2024

Exploring Staff Perceptions of Meaningful Interactions with Leaders in Local Government

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EXPLORING STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF MEANINGFUL INTERACTIONS WITH LEADERS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of

Graduate School of Leadership & Change

Antioch University

In partial fulfillment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

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October 2024

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Antioch University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF MEANINGFUL INTERACTIONS WITH LEADERS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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The study aimed to reduce the literature gap and provide a helpful tool for understanding the follower-centered perspective of leadership in local government. Leaders are undoubtedly essential to organizational success; followers are essential, and follower perspectives of leadership are equally worthy of study (Blanchard et al., 2009). This study utilizes the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) to delve into followers' meaningful interactions and lived experiences in local government throughout the United States. Utilizing the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954), the study sought meaningful interactions and lived experiences of followers in local government throughout the United States. CIT lends itself to exploratory research that seeks context-rich, firsthand perspectives on human activities and their significance and, therefore, is a good fit for the study. Key findings in the study included working with vulnerable populations and work—life balance. In addition, Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) and High-Quality Connections (HQCs) were used to explore the relational elements of leader-staff relationships in local government. Finally, this study adds to the minimal literature available regarding staff in local government. The study provides a valuable tool for understanding the relational aspect of leaders and followers in local government. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (http://aura.antioch.edu/) and Ohio LINK ETD Center (http://etd.ohiolink.edu).

Keywords: followership, relational leadership, municipal government, relational cultural theory, critical incident technique, constructivist research

Dedication

Thomas A. Harrison

August 21, 1945 – July 29, 2023

Acknowledgements

To God be all the glory. I want to thank my family for their support and understanding during my dissertation journey. I will forever remember how you all were my strength and believed in me. A special note to my mother, who has provided so much and set such an example for us all. I am forever grateful for everything you have done. Thank you. I want to express my deepest gratitude to all the vulnerable participants who, through their courage and understanding, have shared their experiences and voices, thereby helping to shape the narrative of my research. Thank you to my husband, who has been my biggest supporter throughout the program; thank you for being the best at listening and offering advice and guidance when I felt like giving up. Finally, I am incredibly thankful for the best chairperson, Dr. Harriet Schwartz; you are kind, patient, understanding, and compassionate. Thank you for holding me up when I felt the need to give up. I look forward to continuing a connection with you. I would also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Lize Booysen and Dr. L. Richard Love, for their expertise and kind patience during my journey.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Leader-follower relationships in local government are challenging. Top-level bureaucratic leaders often work exclusively with elected officials and do not address the day-to-day issues affecting followers. For example, a permit clerk working only with citizens and contractors might have an idea to assist the customer better while saving the government time and money. The clerk takes the idea to the supervisor, who insists there is no time to present it to the director. There are several problems with the supervisor disregarding the clerk's idea. First, the leader disregards the followers' idea for meeting customers' needs; second, the followers (clerks) feel their opinions are not valuable; and third, the permits department disconnect impacts the city's mission. Unfortunately, followers throughout local government are frequently in this position. This study explored follower-centered leadership perspectives from the perspective of followers in local government.

The public sector is under continuous pressure to improve service delivery and address a heterogeneous society's diverse needs. Most employees want to be part of the ongoing change effort instead of being passively influenced by change efforts. Trust and culture, organizational commitment, and complexity of local government leaders have also been a minor focus in current research. Leaders are undoubtedly essential to organizational success; however, there has been little attention to the other side of the interaction: followership (Blanchard et al., 2009). In local government leadership, effective leadership is based on the nature and character of the relationships between leaders and followers (Clarke, 2018).

The study of relational leadership is expanding, as is the idea that leaders and followers have a reciprocal relationship (Clarke, 2018). Leadership scholars are beginning to recognize broader, multiparadigmatic perspectives, suggesting that leadership is co-created in relational

interactions between people and is dynamic and constantly changing (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). This chapter presents an introduction to the study, including a brief synthesis of the relevant literature, theoretical and conceptual orientations, the significance and scope of the study, and methodology and design.

Synthesis of the Relevant Literature

Followership and follower-centered perspectives of leadership theories have taken the leadership conversation beyond the leader's experience to consider the full team experience. Paik (2016) thoroughly reviewed empirical studies, identifying literature gaps to indicate promising future research directions. Through my literature search, I noted several areas needing additional research to create a deeper understanding. Orr and Bennett (2017) conducted a quantitative narrative inquiry from a public administrative viewpoint, finding a collective leadership conceptualization, a sense of organizational realities, and a need for change in leadership training. Orr and Bennett included elements of an ethnographic approach through long-term engagement with local government chief executives using storytelling and narrative techniques. Their study provided an understanding of complex situations within public administration through a relational lens. Suggestions for future research included exploring other parts of government, examining narrative and change at the front line, and continuing the conversation between public leadership research and leadership theory (Orr & Bennett, 2017).

Follower-centered perspectives have been addressed in higher education (Bligh et al., 2007; Collinson & Collinson, 2009). Bligh et al. (2007) took the follower-centric approach to examine the follower's perception of a study of aversive leadership in public high schools. The study focused on the followers' perception of principals' leadership behaviors and how followers rated themselves on job satisfaction and resistance. The qualitative study examined a project on

employee perceptions of effective leadership in the UK. Drawing from empirical research, the study sought to contribute to the growing interest in the potential value of employee perspectives on effective leadership. The blended leadership approach to this study was the internal and external engagements that leaders are involved in. Employee perceptions created a better understanding for leaders as they approach blended leadership daily. Chapter II will highlight the studies from higher education and healthcare to reflect the gap in the literature in local government.

Theoretical Orientation

The central theoretical framework for the study is based on the work of Meindl (1995). Meindl's approach was from a social constructionist view, where he offered new developments, fresh perspectives, and a cognitive explanation for the construction of leadership by followers (Shamir et al., 2007). According to Shamir et al. (2007), Meindl's work emphasized that followers play a critical role in leadership and leadership effectiveness, and leadership is effective in followers' social construction of leadership (p. 52). The follower-centric agenda of the romance of leadership seeks to understand how structure influences social processes (Meindl, 1995).

The literature review presents current theories that will assist in answering the questions related to the intended study. Although I found sufficient literature in higher education on leadership and followers' perspectives of leaders (Bligh et al., 2007; Collinson & Collinson, 2009; Shertzer, 2001), none was specific to local government where leaders' views have been researched. Thus, this study will explore follower-centered perspectives in the context of local government. In this study, I explore the connection between higher education and healthcare through leader-follower perceptions and interactions. Shertzer (2001) examined college student

perceptions of leadership, providing insights into leadership from a student's perspective. In a complementary study, Baker et al. (2016) explored followers' perceptions of their leaders' abilities, highlighting the importance of trust-building with the leader. By connecting these findings to the study, I establish a clear link between the healthcare and higher education sectors, making our research relevant and applicable to both fields.

Definition of Terms

Several terms are utilized throughout the proposed study; the definitions are outlined below.

