow, and had completed assignments key to national security including several in the Pentagon. Colin Powell, of course, ultimately went on to become the youngest Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Presidents Bush and Clinton, before he retired from military service in 1995. (p. 77)

Creating the perception that racial equality enhances the organization is not only a matter

of actions, but also of framing those actions for others so as to link the initiatives to meaningful

outcomes. These can be of two types: outcomes linked positively to task performance and

outcomes that justify or enhance members' investment in core or shared beliefs about the

organization (Thomas & Gabarro, 1999, p. 199). Without this viewpoint, the door is open for

negative perceptions of the process to percolate. Further, there is no accountability to do the

right thing.

Higher unemployment rates support disproportionate African American layoffs. Without

change, the downstream effect can be perpetually damaging to African American leaders and

organizations. If African American leaders lack trust in the system and adopt unfavorable

responses, they will perform from a standpoint of disengagement, carrying this response from

job to job, feeling like marginal players, all the while, boxing themselves into a limiting, bicultural existence. Subgroup members who are persistently exposed to unfavorable treatment may avoid success-producing activities and instead engage in self-limiting behavior, causing them to display a less active approach to the management of their careers than White counterparts (Greenhaus et al., 1990, p. 68). Likewise, the dominant White leader, consciously or unconsciously, may begin to view all African American leaders as incompatible out-group employees. The lower aspirations and commitment and engagement in negative behaviors, reinforce negative opinions about their potential contributions to the organization (Greenhaus et al., 1990, p. 65) and may encourage systemic marginalization by not providing opportunities for African Americans to demonstrate their value to employers (Wilson & McBrier, 2005, p. 303). This may prevent equitable opportunities in terms of positioning, decisioning, power, and very high levels of authority.

As previously noted, the response can be analogous to carrying baggage, from one role to the next, year after year, creating a perceived pattern of probability that inequality will resurface. The carrying of this baggage also generates a psychological and systemic response that has a negative impact on African American representation and leadership in corporate America.

The purpose of the study was not to indicate that all layoffs are biased, but rather to identify perceptions related to layoff decisions impacting African Americans. The study results create awareness to employment factors that are critical to the employment of African Americans prior to layoffs and which, if left unchecked, untested, and unlearned, impact layoffs decisioning, enabling racial bias. The result of this study has potential uses for organizational change. The research could open doors for further discourse at a critical time when U.S. unemployment today is at record-breaking highs, according to data provided in Table 2.1 (*First quarter layoffs:*

Selection of job cuts by major companies, 2009), especially for African Americans. It could also provide training, procedural, and policy opportunities. Strategic (government or corporate) intervention and/or monitoring programs can be designed and tailored to aid in the reduction of higher unemployment rates for African Americans (as we have seen via Elvira & Zatzick, 2002, whose study monitored efforts that produced fewer racial differentials in layoffs of African Americans). Additionally, the research complements the limited studies on this topic, and provides a qualitative perspective where today very few exist.

Additionally, lack of education, historical and ongoing discrimination, systemic marginalization, and biased performance reviews set the foundation for a negative experience for African Americans and create less than favorable perceptions of the layoff process (impacting the organization as well). My exposure as an African American in corporate America to numerous layoffs piques my interest in the perception of disproportionate layoffs of African Americans compared to Whites. The diversity of the study participants reveals if and how widespread the perception is amongst other groups. As such, portraiture, as a method, allows my participants to reflect on the depth of their awareness and perception as part of their direct experience regarding layoffs of African American employees in corporate America.

Chapter III: Method

Boxes may be place holders for that which is deferred or secured. But, it is through this analysis that I have come to discover that boxes also have legs that render them movable. It is not so much what is in the box—whether it is our prized possessions, our careers, or our dreams—but rather our response when they are stolen, moved, retrieved, shelved, or simply torn apart, allowing our goods to fall to the floor.

I learned to sift within the boxes and extract gems. In many respects, I feel I am better for having been boxed. The corporate injustice has made me a better person, creating a desire to help others in the community and to further develop myself educationally and emotionally.

Portraiture

It is through the research supported by phenomenology and ethnography, within portraiture, a subset of phenomenology and ethnography that I addressed the question of whether or not a perception exists amongst various groups that African Americans are disproportionately laid off. Capture of the lived experience via participant interviews supported the tenets of phenomenology data collection and aligned with autoethnography data collection methods from my personal lived experience. Phenomenological and autoethnographical inquiry both draw from empirical and reflective methods. Field notes of verbal and nonverbal interactions and journaling aided my autoethnography. Both methods, phenomenology and autoethnography, rely upon observation, developing or emerging theory, interpretive reflection of meaning, connection of self to culture, narrative development, and pattern identification to understand the human experience. My insider role as a researcher who used field notes and observations from a similar lived through experience as my participant's insider experience brought a strong interpretive viewpoint to methods of comparable tenets of data collection. One benefit was that I

was able to situate myself as a researcher and as my own autoethnographic participant throughout the study via my portrait in addition to the participant's portraits, created from similar, overlapping methods of data collection: observation and interviews of the lived and human experience.

Researchers have studied in much detail, various factors impacting the success of African Americans in the corporate workplace. With portraiture as a supporting methodology, I collectively focused on four concepts or relevant dimensions—educational attainment, work performance, discrimination, and marginalization—typically researched individually, in the understanding of perception, race, and layoff decisioning.

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis (1997) offered a complimentary qualitative method of inquiry, which supported my autoethnographic work of telling the story. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis's work, *The Art and Science of Portraiture*, served as a starting bible, so to speak, in understanding the tenants of this qualitative method of research, how to capture data, and how to shape the story. I was able to identify the connection between science and art, and utilize it as a way to capture the complexity of my topic, via the human experience and organizational life. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis revealed portraiture as a way in which portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspective and experiences of the people they are studying, documenting the voices and the vision—the authority, knowledge, and wisdom (p. xv).

Similarly, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2000) captured voices and experiences of six participants in exploring the underlying nature of respect via portraiture. The work helped to realize portraiture as a complete story, from beginning to end, and envision how my portrait could and would be created.

Featherstone (1989) provided another opportunity to review portraiture, but rather from a critical review perspective. Featherstone provided a review of Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1988) *Balm in Gilead: Journey of a Healer.* This review helped me to understand what makes a story a good story through the eyes of a reader and more specifically, through another's critique of a portrait. Reading portraits provided the cultural and narrative perspective, but a critical analysis enabled me to see the method at work from a different dimension.

Kvale (1996) offered substantive qualitative research interviewing techniques. As a qualitative researcher, the relationship between me, as a researcher, and the participants was a trusted and delicate relationship because of the nature of the material. Considering the phenomenological aspect of this study, understanding how to truly listen without prejudice and allowing the descriptions in the experiences of the participants to unfold without interruption was a critical component of my study. Kvale offered such insight. It also reminded me of the soundness of ethical decisions in my dissertation.

Participants

The diversity of the sample was very critical to the success of my dissertation. As an African American, one may feel that his/her group is disproportionately impacted and, therefore, perceive corporate actions as unfair or biased. But, as noted earlier, as an African American, one may bring mental map baggage into the processing, resulting from historical, discriminatory, and other negative experiences encountered, simply as an African American inside and/or outside of corporate America. As African Americans typically have different experiences than other groups within corporate America, solely considering the perspective of this group could provide skewed data.

A diverse sample provided a balanced view of the perspectives and experiences of other race groups in their perception of the African American experience during layoff periods and decisioning. One of the benefits of having completed an autoethnography was that I was able to self-critique as an African American in the corporate culture and assess how I was othered in the culture and the role I played in being othered. My assessment may have been correct or incorrect in the eyes of others; but nonetheless, it was the truth as I lived and experienced it. My perception is my reality. Similarly, the reality of utilizing only one group for data is limiting and could tell only one story as the truth. A diverse sample, using portraiture as a method, provided an inclusive angle that considered not only the story of others, but their perception of the experience related to another group.

Consider the importance of a diverse sample of perspectives for this research via the viewpoint of a 40-year-old White male (severed) participant in my previous, unpublished research, entitled *Mergers and Acquisitions: Global Leader Perspectives* (Isom, 2008). The senior leader participant felt there was a strong organizational push to mirror the U.S. labor market demographics and mitigate risk by creating a diverse layoff pool within his organization. His personal research led him to believe this resulted in his departure from the organization, despite his success as a strong performer.

He stated that laying off employees, consistent with the demographics of the United States, was an unfair, but necessary process to prevent reputational and financial liabilities. As such, he felt that high-performers, such as himself, would have to serve as sacrificial lambs to ensure legal success for the organization, should any of the severed employees within a protected class (age, race, and gender) bring about a lawsuit. From this perspective, he believed that race did play a role as he feels he was impacted as a White male over the age of 40 and it was

necessary to have members of his group on the severed employee list, creating a diverse layoff pool.

Despite his beliefs, the participant did not believe that any particular group was targeted for layoffs. He felt it was strictly a business effort to balance the scales. He did, however, conclude the interview by stating, "Whoever the favorite is, gets the nod and gets more opportunities." He also added that, after 30 days, the organization could rehire employees who have been severed. He felt White employees could naively be part of the layoff pool as legal pawns to intentionally deceive observers, only to be rehired 30 days later, when no one was looking at the fairness and demographics of the layoffs.

Such data were critical to obtaining a holistic study. But, using a diverse sample was not without challenges. Soliciting six diverse participants who (a) were senior corporate leaders, (b) had been laid off or served as a layoff decision-maker, and (c) were willing to share their experience, presented creative opportunities to locate participants. I found this to be true in identifying participants for my pilot research and the research for *Mergers and Acquisitions: Global Leader Perspectives* (Isom, 2008). Due to the current recession, many available employees were unwilling to risk being part of a research study for fear of losing their job, if they still had one; most who were jobless had signed waivers silencing any negative disclosure in exchange for continuous severance payments.

The participants for this research had experience as Fortune 500 senior leaders and met the criteria identified above in that they (a) are senior corporate leaders, (b) have been laid off and/or served as a layoff decision-maker, and (c) are willing to share their experience. The diverse demographics of the study participants were one African American female, one African American male, one Hispanic female, one Native American male, one White male, and one

White female. Considering this dissertation examined the role of race in layoff decisioning, the diversity enhanced the study.

Additionally, *senior leader* is defined as an employee at a level equivalent to no more than two hierarchies below the CEO of the corporation. I targeted this level because, as a senior leader, an employee has aggressive goals and metrics and must excel at hitting moving targets that vacillate daily between governmental demands, consumer responses, and corporate edicts. They must also, if successful, observe behaviors of and engage other leaders to manage, adjust, and seek solutions to these complex challenges, such as government impositions, financial bailouts, and organizational survival. They have a higher and broader view of the foundation that really anchors the company. Furthermore, as Thomas and Gabarro (1999) found, top management involvement determines the adoption and success of many organizational practices. This level of perspective provided an understanding of how priorities are assigned and what focus is given, top-down, during restructuring, reorganizations during times of reduction in force (RIF). I considered this perspective valuable as the first response from most organizations is to lay off employees, the sustaining force for most companies, as they seek to manage cost and reduce overhead in times of financial crisis.

Data Collection

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) stated:

In portraiture, the voice of the researcher is everywhere: in the assumptions, preoccupations, and framework she brings to the inquiry; in the questions she asks; in the data she gathers; in the choice of stories she tells; in the language, cadence, and rhythm of her narrative. Voice is the research instrument of the self. (p. 85)

But, the researcher's voice must never take command and dominate the voice of the participants. Despite the qualitative method, the research must remain "grounded in

systematically collected data, skeptical questioning and rigorous examination of bias"

(Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 85).

Being an observer and researcher, expressing voice without dominance, and interpreting experiences without bias was a paradoxical paradigm for me. But, the very specific questions poised for the participants (see Table 3.1) supported my unique position based upon the assumptions and preoccupations I brought to the study as a researcher who had been exposed to layoffs in a corporate, Fortune 500 setting, and as an African American senior leader who had been a decision-maker and observer.

Table 3.1

Participant Interview Questions

1. Describe your organizational structure, culture, power base.

2. Describe your experience as a decision-maker and/or severed employee during a corporate layoff.

3. In terms of percentages, what was your perception of the leader demographics prior to the layoff?

4. Do you recall having any perceptions during this time as it pertains to race? If so, what were your perceptions? If not, why do you think you did not have perceptions about race? What did you focus on during the layoffs?

5. Describe the organizational structure, culture, power base after the layoff? Was there any demographic or behavioral shifting? To what do you attribute the shift?

6. Describe how you perceived the layoff decisions and/or the role you played, if any in the decisoning. Did you consider the process fair? What were the criteria for the process?

7. What was the perception of the employees related to the decisoning and fairness?

8. Do you think any of the groups perceived themselves as disproportionately impacted? If so, why or why not? (If answer is yes, address impact of perception.)

9. The unemployment rate for African Americans with or without advanced degrees is higher than the rate of other groups in various regions of the country. To what do you attribute the significantly higher unemployment rates for African Americans?

10. Generally speaking, what do you think the overall perception is of the higher unemployment rate for African Americans? Why do you believe this perception is so and what is the impact of such perception?

11. In terms of percentages, what was your perception of the leader demographics on the remaining surviving leaders after the layoffs?

The order of the questions was structured to understand the participants experience prior to addressing their perspective and perception of the role of race, African Americans, and layoffs. This was critical to understanding the participant's truth related to the corporate culture and their experience within it.

The data collection process involved various facets, to include not only my interactions with the participants, and their individual story, but the physical environment, culture, and other supporting data, such as literature that enabled the context of the portrait. The data collected as a result of the interview questions in Table 3.1 required listening and the ability to engage the participants to expand and provide deeper revelations for clarity and the identification and uncovering of emergent patterns. The questions in Table 3.1 were guiding questions, but as a researcher, I balanced how far to probe in determining the distance and the depth.

The reciprocity between the participants and me began with an explanation of the study, the intent, and goals. The interviews ranged between one to two hours—not to solely answer the questions, but to also build a rapport and relationship with the participants. Considering the delicate nature of the research and pilot study concerns with losing existing jobs or current severance payments, I felt it was necessary to spend upfront time creating an environment of ease, confidence, and trust. I did not anticipate the need for multiple meetings with participants; however, I remained open to the possibility that a revisit was necessary during the interpretation stages of the process and it was with two participants.

I used various sources to identify participants, such as networking and contacting professional associations. In-person interviews were preferred, but given the fact that participants were difficult to identify, it was necessary to interview some participants via telephone as they were a great distance from my location.

Research Bias and Ethics

Critics of qualitative inquiry, especially with a method such as portraiture where there is reliance upon personal experience, reference bias as a problem in data interpretation. With qualitative research, objectivity is not the standard for validity as it with quantitative research. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) provided an analogy similar to that of a lawyer building a case. The process requires gathering data and using it to establish links that create the whole, supported by evidence. The facts should be consistent. But, of course, there is room for bias to creep in (a controversial aspect of portraiture). Again, Hans-Georg Gadamer (as cited in Schwandt, 2007) directed us to consider the very nature of bias through his distinction between "disabling" prejudice or bias and "enabling" prejudice or bias (p. 21). His humanistic approach reminds us of our frailty as human beings.

Disabling bias came in the form of steering clear of losing my perspective, and overweighting and/or under representing data. Schwandt (2007) stated:

> Bias resulting from overreliance on assessable or key informants and/or selective attention to dramatic events or statements, the biasing effects of the presence of the inquirer and the site of the investigation, and biases stemming from the effects of the respondents on the site of the inquirer can be particularly difficult problems in the fieldwork. (p. 20)

Recognizing this challenge in qualitative inquiry, I was conscious of interpreting events as more patterned and congruent than they really were, and ensuring that my interpretation was not self-serving but, rather, for the study and research. Perception and awareness were the main

components of the research, and informing others of truth and capturing central themes was the focal point. Such focus eliminated any ethical challenges encountered, the distortion of the inquiry and support the proper assignment of meaning to the data.

Results

Like a newborn first exposed to the Free World and voicing its arrival, I yelled and cried as I came into corporate America. I couldn't forecast what awaited me then; only knowing it was a forced entrance that set parameters, limitations, and boundaries.

The findings of this research will provide a different perspective than that which is seen from quantitative studies. The individual experiences will shed light on a topic which has had very little exposure. I posit that the results fills gaps and provides insight, learning, and awareness at a level that can only captured via qualitative research.

Chapter IV: Results of Study

Portrait 1

As I settled in my hard, wooden seat and prepared for our interview, I glanced outside the window at the calm, early morning Santa Barbara waters and still palm trees. Morning had barely broken and the sun, thus far, refused to break through the fog, which hovered comfortably over the beach waters. The occasional jogger or biker breezed within view of my sight without regard or concern to the coolness of the weather. The presence of noisy garbage trucks appeared to be out of place, and altered what could have been a perfect view, as did the construction workers who hurriedly placed down orange cones and re-directed traffic. Everyone moved with purpose this morning, and I was no exception.