- **Followership:** Followership is a relational role in which followers can influence leaders to improve and attain group and organizational objectives (Carsten et al., 2010).

  Follower-centered perspectives: Championed by Meindl (1990, 1993, 1995), the follower-centered perspectives on leadership describe how followers play a critical role in leadership effectiveness and are contingent on the followers' social construction of leadership (Shamir et al., 2007). The follower-centric perspective can be defined as the tendency to view leadership as the most critical factor for the success or failure of organizations (Meindl et al., 1985). Meindl and Ehrlich's (1987) romance of leadership represented the first fundamentally follower-centered approaches. The romance of leadership emphasizes followers and their contexts for defining leadership itself and emphasizes leadership as a social construction. In prior years, research with a follower-centered perspective has highlighted the role of the followers as an interactive, dyadic process (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Felfe & Schyns, 2006; Meindl, 1995).
- **Front-Line Workers Staff:** For the sole purpose of the study, front-line non-leader staff works directly with the public and internal customers (other city workers). The front-line

staff do not hold management or leadership roles. Examples of front-line staff include clerks, fiscal administrators, accounting coordinators, coordinators, and permit clerks.

- **Public Administration** is a branch of political science that deals primarily with the structure of agencies administering governmental functions (Merriam-Webster, 2001). It includes community and economic development, public health/social services, emergency management, law enforcement and public safety, parks and recreation, and public works.

Local Government Leadership

Some practitioners measure leader effectiveness in terms of the leader's contribution to the quality of the group process, as perceived by followers and observers (Yukl, 2009). Kaufman's (2001) stated— "Those who wish to go more fully into the field will find fuller treatments in textbooks on public administration and organization theory and treatises on bureaucracy" (p. 18)—inspired this research on local government. Leadership effectiveness in the public sector is essential to citizen satisfaction, trust, and local government reputation (Vigoda-Gadot et al., 2008). Public-sector leaders face highly dynamic socioeconomic and political realities unique to those in the private sector (Nkwana, 2014). Literature on local government centers primarily on elected officials, such as council members and other public figures. Citizens vote for public servants and depend on their decisions; however, there is another, often-unseen public service population. The background personnel include clerks, administrative assistants, fiscal administrators, and administrative assistants, all working to meet citizens' needs (Collins, 2020). Chapter II will further clarify the organizational structure by leadership and staff.

Leadership and public leadership have been defined in several ways. Van Wart (2003) proposed five definitions of public leadership:

1. The process of providing results required by authorized methods efficiently, effectively, and legally.
2. The process of supporting followers who provide results.
3. The process of aligning the organization with its environment, especially the macro-level changes necessary, and realigning the culture as appropriate.
4. The service focuses.
5. A composite of providing technical performance, internal direction to followers, and external organizational leadership, all with a public service orientation.

The public-sector business environment is becoming more like a private organization (Valle, 1999). As a result, local government leaders must learn to observe change processes in an organization driven by bureaucracy. Looking at leader and follower roles is essential, as leaders' fear of change affects their relationships with followers (Collins, 2020). Failure to change might also create inertia that erodes public-sector organizations (Valle, 1999).

Significance and Scope of Study

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in addressing the limited research on followers' perspectives in local government. The study investigates the participants' meaningful experiences with leadership. Most literature pertains to leaders' perspectives and the foundations used to meet organizational goals. A critical incident technique (CIT) approach will enable data collection from semi-structured interviews to obtain meaningful insight. The literature on followers' experiences in local government is sparse. This study includes the follower perspective and

provides findings to help those in local government. In addition, by presenting meaningful experiences, both internal and external customers may benefit from any positive results from the study; for example, clear communication through leader-follower interactions may provide better customer relations.

Scope of Study

This research centers on staff perspectives regarding meaningful interactions with leaders in local government. The participant criteria include non-leadership workers within the U.S. with two or more years in the same locality. I expected to elicit more in-depth information about developed relationships. Due to the concentration on followers' perspectives, I did not interview senior leaders for this study. In addition, this study intentionally focuses on the local government, not state, federal, or national government sectors. Finally, I recruited participants from a range of local government organizations and further described this element of the sample in Chapter III.

Researcher Positionality

My experience working in local government, particularly in the finance department, inspired me to research the dynamics of "followership" in local government. During my 15 years, I progressed to midlevel management as a senior accountant and worked with several department heads. I observed differences in perceptions of the organization's direction, including misunderstandings about communication, connectivity, and ideas. I had the opportunity to work with individuals I considered extraordinary leaders who understood how to run departments successfully and other hardworking employees who believed in making a difference for citizens. I had the responsibility of training city and state employees on the financial system used

throughout the organization. In this role, I collaborated with individuals whose day-to-day processes included working with the public and internal customers.

The most noticeable aspect, however, was poor morale, which inspired me to want to know more about why morale was low. I sought to answer the following questions: Are there specific instances of disconnects in communication, such as misinterpretation of instructions or lack of feedback? Why is there low confidence among followers, for example, lack of support or recognition? Is this the case in all departments, or are there specific areas where these issues are more common? Most importantly, is this the culture of local government, or are these issues specific to certain departments? Relationships matter to the success of any organization, and leader and follower behaviors are connected to the outcome.

CIT allowed me to research meaningful interactions in the local government sector and thus is a good fit for this research project. As a qualitative constructivist researcher, I am committed to understanding and interpreting the participants' experiences. I have learned to separate being a researcher from the position of having my own meaningful experiences with local government leaders. However, it was essential to step outside my own experiences and allow the participants to make meaning of their interactions with leadership. Furthermore, this enables me to construct the meaning of the participants' meaningful interactions, ensuring their perspectives are accurately represented and respected.

Research Questions

My private- and public-sector experience inspired a focus on the relational aspect of local government, looking beyond leadership hierarchy studies to concentrate on followers' perspectives of their interactions with leaders. In my experience, conversations with colleagues, and readings, I found that the relationships between municipal leaders and the less-seen

followers trying to implement leaders' policies are troubled and under-researched. Followership is a recent study area, reflecting the relative invisibility of the many whose work influences whether important policies are implemented or forgotten. In response to the limited literature on the relational aspect of leadership in local government, specifically from the follower perspective, the principal research question is: What meaningful interactions are identified by local government staff when working with their supervisors? The interview asked the participants to share four meaningful interactions with their supervisor. My principal research question led to my methodology.

Methodological Approach

The focus of the study was to increase understanding of relationships in local government. Based on the research question, the appropriate approach is CIT, with data collected using semi-structured interview questions. The study addresses the five principles of CIT: (a) identify the general aims, (b) establish plans and specifications, (c) collect the data, (d) analyze the data, and (e) interpret and report the results. Chapter III will include in-depth information regarding the CIT process and its application to this study. The participants' lived experiences of their interactions with leaders could provide a broader understanding of the relationships in local government. Data collection occurred following the CIT techniques. Conducting semi-structured interviews with an interview took place via Zoom, audio-recorded for transcription.