I previously met Participant 1, a 55-year-old African American woman, and at first glance, the softness of her dark brown eyes, gentleness of her movement, and kindness of her speech failed to reveal the depth of her years of leadership and experience in corporate America. She wore no visible battle wounds or scars, but it did not take long to recognize and appreciate the strength of this survivor, who had lived through 30 years of corporate mayhem in for-profit organizations before residing in a not-for-profit culture as a human resource director of a major medical facility.

Her early corporate years included several years as an operations manager and human resource manager in Fortune 500 financial services, before securing an opportunity in the not-for-profit medical field. She found the corporate arena in stark contrast to her demeanor—the culture was aggressive, hard, and unkind. The senior leaders were cruel, hungry for power, and willing to go as far as needed to ascend the rungs of the corporate ladder. If you were not a

member of the in-crowd, the experience was worse. She described the unfavorable experience with her last manager—in Human Resources—as an incredulous experience.

 "She was abusive. She was always after me and I didn't know why. Everyone witnessed it." I listened carefully, waiting for more. "My peers would come to me after the meetings and express concern and sympathy for me, but they were afraid to get involved." Her voice was powerful as she recalled the "long period." I could feel her pain and understood her strength as she proceeded, "she told me she wanted me to act like a bitch, like Mary. Can you believe that? But I kept my dignity and self-respect. You know, every Sunday, I listen to Joel Olsten, do you ever listen to him or read his books?" she asked. I affirmatively responded, sharing that I have read his books and seen him occasionally on television.

She delivered encouraging advice from his sermons and told me how she "held on" during that dark season. "It is always dark before the light, favor, and grace. I knew my experience [in the corporate world] wouldn't last forever. It was a test [from God] and my boss was only an instrument to carry out the test." Her voice became soft, but her delivery was steady, strong, and convincing; there were no hints of bitterness, just of lessons learned. She survived the pain, anguish, and humiliation that others observed but refrained efforts of rescue.

Personal healing was evident as she comfortably shared the trauma of her corporate past with ease and introduced me to her present day. As she described how her workday often begins at 7 a.m., the highness of her energy level bursts out. "It is fast-paced, but I love it." She proudly shared details of the organization of which she has been the Human Resource Director of Employment and Employee Relations for 20 years.

The facility offers accessible, no-cost healthcare to over 1 million members of the community, 70% of which do not have medical coverage. The community members, many of

whom are immigrants, are low income, elderly, or disabled, with a third of the patients unable to speak English. They come from all walks of life and all over the globe for the medical services offered by some of the finest doctors and surgeons in the country, who are committed to offering this service.

The operational success of the workforce is reliant upon state and federal government dollars that come in the form of end-of-year reimbursements to the hospital and from the 30% of patients who can afford to pay for their services or have medical insurance. The employees are very passionate about their jobs and the unique services they offer. But, as Participant 1 continues, "whenever we receive a shortfall and do not receive a reimbursement from the state or federal government [to cover the money our facility has put up front] and because our endowment is much smaller than other medical facilities, we have to make drastic changes."

The drastic changes she spoke of were all too familiar in these dire economic times. "When we are hurting" she explained. "We need to be very frugal, frequently asking ourselves, how can we accommodate our patients, our customers without a particular service? Where are our services duplicated? Where are the departments that are not bringing in the money?" There were no challenges in following her logic. She spoke as a woman who was very familiar with her role and confident that the process they went through to adapt to the shortfall was the right process for her company, her customers and her employees. She offered a realistic perspective:

"It [layoff] is a very sensitive issue. It can never be 100% fair. But we do an in-depth analysis, reviewing all demographics, to include race, gender, age, seniority. We try to ensure it is not disproportionate. Sometimes we cannot avoid it, though," she said, her voice trailing off.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, you know, if we are closing down a whole unit or trying to save thousands of dollars . . . we try to have a valid reason. Some decisions need to be quick because of the financial impact, depending upon what's in the reserves, how much we are spending each month—it could be weeks. But, it helps that our union employees have contracts which lay out the terms of their employment. It outlines their rights, the layoff process, conditions of employment, and the conditions of layoff. Union layoffs take more time, too. They can take months, but it makes the process more transparent."

I absorbed her comments as a group of cyclists whizzed by and drew my attention briefly to their neon-colored attire. I simultaneously wondered about the lack of contracts for roles, such as those which are more professional and less laborious, which are not in the union. I intercept her recollections and inquired about the employees who are not privy to contracts which spell it all out prior to an actual layoff. "What is the impact of non-union layoffs to the organization since they lack contracts and can be quicker, without as much transparency?" I could barely wait for her to respond because I anticipated a different reaction between the non-unionized and unionized employees.

 "The non-union employees (40%) are caught off-guard, shocked, actually. They are worried about insurance and the time it may take for them to find another job, especially if they have a family. But we still try to be fair with their severance." She proudly, continued, "we begin our entire process with a holistic layoff committee, which is comprised of human resources, the line of business, the Vice President of Staffing, Legal, and Labor Relations. I have to tell you out of all of our layoffs, and throughout the process we have not heard any noise of people coming back saying 'You laid me off because of my color.' I think we have been successful, unlike many other organizations, because we do not cherry-pick people. Our

employees perceive the process as fair because they understand the process. We have compassionate reasons based upon valid business reasons and make sure we have a business case before letting anyone go. Our process is very transparent . . ."

I did not really mean to, but I cut her off mid-sentence. "How much impact do you think that plays?" I asked.

"I think companies get into trouble because they don't dig deep to see if there is a personality issue with say, a manager and an employee. But we looked across the organization holistically at the very beginning. We hired external consultants who were Six Sigma Black Belts . . ."

I hated to abruptly interrupt, but I had to. "You hired external Black Belts at a time when the organization was hurting, losing money?"

"It was beneficial to identify where we could save money, where we could spread out work functions, and still be effective and run pertinent operations; we needed to know what areas could be targeted and have less impact to our business operations. We were able to slide people who were targeted to be laid off into other roles, other vacancies that were needed."

I was impressed. "It sounds as though you really had a good plan. How many employees ended up laid off?"

Participant 1 is momentarily silent, as she tried to recall the layoff statistics. "We had planned to lay off 200 employees of our 6,200 workforce. After we went through the process, we were able to place most of the employees and ended up laying off only 40 employees."

"That's incredible, that is pretty darn good! That includes union and non-union employees?"

"It sure does!"

I was surprised that an organization put so such much effort and care into a plan that provides for customers and employees, and the results actually were quite favorable with only 20% of the targeted employees losing their job. The experience marked a success on all fronts, such that I was not prepared for her subsequent comments related to her perception (and her perception of others) on whether or not African Americans are disproportionately impacted during layoff periods than other groups at other organizations.

Without hesitation, she piped out that, "we are the first to go." By "we," she is referring to African Americans. She had my full attention. "I think the perception out there is that we are the first to go . . . My husband and I talk about this all the time. Without a level playing field . . . and I think it would take years, decades, if then, before we are able to feel there is a level playing field . . . and I don't think we are gonna get it without some type of help . . . " She never fully completed her sentence, but I understood her point. Where there was previously satisfaction and pride in the earlier parts of our conversation, frustration and despair now seeped through.

"If you are hundreds of years behind and you can never get a home, mortgage, or job based upon your qualifications, how can you ever catch up based upon middle class salaries? It is overwhelming. The perception exists because race is a major factor. If you don't give a good business reason they are gonna look back and say, 'Why me?' People need to be told in a compassionate way. If organizations lack full disclosure, it creates more trouble." She continued, "Without a business case, employees draw their own conclusion, based upon what they feel they bring to the table."

"So if a person is [age] 50 and White, what conclusions do you feel they draw?" It was not a question I planned to ask, but one that pushed the envelope a bit farther, based upon Participant's 1 last statement.

"They are gonna say age discrimination. I think the perception exists also that people over 50 get laid off more. You know what else? Poor management is another element. If there is a poor manager who hasn't led her staff well, it is the same type of issue, even with a legitimate reason. People will say they are being let go because they didn't get along with a manager. They will say it is because they were a thorn in your side, not because of business reasons. This is why it is so important to give [performance] feedback to employees at all times. If the manager has not properly handled the performance aspect, they may have a legitimate reason for letting the employee go, but in order to make it go away, the company may need to 'sweeten the pot.' It is compounded if you are over 50, or a person of color."

"The impact to leadership can be great. After a layoff, the organization needs to tell the people what is going on . . . they need to have a communication plan. It can only be a five-minute pow-wow. The organization needs to tell the people, not let the [severed] employee tell the other employees. You have to remember they are still connected to the employees and keep in touch. The impact to companies that don't do that is great. If they have ten people, and fail to communicate what is really happening, there is s a ripple effect, as there are now 10 different perspectives. Employees tell their version and depending upon their [surviving employee] frame of mind, other employees may believe them, creating morale problems. The remaining employees may feel uncomfortable, that you may let them go and the very employees you are trying to keep, well you may lose, as they wonder if they trust the organization. Cleaning up the mess after the fact is harder than doing something in the beginning. *You* want to manage the version—not let the employee manage it."

As the sun crept into the day, breaking through the fog, and our conversation wound down, the emphasis on strategy and clear direction before a layoff and its potential impact after a

layoff was clear. I watched the bikers as they continued to whizz by through the now heavier traffic, the construction workers readjusted the orange cones to accommodate and direct the traffic patterns. They, too, understood the importance of strategically managing circumstances for desired outcomes and paths.

Portrait 2

The warning, laced with instruction, came early. I was to stop her in her verbal tracks and let her know she was speaking too swiftly as she had a tendency to do. There was no need for concern as she would not be offended. But, I was rendered momentarily still as the words rolled swiftly off her tongue, "they don't want to look for jobs; they'd rather live off of the system, which enables them." The statement stung and shocked me, all at the same time. As I spoke to Participant 2, I was appreciative of her forthrightness and energy, which aligned with her numerous years of service as a business operation strategist with a 60,000 employee, Fortune 500 telecommunication organization. Now, retired at age 54, after 22 years of service with the company, this Hispanic female, had just provided her perception of the reason why the unemployment rate for African Americans was double the rate of other groups.

The statement caused my head to tilt back and my brows to furrow as I briefly closed my eyes with thought, opening them to notice the yellow ribbon tied in the vent of the air conditioning unit above. If she knew I was African American, would that have changed her honest perception? Does it even matter? The abruptness of the start of the air conditioner in the sweltering room, returned me to the conversation and away from my private thoughts. I concluded that it did not matter, and welcomed her truth as pure data. I continued listening, fascinated by the experiences of the senior leader, who had experienced multiple reorganizations and layoffs.

As a business operation strategist, she had the unique role of providing the due diligence within the organization to determine which areas were profitable, efficient, expendable, and/or duplicated. Like an auditor, arriving with a notepad, lines of businesses perceived her and her team's presence unfavorably. This first form of communication caused the team to be known as "Dr. Death" or "The Grim Reaper." Tight-lipped information seeped out of employees when asked questions (during the due diligence process), under their false, but self-preservation notion, that "if I do not share, they will not know; and if they do not know, I cannot be severed." Even when the now federally imprisoned chief executive officer occasionally accompanied her due diligence team and offered early explanations to the employees of forthcoming actions and decisions, she still encountered employee apprehension. The chilly, non-disclosure reception was similar in four different states throughout the country, as she carried out her reduction-in-size responsibilities at various points within her career.

But this day, she continued with her perception of layoffs and race. "I had no idea African Americans had significantly higher unemployment rates than other groups. It could also be education," she stated. "I am not totally sure. I do believe it to be a systemic issue. In my retirement, I work with many senior citizens today. They are such a joy to work with and so insightful, not like the cut-throat environment of corporate America—I don't miss that at all." Her voice rose with enthusiasm and the joy in her work was apparent. She returned to the conversation at hand. "Often times we have open positions [at the senior community center] and will do the interview screenings. African Americans will come in and fill out the paperwork, and we contact them to offer a job or take a drug test. We tell them to come and start at 7 o'clock. Guess what? They don't come back. Sometimes, they'll come in and ask if we have openings. I'll tell them, 'No,' and they ask to fill out an application anyway. The system today, with so

many people out of work, requires that they fill out about five applications per week in order to continue their unemployment benefits. They need to be able to say, 'Yeah, I applied somewhere' in order to continue their benefits. I see the same thing with Hispanics who are also uneducated and bucking the system." As if trained to keep me focused on the conversation and conscious of not introducing any biased thoughts, the air conditioner kicked in again. The ends of narrow yellow ribbon extending below the air conditioning unit fluttered from the force of the air as proof that this system was working. The coolness reached me and was comforting. I was as conscious of the air conditioner as I was of her conversation.

"Was that your experience at the telecommunications company as well?" I asked.

"Well, sometimes I think situations are determined by the region. The region I was in [while working with the telecommunications company] had a heavy influence of Hispanics. Other locations where I did due diligence had more African Americans. Due to the nature of our industry, there were always more men. But overall, I would say the organization was pretty diverse and this location was well-balanced. It was about 30% Hispanic, 30% African American, and 30% White."

"What was the impact of such diversity in layoff decisioning?" I wanted to know, given the impressive balance.

"There was very little impact, to be honest. We looked at performance as the first criteria, then tenure, followed by the willingness to relocate. Often times we were shutting down call centers, and could relocate some of our best workers to other cities. We really didn't look at maintaining the balance; we took age and race out of the way. We offered opportunities to relocate regardless of race and age."

"What do you mean by, 'we took age and race out of the way'?"

"Well poor performers were the first to go. We offered relo's regardless of the race or age. We didn't say, 'Hey she's a single mom, so she can't relocate because she doesn't have family in the new location . . . we just ignored those types of factors."

I wanted to make sure I understood. "What was your primary goal? Were you looking to relocate employees due to the centralization of call centers, or were you trying to lay employees off?"

Participant 2 was quick to clarify, stating, "our primary goal was to relocate employees; there were only two options: relo or layoff. We wanted people with good performance, who had knowledge of the products and services. Some employees approached us, stating if we were considering them, well don't . . . they didn't want to go, they preferred to be laid off."

"As you looked at who had the skill, who had the product knowledge, was the deck stacked in favor of people who had more tenure?", I blurted out, wondering if those with more tenure had an advantage due to greater familiarity with product and service.

"Absolutely not! Some of the more senior employees were stagnate in their career, very comfortable, just waiting for retirement. They never aspired to be a leader. We had high achievers with shorter years of experience and they had higher levels of knowledge . . . 'super achievers,' I called them. This is why tenure was second to performance. But we had take some knowledge with us . . . did we make some bad decision? Yeah, we did. As we worked down the list of performers [to relocate] and was rejected, we moved into the list of employees who were not the best performers. Employees with stellar performance felt they could get jobs elsewhere in the company or without relocating. Mostly we saw White males willing to relocate to other locations from this area [which was predominantly Hispanic]."

"So, if the community was predominantly Hispanic and the workforce was very diverse, I think you mentioned 30% White, 30% African American, and 30% Hispanic, and the White males were the primary relocators, that would mean that the laid off individuals were primarily the other two groups—Hispanics and African Americans, no? Would not that increase the unemployment stats of those two groups in that geographic area, especially considering the size of your organization and its contribution to the community?" My questions seemed obvious to me. But, she disagreed initially, later agreeing.

"It varied by region. People do not want to leave their families or relocate. So, as we moved from one location to another the predominant groups chose to remain in the city with their families and support. Los Angeles had more Hispanics; Seattle had more Blacks and Whites. So, ultimately more Hispanics received packages in Los Angeles and more Blacks and Whites received packages in Seattle. There was no real attempt to balance," she explained.

The managers, who wrote the reviews, made layoff decisions with other managers from various departments. The decisions were passed through human resources and the legal departments to create layoff packages and review decisions impacting age or tenure that could potentially cause the company problems. Upon receipt of the blessings from these two divisions, they proceeded as planned with the relocations and layoffs. In the beginning, managers presented offers to employees as an either/or situation. Either they accepted the relocation package offered to them or they received nothing from the company. This proved to be problematic and a liability, causing human resources to move in quickly and cease such behavior, as it was a manipulative way to remove unpopular employees (who managers knew could not relocate).

As if on cue, Participant 2 anticipated my next question and directed the dialogue towards that of the disgruntled employees. "Oh yeah," she stated, "they didn't give a rat's ass after that. . . . They let calls stay in the queue." Somehow, I was unsurprised to hear this. I let her continue without interruption. "Many of the employees were upset that they didn't get an offer to relocate, causing them to be laid off. Some were really pissed. We talked to them and explained the criteria, that performance was the number one criteria for selection."

Despite the fact the company provided one week of severance pay for every year of service, up to 6 weeks, for rank and file employees and more customized packages for those in senior roles, employees suggested the real reason they were laid off. Few played the race card, but those that did felt they were laid off because they were Hispanic (the predominant group in this particular region of the United States). Others felt they were laid off because they were gay. The largest declaration of foul layoff decisioning was due to "so and so doesn't like me."

For two years, while Participant 2 kept up the stressful due diligence responsibilities, she had at-home conversations with her spouse about how they would address her circumstances, if the tables turned and she was faced with relocating or being laid off. My curiosity got the best of me and before she could offer the result, I leaned in as if reading a good book, waiting to turn the page, and asked, "Well did it ever happen?"

"Yes," she replied without any hint of remorse or concern in her voice. She was offered an opportunity to relocate several hundred miles from her home. She declined, tired of the process of severing employees. Over the years, she had worked her way up the ranks from operations, through customer services, out in the field and had enjoyed all of the learning and experience; but her last two years with the company was filled with tiresome, travel-worn layoffs. She knew the system, though. If she did not accept the relocation, she became a severed

employee. Her performance had been stellar and the package she received and considered fair reflected the organization's appreciation of her efforts over the past few years.

Today, she feels fortunate to have exited when she did. The company's layoff strategy began as a way to consolidate functions, processes, and products. By the time she accepted her package, the strategy had transitioned from consolidation-based needs to merger related downsizing. Later, reduction-in-force layoffs were generated by the off-shoring of services to foreign countries. The leaner, meaner organizational approach struck an uncomfortable chord with her as relocation packages were not part of merger/offshore severance packages.

"The government is too paternal. I tell you it is the system. The government shouldn't be picking up the tab. It should be the companies picking up the tab." She became furious. Her deliberate speech sped up, begging for my ears to catch up. Her prominent Spanish accent created a moment of déjà vu. I privately digressed and was reminded of my undergraduate Spanish classes and struggle to understand my Spanish instructor who only spoke Spanish in class. I could read the Spanish language textbooks well and write great term papers in Spanish. But, I needed a plan for the audible piece. I developed a long-lasting friendship with a classmate who had the reverse problem. She couldn't read or write Spanish, but understood every word spoken. I smiled thinking of this conjoined team, as I politely laughed and said, "Whoa, Whoa" to my participant.

"I am so sorry! I get so worked up over this stuff," she said with a laugh. "I am just not fan of companies sending work overseas. The companies save so much money doing that. We pay the taxes to pick up the unemployment expenses and the companies spend $4 per hour to the employees overseas. The whole issue is just systemic."

Portrait 3

"What's education got to do with it?" By the time I interviewed Participant 3, I had come

to expect "education" as a response for addressing the higher unemployment rate for African

Americans. But, when he practically belted out the line like Tina Turner (1984) gripping a

microphone, schooling her audience about the disconnect between socialized beliefs and

reality—"What's Love Got To Do With It?"—you come to realize the impact of the second hand

emotion—in her case love, in his case frustration—of having a Master's Degree in Business

Administration, graduating with honors, and being severed from his employer, despite receiving

a coveted award as one of the top 1% performing employees within his organization. The

response I had become familiar with hearing was not education, but emotional frustration.

The intelligence, mettle, and faith in God of this 49-year-old African American male is

immediately obvious, but it is his frustration that disturbingly sticks, long after the interview has

concluded. As a senior leader, with eight years of service, he reported to an executive who was

responsible for integrating and maintaining the stability of an electronic payments infrastructure

of a Fortune 500. He described the culture of the financial organization with 300,000 employees

he worked for as "very, very aggressive, priding itself on execution, subject matter expertise, the

ability to influence, precision, and a very high degree of quality."

It could have been the no-nonsense delivery, but the description failed to arouse

congenial and homey images within me. It elicited thoughts of whether the quest for over-

improving yielded diminishing returns, prompting me to ask, "Did you find this positive?"

"Well, at the end of the day, I found it challenging and positive because it elevated my

personal standard of excellence and level of operating; so from that standpoint, yeah it was

positive. From the less than positive standpoint . . . for individuals who were not able to execute

as quickly, you were not given second chances. You were expected to deliver, deliver once, and deliver right."

He continued to describe the circumstances prior to being laid off. "The environment was project-oriented where projects were budgeted and assigned early. The risk and capital committee allocated resources, ranked and prioritized projects, decisioning which projects to execute upon and which needed to fall between the cracks. There was a lot of internal positioning and shuffling and a person plugged into the decision base could align themselves with high priority projects which were well-funded."

"How many African Americans were in your division?"

"Oh, there were only two African Americans males, including myself, out of perhaps, 70 to 80 employees. There was one Asian female, but she was more junior."

"Were you conscious of race, did you have any perceptions related to race?" I asked.

"Absolutely. I am always conscious of that. Being able to seeing faces that look like yours is a very important element of fitting in and getting along in a culture. That was one of the things that attracted me to the organization—the Chief Executive Officer's (CEO) focus on diversity.

When asked specifically about his perception surrounding the layoff, the intensity in his response began to percolate. He was calm and pleasant, but the evidence of controlled frustration was in the details of this participant, who was laid off in mid-2009, and was able to secure contract work with various organizations. (His employment efforts are now entrepreneurial-focused.)

"I sensed something was going on behind closed doors. Things were changing, the mood was different. We were not executing on any projects; the organization was in a holding mode.

We were doing busy work . . . administrative work, meetings that didn't add value or go anywhere."

"What about the employees who were aligned to high-priority projects?"

"Well they were probably operating at 75% capacity. I was probably at 50% capacity."

"Did you have any perceptions related to race, as you were anticipating layoffs?"

He stated, "There is a perception within my community . . . " I cut him off before he elaborated to ensure we were talking about the same thing. "What community are you referring to?" I asked for clarity.

"The African American community . . . well there is a perception of last one hired, first one fired. I knew this layoff would put the organization's diversity focus to the test. In my mind I didn't think diversity could hold up as a key business priority. Considering this was the first major recession, close to being a depression in a generation, I felt the system would convert back to what it was used to, with people of color taking the brunt."

"So do you feel people of color took the brunt of it?"

"Yes, that is my perception. It was as easy as taking people of color who had not been with the company more than 10 years, especially those who were male . . . " he paused and resumed, "I looked around, they were gone. Just point blank—hit, gone. Some [African Americans] have gone on to work as CEOs and directors of major organizations. It was definitely a loss of intellectual capital. A lot of very talented people were reduced, eliminated."

"Do you think that was true of other groups . . . you know Asian, White, Hispanic?" I pushed further, conscious of the time. A clock behind his head and over his shoulder, in another room was visible to me through the glass windows of the small, but effective conference room. I wanted to be respectful of his time, especially considering his half-joke, just prior to our

discussion. As he had handed his consent form to me, he stated, "Ok, tell me what we are going to do it, let's do it, and tell me how you are going to use the information—President Obama is speaking tonight from the Oval Office [to address the BP oil crisis]." I had gotten the sense that he really wanted to watch the President, but that it was really ok that he was missing him for something else he also considered important.

He picked up where I left off, stating that if it was true that other groups were greatly impacted, it was not to the same magnitude, as people of color. He felt people of color were let go double and triple the rates of other groups. "I say that as one who is connected to other groups, peers, network organizations, and people who were three levels above me. I took a look around front, back, vertically, horizontally, and I say that from that perspective, my observation."

I wanted to turn the corner and get his perspective in general, not just one related to his organization. He continued, "I would think it is true of other organizations; I read, *Diversity, Inc*. and they have had articles over the last 17 months which can validate some of my observations." I wanted to hear more about his perception of other organizations; but it appeared the intensity of his experience created a shield, rendering his focus linear. Despite questions regarding other organizations and overall perceptions he provided answers related to his personal experience. Not wanting to introduce my biases, I avoided any leading questions.

 "A layoff is a painful experience. The only way through it in my view is by faith in Christ, relentless in being 'better, not bitter' and knowing that what my Maker has for me is for me. I was privileged to be one chosen to go through this for the ultimate purpose of being a more effective witness of God's Glory. But, I also consider the process a business decision, which needed to happen rather quickly," he commented, "one that was not planned or fully vetted, but one which was easy to take the-across-the-board approach. I don't think anyone

could ever say it was close to a fair process. It wasn't merit-based; it was not based upon performance. I ranked very highly in terms of awards and incentives . . . a top performer . . . 1% of 17,000 employees [in his division], and then the very next year I am out the door while others who didn't get the recognition or meet the performance standards are still there. Fairness? Probably not. I don't think anyone can say it was fair." Participant 3 explained further why he was laid off, "so that He is further glorified in all I think, say, and do. This is what growing in Christ and trusting His word through the storms of life is all about. But, it was also a business decision. It was an approach to look at what I consider heavy cargo."

By heavy cargo, Participant 3 was referring to highly compensated employees, who had not been around the organization for more than 10 years. He felt employees who had been with the company through mergers and acquisitions had built relationships via [merger] transition teams and were also less compensated, having come up via the ranks [and receiving slower salary acceleration], than someone who was hired into the organization within the last 10 years. He could envision the gridlock of the decision-makers in trying to determine who was a keeper. He found a glimmer of humor in perhaps an unlikely place, when he painted the picture of how the closed door decisioning meetings may have taken place. It was difficult to discern if the chuckle was facetious, but regardless, it was the first sign of relief from what must have been a painful ordeal.

"It is very political sometime. You know, I have been in meetings where people cannot make up their minds. I can see someone saying, 'Look let's make this easy, painless. Is everybody ok with that?' and everyone just raises their hand in agreement."

"So, do you think they were willing to risk all of the years of hard diversity work you described by the raise of a hand?"

He responded, "yes, absolutely" without any hesitation. "There was a lot of movement and politicking during this time and there were some who really wanted to stay with the company after receiving word they were being let go in the first round. Some were able to find a spot, even promotions in other parts of the organization for about 120 days before they were ultimately let go. I guess for me, realizing the industry was contracting instead of expanding, I decided to transfer my skills in another area."

I got a huge laugh and chuckle from Participant 3 when I asked how much notice he received prior to being laid off. It was the first real sign that he had moved on. He responded, with, "three hours." He proceeded to describe the events, with his boss pulling him into a conference room with a large white folder with the initials "CSP" on it. I initially found it odd that he remembered what the initials stood for after so much time, but after giving it a second thought, concluded that the experience was an indelible moment that, up to a certain point, probably played out repeatedly in his mind. Who would not remember that CSP stood for Corporate Service Package? He mimicked his boss, with the difficult conversation, saying, "You were picked, sorry I have to tell you that, but this is the decision."

"You know," he said, "there is historical data that suggests that the African American male is on the bottom of the socioeconomic totem pole, aggregately speaking. The order would be, White male, White female, African American female, and African American male." Participant 3 became more relaxed. There was an outburst of laughter; again, humor resurfaced in an unlikely place.

After acknowledging his familiarity with the historical data indicating that African Americans have historically suffered higher unemployment than other groups, Participant 3 explained his rationale for the statistics. He referenced Dr. Cornel West's (1993) work on

xenophobia, stating that there is a fear of African American males, which enables the socioeconomic structure. When informed that the unemployment statistics pertain to all African Americans, not just African American males, he provided a scenario of statistical averaging of the African American female and male, which included combining their data and performing a degree of exponential smoothing and forecasting, and then repeating the same for White males and females. The result was a smaller gap between the White male and female. He suggested that the gap was not smaller for the African American Male and female, and a large part was due to the roadblocks and obstacles that African Americans encountered.

He described the roadblocks as lack of access and inclusion, where African Americans were not privy to information that impacted the organization and it successes, but rather to information which was inconsequential. Such lack of access and inclusion left African Americans in positions to be cut or eliminated from their employer. He described the downstream impact as one of positioning, power, and influence.

He shuddered when I asked if he was of the perception that African Americans were victimized, refusing to accept such a word, but rather recanted a socialized statement that "African Americans had to work twice as best as the rest" and be triple qualified before even getting in the door. He spoke of the realities of the historical data with African Americans suffering most from joblessness and quoted statistical data indicating African Americans receive 60% of the earnings of their counterparts. He wanted the facts and data to speak for itself, not words, such as "victimization." He commented that it was his reality, although it reflected how color-struck our society is and how sick it remains. "It is based on all of our individual values, culture, and backgrounds which clashes sometimes and inhibits our ability to listen, rightly

divide and judge fairly. You can slice and dice groups and data to make them say what you want

them to say," he further added.

I stumped him when I asked what he thought the perception of the general population

was related to the higher unemployment rates for African Americans. He was unsure, but after

considerable thought, indicated that they would probably link the statistics to the incarceration

rate of African Americans.

He then methodically provided what he considered a realistic corporate American

scenario, which excluded African Americans and limited their success regardless of their

credentials and experience.

"Ok, take 10 line roles within an organization and the best you are going to get, at least

from the organization I came from is 5% people of color. So you only have 10 [line roles] and

5% people of color. So, you do the math on those and 9 of the roles are held by people who are

not people of color and they are connected to the Chief Executive Officer, Chief Operating

Officer (COO), and Chief Financial Officer (CFO), and so forth. So, when it is time to pass the

baton and the CEO retires, his board and his constituents will give that one other slot, which is

empty, to one of his newly graduating Harvard grads or Princeton grads, or nephew, whatever

the case may be."

"The Harvard MBA can't be African American?" I quickly shot back, knowing many

African American Harvard MBAs.

"Oh, absolutely! But, he is not a Harvard grad who is going to have an equal shot at

getting the role because he is not connected to the power structure that will make the decisions to

fill that role. So, now you have a stack of over-qualified people of color in the waiting queue but

they can't get into that slot. That slot is reserved. That is repeated over five years, 10 years, 15

years. You have to think, they have children and nephews. Their families are still growing,

perhaps at a slower rate, but you can go 200 years and unless that power structure, that base is

altered through change, or unless African Americans say, 'I can create my own power structure,

my own corporation, my own entity that I can invest in, my own communities I can spend in,

there is no change.'"

The socialized belief that love had to be connected to a boy-girl attraction was far from

reality. Just ask Tina Turner. But, if you asked Participant 3 if the socialized messaging that a

good education, graduating summa cum laude and performing at top organizational levels was a

contract for organizational inclusion, survival, or power for African Americans, he would deny

that as a reality. The gap, although disappointing, did not stop Participant 3 from progressive

entrepreneurial movement, but rather left a void where there should have been concrete answers

to complicated questions—why did unqualified employees with less experience remain? Why

was my skill and intellect dispensable? What's education got to do with it?

Portrait 4

Amidst the Bibles, colorful reference, and leadership books, was one book in particular

whose binding, for some reason or another stood out of place on the large, mahogany wall book

case. "National Bestseller" was emblazoned on the red backdrop of the black and white

paperback bind, which was stacked somewhere between the neatly arranged books and those

resting untidily on the shelf. A walk over to the bookcase presented closer scrutiny of the book

entitled "Our Kind of People." Yes, I thought, I recall this book, having read it as a member of a

book club several years ago. I did not remember the title but familiarity with the author's

name—Lawrence Otis Graham, brought flashbacks of the heated, controversial discussions

amongst the African American women in the book club on topics such as, race and the social and

political behaviors of privileged African Americans. For me, as I am sure it was for many of

them, it became a most memorable book club outing. I felt fortunate to have been a part of that

discourse, hearing unfamiliar perspectives, which challenged my own thoughts and assumptions.

I returned to my seat and waited to begin my discussion on race with Participant 4. Little did I

know, I was about to take another journey down the road of unfamiliar perspectives.

His last name was my first hint that Participant 4 was a descendant of indigenous peoples.

Given the Native American similarities to African American enslavement, I was particularly

interested in meeting Participant 4. My corporate experience led me to work with many Indian

American senior leaders, but Native American senior leaders were rare in my circle within the

financial services industry. I was very pleased to capture his perspective as a senior leader

within a large $50 billion, global Fortune 500 package delivery organization and as such eagerly

anticipated his responses related to this highly productive, intense, time-sensitive culture. He

knew the history of his organization well, taking me back to periods when the organization was

only domestic-based. He had excelled through the organization from the stock room, rising to a

senior level Vice President.

Participant 4 served in a role within this company that enabled him to support minority

businesses, ensure their success, and offer small businesses guidance. He had an easy, but

business-like delivery that made me feel he was comfortable with his topic and assured of his

knowledge; so, I was not shocked to learn that his recent retirement, after almost 40 years of

service did not reduce his corporate efforts, but rather transitioned him to service as a strong

diversity advocate for small, women, and minority-owned businesses and a liaison between those

companies and larger organizations. He is currently well positioned to pull up smaller

companies via supplier diversity programs. His chairmanship and membership with numerous

organizations which support women and minorities, highlights his commitment to strengthening the minority and women-owned businesses and communities. His involvement with several Native American groups was the second hint that he was a descendant of peoples with a long history of oppression and struggles. In a way, I felt connected.

I felt a bit of drizzle on my parade when he described his ability to assimilate into the organization without others recognizing that he was Native American. My eyes veered in the direction of the bookcase upon receipt of this revelation, now noticing I had returned the book to the wrong section in my haste to begin the interview. I dismissed the misplacement and recalled that the most contentious part of my book club's debate was regarding a section of Graham's book related to *passing* and the accompanying how-to rules. Although Participant 4 did not describe any conscious efforts to conceal or deny his ancestry, the details reminded me of passing, a personal strategic effort going back to early centuries, where some very fair to light-skinned African Americans attempted to blend into society as Whites rather than as Blacks. It offered the social and economic advantages of the White world and rejected the harsh cruelties of the world experienced by Blacks in that era. Participant 4 did not use the term passing, but rather spoke of the complexion of his skin and his ability to assimilate into the corporate society without others recognizing his Native American ancestry.