Critical Incident Technique

As an exploratory approach, CIT positioned me to develop an understanding of local government followership and propose ideas for practice and future study. It is essential to capture the relational aspect from the followers' perspectives. By adopting the CIT design, I can understand followers' perceptions of their interactions with leaders.

Although I considered grounded theory before my practice interview, I soon recognized that CIT was a better fit. The practice interview question required the participant to describe a time she presented an idea to her leader, which she told from a relational perspective. Through this practice interview, I realized I wanted to explore critical moments. The following section will present the participant criteria, recruitment strategy, and data collection and analysis procedures. Data collected from interviews with local government participants explore the impact of meaningful interactions as described by followers in local government.

Data Collection, Analysis, Interpretation, and Reporting

Interviews were the primary method of data collection. I used an interview guide for a basic structure that allowed for follow-up questions and flexibility. Bradley (1992) stated, "An open-ended approach is essential for CIT because data has to be categorized inductively, without reference to pre-existing theories" (p. 98). Individual interviews are the preferred means of collecting CIT data. Developing an open rapport and trust with interviewees was essential, as they might be more willing to discuss sensitive information. During the interviews, I asked about specific incidents to minimize the likelihood of respondents recalling adverse experiences (see Dasborough, 2006). I had the interviews transcribed and discussed this process further in Chapter II. I used Dedoose software to code and then worked with a coding partner or team. I engaged in a constant analytical process, further described in Chapter III.

The last step of the CIT process was to interpret the data and report the findings. Although no specific CIT reporting format exists, the findings often include critical behaviors defining the activity (Hughes, 2007). If themes emerged regarding the incident type, I reported these themes. I also report overall themes of antecedents, incidents, outcomes, and implications for practice.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations for Antioch University, the locality, and all involved in the research process necessitate an approved internal review board application before recruitment. I obtained participant approval and signed informed consent forms before conducting interviews. Participants in the study did so by voluntary agreement; any participants posing doubt or feeling uncomfortable were encouraged to withdraw anytime during the study. I was committed to keeping participants' names and other significant identity characteristics from the research content. The storage of research data and records will only be available to me as the researcher.

Chapter I provided an overview of the study. Chapter II will review the theoretical and topical literature, showing the need to explore the relational aspect of local government further. Due to the limited literature on the followers' perspective, there will also be discussions of the follower-centric perspective theory. Chapter III will present a deeper discussion of this study's method and design. The CIT design is appropriate to elicit participants' descriptions of critical incidents and identify the criteria they expect or see in leadership. Analysis of the collected data will provide a greater understanding of the perspectives of followers who work with leaders daily.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will present earlier scholarship around follower perspectives. Throughout the literature review, I defined local government in the U.S. and described its organizational structure. Chapter II will include existing studies on follower perspectives in higher education and healthcare to interpret the gap in local government literature. The constructs of this study do not draw heavily on leadership literature but on theories related to followers' and followers' perspectives of leadership. This study adopts the follower-centered perspective of leadership in local government.

Local Government in the U.S.

Local government administration consists of towns, cities, counties, and districts. City governments deliver most local services, including education, zoning regulations, police, and fire protection public utilities, to name a few. A new way of looking at leader and follower roles is essential. Local government also promotes economic development, where the goal includes keeping communities informed while including the community in decision-making processes when possible.

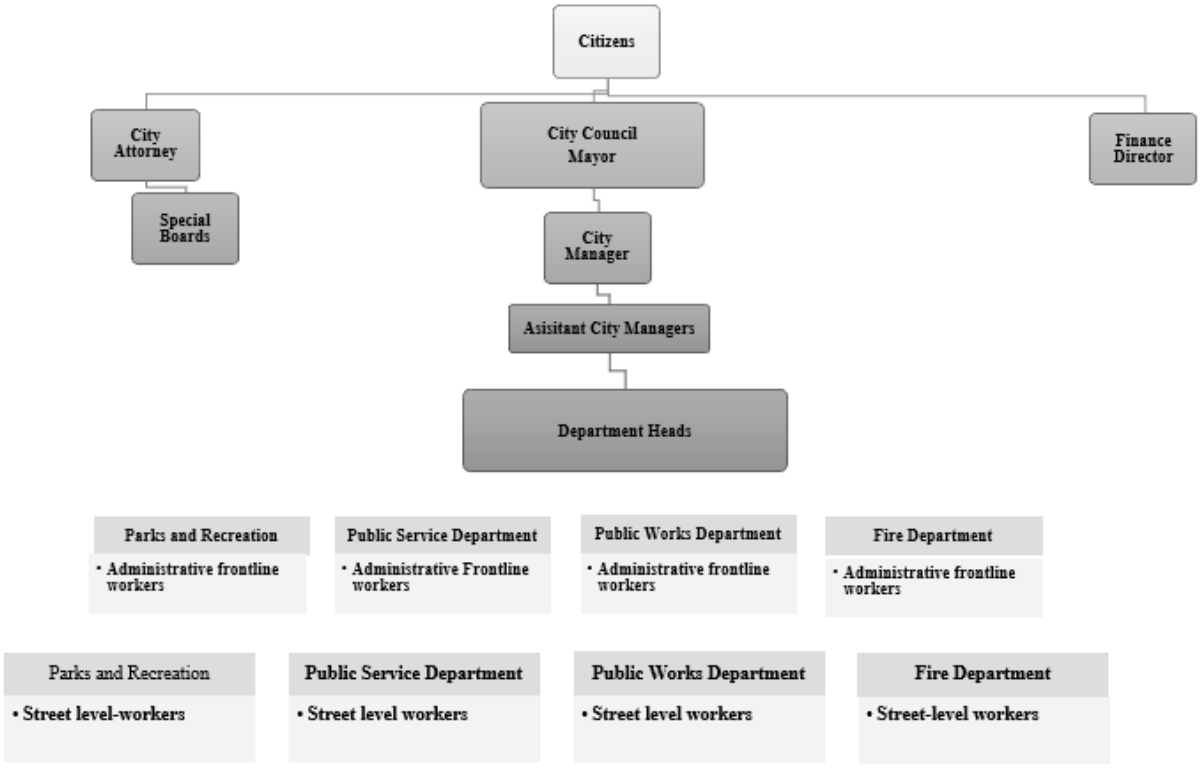
According to Tausanovitch and Warshaw (2014), as of 2014, there were 90,000 local governments in the United States (p. 1). At the beginning of the 21st century, there were around 20,000 municipal governments in the United States, and they were more diverse in structure than state governments (Britannica, 2022). In the United States, cities are categorized as small, medium, and large. Small cities, also known as boroughs, have a population of less than 100,000. Medium cities have populations between 100,000 and 300,000 and offer various services. Large cities have populations between 300,000 and over 1 million and provide numerous services.

Metropolises are large cities, and their suburbs have populations ranging from 1 to 3 million (United Nations Population Fund, 2022).