"I was never conscious of the race factor or singled out or treated differently [within corporate America]. My last name is Native American, although some people thought I was Korean because my surname is also a common Korean name. I am really only 6% Native Indian, although I consider myself Native American and am Blackfoot Indian . . . but my mother was Irish. You gotta understand, I have sandy-brown hair, with blue eyes and I don't have dark skin like many Natives do. Unless I told someone I was Native, they never knew." It did not

take much to understand where he was coming from. Coupled with his business acumen, he could have passed for a White, male CEO of any major organization. "I don't ever recall being subject to discrimination at all in the 39 years I was with the company," he continued.

"Do you think any group had the perception of disproportionate layoffs?"

"No, I don't think so, it is one of the largest corporations in the world and I don't recall ever hearing of any cases of class action suits. It has always been a great company to work for."

Despite not experiencing any layoffs or discrimination at his company, he was aware of the higher jobless statistics for African Americans, and linked the unemployment rates to education. His business and community involvement kept him abreast and involved in the economic welfare of women and minorities. He was much attuned to prejudices that may impact these groups, stating, "I know it exists and may be a factor." He continued with a perspective, secondary to education, that I had not previously heard.

"Many African Americans are apt to work for small companies where they are most comfortable, preferring to remain in their communities. It is the small businesses that are driving employment, not large corporations. Because of this, African American's numbers are more severely impacted [because smaller businesses are hit harder during tough economic downturns, due to lack of access to capital]. Not that there are not millions of minorities who work for large companies, because there are, I just think those African Americans are not as impacted, on a percentage basis. I think overall, people's perception of the higher African American unemployment rate will probably be due to education levels. Most will believe that it has more to do with prejudice than working at small companies. The 'average Joe,' depending upon how you define the average Joe will probably say there is a systemic issue like education or prejudice due to lack of insight. They would not go beyond that. "

Participant 4's passion around this topic and loyalty to his organization was evident. The layoffs experienced within his organization were due to decentralization as they extended their service into larger U.S. territories and branched out internationally. Economic downfalls and later consolidation of districts created redundancy issues and led to the need for reductions. Due to the nature of the work, divisions and districts had key performance indicators (KPIs) which drilled down to the employee level and generated performance metrics. When the organization was forced to lay off employees, they first looked at these measurable objectives. Participant 4 had a staff of people and submitted a budget, but found that they occasionally needed to reduce the work force. In any given year, depending upon budget constraints the senior leaders worked with human resources to reduce staff or move them to other roles. Up until recently, they rarely laid employees off. Even in rough economic times, they were still growing. But, if volumes fell below projections, they would lay people off.

Participant 4 felt the process was fair and sensitive, with African Americans having an advantage. He was not aware of any group, African American or otherwise, feeling they were disproportionately impacted or perceiving the process as unfair.

"I think corporations as a whole, are very sensitive to making layoff decisions, and determining who is chosen . . . they want to make unbiased decisions and most of them, if not all, have the same KPIs which makes the process more objective than subjective. That was certainly the case with my organization. In many cases, particularly with large organizations, minority employees get the benefit of the doubt, more than others." This statement puzzled me, coming from an employee who advantageously and successfully was absorbed into a corporate society and also recognized prejudice existed, but never witnessed it.

I wanted to know more about this perception, so I pushed a bit further. "Tell me," I asked, "why do you believe this to be true?"

"Based upon my experience, it is always more difficult to fire or lay off a 'protected employee.' You had to be absolutely sure to have written documentation to support your reason. It was tougher to make sure there was no injustice done, at least at my company; and my sense is that it is the same thing at most larger companies." Participant 4 felt he was very familiar with how companies operated and managed downsizing and layoffs due to his position as a committee chair, represented by large companies, which serve as advocates for smaller companies. He talked further about his employer. "We did two [performance] reviews every year, and in every decision we made, well, it was based off of the performance review. That's not to say there wasn't bias, but we strove to ensure the reviews were quantifiable. These are metrics the employee and manager agreed upon together. We would let employees draw up their own goals as long as they supported the KPIs of the district."

"Did you ever do forced-rankings?" I asked.

"I am not familiar with that, huh . . . I am pretty sure my company wasn't doing *that*," he responded after I explained the forced-ranking process. His answer left doubt in my mind—was he simply not aware or was an organization of this size really not doing forced-rankings? Was his company really sensitive? Were they really this nice to its employees? Was I jaded because of my large corporation experiences?

Regardless of my experiences and questions it did not erase proof of Participant 4's deep passion for minority economic stability; he explained the government's lack of commitment to small businesses impacting layoffs in the minority community. Access to capital continued to be a focus. He felt the government has talked a good a game, but has refused to free up capital and

allow minority businesses to grow, affecting minority employment. With authority, he stated, "They don't get it, don't go out of their way to ensure they have the same chance to win the government business."

"Why do you feel this is occurring?" I inquisitively asked, wanting to capture the perspective of the man who has spent a greater part of his organizational and retirement life to advocating minority businesses.

He confidently offered his perspective, ensuring we did not conclude our discussion without him providing another reference point. "I think, primarily, the lenders are scared to death right now. Even though there have been specific funds, supposedly available, it has been slow for the people who have the money to lend the money; they still consider these smaller, minority companies a high risk. Unless the minority company comes in with an advocate or partner, the lenders are reluctant to loosen the purse strings. It has been devastating for many small businesses because they stagnate or have cash flow problems. Many large organizations have stretched out their payment terms. They have changed their payment terms from 30 days to 90, or 120 days—for a small company who lives and dies by their cash flow . . . that is a killer for them. Then, they can't get a loan and well, that's why many companies don't make it. It is hard for these companies to retain employees."

I got the sense he was involved in a daily warfare as he described his non-profit efforts as a "good fight" for which he hopes to be successful, but also one that he enjoys. I wanted to conclude our interview but something about him as a Native American senior leader, where most corporate leaders considered him White, gnawed at me. I perused my list of questions and every question was accounted for. I looked over at "Our Kind of People" and outside of the book being in the incorrect spot, I knew what disturbed me.

"You mention that your heritage was not visible due to your hair color and eyes. What impact, if any do you feel this may have had if your Native American ancestry was more obvious? Do you think you would have encountered any prejudices? Do you think it would have impacted your success in corporate America at all?" There, I got it out. I exhaled.

"As much as I would like to believe that I would have advanced on my merits, based on my experience with other Natives, I believe I would have experienced some prejudice."

I concluded the interview and returned the book to its proper place.

Portrait 5

I listened to Participant 5 and all I could think about was Charles Swindoll's poem on "attitude." I could not recant the poem word for word, but could remember the line about life being 10% what happens to us and 90% of how we react to it. By the time Participant 5 and I concluded our discussion, I remembered more: "It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than success, than what other people think or say . . . "

Participant 5, a White female, age 52, had a strategy to do research and look for a job, having been unemployed for three months from her 10-year employer, a large, Fortune 500 healthcare company. Bachelor's degree in health in tow, she had an aggressive contact list and balanced job search schedule, carefully allowing room for downtime from the process. She had come to work with this employer after her smaller company was acquired. The two organizations had different strategies and methods of operations. The acquiring organization was described as a very conservative, managed care organization, mostly known for its Health Managed Organizations (HMOs), whose targeted customers were other large, Fortune 500 organizations. These targeted national organizations required a particular type of sales effort,

marketing, and back-end support. Her former (acquired) employer, previously targeted smaller, mid-sized companies, with a different philosophy and, thus, had difficulty providing the needed service in the new environment, causing the merged organization to lose customers. As a result, there came a decisioning point where the organization needed to sell off that piece of the business to a competitor.

Additionally, bad management decisions, loss of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), and moving into markets previously unchartered which required licensing and staffing, on top of losses due to the financial acquisitions, exacerbated the impact of a change in Medicare coverage legislation. The new legislation created a huge cost increase in one of the products, deeming it too expensive to market and maintain, resulting in another piece of the business being sold. The employees aligned to the management, sales, support, and service of the product became vulnerable to being laid off. Participant 5 had been a director of Information Technology (IT) at the time of her layoff.

By mid-2009, a critical time for most organizations due to the recession, the organization was laying off, impacting 10 to 15% of its 2,500 IT workforce. Participant 5 compared the experience to the loss of her spouse.

"I was not in the first wave of layoffs. I flew to other states to lay off employees. My husband recently passed away and that was the worst day of my life . . . this experience was very close. I had to bring [employees] into a room and tell them they were losing their jobs. They were shocked, begging me, asking me not to do that to them. It's the shock. . . . One woman was pregnant, another was in graduate school . . . I don't drink Scotch, [laughter] but Carole let me tell you, I drank Scotch that night. Management was flying all over the country letting people go. It was a tough thing to do."

Despite the gloomy description, Participant 5 was able to maintain a pleasant disposition. She tottered between an empath and a pragmatist. Her energy was vibrant and it was clear that there was no moss growing beneath her feet. If there was any healing left to be done, it was not evident.

"How did they make the decisions [identifying those to be laid off]?" I asked.

"The decisions were made prior to my arrival and to be honest, I couldn't tell you how it was decided. To this day, people still ask, but no one talks about it."

I found it odd and unfortunate, that Participant 5 had no input into the layoff decisioning of the people she was speaking with, so I wanted to know if the employees reported to her, if she had any relationship to them. She mentioned that two of the employees directly reported to her and one, well, because Participant 5 was in the neighborhood, she had the responsibility of laying off another employee who did not report to her.

Relying upon her insight, she knew the layoffs were not going to end. With the layoffs, she assumed the role of team manager on top of her director responsibilities, making her day consistently longer and more complex. The extra work made her experience "hell" causing her to contact the Vice President of her area, the person who had hired her 10 years ago and subsequently became a friend. In her quest for answers, she had hoped he would fill in some of the gaps, especially since he had recently hired a new, strictly IT employee who was interested in building systems and infrastructure, without focus on relationship management, marketing, or communication. He was also going to be her new manager. The new manager had put the writing on the wall very early, informing Participant 5 that he did not see her as a member of his organization and further, that her role needed to reside elsewhere within the organization.

Failing to be completely upended by the manager's dismissive words, she had approached her friend, the Vice President, inquisitively. "'You know,' I said, 'We need to talk, all of these people reporting to me, looking for numbers, ways to enhance efficiencies, what's going on? It's difficult. How are you planning to change your organization?'" She continued. "He assured me that he had no plans of chucking me out of the door, that I was well-respected, had a lot of needed experience, that they would create room for me . . . that they were just trying to find a good place for me because they needed me. I said, 'Listen, you gotta do what you have to do, I understand that. If you need this organization to go to another side of the business, let me help you design this, figure this out, or if you plan on disseminating it and no longer want this piece of the business . . . whatever you do, don't send me off on my way. Give me a chance to find another job.'"

She had walked away feeling confident that the Vice President did not want to "chuck her out of the door." Despite the great working relationship she and the Vice President had shared over the last 10 years, she still did not feel warm and fuzzy about their discussion. She felt that, in the end, it came down to the numbers, and if someone looked around, they would probably say that her role and her team did not belong in IT.

"What do you think was the turning point?" I asked.

Her response made it clear that her relationship with the new manager was not getting off to an employable start. "He was creepy, you couldn't believe anything he said, or what message he [the new manager] was delivering to the Vice President. He didn't like me speaking with the Vice President. He began to limit my travel and face-to-face meetings that were on my calendar and required to do my job. He said he was going to handle all of those meetings."

"The fourth quarter was horrible. I kept hearing how they were trimming the waste. They began to stack-rank the employees and reviewing performance plans. We had to constantly look at where we had efficiencies and we could improve. This was the perfect opportunity for the new manager because he did not want me there. He wanted someone who could build up systems, an architectural-type person. He didn't want to take up space with my type of expertise (relationship management, marketing, and communication within the IT space). I just knew it." Her bandwidth was not increasing and company dollars were not being invested in her area; so Participant 5 began preparing herself, by cleaning up her office, team, and work, taking her personal information off of her laptop and removing items from her desk, taking them home, preparing for what she considered the inevitable. She made sure her staff was fit, had everything in place, and was outfitted with needed schedules. By the time she became a statistical reduction in force (RIF) employee, she had already cleared out her office and was literally sitting in her office waiting for human resources to arrive by 9 a.m., she had her office keys, laptop, and cell phone in hand, ready for return to the organization which had relished in her superior performance. She sipped on coffee as she awaited the moment. The experience seemed like a self-fulfilling prophecy and I wanted to know if she agreed.

I approached my question carefully. "Do you think you contributed to the end result? Do you think you made it easy for them to lay you off as you went through the process of setting the stage as a RIFed employee, with them thinking you may have already checked out? Did you consider that they may have decided to put you in another area given your superior performance?"

"No, no. I called my VP friend three days prior, Wednesday. He didn't answer his phone; so I instant messaged him and he asked me what I wanted. When he realized I wanted to talk about the upcoming layoffs, he never called me back."

By 9:30 a.m., Participant 5, after receiving the trained layoff speech, was en route to her manicure and pedicure appointment, severance papers in hand. She indicated that she did not feel the process was fair. As a decision-maker, in the first layoff, she had no idea what the criteria was for layoff and it left her surprised. The subsequent round of layoffs, where she was a severed employee, left her befuddled due to her excellent service to the company.

"Are you ready for this, are you ready for this!" she blurted out. "The company laid off two other people, two African American females who were under project management." The two women were below her level and had less experience than the other directors.

"Do you feel that any particular group was targeted? Why do you feel the African Americans were let go?

"Well, they did have the least number of years and experience. I had worked so hard with them and I wanted to see them blossom and grow. They were successful, but then it just happened. It was a head count . . . it went by least experience, number of years . . . but with me, I had 10 years. People who are still there call and tell me I am in a better place, but they are getting a check and I getting unemployment. Everybody keeps saying, 'I can't believe they did that to you.' You know, I am a very smart and intelligent woman. I have great experience and have had many successes. I make great relationships. I have a lot to offer to a company. I know that. It's just funny how one person can come into your life and ruin your whole record.

"How do you think the manager was able to lay you off with 10 years of service and great performance? Was human resources concerned about liabilities?"

"They get around it by saying the *position* is eliminated?"

"To this day, has the role been filled?" I asked.

The first and only hint of disappointment appears when she responded, "No. You know they [organization] only have to wait six months and they can do whatever they want to."

"Why do feel the process was not fair for you?'

With the same apparent energy visible throughout the interview, she responded, "they let a good employee go and they could have placed me somewhere else within the organization. You know, I have a friend who is a recruiter; to test references, she contacted my friend, the Vice President, who I still think would do and say the right thing. You know what he said? He told her I worked my way out of a job . . . worked my way of out of a job. He said, 'She built a hell of a team and they can run on their own.'"

It reminded me of employees who withhold information, thinking that such an act will make them more valuable to an organization. I could almost understand that line of thinking after listening to Participant 5. If she had held back and not given her all, leaving the organization in need of her expertise, unable to function without her, would her demise have been the same?

There was great pause, when she was asked her perception of the factors attributed to the higher African American unemployment rates. It was the first long pause in our 90-minute discussion. In her networking and unemployment sessions, she sees very few African Americans. She considered that it is because the meetings she attends are at senior leader levels, and not attended by those who are rank and file employees. She offered that the general public perception may be that education is major contributor to the higher jobless rates for African Americans. But, she questioned the validity of her statement when she considered the two

African American women who lost their jobs from her team. They both had Master's degrees. But when she considered employees she had interviewed over the years, she concluded it must be education.

She acknowledged that she has been through tougher times, that there are so many opportunities out there, and that she has had opportunity to dialogue with some very positive people since she has been laid off. She has gone through a period of self-discovery and questions whether she wants to go through the corporate America scene again, but considers taking a step back and re-prioritizing her life.

I have one last question for this incredibly positive participant. "Given that you worked yourself out of job due to hard work and excellent service, what you will do the next time . . . will you give it your all?"

True to the end, she shared her passionate concerns, "You know what? What I am fearful of, is do I put my heart and soul in my next job? . . . And it's a terrible thing, you don't want your employees killing themselves, you want them to give you their best. Then you rate them and that is how employees get to the next step. But look at what happened to me . . . I almost fearful, but what do you do? Do you hold back? To answer your question, I will still give my heart and soul, because that's just the person I am."

> The single most significant decision
> I can make on a day-to-day basis is my choice of attitude.
> It is more important than my past,
> my education, my bankroll,
> my successes and failures, fame or pain,
> than what other people think or say about me.
> Attitude is the "single string" that keeps me going
> or cripples my progress.
> It alone fuels my fire or assaults my hope.
> When my attitudes are right, there's no barrier too high,
> no valley too deep, no dream too extreme,
> no challenge too great for me.

The longer I live the more convinced I become that life is 10% what happens to us and 90% how we respond to it. (Swindoll, 1982, p. 207)

Portrait 6

I always enjoyed the view of the rowers from the banks of the Charles River in Boston, especially during sunrise. The crisp, early-fall air coupled with the historic Harvard Square background and peaked foliage seemed so peaceful and beautiful. The synchronization of the oars, as the rowers moved in unison was a graceful, easy sight in the early mornings. The athletes made it looked effortless, but I could only imagine the difficulty of plying such a craft.