New York City is the largest city in the United States, with a population of 8.5 million, and it is part of the Northeast megalopolis. Approximately 40% of the U.S. population resides in cities with 50,000 or more inhabitants (Soller, 2004). As urban populations continue to grow, the number of cities in the United States will also increase (United Nations Population Fund, 2022). The size of cities influences the services they provide. Each state can establish governments to help carry out constitutional powers, and local governments exercise only those powers granted by the state (Britannica, 2022). This study interviewed participants from various localities across the United States. The participants included staff members who were not in management or leadership positions. The public-sector business environment is becoming more like a private organization (Valle, 1999). As a result, local government leaders must learn to observe change processes in an organization driven by bureaucracy. Literature on local government centers primarily on elected officials, such as council members and other public figures; however, based on the organizational structure, local government has several position levels. Figure 2.1 will show the different levels of local government and flow from elected officials, leadership, front-line administration, and street-level bureaucrats. Front-line administration includes but is not limited to fiscal clerks, office clerks, permit clerks, and accounting clerks.

Figure 2.1

Sample City Organizational Chart



(Collins, 2022)

Public Service and Private Sector Differences

Cultural and structural differences between the public and private sectors include values and decision-making processes. Work values can be specified as generalized beliefs about the desirability of specific work attributes (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). Several authors have cautioned against distinctions between public and private sector management (Murray, 1975; Simon, 1995, 1998). However, the noticeable differences include electing officials, bureaucratic rules, and procedures in public organizations. Government agencies and non-profits have no profit indicators or incentives (Rainey, 1983). Public service workers accept lower payment options.

However, they have benefits to replace the discrepancies in pay, including job security, although no job has 100% security. Private sector workers may deal with layoffs attributed to low profits.

Government agencies have variations in how they operate. Organizations with public features are seen as constrained in ways that limit their ability to make strategic choices (Nutt, 2006). One such example includes the ability to budget without mandates from state and federal governments. Several studies have found that private, for-profit organizations experience easier processes while public organizations experience controversy and unstable processes. The organizational structure for most local governments is similar but different from those in the private sector. Municipal, or city, governments have three basic types of system: mayor-council, commission, and council-manager. The mayor-council form is used in Boston, New York, and Chicago.

Figure 2.1 presents an organizational chart for the council-manager structure. Some cities allow citizens to vote for elected officials such as the mayor, vice mayor, and city council; in this case, the city manager is not elected. Positions in local government are like those in the private sector. Titles in the private sector, such as computer programmers, general managers, and auditors, all have the same tasks. However, for example, the public sector's administration and administrator terms are known to tie to elected officials. The elected officials consist of mayors and council members; for the study, the administration specifically refers to those employees who work in an office environment, have no direct reports, and encounter external and internal customers (see Figure 2.1). Leadership functions vary, and administrative leadership in government means the need to be responsive, open, aware of completing interest for the common good, and so forth to create a sense of public trust in their stewardship roles (Van Wart, 2003). The job of elected officials can be complicated; however, those who elect them have

expectations and rely on the officials to consider the taxpayers and their communities (Vogelsang-Coombs & Miller, 1999).

Followers in the public and private sectors have their perspectives on leadership. The follower-centered perspective approach can apply to both sectors.

Public Leadership Studies (Public Administration)

Governments worldwide remain attentive to public administration (Christensen et al., 2017). Although Christensen et al.'s (2017) systematic meta-analysis of public service motivation was commendable, little research is devoted to the implications of empirical findings for managers. Orr and Bennett (2016) conducted a qualitative narrative inquiry from a public administrative viewpoint, finding a conceptualization of leadership as collective, a sense of organizational realities, and a need for change in leadership training. Orr and Bennett included elements of an ethnographic approach through long-term engagement with local government chief executives using storytelling and narrative techniques. Their findings presented a way to understand complex situations within public administration through a relational lens. Suggestions for future research included exploring other parts of government, examining narrative and change at the front line, and continuing the conversation between public leadership research and leadership theory (Orr & Bennett, 2017).

Although leadership studies have generally focused on the leader, leadership styles, and the leader's perspective of followers, there is limited study on followers' perceptions of leaders in local government. I explore the experience of local government followers as they navigate "permanent white water" (Vaill, 1996, p. xiv), which pertains to space outside one's comfort zone. According to Vaill (1996), permanent white water is prevalent and overwhelming and impacts work and daily lives. Researchers have explored street-level bureaucracy and the

outcomes of policies created by leaders and enforced by lower-level workers. The study focuses on non-leaders (i.e., frontline administrative workers).

Lipsky (1980) introduced the phrase "street-level bureaucracy" to designate the often unseen but vital workers who perform countless tasks to serve the citizens of a modern municipal community. Unlike many "great man" literature about mayors focused on the prominent elected officials and chief executives of central local government departments, Lipsky (1980) studied those who interact directly with citizens and substantially influence the execution of their work. Lipsky (1980) contrasted the significant authority of these officials with "lower-level workers in most organizations" who do not have nearly as much "discretion in determining the nature, amount, and quality of benefits and sanctions provided by their agency" (p. 13).

Lipsky's (1980) work and the concept of street-level bureaucracy have been followed up and used in a wide range of literature (Brodkin, 2012; Hupe et al., 2015). Lipsky provided a small piece of a complicated picture of public policy and relationships in local government by focusing on street-level positions and the importance of working with citizens attached to the results of a bureaucratic world. Lipsky considered street-level positions to include teachers, police officers, and other law enforcement personnel. According to Brodkin (2012), "Lipsky saw those disparate types of public service organizations had common characteristics and that those characteristics systematically shaped much of what they did and how they did it" (p. 941).

Long (2019) conducted a qualitative grounded theory study of local government relationships between mayors and chief administrative officers. The purpose was to understand how the functionality of mayor-chief administrators' relationships impact the ongoing operation of local government. Using grounded theory, Long (2019) developed a constructivist theory and heuristic model of the central relationship dimensions based on the findings. The demographics

for Long's study included both mayors and chief administrative officers (CAO), allowing his research to define the relationships between the mayors' perceptions and the CAO.

Relational studies in local government have been limited to the follower's level and the perception of leaders in local government. The following section will discuss the background of the follower-centric perspectives of leadership and the focus on followers' connection to leadership.

Follower-Centric Perspectives

Follower-centric approaches arose in response to leader-centric views and drew attention to the role of the follower in constructing leaders and leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). The follower perspective predates followership studies and better explains the perspectives of staff in local government from a theoretical standpoint. The follower-centered approach to leadership research does not assign an active role to followers. However, it argues that follower perceptions, preferences, or attitudes, influenced by their traits and emotional arousal, can passively shape or even restrain leadership processes (Oc & Bashshur, 2013).

The follower-centric perspective can be defined as the tendency to view leadership as the most critical factor for the success or failure of organizations (Meindl et al., 1985). Meindl and Ehrlich's (1987) romance of leadership represented the first fundamentally follower-centered approaches. The romance of leadership emphasizes followers and their contexts for defining leadership itself and emphasizes leadership as a social construction. In prior years, research with a follower-centered perspective has highlighted the role of the followers as an interactive, dyadic process (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Felfe & Schyns, 2006; Meindl, 1995). Meindl (1995) invited scholars to understand such influences as toxic leaders and the psychological needs and fears contributing to the follower's perspective of leaders. Chaleff (2009) introduced the concept of

the courageous follower model that encourages healthy communication and that everyone assumes the follower role at some point. Chaleff further describes the position of the courageous follower as assuming responsibility and serving by contributing to team goals and missions.

This study pursued meaningful interactions among staff and their supervisors and is closely connected to how followers construct meaning from a social context. According to social construction, individuals construct reality through interaction with one another. A social constructionist view suggests that much of how individuals understand organizations depends on how they construct meaning regardless of events (Chen & Meindl, 1991). Among other researchers, Shamir et al. (2007) examined how images and social contagion contribute to followers' social constructions and relationships with leaders. As noted by Meindl (1995), followers' orientation to the leader and the self-perception of followers are precursors to overt acts of followership. Several psychological factors can initiate the follower's leadership perspective. Individuals confront a world they must interpret using motives, attitudes, need-dispositions, role requirements, and situational demands (Blumer, 2013).

A social psychological view suggests that understanding behaviors requires understanding the context and situation in which actors in social interactions operate. A social-psychological approach is a way to know how social-psychological variables facilitate or inhibit the emergence of different types of leadership (Shamir et al., 2007). Koonce (2016) defined leadership as the socially co-constructed and emergent process through which people in their respective roles individually, relationally, and collectively lead and follow others. Therefore, the social construct of followership includes a people and a process orientation. People orientation refers to the coordination of individual, relational, and collective efforts, and

process orientation pertains to the collective actions of the respective constituents in pursuing intertwining goals and initiatives (Koonce, 2016).

Looking into a follower-centric perspective and the meaningful experiences of non-leader staff in the local government could allow questions about trust and motivational factors to surface. Most importantly, leaders may understand that the follower concept can be crucial to the leader's success. Leadership is considered to have emerged when followers construct their experiences in terms of leadership concepts (Ford & Harding, 2018), and according to Meindl (1995), that is, "when they interpret their relationship as having a leadership-followership dimension" (p. 332).

The follower-centered perspective on leadership proposed by Meindl not only maintains that leadership is, to a substantial extent, socially constructed, but it also emphasizes that leadership is often invoked as an explanatory mechanism (Shamir et al., 2007). What are the interactions between leaders and followers from the follower's point of view? In addition to the practical challenges of leadership, theoretical and methodological developments and empirical findings have shown shortcomings and limitations (Kupers, 2007).

Meindl and Ehrlich's (1987) romance of leadership represented the first fundamentally follower-centered approaches. It can be defined as the tendency to view leadership as the most critical factor for the success or failure of organizations (Meindl et al., 1985). In prior years, research with a follower-centered perspective has emphasized the role of the followers as an interactive, dyadic process (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Felfe & Schyns, 2006; Meindl, 1995). The following section will describe the existing research on followers' perceptions of leadership in the education and healthcare sectors. Given that the follower perspective has not been researched widely in the context of local government, I explored the literature about follower perception in

education and healthcare. I considered the educational and healthcare perspectives of follower perception to provide similar concepts related to the student and staff perspectives due to the limited research on staff perspectives of leadership in local government.

Student Perceptions of Leadership in Education

There is a need to understand better how followers construct the meaning of leadership not only in local government but also in other organizations. Although there is minimal research on the perspective of followers of leadership in local government, several existing studies in higher education exist (Bligh et al., 2007; Collinson & Collinson, 2009; Shertzer, 2001) leader positions and titles included in these studies fit the titles for each specific study. In the upcoming studies, we will explore how followers perceive leadership in higher education. I chose to focus on higher education because of the current literature in education that explores the relationship between students and faculty perception. The study looked at this topic from a local government perspective and contributed to existing conversations on this subject.

Follower Perspective of Aversive Leadership

Bligh et al. (2007) conducted a study to examine the followers' perceptions of aversive leadership in public high schools. The study aimed to combine the "Romance of Leadership" and "Dark Side of Leadership" theories by analyzing the followers' perceptions of principals' leadership behaviors and how followers rated themselves on job satisfaction and resistance.

The study also included the ratings of heads/teachers provided by principals and the perceptions of aversive leadership styles of principals by head/lead teachers. The sample for the study was selected randomly from 2,000 high schools listed in California, and 491 questionnaires were mailed to principals asking them to rate their department/lead teachers on behavior measures, follower performance, and citizenship behaviors. Additionally, 1,060 confidential

questionnaires were mailed to head/lead teachers to gather their perceptions of the aversive leadership styles of principals. The study concluded that aversive leadership, which uses intimidation, threats, and reprimands to exercise power, had a negative correlation with follower job satisfaction, and a positive correlation with followers' self-rating of behavioral resistance. The data collected through questionnaires and surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics, intercorrelations, and reliability of variables.

In summary, the study aimed to provide insights into the followers' perceptions of leadership, and it concluded that aversive leadership negatively affects followers' job satisfaction and increases their behavioral resistance. According to Bligh et al. (2007), the perceptions of aversive leadership are highly related to follower-related outcomes of job satisfaction and resistance (p. 547). Their findings also align with prior research (Pearce & Sims, 2002; Tepper et al., 2001), and that components of aversive leadership are negatively related to several traditional follower outcomes (p. 548).

Employee Perspectives On Effective Leadership

Higher Education

Collinson and Collinson (2009) studied effective leadership in UK further education (FE), focusing on Heroic and Post-heroic leadership. Post-heroic leadership emphasizes the importance of followers and balanced leadership styles, such as shared leadership, servant leadership, and social processes. The study highlighted such aspects as being valued, the adverse effects of non-approachable leadership, and the likelihood of employees lacking respect and trust in leadership. Respondents also understood leadership's multiple responsibilities of community representation and college accountability (p. 375).

Collinson and Collinson (2009) conducted semi-structured interviews across seven FE English colleges for 2.5 years between 2004 and 2006. When asked about effective leadership in this sector, many respondents emphasized the importance of open, engaged, and collaborative practices (p. 369). Like this study, the perspective of followers on leadership and the negative impacts of distrust and lack of transparency in local government relationships parallel the findings of Collinson and Collinson's 2009 study on higher education relationships.

Collinson and Collinson (2009) also explored leaders' accounts; they sought to drill down into organizations to examine subordinates' views about effective leadership (p. 368). Findings suggest that FE leaders who can balance strategic priorities and competing responsibilities are most likely to be seen as enacting effective leadership (Collinson & Collinson, 2009).