The annual Head of Charles River Regatta, a rowing event, was even more spectacular as thousands of competitors participated and many spectators lined the Eliot Bridge and grassy areas waiting to be awed by the uniformity and sportsmanship. Never learning the skill of swimming until much later in life, I lacked this basic needed skill of rowing and was rendered to watching from the side lines and surmising what the experience was like as a rower. I perceived the experience as a wonderful, team-spirited encounter. I later learned from rowers of the wee early morning rise to train and the long process of becoming a rower, which required patience, consistency, fitness, and power.

My current, outward view from the waterfront patio of the seafood restaurant on Lake Norman in North Carolina had similar elements of my years watching rowers in Harvard Square. There were speedboats where Harvard Square had rowboats. People were coming and going as patrons angled and moored their boats up to the slips and landing docks of the restaurant and hopped out, as others, having met their culinary delight, began to board their boats and unravel their lines.

The restaurant was void of students, but the nearby, quaint Davidson College, with its green luscious campus, historic in its own right, presented a different look and feel to that of

Harvard University's collegial yard. Although the sun was not rising, the sweltering day was setting and the fall coolness of the Charles River would have been a welcomed relief. Most customers, unlike onlookers lining the Boston bridges, opted for indoor seating and the opportunity to break for air conditioning, away from the suffocating humidity. I chose to relish the warmth against my skin and intake, albeit a tad stuffy, fresher air. Besides, the 9-inch canvas umbrella secured to my dining table, and tilted above my head provided sufficient shading; with everyone else inside, I could watch the sun set and have a quieter locale to meet with Participant 6.

Participant 6 had the unusual position of providing a perspective of a decision-maker and severed employee from the same company where he was a decision-maker and 37-year employee. He was the Director of Human Resources of North America, and served two levels down from the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), enabling him to be close to the direction and vision set by the CEO. He is a White, 57-year-old male, employed (until his severance) at a Fortune 500 oil and chemical company. His experience with layoffs was primarily a result of organizational change related to mergers. He described the structure of his organization as very hierarchal with several leadership layers. His publicly traded employer, one of the world's top ten largest organizations, sold his division as a single unit to a privately-held oil and chemical company, which then became his new employer. The publicly traded organization benefited from revenue of almost $40 billion in 2008 and had over 100,000 employees, while the privately held organization had 6000 employees.

As a decision-maker, Participant 6 indicated that it was easiest when closing an entire site, because everyone was affected. If they were not closing an entire site, the decision-making process became more complicated. He indicated that as a director of human resources, his

process began by assisting the divisions in first identifying employees with the greatest potential. They also took into consideration strong performance reviews as an identifier for those who had the greatest potential, and because the reviews were 80% quantitative, they were able to do some forced-rankings and stack rank employees against each other to identify the best and worst performers. Additionally, they considered role consolidation, an employee's ability to multitask and get along with others.

Participant 6 indicated that the difficulty rested with employees who landed in the middle of the page. The forced-ranking requirements were that 10% of the employees would be top performers, 25% were in the bottom and should have been severed long ago, leaving 65% of the workforce in the middle. The top 10%, although still risked being severed, were most likely automatic keepers. For the top 10%, they looked at specific competencies, teamwork, and whether or not the individual was action-oriented. The bottom 25% was not necessarily automatically severed, as a poor performer could be adjusted in the forced-rankings to accommodate factors such as, diversity or length of time with the organization.

As if recognizing a faux pas, Participate 6 took a deep sigh, and explained that such accommodation, although rare, happened. In some aspects, he seemed matter-of-factly as he described the process; yet, at other times, he appeared apologetically to have been a participant and decision-maker in the layoff process. Without hesitation, he balanced his statement. "Similarly, the remaining 65% were subject to the same criteria such as skill, team work, results, diversity, length of time, and the forced-rankings."

But, the matter-of-just-the-facts side of him continued to wrestle with his emotional side. "Honestly, often times, the deciding factor was whether or not the individual had an advocate looking out for them at the decision-making table. Strong push from an advocate could

favorably tip the scales in the direction of one person causing the deck to shift unfavorably for another, perhaps more organizationally-suited employee lacking an advocate voice."

Participant 6 was eager to talk and relive himself of what may have been a therapeutic opportunity, explaining that gender and race were remotely an issue, only splitting hairs if all things were equal, feeling that African Americans were lionized above other groups. All things being equal, Participant 6 felt that the organization would keep an African American employee and that the color of an employee would be a benefit.

This was not a foreign perspective to me, but was certainly one that required deeper discussion. "Please elaborate," I asked.

Willing to delve, he stated, that "although none of the companies I worked for, including the last one where I was a much more prominent decision-maker, had filed Affirmative Action Plans (we were never required to do so because we were not tier one suppliers selling directly to the government), we always tracked this data as though we were [tier one suppliers] in order to ensure our hiring and demographics were reflective of the population as a whole. Therefore, to stay in compliance with our company beliefs and values of being diverse and supporting affirmative action, we wanted to make sure we were not letting go a disproportionate segment of the employee population versus the population as a whole."

"I see." I quietly mumbled, careful not to interrupt and break his concentration, but loud enough to ensure him of my devoted attention.

"It was especially difficult at times to attract minorities into the chemical industry (especially degreed professionals). So, whenever we did these downsizings, we would err in staying within our self-imposed affirmation action guidelines. We always also had legal consultation and never encountered any claims of "reverse discrimination." I always felt it was a

much fairer deciding factor, for example, than having a White supervisor select a White subordinate who they were friendly with outside of work. Again, all else being equal with performance, years of service, experience, education, etc., this actually helped take some subjectivity out of the process. . . . All things being equal, being a person of color was a benefit, because there was more sensitivity around race . . . "

Participant 6 continued, "certainly if someone was looking for a reason to disagree with our decision they could have tried to raise this issue, but it never happened . . . as you and I know all too well, it certainly is never easy to be told you are being let go, regardless of the circumstances."

His voice of experience transitioned us to his unusual dual role as a decision-maker and severed employee. As a decision-maker, but prior to his subsequent layoff, he felt the process was as fair as it could be and that there were always going to be employees for whom you would have to flip a coin to make a decision. As a severed employee, he indicated that he did not have bitter feelings, but the rationale for laying him off was "bogus and disappointing."

The sun had not yet fully set; but as the yellow of the day sun and the burnt-orange of the declining sun, melded with the settling blue of the sky and gray of the evening, I recognized the irony of how the view changes depending upon where one sat. Much like my sidelined perception of the joys of rowing and of learning of the contrasting grueling commitment and process, Participant 6, on the other side of the coin, felt the process was now unjust and the organization owed him a chance to remain if he had done a great job. His perception was that the employees of the organization also did not consider the layoff process a fair one and such disappointments undermined the credibility of the process. He felt the employee's perception was that there was always something else behind the decision and they never knew what that

something else was. Additionally, poorly executed communications plans created more distrust in the midst of turmoil within the organization, presenting employees with difficulty understanding all of the change.

Participant 6 was of the perception that the decision to lay him off was due to his age. He indicated that after a certain age, especially after reaching age 50 or higher, departure from an organization most likely will not end on the employees' terms. His expectation, as a top performer, was that he would be moved into a new role. His observation was that the organization retained employees who were younger, because they represented longer continuity and potential. He felt that the organization would keep a guy who was in his 40s over one who was in his 50s. Most interestingly, he "somewhat" felt that particular groups were targeted, specifically members of the older group.

Layoff severance and voluntary retirement packages were financially more attractive for those who were members of the older group, making it difficult for these members to question or express dissatisfaction with the process.

"Why didn't you reject your package in pursuit of fairness?" I had a pretty good idea of the coming response, but wanted to hear it from him.

"Rejection of the severance package, in pursuit of fairness, left the package on the table, with me and any other employee who got a package, still exiting the company. The package was considered a courtesy offering from the company and was therefore optional; the severance, due to layoff was not optional. It's hard to reject the package. Rejection of the package would most likely result in the employee attempting to sue the organization while unemployed, potentially rendering a financial hardship."

When asked about the risk and legalities of such targeted decisoning, Participant 6, quickly shifted back to his role as a decision-maker. "As a human resource representative seated at the table, we were well aware of the liabilities (and challenges faced by employees faced with signing releases) and purposefully focused discussions around employees who would have an axe to grind. In such cases, we would up the ante on the employees' package, and as with all severance packages, the employee was asked to sign a waiver releasing the organization from any liability with acceptance of the package."

The decisioning and strategy sounded unfairly calculating; I looked across the reflective waters and thought about boat docking tips I once read:

1. The first step in preparing to dock is to judge the external factors.
2. Be prepared for tricky docking.
3. Sometimes this situation is unavoidable so you must be prepared for it.
4. Easy? It is if there is no outside factor influencing your performance.
5. Do not panic if you feel tension when you go to dock against the wind and current. Remember that keeping cool, going slow, envisioning how the docking procedure will go, and communicating to the people who are throwing and catching your lines are the most important things for a clean docking. (Bloodwell, 2002, para. 5,10,11, 12)

The process sounded all too familiar.

Chapter V: Analysis

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to address whether or not the perception existed that African Americans are disproportionately impacted during layoffs within corporations. Phenomenology was the ideal method to understand the human experience and perception of the participants and generate awareness around race and corporate layoffs. This methodology welcomed my personal experiences on this topic and allowed the opportunity to bring my interpretive insight, analytic scrutiny, and aesthetic order to the collection of data, spoken of by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997, p. 185). In this chapter, I will discuss the emergent themes, resulting from the research in relation to the relevant dimensions that cut across the six portraits, in addition to my own experience.

As a phenomenological researcher, I included excerpts from my autoethnography on my 25 years of layoff experience within various organizations, as an African American employee, beginning with a role as a layoff decision-making human resources manager. I expressed in my autoethnography, that I feel the burden for me, as an African American, is greater than that of my peers of other races, because there is more baggage associated with the process. I could look back as far as slavery or the Jim Crow era—where laws supported discrimination of African Americans—to be distrustful of marginalizing systems; but I do not have to look that far in arrears. All I have to do is focus on the recent organizational restructuring (previously mentioned) where I was realigned to report to a young, White male who lacked comparable experience or educational attainment. Although I was not laid off in the process, I witnessed numerous African Americans who were severed, over their White peers, who had less educational attainment and experience. Such inequalities are reminders, to me, of historical patterns of unfair, unjust treatment and can add to psychological devaluation.

Due to my experiences, a level of anger existed prior to the layoffs, most likely built up from all of the previous layoffs and restructurings, and uncomfortable conversations due to weak assignments, where I was under-utilized, while unqualified, White co-workers excelled. My psychological expectation was, and continues to be, that the organization, if employing me, has an obligation to provide me with fair placement based on my contribution, experience, and education.

My layoff experience in corporate America as an African American senior leader, former human resource decision-maker, and later corporate observer coupled with the exposure to layoffs in the 1980s, well before they were organizationally caché, offers a perspective from various angles. I feel I have been researching this topic long before I knew I was truly researching it. It is because of this exposure I feel confident as a phenomenological researcher, but also a bit concerned as the emerging themes and pre-defined relevant dimensions overlap. Beneficially, this recognition was at the forefront of my research as I sought to mitigate my bias in identifying emergent themes. The emergent themes were congruent with my experience, from the six participants who were of diverse backgrounds, organizations and industries and shared their story. I placed the emergent themes into three categories: institutional rituals, patterns, and beliefs.

Institutional Rituals

Decision-maker participants spoke of the preparation to select employees to be laid off, primarily after a merger, restructuring, or other external factor impacted the organization. One hundred percent of the participants with decision-maker responsibilities (Participants 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6) began the process with reliance upon performance evaluations as the key institutional ritual used to assess employees. Most notable to me about the reliance upon performance

evaluations was that only Participant 6 utilized performance assessments as a tool to identify "keepers." The remaining decision-maker participants used the tool to identify "goers," meaning those who would be severed from the organization. The impact of the approach is that one focuses on identifying employees with whom there is a negative connotation—the thorn in the side or those they cannot relate to—while the other focuses upon employees who present value to the organization.

Fifty percent of the participants (Participants 3, 5, and 6) mentioned some degree of forced-ranking, used by their organization to rank the employees against each other in the performance review or layoff process. Despite the fact that forced-ranking is usually enabled by quantitative performance goals and data, 66% of the participants (Participants 1, 3, 4, and 6) referenced bias in the performance review or layoff process (see Figure 5.1). (Participant 1, although not referencing forced-rankings, suggested bias in the layoff process of other organizations and that felt companies needed to look deeper into reasoning behind layoff decisions made by their leaders.) This theme was consistent with the supporting research of the relevant dimensions, where 83% of the participants discussed performance evaluations for layoffs selections with 66% of the participants addressing some degree of bias in the process. Powell and Graves (2003) found that biased performance evaluations could have a devastating effect on employees' career, influencing virtually every decision about them (p. 206). As the first reflection of an employees' ability to add value to an organization, the performance evaluation is the first formalized and documented step in a process of identifying those for the in-group or out-group. The downstream repercussions are impactful throughout the employee's career in terms of inclusions, promotions, and layoffs. Unchecked bias is significantly damaging.
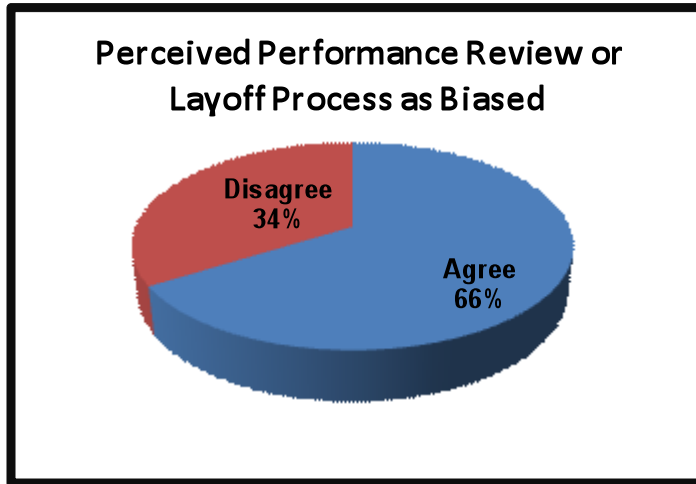
Figure 5.1. Perception of bias.

Decision-makers also included subject matter experts to reduce organizational liability. Legal, human resources, and other key stakeholders were asked to either assists in the selection process or provide insight into the final selections. The degree of involvement varied from participant to participant. For example, Participant 1 had a strong committee of experts to assist in the process to include external consultants such as, Six Sigma Black Belts, where Participant 2 referenced the involvement of legal and human resources in an after-the-fact governance capacity. The result for the organization of Participant 2 was that decision-makers had to return to the table for more decisioning due to unfair, libelous practices, and selections made by managers to rid themselves of thorn in the side employees. Participant 6, also a decision-maker and human resource expert who was involved in the process spoke of the need of his expertise, but reflected that, if an employee had an advocate or friend at the table, shifting of employee ranking took place which allowed some employees to stay and others to go. Such actions speak to the credibility of the performance process and the need to ensure that all parties do the right thing, as well as the level of flexibility within the layoff process, even as the subject matters experts participate.

Previous research findings highlight the homosocial implications of similar attraction and performance evaluations. Kraiger and Ford (1985) found that Whites (supervisors) rate Black employee performance lower than that of White employees. Similarly, Elvira and Zatzick (2002) in their study, concluded that Black's performance rating were significantly lower than their White peers. The results of Greenhaus et al. (1990) also identified similar outcomes with Black's receiving lower performance ratings. These finding are consistent with Northouse's (2007) research of identifying those who are in the out-group being perceived as less attractive, than those who share common experiences.

Furthermore, historical perception of Whites as leaders reinforces the keeper characteristics of Whites during the layoff ritual. The negative connotation previously mentioned when identifying goers closes the door on acceptance of diverse thought, behavior, or appearance, when pre-existing knowledge structures lead to a mismatch of leader traits.

A racial bias study characterizes a match as a leader and subject to more favorable evaluations, while a mismatch fails to categorize the person as a leader (Rosette et al., 2008). A causal position is supported with the research of Kluegel (1978), which found that African Americans lack the opportunity to demonstrate "particularistic" (p. 304) characteristics and leadership potential prior to layoffs due to exclusion and disconnect from the power structure spoken of by Participant 3. The research of Elvira and Zatzick (2002) found that Whites, as predominant corporate decision-makers, were more likely to retain other Whites during layoff periods as opposed to out-group members whom they did not identify with. As previously stated, such data is important in analyzing the role of race and layoffs. All groups have a tendency to select similar people, but White males had the opportunity to do so (Elliott & Smith,

2004). On the surface, performance evaluations for corporate layoff selection may appear to be the easiest and safest ritual to begin the layoff process, but it is not without challenges.

Patterns

There were salient sensing and judging patterns present in many of the interviews. The participants revealed behaviors of psychological preparation, reliance upon senses, and personal decision-making on how to respond to the possibility of being laid off—looking for another job internally and/or externally, networking, or positioning. Additionally, upon being laid off, the participants re-examined the layoff process in terms of fairness.