Student Perspectives of Leadership Empowering and Constraining Beliefs

Shertzer (2001) focused on college student perceptions of leadership. Shertzer described the rationale for studying student perceptions of leadership in higher education as the need to understand better how students are being empowered to become change agents and leaders (p. 4). The theoretical framework for the study was based on the work of Astin and Astin (2000) who described the obstacles of student beliefs. Schertzer's study aimed to identify beliefs that constrain students from being engaged in leadership and to empower beliefs that encourage students to be involved (p. 6). The study included the term disengaged students to define students who have never and are not currently involved in traditional student leadership roles.

Shertzer (2001) later described the purpose of using the qualitative method to conduct the study and better understand the perspective of leadership and how students make sense of their relationships with leadership (p. 28). Shertzer used focus groups to collect data, allowing

students to learn from one another. However, this study will collect data to allow participants to provide meaning for interactions with local government supervisors.

Shertzer's (2001) study findings included several empowering and constraining beliefs that emerged from the perceptions and the participants' stories (p. 66). The study summarizes that empowering and constraining beliefs were evident and a fundamental part of the students' experiences with leadership (p. 74). Suggestions for future research include more voices to be heard in greater detail; examples include students of color, students with disabilities, and LGBT students.

Follower Perspectives in Healthcare

In an exploratory study, Baker et al. (2016) examined followers' perceptions of their and their leaders' abilities, identifying the need to build trust with the leader. Baker et al. distributed field surveys to 493 healthcare workers at six sites in the U.S. Mid-Atlantic region, with a 40.4% response rate. Theoretically, these findings contribute to the growing literature concerning the critical role of trust, centering on trust and new insights into leadership emergence processes. The concepts of follower self-efficacy and follower motivation to lead are promising ideas for future research.

Chaleff (2009) developed and created the dimensions of the courageous follower. The courageous follower emphasizes courage and active engagement by the five essential characteristics (p. 7):

1. The Courage to Assume Responsibility: Step up willingly, even when risky.
2. The Courage to Serve: Actively supporting the mission and recognizing their role as crucial and doing so with dedication and humility.
3. The Courage to Challenge: Ask questions and provide critical feedback.

4. The Courage to Participate in Transformation: Willingness to learn and contribute to positive change.
5. The Courage to Take Moral Action: Their moral compass guides their actions, and they never compromise principles or stand up for what's right.

Research has been conducted using Chaleff's dimensions of courageous followership in healthcare (Muhlenbeck, 2012; Paxton, 2021). Muhlenbeck (2012) studied the general descriptions of follower behaviors with an emphasis on courageous followership and sought to understand the perception of leadership; the focus was on the relationship between leaders and courageous followers and restricted to professional-level employees. Paxton (2021) investigated how nurses utilize Courageous followership in healthcare conversations with colleagues (p. 2). Using Chaleff's concepts in the healthcare field to promote and comprehend courageous followership can enhance collaboration, elevate patient care, and contribute to organizational achievements. Some of Paxton's findings included positive and negative emotions driven by courageous conversations with leaders (medical doctors) from the perspective of followers (nurses). Similar to Paxton (2021), this study determined the emotional components through meaningful interactions with leaders in local government, later described in Chapter V. Additionally, Paxton (2021) utilized CIT as the methodology to conduct the study.

Literature Using CIT Methodology

Holloway and Schwartz (2014) conducted a related study using CIT to explore significant incidents between faculty and students in higher education. Their findings provided examples of lived experiences between master's students and professors. Holloway and Schwartz sought to understand better how relationships shape and improve teaching and learning. Holloway and Schwartz used a constructivist perspective and open-ended questions to explore participants'

meaning-making. The findings showed that individualized attention was paramount in what the students reported as meaningful, albeit brief, interactions. The researchers provided in-depth detail from a relational stance, showing how CIT is appropriate for future research. Despite the study being unrelated to local government, the findings showed me the general process of using CIT and how to approach studying perceptions concerning relationships.

Bott and Tourish (2016) offered a reconceptualization of CIT to affirm its use in management and organizational studies. Although they found the theory well established, the researchers argued that the value of uncovering critical incidents is enhanced by analyzing the extent to which they suggest a novel view. Bott and Tourish investigated nonprofit boards' role in and importance to the organizations and clients they serve, drawing from the research designs and other empirical case studies' findings to explore various behaviors of boards in Canada. The research design was inductive, with semi-structured interviews to collect data from 53 board chairs, directors, and executive directors from 18 diverse nonprofit organizations in Canada. Bott and Tourish (2016) used purposeful sampling to select diverse organizations in age and revenue generated. The study showed that CIT benefits researchers and prepares them for theory-building studies. Bott and Tourish (2016) suggested that CIT enables an imaginative approach to empirical investigation, data analysis, and theory development.

Conclusion

The literature on relationships between leaders and followers incorporated many types of scholarly work, leading to theoretical models to describe relationships in all kinds of organizations. Leadership research emerged in the 1990s with a follower-centered approach (Shamir et al., 2007). Despite my initial perceptions of followership as a passive act, the literature showed that followership does not necessarily mean a lesser role and that

leader-follower dynamics are reversible. The idea of natural-born leaders has faded. At some point, every leader was a follower, and, at times, a leader again becomes a follower. Several leadership theories, such as charismatic leadership, suggest that followers actively participate in leadership (Hoption, 2014).

The follower-centric perspective aspect of leadership in local government has not received in-depth study. More empirical research aligned with existing theoretical studies in public administration could provide additional perspectives. The study uses an emergent approach but will hold the theories covered in this chapter as sensitizing concepts. I hope to stimulate conversation about leader-follower relationships in local government, perhaps contributing to leaders' follower training for government organizations. Chapter III will introduce the qualitative methodology used to create and facilitate this study on leader-follower relationships in local government.

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHOD

Introduction

This chapter presents the CIT methodology and its use for the proposed study, including the research design and approaches linking the study's purpose and approach. As a qualitative approach, CIT helps researchers explore critical moments in various sectors (Viergever, 2019). This qualitative study examines social situations or interactions in the local government's leader-follower relationship. People assign meanings to their experiences. When we group collections of such meanings to make sense of the world, we engage in research and seek understanding (Kain, 2004). The critical incident technique provides a systematic means for gathering the significance others attach to events, analyzing the emerging patterns, and laying out tentative conclusions for the reader's consideration (Hughes, 2007).

Epistemological Context

As a constructivist researcher, I aim to understand the subjective truths and perceptions of the participants. Constructivist researchers take the position that human beings construct their understanding of social experiences and that there is no singular objective truth about the social world. The CIT method used in the study helped me determine how participants derive meaning from their experiences. By taking a constructivist approach, I centered each participant's own meaning-making. Each participant demonstrated their individual way of relating to the world around them within the realm of local government. My intention as a constructivist researcher was to understand participants' meaning-making and, through the study of critical incidents, to help create a broader understanding of the overall phenomenon of relationships in local government.

CIT offers well-defined guidelines and allows for interviews about real-life, firsthand experiences, which is consistent with the study's aim. Researchers immerse themselves in participants' worlds to better understand a phenomenon or experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Chapter III presents the methodology, the rationale for using CIT, and the history and evolution of the method since Flanagan (1954). I used CIT to contribute to the literature on local government studies.