Sensing. The participants observed certain organizational patterns, such as refusal to fund particular projects or redirection of funding for projects as the first sign that their company was struggling financially. This observation elevated the participant's awareness to what was happening around them. Participant 3 indicated that he sensed something was going on behind closed doors due to changes in the organizational mood and the type of work engaged. He also became aware of work assignments designed to keep the employees busy, rather than assignments of value which resulted in tangible deliverables. Participant 5 sensed changes were abounding when a merger caused a clash of cultural philosophies leaving the company unable to meet customer demands. New legislation increased the organizational pressures. But, it was her new manager putting the "writing on the wall" by telling her he did not have a vision for her on his team that confirmed that reality of what she sensed. Participant 4 spoke of "redundancy of work" as they decentralized and extended service into other markets which occasionally negatively impacted key performance indicators.

Much like the psychological experience and process of sensing layoffs I encountered, the participants, armed with awareness, began to prepare themselves prior to knowing the results of

any organizational decisioning. Participant 3 observed many employees networking, jockeying, and attempting to position themselves for survival and other internal opportunities for continuous employment. He (Participant 3) chose, instead, to seek external employment, which he did not find prior to being laid off. Participant 5 sought refuge from a previous work relationship by connecting with a former manager to understand what was going on and get a handle on expectations for her role. The effort left her even more assured that she would be laid off, despite hearing otherwise; she begin to physically prepare to be laid off by taking her personal items home, cleaning up her office and seeking employment elsewhere, again external to the company.

Likewise, I had observed the restructuring and layoff patterns so frequently as an employee that I knew the process thoroughly. I knew when laptops would be confiscated and had already retrieved the majority of my personal files. I knew there would be little time to say goodbye, and considered drafting a goodbye letter to friends and co-workers, only ceasing to do so, when it was apparent that was going one step too far. I even knew that boxes would be scarce and toted one for years, waiting to put my belongings in it. I secured phone numbers of coworkers I planned to continue a relationship with in advance. For all of the preparedness, I was simply waiting to be told that I could go. Part of my response was anticipating an involuntary exit.

Participant 2, as a decision-maker, sensed the day would eventually come when she too was in the very same position as the people she was decisioning. The company's layoffs initially began as a result of consolidations, and then merger-related downsizing. After several years, it was not hard to realize the downward spiral with the issues of the company making daily headline news and the CEO being imprisoned. She and her husband had talked about the

situation and made their own personal decisions as to how they would handle her being laid off once it materialized. When it did occur, it was an easy to accept the layoff package, as her family already had a layoff strategy.

These data suggest to me that employees are astute enough to recognize organizational changes well before the organization gets around to announcing the impact of mergers, restructurings, or other factors. The sensing leading to psychological and physical preparation before the impact has been communicated organizationally detracts from needed employee work efforts as they are focused on their personal economic survival.

Judging. Notably, 100% of the participants who were decision-makers, perceived the process as fair or as fair as it could be. Most remarkable is that Participants 1 and 6 fell into two categories, believing the process fair and unfair. Participant 1 (African American decision-maker, Human Resource Director) felt the process utilized by her organization was fair, but felt that such fairness was not exercised at other organizations. Participant 6 (White decision-maker and laid off employee, Human Resource Director) felt the process was fair when he was a decision-maker, but unfair when the decision-makers later, void of him, decided he should be laid off. Participant 6 was included in the sixty percent of the participants who served as a layoff decision-maker, prior to being laid off themselves from the very company in which they were a decision-maker.

Once laid off, the majority of these decision-makers felt the process was no longer a fair one. Each of these participants was a self-identified strong contributor to the organization, based upon their performance evaluations. The reliance upon performance evaluations as the primary criteria for selection, gave greater weighting to managerial discretion and subjectivity which

appears personal without the benefit of transparency and may account for 100% of participants who experienced being laid off perceiving the layoff process as unfair.

Participant Beliefs

There were refrains expressed or implied by the participants that I heard repeatedly, many of which aligned with the relevant dimensions. It was a common belief among the participants that the lack of education of African Americans was a major contributor to the higher rate of unemployment of African Americans compared to other groups.

The African American participants had very strong beliefs related to discrimination and marginalization, which were not the beliefs of other participants. Because the viewpoints of the African Americans differed starkly and were consistent with my personal experiences and views of layoffs, I have given greater attention to the overlapping of beliefs and relevant dimensions pertaining to education and discrimination in this section.

Education. Eighty percent of the participants, who worked within Fortune 500 companies, had expressed their belief on the impact or lack of impact of education. Two participants, although both aware of the higher unemployment rates of African Americans prior to our discussion, failed to mention education as a layoff factor: Participant 1 (African American female, advanced degree) who previously worked for a Fortune 500 company, but currently works for a nonprofit organization and Participant 6 (White male, education level unknown), who was a layoff decision-maker and severed employee. Both Participants 1 (currently) and 6 (prior to layoff) served as our human resources directors.

Participant 2 (Hispanic female, educational level unknown), was unaware of the higher unemployment rates for African Americans, but attributed the statistic to lack of education. She

felt the "system" provided a crutch enabling a dependent mentality on the government rather than pursuit of an education leading to gainful employment.

A stronger opposing perspective was shared by Participant 3 (African American male, MBA), who was well aware of the job rate statistics, and felt that having an education did not ensure long, gainful employment, or prevent one from entering the unemployment lines. His experience as a successful African American male with an advanced degree did not yield the anticipated socialized results, which suggests that education for African Americans provides economic stability. Participant 3 has now taken an entrepreneurial approach and followed the suggestions of Livers and Caver (2003) given to African Americans to build relationships and create opportunities to offset corporate barriers.

The research of Wilson and McBrier (2005) concluded that college degrees reduce the likelihood of experiencing layoffs for African Americans and Whites. However, government issued research by the U.S. Department of Labor confirmed societal, internal, structural, and governmental barriers, which impact the employment of people of color (James-Hughes, 2003). Imagine being socialized to believe that education is the "key" to your success, freedom and independence in corporate America, only to arrive and find out that education only opened the door. Once inside, you become acutely aware of the barriers designed to eradicate your progress and success.

Participant 4 (Native American male, educational level unknown) was also very aware of the unemployment statistics and the higher jobless rates for African Americans offering a similar perspective to Participant 2. He cited education as a cause for the higher African American unemployment rates, but laid secondary blame with the United States government, feeling as

though there was more the government could do to help small businesses, where most African

Americans worked.

He felt the lack of governmental support cost small businesses to shut down, increasing

the unemployment rate of African Americans. Participant 4's perspective on government impact

has further support from Merisotis (2005) who stated that the declining purchasing power of

federal aid continues to be a critical barrier to access to higher education (p. 541), especially

considering other highly funded government efforts, such as the war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"We're so focused on 'too big to fail' that we are treating the issue as 'too little to matter,'" said

Representative Emanuel Cleaver, (D-Mo. and Chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus'

jobs task force) (as cited in Goldman, 2009, para. 7). Cleaver said the main reason for such a

high rate of Black unemployment is a lack of opportunities for proper job training in urban

communities.

Participant 5 (White female, bachelor's degree), similar to Participants 2 and 4, also

assigned education as a factor in the higher unemployment statistics for African Americans. She

initially hinted that two (co-worker) African American females, who possessed advanced degrees

and were laid off during the same period as she, were severed due to race; upon further

questioning, she linked their severance to their junior status, despite them having further

education than she (but reporting below her).

Education may support African American entry into corporate America, and although not

shielding one from corporate layoffs, may aid in closing the unemployment gap between African

Americans and other groups. There remains a high degree of inequality in employment for

Blacks and Whites who have received equal education. The rate of unemployment for Whites

with a college degree is 4.3%, but for Blacks it is 5.8%. For those with a high school diploma

but no college, the unemployment rate is 9.1% for Whites and 15% for Blacks (Goldman, 2009, para. 17). According to another recent study conducted that looks at a series of indicators of the benefits of higher education in all 50 states, increasing educational attainment is highly associated with lower unemployment rates and a range of other factors that have a broad impact, both economically and socially, on our nation (Merisotis, 2005, p. 540).

The decade of the 1960s took us to the precipice of great social change and provided many avenues to use government policy to make true the words of equality and freedom from Dr. King and the Declaration of Independence a reality. One of our great truths is that higher education is a key component of our national well being (Merisotis, 2005, p. 539). The advantages of securing an education, especially higher education, have been linked to self-sufficiency, economic stability, and career growth, among other critical benefits.

Education has also been deemed a critical goal for societal and corporate success and as such was a very salient theme in the research. I believe so because I suspect that most people, regardless of group, are socialized to believe that education is the key to economic sufficiency and opportunities, making it easy to identify education as a factor. But, for African American parents, the process by which children's beliefs, goals, and behaviors are shaped to conform to those of their social group so that they may become competent adult members of that group is more complex because they must socialize their children to function in two social groups: mainstream White society and the particular Black community to which they belong (Suizzo et al., 2008, p. 289). This parental leadership serves as a proactive approach toward successful societal preparation and engagement.

Similarly, my personal experience, as revealed in Chapter II, identifies parental intervention in directing me towards a good education resulting in a good job, despite my desires

to follow my heart and artistic abilities. The disappointment of reporting to a high school educated, White male who was previously a level below me, but promoted above me, dispelled the socialized messaging. I remained employed during a restructuring (where others loss their job), but confused.

The hierarchical regression research of Hargis et al. (2006) found a correlation between education and job termination with African Americans more likely to be laid off than White employees. Not surprising then that education was a consistent, causal emergent theme throughout the research, in explaining the higher unemployment rates for African Americans, with each participant offering a slightly different perspective.

I believe there is truth in the correlation between education and the higher unemployment rates of African Americans as the data from previous research has suggested; however, because African Americans have historical challenges and a need to function bi-culturally, in two worlds, the socialized message is amped up. Perhaps, as African Americans we have greater corporate expectations upon receiving educational attainment because it was harder to achieve and the message has been so ingrained.

Discrimination/marginalization. Sixty-six percent (see Figure 5.2) of the participants were of the belief that discrimination could play a role in layoffs. Participant 4 (Native American male), not conscious of race and excelling in corporate America as White, mentioned that he knew layoff discrimination existed, although he did not witness such behavior. Participant 6 (White male) as a director of human resources stated that he attempted to mitigate subjectivity in the decisioning process by adhering to self-imposed Affirmative Action guidelines, which was fairer than a White employee selecting another White he or she was a friend with as a keeper during the layoff period.

Perceived Discrimination as Impacting Decisioning

Disagreed 34%

Agreed 66%
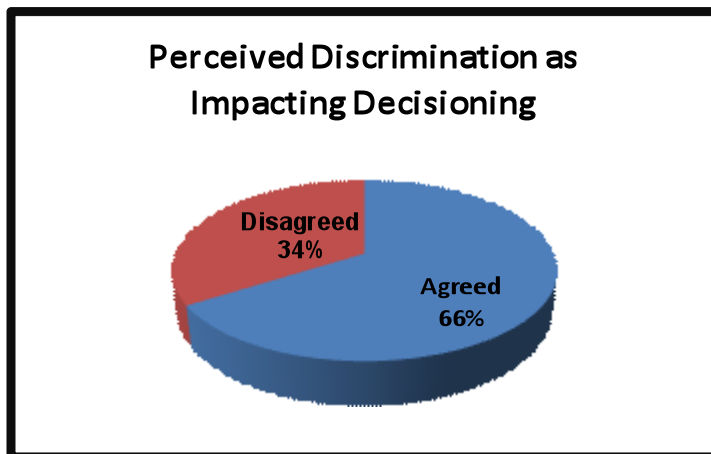
Figure 5.2. Perception of discrimination.

Thirty-three percent of the participants felt African Americans were disproportionately impacted during layoffs within corporations, and they were the two African American participants. The remaining participants failed to identify any group as a target, with the exception of one 57-year-old participant (17%) perceiving individuals over the age of 50 to be a targeted group. Participant 2 (Hispanic female) felt those who were laid off within her organization attributed their layoff status to whatever group they belonged. Participant 1 shared a similar viewpoint for those organizations that lacked full disclosure of the layoff process. For example, gay employees felt they were laid off because they were gay and Hispanics felt they were laid off because they were Hispanic. Overall, most of the participants were at a loss to draw a conclusion on the perception of others, within the general population, on whether or not African Americans were more greatly impacted during layoffs.

African American perception. The perception that discrimination practices impacted layoff decisioning was strongly echoed by 33% of the participants—the two African American participants, who stated they were always conscious of race and that African Americans were disproportionately impacted during layoffs compared to other groups. Participant 1 (African American female) and Participant 3 (African American male) became impassioned in describing

the role of history and discrimination on corporate layoffs. Participant 3 linked marginalization to subjective processing. My personal experience identified in Chapter II (previously mentioned), revealed a similar subjective encounter during the restructuring, where I was positioned below a junior White employee. The senior executive, who layered me, could not offer any concrete reasoning when approached for an explanation.

Participants 1 and 3 both referenced the historical origins of discrimination and the impact of African American success in corporate America, resulting in African Americans being the first to be severed from an organization during layoffs. Zachary Karabell (2009) explained that in epidemic of layoffs, no one is immune and that unemployment is not a scythe that cuts equally through different sectors of society, felling white collar and blue collar, African American and Hispanic, male and female, in equal measure (p. 30).

The different experience is also subject to much research such as, that of Northouse (2007) who contributed better positioning in times of layoffs to in-group status, which offers respect, liking, trust, and reciprocal opportunities. Researchers Greenhaus et al. (1990) lent such practices to access discrimination preventing African Americans and other subgroups from penetrating workplace dominant groups. This was also the position of Participant 3, who felt that despite coming to the corporate table armed with a Harvard MBA, an African American had little to no chance of filling an executive suite open slot vacated by another White employee. But rather, the slot was reserved for other White Harvard MBAs who were connected to the organizational power structure.

Similarly, Participant 1 offered that a 200-year lag of an uneven playing field without qualification based decisioning in jobs, homes, and mortgages enables the perception that layoff decisioning is unfair. Consider the historical exposé by Douglas Blackmon (2008) that examined

the historical impact of corporations which violated Civil Rights Acts and whose legacy includes

profiting from slavery:

> American banks maintained ubiquitous discriminatory lending practices throughout the country that until the 1960s prevented millions of working-class African Americans from attaining the lines of credit that millions of White families used to accumulate wealth and move from lower to middle class status. Indeed, the opportunity for Blacks to pursue the most basic American formula for achieving middle-class status—buying a home in desirable neighborhoods where real estate values were likely to appreciate over time— was openly barred by legions of rural estate agents in every city and every region. . . . It was hundreds of thousands of individual businesses that refused to give Blacks jobs, equal pay or promotions. It was wealthy men on Wall Street and in the executive suites of southern banks that financed the organized opposition to passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. (p. 390)

Fast forward to more current times, where Wachovia Bank, a Fortune 500 organization,

disclosed in 2005 that two predecessor banks in Georgia and South Carolina owned or held as

collateral at least 691 slaves before the Civil War. The bank formally apologized to all

Americans and especially to African Americans and people of African descent. Additionally,

they established scholarship funds for minorities and promoted a broad discussion of racial

issues inside the company (Blackmon, 2008, p. 391).

Perception is reality and represents the perceiver's truth, which can be as damaging as

actual truth. The CEO of Wachovia was hesitant to disclose the actual truth, concerned with the

public and employee perception and uncomfortable with the reaction of opening abuses from

long ago—a realistic concern considering the viewpoint of Participant 3 who described his

perception as his truth in relating organizational discrimination to layoff decisioning. The CEO's

ultimate apology had an emotional impact on African American employees within the company,

some of whom I know personally. In the view of their CEO, the African American employees

were more willing to trust the organization and "were all of a sudden willing to give the

organization the benefit of the doubt on our intentions about anything that is race related"

(Blackmon, 2008, p. 392). Perception was altered to one of trust rather than distrust, or so it appears.

The data captured from Participants 1 and Participant 3 also suggested that African Americans are not provided the same corporate opportunities as their White peers, rendering them susceptible to high target roles, which are vulnerable to layoffs. Such inferior positioning, resulting from lack of inclusion and connection to the corporate power structure, reinforce perceptions of exclusion and discrimination. The research of Wilson and McBrier (2005) provided an explanation to support this data. They provided data indicating that African Americans in upper tier roles are expendable, relative to Whites, because they are placed in jobs that generate low levels of revenue and have marginal to long-term trajectories for the economic value of the organization (p. 303). Additionally, Fairlie and Kletzer (1998) linked a higher displacement rate of African American males into types of jobs which are high targeted positions.

Non-African American perception. The emergent themes brought forth by the two African American participants were not addressed by any of the other participants. Thirty-three percent of the participants, perceived African Americans as having an advantage during layoffs over other groups due to race sensitivity. This significant difference between the perception of the African American participants and the other groups may be explained by the everyday consciousness of race by Participants 1 and 3. Participants 1 and 3, as African Americans, indicated they were always conscious of race, before, going into, during and after layoffs. The other groups indicated they were not as conscious of race, if at all.