Critical Incident Technique Overview

Flanagan (1954) developed the CIT to identify the effectiveness of pilot performances in the United States Air Force. Flanagan also applied CIT to create ethical standards for psychologists to assist with designing job procedures and proficiency in personnel (Woolsey, 2011). Since its development, CIT has evolved beyond Flanagan's extensive work. The CIT is a qualitative research approach that offers a practical, step-by-step process for collecting and analyzing information about human activities and their significance to the people involved (Hughes, 2007). Flanagan stated, "An incident is critical if it makes a 'significant' contribution, either positively or negatively, to the general aim of the activity, and it should be capable of being critiqued or analyzed" (p. 338). The first CIT studies addressed combat leadership, pilot disorientation, and bombing raid failures.

CIT lends itself to exploratory research that seeks context-rich, firsthand perspectives on human activities and their significance. The CIT approach has received significant use. For example, Herzberg et al. (1959) used CIT to study work motivation, Flanagan (1954) engaged the technique to examine the quality of life in America, and Chell (2004) recognized CIT as an adequate exploratory and investigative tool. Various terms have been used to refer to CIT over the years, including critical incident analysis, critical incident exercise (Rutman, 1996), and

critical incident report (Kunder, 1987). The CIT approach has evolved since Flanagan for use in areas such as nursing (Dachelet et al., 1981), job analysis (Kanyangale & MacLachlan, 1995), and education and teaching (Le Mare & Sohbat, 2002).

Critical Incident Technique Process

Flanagan (1954) acknowledged that the CIT "does not consist of a single rigid set of rules regulating such data collection. It should be considered a flexible set of principles that must be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation" (p. 335). There are five CIT steps to define the activity of interest: (a) establishing the aim, (b) establishing plans and specifications, (c) collecting the data, (d) analyzing the data, and (e) interpreting the data. The following best describes the five steps to meet the specifications of my study:

Establish the aim: The general aim of the study was to identify the characteristics of meaningful interactions as perceived by local government followers.

Establish plans and specifications: Although this study has a relational focus, the data collected from semi-structured interviews provided only the follower's perspective. The study intended to allow participants to share their perspectives on meaningful experiences from interactions with local government leaders; the study did not include state and federal government. This study used a purposeful sample, meaning I sought participants interested in discussing relevant experiences (Holloway & Schwartz, 2014).

Collecting the data: Individual interviews are typical for CIT (Holloway & Schwartz, 2014; Woolsey, 2011). I used an interview guide as a structure that enables follow-up questions. Developing an open rapport and trust with interviewees is essential, as they might be more willing to share their perspectives. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, allowing only the participants' perspectives. All participants were allowed to

withdraw from the interviewing process if they had concerns or questions concerning the interviewing process.

Analyzing the data: After completing the interviews, I analyzed the data more deeply, exploring emergent themes. I considered these themes about antecedent, incident, and outcome types and possibly demographic material to see if any connections were present. Engaging in a constant comparative approach, I coded transcripts soon after the interview and did not wait until the end of the study to code all transcripts at once

Interpret the data: I coded along the way. As I developed more codes, I clustered related codes in Dedoose, which helped me begin to identify themes. The analytical memoing process assists with describing, classifying, and interpreting the data into themes. I also used process memoing to track decisions made throughout the study; these memos become part of the audit trail and help establish trustworthiness. Additional details about the CIT process can be found in Chapter III.

Bradley (1992) argued that "an open-ended approach is essential for CIT because data has to be categorized inductively, without reference to pre-existing theories" (p. 98). Researchers must develop a rapport of trust with interviewees, who will be more willing to openly discuss sensitive information (Bott & Tourish, 2016). Sometimes, a researcher will not specify the type of incident under study, permitting the participant to recall adverse incidents (Dasborough, 2006). To interpret the data, the researcher should explain to observers what data they seek, record the conversations, and capture all necessary details (Flanagan, 1954).

After collecting interview or questionnaire data, a researcher determines the appropriate level of analysis according to the activity's aim and the data's intended use (Hughes, 2007). The frame of reference allows the researcher to set broad categories for classifying the critical

incidents, allowing room for category formulation. During data analysis, a researcher seeks to summarize and describe the data efficiently for practical use in other situations (Flanagan, 1954). Fitzgerald et al. (2008) identified a three-step data analysis process:

1. Selecting a frame of reference that will be related to how the data would be used.
2. Developing a set of significant area and subarea categories. The process is informed by guidelines from qualitative research methods such as grounded theory.
3. Place the incidents into the categories as they are reviewed and make a simple count. (p. 301)

The last step of the CIT process is to interpret the data and report the findings. Although no specific CIT reporting format exists, the results often include critical behaviors defining the activity (Hughes, 2007). During the last step, a researcher can review potential bias in the first four CIT steps: (a) establishing the aim, (b) establishing plans and specifications, (c) collecting the data, and (d) analyzing the data and identifying any limitations (Fitzgerald et al., 2008). Reporting facts about behavior is preferable to collecting interpretations, ratings, and opinions based on general impressions (Flanagan, 1954).

The Rationale for Critical Incident Technique

The desire to construct a better meaning of relationships in local government led me to CIT. Using CIT will allow me to understand the experiences of followers as they engage with leaders. The exploratory component of CIT has shown to be both dependable and valid in generating a comprehensive and detailed description of a content domain (Anderson & Nilsson, 1964). The CIT method allows for flexibility, permits the researcher to collect the participant's meaningful experiences, and has been considered a qualitative research method with clearly designed guidelines for data collection and analysis, creating a better understanding of the human

experience (Bott & Tourish, 2016; Butterfield et al., 2005). CIT will allow all the participants (followers) to reveal their meaningful interactions with leadership.

Researcher Positionality

My experience working in local government, particularly in the finance department, inspired me to research the dynamics of "followership" in local government. During my 15 years, I progressed to midlevel management as a senior accountant and worked with several department heads. I observed differences in perceptions of the organization's direction, including misunderstandings about communication, connectivity, and ideas. I had the opportunity to work with individuals I considered extraordinary leaders who understood how to run departments successfully and other hardworking employees who believed in making a difference for citizens. One of my responsibilities was to train city and state employees on the financial system used throughout the organization. In this role, I collaborated with individuals whose day-to-day processes included working with the public and internal customers.

The most noticeable aspect, however, was poor morale, which inspired me to want to know more about why morale was low. I sought to answer the following questions: Are there specific instances of disconnects in communication, such as misinterpretation of instructions or lack of feedback? Why is there low confidence among followers, for example, due to a perceived lack of support or recognition? Is this the case in all departments, or are there specific areas where these issues are more prevalent? Most importantly, is this the culture of local government, or are these issues specific to certain departments? Relationships matter to the success of any organization, and leader and follower behaviors are connected to the outcome.