Governance need. Despite the fact that marginalization was not a salient theme for the non-African American participants, the data revealed that 82% of the participants identified a

need for transparency or governance (beyond legal and human resource teams), feeling that

decision-makers would exercise unfair decisioning if left to their own determinants (see Figure

5.3).
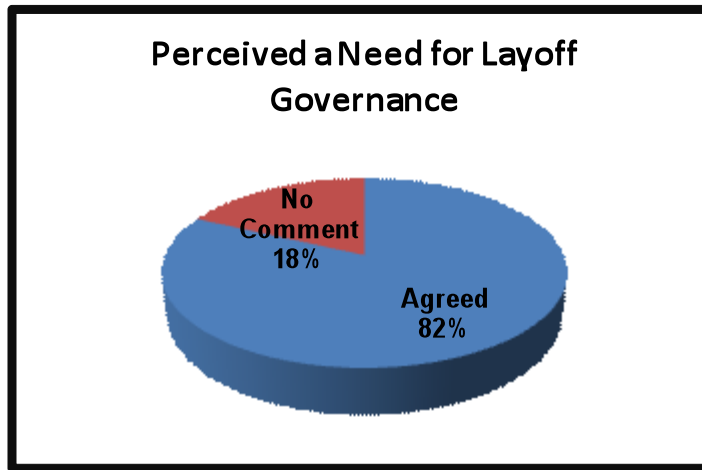
Figure 5.3. Perception of governance.

Participant 6 (White male) expressed the need to remove subjectivity from the process,

because he felt a White employee selecting another White employee/friend as a "keeper" during

the layoff was problematic. Participant 2 (Hispanic female) described advantageous behaviors of

decision-makers who strategized to lay off "undesirable" employees they wanted to get rid of by

offering relocation packages to them, recognizing that the employees were not able to move.

Rejection of the relocation package was an automatic severance from the organization.

Participant 1 (African American female) in describing disparate treatment of African

Americans in the corporate workplace felt that there would be no change, unless there was an

intervention. Her organization provided transparency via employment contracts with employees

and manuals, which outlined all conditions of employment to include layoff expectations. The

layoffs at Participant 1's organization were considered successful and resulted in fewer than

expected terminations. Participant 5's (White female) layoff experience provided insight to what

appeared to be unchecked personal decisioning, when her management changed and she was subjected to a manager who did not value her skill set. As a layoff decision-maker, Participant 5 was oblivious to the decisioning criteria used for the members of her team, whom she herself laid off. Participant 3 also expressed lack of knowledge regarding the decision criteria used within his organization.

Breach of trust. The role of workplace performance based upon performance evaluations was a key factor for participants, just as it was for their organizations. One hundred percent of the laid off participants described themselves as a top performer, ranking high in forced-rankings and performance reviews. Each of these top performer participants understood the need for layoffs and role elimination; but, they expected to survive the layoff, with the organization finding another role for them elsewhere within the organization. The expectation was based upon stellar performance and the organizations' goals for excellence. Participant's perused the remaining workforce which, in some cases was not reflective of employees previously identified as hard workers or top performers, as they (participants) had been so labeled. This emergent theme suggests a reciprocal expectation between employee contribution and organization loyalty and is consistent with relevant dimension research.

Rust et al. (2005) found that layoffs disrupt the employment relationship (p. 74) causing employees to feel betrayed. Such betrayal of the perceived contract is, per Morrison and Robinson (1997), a breach of psychological contract, which occurs when the employees believe the organization has not met its obligations. Failure of the organization to keep its end of the perceived contract results in lack of trust and loyalty, not just with the organization which has severed the employee, but can also impact relationships with future employers (Pugh et al., 2003) as they carry baggage from one employer to another.

Summary

I could relate to the experiences of each of my participants. As a former human resource senior leader, I could share in the experiences of Participants 1 and 6 who were human resource directors and the preparation and rituals they proceeded with as they made the selections. I could identify with the frustration of Participant 3 as an educated African American who has wondered why others with less contribution and education excelled or were invited to in-group status. Certainly, I could identify with Participant 5 who prepared for her demise by packing up. I, too, had sensed the layoffs and made similar preparations.

There was a correlation between my experiences and the rituals, beliefs, and patterns that emerged as themes in the study, with some relevant dimension alignment as 66% of the participants referenced education, 66% addressed discrimination/history, and 33% addressed marginalization (see Figure 5.4). Despite the correlation, I interpret the results of the data to suggest that most participants did not feel African Americans were disproportionately laid off compared to other groups; however, the data suggested that laid off employees personalized the experience, feeling that they were laid off because of their identifiable group. This may account for the African American participants feeling African Americans are "first to go" and Participant 6's perception that he was targeted because of his age, which was over 50. The lack of governance to ensure decision-makers do the right thing and lack of transparency reinforces the perception of an unfair process and subjective performance evaluations.
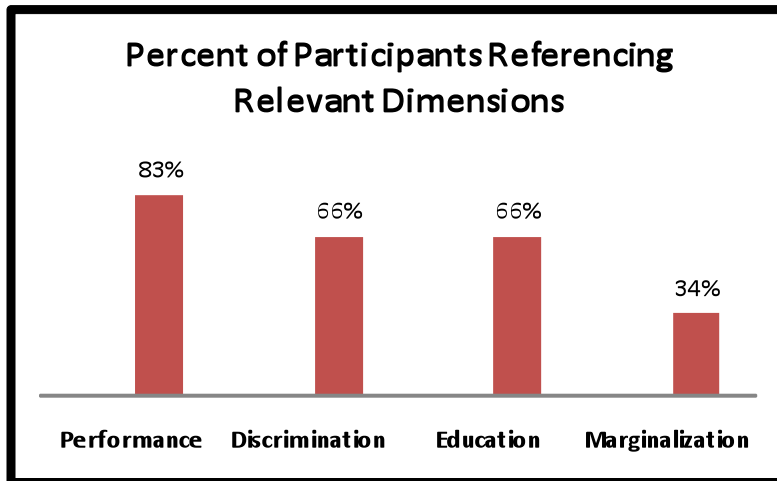
Figure 5.4. Percent of participants referencing relevant dimensions.

Chapter VI: Implications for Leadership and Change

In the meantime, I will stick to my long corporate strategy of out-performing team members, being personable, engaging, well-trained, educated, and re-tooled. What I won't do is attempt to influence the decision-makers one way or the other in deciding my fate because what is supposed to happen will happen. God does a much better job of managing my future than I do. He'll make sure I get what He has for me.

As an upper-tier leader in corporate America at the height of corporate change, I experienced how layoffs can threaten organizational gains, exacerbate already existing systemic injustices, and in my experience, contribute to the perception of disproportionate departure of African Americans. Treatment as a marginal player and failure to recognize my human capital credentials "boxed" me in. My detached response was to carry a physical box from one role to the next, storing it beneath my desk, prepared to pack and depart the organization at a moment's notice. The psychological response created boxes on a shelf, stored with junk, picked up along my corporate trail.

My commitment became less to the organization and more to keep myself whole. The research of Reilly, Brett, and Stroh (as cited in Benson, 2002) revealed that as job cuts increase, survivors become more loyal to their own career rather than the organization, suggesting that organizational commitment may suffer. I witnessed this in my own behavior as I became more self-reliant, self-protective, engaged in my personal development, and became less concerned about my employer as I managed my out-group status during repeated exposure to layoffs.

I was only able to reconcile the experience with faith and my ability to transition unexpended energy into other more satisfying areas of my life, such as, advanced education, and physical and mental well-being. The benefit was availability for community organizations,

insulation from high-level work stresses typical with greater responsibility, and personal life balance to develop supportive external relationships.

Impact

Sociologists have documented organizational gains in recent decades indicating African Americans have increased their representation in the upper-tier occupational categories—namely, those that include managers, executives, and professionals—at approximately twice the rate of Whites (Wilson & McBrier, 2005, p. 301). But, prior research also maintained that African Americans are more likely to experience layoffs from upper-tier occupations than Whites, despite similar background social economic statuses and human-capital credentials (Wilson & McBrier, 2005, p. 304). This phenomenological study identified relevant dimensions—education, discrimination, marginalization, and performance—as key factors contributing to the lay off of African Americans in corporate America, despite the gains. Subjectivity, bias, lack of control, and governance all exacerbate an already race-sensitive environment (at least for African Americans), making it all the more complex in the midst of layoffs. The lines are not straight and each dimension or factor bleeds into the other.

The relevant dimensions in this study revealed how the cumulative impact of historical oppression, systemic injustices, breaches of implied corporate contracts, unfair organizational decisoning, biases, and exposure to layoffs impact employees and organizations: it is counterproductive to personal and corporate growth. The perceptions, as revealed via the emergent themes, identified the psychological impact, leaving a feeling of being stifled or discriminated against in corporate life, community separation, disengagement, and feelings of not being accepted or valued, regardless of race.

The impact can create a response of going to work each day to get the job done and leaving it behind upon arriving at home, where a new life, with other relationships begins. I focused more on the benefit of constant re-tooling and higher education in my quest for a higher level of achievement. Ironically, the preparation provided a lift of confidence and greater resiliency to the change because I was less vulnerable to harsh changes and involuntary severance. For others, the response may be lack of commitment or trust with future employers, resulting in lower aspirations and self-limiting behaviors.

As previously mentioned, the organizational implications of a process that identities itself as objective, yet is subjective, breeds many negative behaviors that affect the organization as a whole, such as systemic distrust, low morale, lack of motivation, and lack of attention to diversity. These behaviors support negative perceptions which have their own set of internal, external and economic implications.

The perception of unfair layoff practices—true or false, conscious or unconscious—creates an environment that symbolically states there is enough evidence of systemic bias to negatively impact the organization. An organization that does not care enough to keep its very best workers, will be perceived as not caring about its (a) customers, (b) employees, (c) shareholders, or (d) communities. Organizations need to demonstrate fairness, especially in the midst of change, if they are to retain customers, who ultimately affect revenue and organizational growth. Many employees are also customers of the organizations where they work and live in surrounding communities. Negative perceptions, again true or false, can create external reputational risks within the community via media and word of mouth. A recent poll (Stengel, 2009, p. 38) revealed that among a national random sample of 1,003 Americans ages 18 and older, 42% believed that businesses cannot be trusted to make socially responsible

decisions—that it is up to government to make sure they do, while 49% felt that businesses will make socially responsible decisions without the government telling them what to do. Nine percent of those surveyed were indecisive. Due to the social and economic impact of layoffs, not just on a personal level, but also on a national level (i.e., lack of healthcare, increased foreclosures, and redirection of government resources due to job loss), fair layoff decisoning can also be considered socially responsible decisoning. The implications of organizational irresponsibility can have a hysteretic effect. Even worse, the lack of caring can be perceived as a way to promote Whiteness and marginalize other groups, as the organization contributes to the increase of the unemployment rates for specific groups. When the economic cloud has lifted and the organization is doing better, it may be difficult to attract other talented employees to the organization because the perception remains that particular groups were targeted.

Furthermore, the perception that good workers can be displaced while poor-performing workers remain due to advocates, coin tosses, skin color, and so on, opens the door for surviving employees to feel (other remaining) co-workers are not worthy of particular roles they are assigned, impacting credibility and respect. Additional downstream implications reach the bottom-line. The organization will be upside down—the good-performing workers become unemployed, taking the best skills to competitors, while the weaker, look-like-act-like-me performers remain and are not able to lift the company to the new heights in the midst of change—further weakening the company's position and ability to rise above competitors at a critical time.

Recommendations

Prior quantitative research focused primarily on blue-collar, unskilled workers who lacked educational attainment, making them more susceptible to unemployment (see Figure 6.1).

The results of this research open the door to greater examination of African American and corporate layoffs at a professional and senior leader level. When I began this study in 2009, the unemployment rate for African Americans with a Bachelor's degree and higher was 7.3%, up from 4.0% in 2008. For Whites with the same credentials, the rate was 2.4% in 2008 and 4.2% in 2009. Although the unemployment rates by race and educational attainment have not been determined for 2010, the overall unemployment rates to include all workers, with or without advanced education, are 16.1% for African Americans and 8.7% for Whites as of September, 2010 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010c). There is no simple explanation for the higher unemployment rate for African Americans. Multiple factors are at play, some of which we may be unaware of despite the emergent themes and relevant dimensions in this study. We each have our perceptions, truths, and interpretations to consider as well.

Education pays

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey
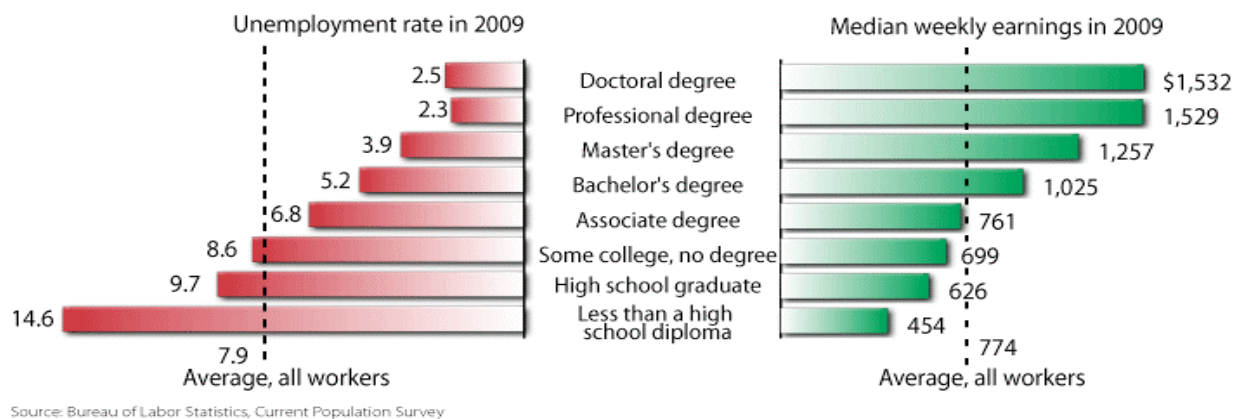
Figure 6.1. More education leads to higher earning, lower unemployment. (Note: Data are 2009 annual averages for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers) (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010d).

My experience and study only scratch the surface of race and layoffs in the complex organizational culture. More in-depth qualitative research, for the benefit of developing

strategies and narrowing gaps, could provide future relevance in highlighting the corporate experience of African Americans and in determining areas of vulnerability to negative outcomes, as well as begin closer scrutiny of the layoff process overall.

The study did not conclusively reveal that the perception existed that African Americans were disproportionately laid off from corporate America—only the African American participants expressed such perception. However, it did reveal that the layoff process and decisoning related to layoff selections were subjectively damaging. An objective approach reduces negative perceptions, but also has business challenges. The most straightforward way to select workers for layoff is last-in, first-out, preserving the more senior employees. However, that does not always make sense from a business perspective as employers look to cut expenses, including higher wage earners, according to Miranda Du, an employment law attorney (as cited in Lucht, 2009). Additionally, the newer employees may actually be the best performers (Lucht, 2009, para. 7). The creation of a systemic imbalance, resulting from lack of objectivity, has far reaching implications as it perpetuates perceptions of unfairness, affecting the success of the organization, potentially at a critical time when it may be recovering from a shaky economy, merger, or reorganization.

Transparency may offset the system imbalance and mitigate negative perception. Regardless of a company's layoff methodology, those making the cuts need to have documentation to support their decisions in case a jilted employee sues for discrimination. But, if employers have done their homework, their layoff selections will be ironclad, and employees have little room to fight any perceived discrimination (Lucht, 2009, para. 9). A well-planned strategy with criteria and transparency may offset any negative perceptions and reduce corporate

liabilities, especially given the predisposition of African Americans to believe that the system is corrupt and anti-Black employee.

Our current economic crisis pours water on old success models taught in business schools and followed by corporate America. Many organizations are now experiencing a paradigm shift and revamping what they believed were the criteria for organizational success in the midst of change. In light of extreme unemployment, business failures and closures, lax consumer sales, and dissatisfied employees, many companies now have a pivot-point opportunity to change their playbook by throwing out old ways of leading and inserting new processes for successful and fair decisoning across the board.

Now is the perfect time to square the circle and formalize the layoff process. Laying-off is a difficult, and often emotional, process. It is a process that we know is not without bias. Participants 1 and 6 indicated that they did not know if the process could be totally fair—and they are perhaps correct. But, a level of awareness and transparency at the round table in the midst of layoff decisoning can go a very long way in reducing bias from the process and altering perceptions of a subjective process. Few companies have formalized their manpower decision-making models, and fewer yet have developed models establishing layoff priorities (Ornati & Giblin, 1975, p. 27). Given the current state of corporate America and the unemployment rates, establishing layoff criteria, and priorities seem very apropos.

Employers, the U.S. government, and employees—especially people of color—should take accountability to ensure equitable workplace experiences. Employees must remain aware of workplace inequalities and hold their employers and the decision-makers within them accountable to fair opportunities and inclusive representation for all. This can lead to uncomfortable conversations, feelings of uneasiness and perhaps even some negative

repercussions. Therefore, it is imperative that, prior to taking this path, some self-reflection is done to ensure that performance, credentials, and experience are consistent with the sought role and those who occupy similar roles. Equally important, African Americans must not allow their responses to hinder oneself or African Americans following behind by perpetuating contributory stereotypes.

Corporate America has a responsibility to provide equality in every facet of business, not just because it is the right thing to do, but also because there is a legal obligation to do so. Most major corporations have disaster recovery and contingency plans to ensure successful continued operation in the midst of a crisis. Human resources divisions should be armed with contingency plans, not just for numbers, but also for proportionate and equitable departures through the organization during layoffs. Too often, human resource executives and their staff assume passive roles and leave decisioning to division managers, taking them at their word in identifying fair severance selections. Such representation is also beneficial to the health and success of the organization.

Finally, federal regulations, such as the Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act (WARN) (United States Department of Labor, 1989) which requires companies to disclose significant job cuts, has plenty of loopholes. A WARN notice is required when a business with 100 or more full-time workers is laying off at least 50 people at a single site of employment (Ranii, 2009). Lack of government enforcement enables corporations to stagger, skirt, and under report who and how many employees have been severed within their organizations. Consider a recent layoff experience: a former co-worker recently contacted me and informed me that as he left one of his sites, he received a cell phone call, instructing him to turnaround, make a u-turn in the road, return, and lay off all of employees without any severance packages at the location he

had just left. Dumbfounded, he questioned his boss, asked for the supporting legal script, and

suggested that they not proceed so hastily due to legal and government concerns. The boss

demanded that he do so, especially since there was only 42 employees, 8 less than the number

needed to be concerned with government notification. There were several employees who had

been with the company for over 25 years. My friend proceeded as directed, writing his own

script on paper in his car. The media, cameras in tow, descended upon the company the very

next day. Given the current economic conditions, where unemployment rates in many states are

at their highest levels in 25 years, it is time for the government to give serious attention to

WARN and ensure laws are being adhered to by major corporations.

Conclusion

I began this journey long before I knew I had. In a progressive effort to look forward, it

was not until I looked in arrears and realized there was a long, bumpy trail behind me, that I was

fully able to discern the impact and magnitude of my experiences. Merleau-Ponty (1958)

philosophized that the events of one's past has great significance with one's future with the

introduction of historicity into one's life (p. 403). My perception (and interpretation) of the

experiences is personal and true to me, but now armed with significant knowledge and insight to

match the experiences, I have been able to construct the past in a different way. Where I

previously may have screamed foul play, I can recognize how my response, such as redirection

of workplace energy or reduced workplace aspirations, perpetuated negativism and shaped future

behaviors of self and perhaps of others as our worlds intersected. There is pride in the inner

strength of survivorship and the courage to stand up and express voice; but there is also

awareness of tacit mental models. My awareness of constructing an objective truth, much like

that of the participants of this study, would never provide me with anything more than an

objective truth for me and my greatest attempt at impartiality would never enable me to prevail over my subjectivity (Merleau-Ponty, 1958, p. 414).

The impact to leadership becomes one where total objectivity can never occur for me as an observer, for decision-makers or those laid off. There will always be some degree of subjectivity as corporate decision-makers select employees for layoff, despite performance evaluations, and forced-rankings. There will always be some degree of interpretative subjectivity by those laid off as well. We cannot escape it.

Our realities are built upon our past experiences, our histories, our untested mental models which slip into how we perceive other's behaviors, and impactful decisions made by others on our behalf, affecting our lives. We cannot change that, but we can heighten our awareness.

Organizationally, I conclude from this research that (a) layoffs are complex, (b) neither bias nor subjectivity can be fully removed and neither should be ignored, and (c) layoffs require greater attention, organizationally, before the process is needed or implemented.

Personally, I conclude that moved boxes are not always detrimental to our success. Some boxes need be moved and thrown out as they take up too much space and encourage rat packs. I posit that it is important to search old boxes and revisit purposes. If necessary, eliminate junk and allow space for new opportunities not previously considered. Otherwise, put them to good use. I have taken my own advice. I no longer have a box at the foot of my desk.

References

America, R., & Anderson, B. (1996). *Soul in management: How African American managers thrive in the competitive corporate environment*. Seacaucus, NJ: Carol.

Benson, C. (2002). *Procedural justice, effective leadership, and organizational commitment amidst organizational change* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3078376)

Bies, R. J., & Shapiro, D. L. (1988). Voice and justification: Their influence on procedural fairness judgments. *Academy of Management Journal, 31*(3), 676-785.

Blackmon, D. (2008). *Slavery by another name: The re-enslavement of Black American from the Civil War to World War II*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.

Bloodwell, G. (2002). *Tips for new boat owners: How to dock a boat*. Retrieved from www.essortment.com/hobbies/dockingboatboa_sbiw.htm

Boisjoly, J., Duncan, G. J., & Smeeding, T. (1998). The shifting incidence of involuntary job losses from 1968 to 1992, *Industrial Relations, 37*(2), 207.

Bolman, L., & Deal, T. (1997). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Bruner, J. (2002). *Making stories: Law, literature, life.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bushe, G. (2001). *Clear leadership: How outstanding leaders make themselves understood, cut through the mush, and help everyone get real at work*. Mountain View, CA: Davies-Black.

Clay, C., Ellis, M., Amodeo, M., Fassler, I., & Griffin, M. (2007). Black women and White women: Do perceptions of childhood family environment differ? *Family Process, 46,* 243-256.

Collins, S. (1993). Blacks on the bubble: The vulnerability of Black executives in White corporations. *Sociological Quarterly, 34,* 429-447.

Connerley, M., & Pedersen, P. (2005). *Leadership in a diverse multicultural environment: Developing awareness, knowledge, and skills*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cornfield, D. B. (1983). Chances of layoff in a corporation: A case study. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 28*(4), 503-520.

Elliott, J. R., & Smith, R. A. (2004). Race, gender, and workplace power. *American Sociological Review, 69*(3), 365-386.

Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Elvira, M. M., & Zatzick, C. D. (2002). Who's displaced first? The role of race in layoff decisions. *Industrial Relations, 41*(2), 329.

Essed, P. (2004). Cloning amongst professors: Normativities and imagined homogeneities. *Nora, 12,* 113-122.

Fairlie, R., & Kletzer, L. (1998). Jobs lost, jobs regained: An analysis of Black/White differences in job displacement in the 1980s. *Industrial Relations, 37*(4), 460-475.

Featherstone, J. (1989). To make the spirit whole. *Harvard Educational Review, 59*(3), 367-378.

Fernandez, J. P. (1981). *Racism and sexism in corporate life: Changing values in American business*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Fernandez, J. P., & Davis, J. (1998). *Race, gender, and rhetoric: The true state of race and gender relations in corporate America.* Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill.

First quarter layoffs: Selection of job cuts by major companies. (2009, March 3). Retrieved from http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2009/01/08/first-quarter-layoffs-selection-of-job-cuts-by-major-companies/

Flabbi, L. (2010). Prejudice and gender differentials in the U.S. labor market in the last 20 years. *Journal of Econometrics, 156*(1), 190.

Foster, E. (2007). *Communicating at end of life: Finding magic in the mundane*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Goldman, D. (2009, December 4). *Black unemployment "a serious problem": Despite falling unemployment rates overall, African Americans face the biggest uphill battle in their search for employment.* Retrieved from http://cnnmoney.printhis.clickability.com

Greenhaus, J. H., Parasuraman, S., & Wormley, W. M. (1990). Effects of race on organizational experience, job performance evaluations, and career outcomes. *Academy of Management Journal, 33*(1), 64-86.

Hackman, J. R. & Oldham, G. R. (1976). Motivation through the design of work: Test of a theory. *Organizational Behavior & Human Performance, 16*(2), 250-279.

Hargis, M. B., Baltes, B. B., Fried, Y., & Levi, A. (2006). Race differences in termination at work: The role of educational inequality. *Journal of Business & Psychology, 20*(4), 587-598.

Herold, D., Fedor, D., & Caldwell, S. (2007). Beyond change management: A multilevel investigation of contextual and personal influences on employees' commitment to change. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *92*(4), 942-951.

Ilgen, D. R., & Youtz, M. A. (1986). Factors affecting the evaluation and development of minorities in organizations. In K. Rowland & G. Ferris (Eds.), *Research in personnel and human resource management: A research annual* (pp. 307-337). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Isom, C. (2008). *Mergers and acquisitions: Global leader perspectives*. Unpublished manuscript, Antioch University, Yellow Springs, Ohio.

Isom, C. (2009a). *Moving boxes.* Unpublished manuscript, Antioch University, Yellow Springs, Ohio.

Isom, C. (2009b). *The color of perception.* Unpublished manuscript, Antioch University, Yellow Springs, Ohio.

James-Hughes, J. B. (2003). Communicative strategies of African American female executives in dominant culture corporate (America) organizational settings. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 18.* (AAT 3114632)

Kanter, R. M. (1979). Differential access to opportunity and power. In R. Alverez (Ed.), *Discrimination in organizations* (pp. 52-68). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Kanter, R. M. (1997). *Men and women of the corporation*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Karabell, Z. (2009, April 12). We are not in this together: Young minority men who didn't earn much to begin with are hit hardest by unemployment. *Newsweek*, 30-31.

Kee, J. E., & Newcomer, K. E. (2008). *Transforming public and non-profit organizations: Stewardship for leading change.* Alexandria, VA: Management Concepts.

Klayman, J., & Ha, Y. (1987). Confirmation, disconfirmation, and information in hypothesis testing. *Psychological Review*, *94*, 211-228.

Kluegel, J. R., (1978). The cause and cost of racial exclusion from job authority. *American Sociological Review, 43*, 285-301.

Kraiger, K., & Ford, J. K. (1985). A meta-analysis of ratee race effects in performance ratings. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *70*(1), 56-65.

Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lamott, A. (1994). *Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life*. New York, NY: Pantheon.

Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (1988). *Balm in Gilead: Journey of a healer*. Boston, MA: Addison-Wesley Longman, Incorporated.

Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (2000). *Respect: An exploration*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Hoffmann Davis, J. (1997). *The art and science of portraiture*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Lewis, L. (2003). Measuring progress. *Black Enterprise, 34*(5), 30.

Livers, A. B., & Caver, K. A. (2003). *Leading in Black and White: Working across the racial divide in corporate America.* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, John, & Sons.

Lord, C., Ross, L., & Lepper, M. (1979). Biases assimilation and attitude polarization: The effect of prior theories on subsequently considered evidence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 37,* 2098-2109.

Lucht, N. (2009, November 27). *Workplace transparency helps ease pain of employee layoffs*. Retrieved from http://www.lasvegassun.com/news/2009/nov/27/workplace-transparency-helps-ease-pain-employee-la/

McLoyd, V. C. (2005). Work and African American family life. In V. C. McLoyd, S. Hill, & K. Dodge (Eds.), *African American family life: Ecological and cultural diversity* (pp. 135-165). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Merisotis, J. (2005, June 15). Black issues in higher education: We must work together to make the case for our students, our collective future. *Vital Speeches of the Day, 71*(17), 538-544.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1958). *Phenomenology of perception*. New York, NY: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Morrison, E. W., & Robinson, S. L. (1997). When employees feel betrayed: A model of how psychological contract violation develops. *Academy of Management Review, 22*(1), 226-256.

Nisbett, R., & Ross, L. (1980). *Human inference: Strategies and shortcomings of social judgment*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Northouse, P. (2007). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

O'Callaghan, T. S. (2009). The politics of perceiving skin color. Retrieved from http://wellness.blogs.time.com/2009/11/23/the-politics-of-skin-color-perception/

Ornati, O. O., & Giblin, E. J. (1975). Recession layoffs can be discriminatory. *Management Review, 64*(5), 25.

Page, S. (2007). *The difference: How the power of diversity creates better groups, firms, schools, and societies*. Princeton, NJ: University Press.

Pettigrew, T. (1985). New Black-White pattern: How to best conceptualize them. *Annual Review of Sociology, 11,* 329-326.

Pettigrew, T., & Martin, J. (1987). Shaping the organizational context for African American inclusion. *Journal of Social Issues, 43,* 41-78.

Powell G., & Graves, L. (2003). *Women and men in management* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Price, G., Darity. W., & Headen, A. (2008). Does the stigma of slavery explain the maltreatment of Blacks by Whites?: The case of lynchings. *The Journal of Socio-Economics, 37,* 168-193.

Pugh, S., Skarlicki, D., & Passell, B. (2003). After the fall: Layoff victims' trust and cynicism in re-employment. *Journal of Occupational & Organizational Psychology*, *76*(2), 201.

Ranii, D. (2009, June 12). Companies often won't reveal much about layoffs. *Charlotte Observer*, pp. D1, D3.

Reitman, M. (2006). Uncovering the White place: Whitewashing at work. *Social and Cultural Geography, 7*(2), 267-282.

Rexrode, C. (2009, March 19). N.C.'s layoffs law has loopholes. *Charlotte Observer*, p. 9A.

Richey, M. (1992). The impact of corporate downsizing on employees. *Business Forum*, *17*(3), 9.

Robinson, S. L. (1996). Trust and breach of the psychological contract. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 41,* 574-599.

Rosette, A. S. (2006). Unearned privilege: Race, gender, and social inequality in U.S. organizations. In M. Karsten (Ed.), *Gender, ethnicity, and race in the workplace* (pp. 253-268). Westport, CT: Praeger.

Rosette, A.S., Leonardelli, G., & Philips, K. (2008). The White standard: Racial bias in leader categorization. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93 (4), 758-777.

Rosette, A. S. & Thompson, L. (2005). The camouflage effect: Separating achieved status and unearned privilege in organizations. In M. Neale, E. Mannix, & M. Thomas-Hunt (Eds.), *Research on managing teams and groups* (pp. 259-281). San Diego, CA: Elsevier.

Ross, J. (1997). Organizational change: Does shuffling the deck work? *Harvard Business Review, 75*(6), 17.

Ross, L., & Lepper, M. R. (1980). The perseverance of beliefs: Empirical and normative considerations. In R. A. Shweder (Ed.), *Fallible judgment in behavioral research: New directions for methodology of social behavior science (Vol. 4)* (pp. 17-36). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Rousseau, D. M. (1995). *Psychological contracts in organizations: Understanding written and unwritten agreements.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rust, K., McKinley, W., & Edwards, J. (2005). Perceived breach of contract for one's own layoff vs. someone else's layoff: Personal pink slips hurt more. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, *11*(3), 72-83.

Schein, E. (2004). *Organizational culture and leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Schwandt, T. (2007). *The Sage dictionary of qualitative inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Senge, P., Kleiner, A., Roberts, C., Ross, R., & Smith, B. (1994). *The fifth discipline fieldbook: Strategies and tools for building a learning organization.* New York, NY: Doubleday.

Stengel, R. (2009, September 21). The responsibility revolution. *Time*, pp. 38-42.

Suizzo, M., Robinson, C. & Pahlke, E. (2008). African American mothers' socialization beliefs and goals with young children, *Journal of Family Issues, 29*(3), 287-319.

Swindoll, C. (1982). *Strengthening your grip: Essentials in an aimless world*. Waco, TX: Word Books.

Thomas, A. & King, C. (2007). Gendered racial socialization of African American mothers and daughters. *The Family Journal, 15,* 137-142.

Thomas, D., & Gabarro, J. (1999). *Breaking through: The making of minority executives in corporate America.* Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

United States Department of Labor. (1989). *The worker adjustment and retraining notification act (WARN).* Retrieved from http://www.dol.gov/compliance/laws/comp-warn.htm.

United States Department of Labor. (2009a). *Labor force statistics from the current population survey: Seasonally adjusted unemployment rates.* Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab10.htm

United States Department of Labor. (2009b). *Unemployment rates by demographics in June 2009.* Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2009/jul/wk1/art01.htm.

United States Department of Labor. (2010a). *Household data/seasonally adjusted: A-4, employment status of the civilian non-institutional population by race, Hispanic, or Latino ethnicity, sex, and age.* Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpseea4.pdf

United States Department of Labor. (2010b). *Labor force statistics from the current population survey: Seasonally adjusted unemployment rates.* Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab2.htm

United States Department of Labor. (2010c). *Household data: Table A-2, employment status of the civilian population by race, sex, and age.* Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t02.htm

United States Department of Labor. (2010d). Education pays: More education leads to higher earnings, lower unemployment. *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*. Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm

Vaill, P. (1996). *Learning as a way of being: Strategies for survival in a world of permanent white water*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Valle, K. (2008, May 11). Dealing with discrimination. *Charlotte Observer*, p. 1D.

West, C. (1993). *Race matters: Black thought and culture*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Wheatley, M. (2005). *Finding our way: Leadership for an uncertain time*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Wildman, S. (1996). *Privilege revealed: How invisible preference undermines America*. New York, NY: University Press.

Wilson, G. (1997). Pathways to power: Racial differences in the determinants of job authority. *Social Problems, 44,* 38-54.

Wilson, G., Sakura-Lemessay, I., & West, J. (1999). Reaching the top: Racial differences in mobility paths to upper-tier occupations. *Work and Occupations, 26,* 165-186.

Wilson, G., & McBrier, D. (2005). Race and loss of privilege: African American/White differences in the determinants of job layoffs from upper-tier occupations. *Sociological Forum, 20*(2), 301-321.