CIT allows me to research meaningful interactions in the local government sector and thus is a good fit for this research project. As a qualitative constructivist researcher, I am

committed to understanding and interpreting the experiences of the participants. I have learned to separate being a researcher from the position of having my own meaningful experiences with local government leaders. However, it was essential to step outside my own experiences and allow the participants to make meaning of their interactions with leadership. Furthermore, this enables me to construct the meaning of the participants' meaningful interactions, ensuring their perspectives are accurately represented and respected.

In this study, my role as a researcher is significant as both an insider and an outsider. This unique perspective is crucial for the integrity and transparency of the research process. Kerstetter (2012) explored the impact of insiders, outsiders, and somewhere in between, where the focus was an extensive debate on the researcher's status as an insider or outsider based on the research process and multidimensional space (p. 101). Moreover, my 15 years of experience within local government and knowledge of local government practices and processes in Virginia created the insider status for the study.

Furthermore, Kerstetter (2012) described geographic location and what constitutes insider and outsider status based on demographic location, for example, interviewers not living in a demographic location for a few years before conducting the study (p. 106). The requirements of this study included localities within the United States; I am considered an outsider in the locations where I do not reside. Also, I am an outsider because I did not work in local government when the research was conducted. Lastly, in my position as a mid-level manager, I could not identify with the positions the participants represented as non-leaders.

Research Question

Researchers using the CIT rely on storytelling, allowing the participants to make meaning of their experiences. The principal research question is: *What meaningful interactions are identified by local government staff working with their supervisors?*

Qualitative researchers explore the complexity surrounding the central phenomenon, presenting participants' varied perspectives and meanings. CIT allowed me to explore the participants' lived experiences. This study is a means to reduce the gap in the literature and provide a helpful tool to further understand the leader-follower relationship in local government. I used the five CIT principles of (a) identifying the general aim, (b) establishing plans and specifications, (c) collecting data, (d) analyzing the data, and (e) interpreting and reporting the results (Byrne, 2001; Fitzgerald et al., 2008; Flanagan, 1954; Hughes, 2007; Schluter et al., 2008; Urquhart et al., 2003).

The Study Design

The general aim of this study was to identify the characteristics of relational leadership as perceived by the followers in a department in local government. CIT researchers rely on the storytelling of participants' lived experiences, in this case, non-leadership employees who work in local government. I selected inductive and semi-structured interviewing techniques to understand the relationships between the participants and leaders. CIT researchers employ a semi-structured interview guide consisting of a set of questions to assist the interviewer in addressing topics. This approach encourages participants to provide detailed insights into meaningful interactions while also understanding their decision-making process (Schwartz & Holloway, 2025). All questions are prepared to focus on the antecedents, incidents, and outcomes; the questions are not derived from other studies; the questions are prepared to ensure

focus on the specific study. Participants were aware of the nature of the study, the importance of their participation, and the anonymous reporting of results. The selection criteria required for the study are the participants who work for a locality within the United States with two years or more experience and no prior relationship with the researcher. Interested individuals received a consent form and a list of interview questions and were informed of the recorded discussions.

Scope of Study

This study focused on leader-follower relationships, specifically in local government. The study is not designed to define relationships in local government but to understand the relationships within local government better. The focus was on local government within the United States. Although this study has a relational viewpoint, the data collected from semi-structured interviews provide only the follower's perspective. The study intends to allow participants to share their perspectives on meaningful experiences from interactions with local government leaders; the study did not include state and federal government. This study used a purposeful sample, meaning I sought participants interested in discussing relevant experiences (Holloway & Schwartz, 2014). As noted, I sought participants from local government organizations in non-leadership positions who have worked in local government for at least two years.

In the following section, I will review various steps of data collection, analysis, and reporting. As noted earlier in this chapter, these steps align with Flanagan's (1954) initial outline of how to design a CIT study.

Research Process and Analysis

Individual interviews are a typical means of collecting data for CIT (Holloway & Schwartz, 2014; Woolsey, 2011). I used an interview guide as a structure that enables follow-up

questions. Developing an open rapport and trust with interviewees is essential, as they might be more willing to discuss sensitive information.

The data analysis stage entails summarizing and describing the data for use in other settings. Prior to the data analysis stage, I would have determined the appropriate level of analysis according to the study's aim and the data's intended use. The frame of reference allows the researcher to set broad categories for classifying critical incidents, allowing room for category formulation (Hughes, 2007).

The last step of the CIT process is to interpret the data and report the findings. There is no specific format for reporting CIT studies; however, the results often include a set of critical behaviors that define the activity (Hughes, 2007). I used Dedoose software to code the data, recognizing that any errors come not from data collection and analysis but from the failure to interpret them correctly. Purposeful sampling procedures were used to locate individuals from individual localities. I used the snowballing sampling strategy, networking, or chain sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

Participant Criteria and Recruitment Strategy

As noted, I engaged in purposeful sampling for this study. To invite participants, I drafted and posted a call for participants. The selection criteria included the following:

- Staff with no direct reports located in the United States
- Minimum two years working in local government
- No prior relationship with the researcher

I posted this with relevant professional groups, on relevant social media sites, and shared it with my professional network. I also shared the call for participants in my follow-up email with participants I have already interviewed, meaning I engaged in snowball sampling.

Qualitative research requires the researcher to meet saturation, and the number of participants cannot be pre-determined. The initial screening process included collecting demographic data. Each participant must meet the participant criteria (working in a local government for two years or more) before moving forward to an interview. All participants who met the demographic criteria received the consent form, and all forms were returned to me via email, after which, I scheduled the interview. All approved participants were listed as pseudonyms (that they chose) to ensure confidentiality.

Memoing

Memoing is a technique that requires the researcher to assume a reflexive stance about the research situation (Birks et al., 2008). There are several memoing approaches and benefits for the researcher and study outcomes (Birks et al., 2008). I utilized the analytical memoing process to write ideas as data was collected and analyzed. The analytical memoing process assists with describing, classifying, and interpreting the data into themes. I also used process memoing to track decisions made throughout the study; these memos become part of the audit trail and help establish trustworthiness. Finally, I engaged in reflexive memoing to reflect on my position and the ways in which my identity and experience may influence my engagement with the data.

Interview Data Collection

I understood the need for all participants to understand the purpose of the study and the assurance of confidentiality. After receiving all demographic requirements and informed consent forms, I explained the study and allowed space for questions.

All interviews occurred virtually via Zoom, with Otter.ai used to transcribe the recordings. I encouraged each participant to describe four meaningful incidents with their supervisor. Please see the interview guide in Appendix C. The interview guide provided structure

yet also allowed flexibility. Constructivist CIT researchers are expected to ask follow-up questions to invite the participant to reflect more deeply. In addition, if participants did not describe antecedents and outcomes along with each incident, I invited them to share (per the interview guide).

After Otter.ai generated the transcription, I reviewed the transcript and the audio to correct errors. I also de-identified each transcript, removing names, places, and other identifying information. Next, I sent the transcript to the participants and invited them to review it to correct errors or delete any sections they did not wish to have included in the study. I informed participants that if I did not hear back from them within three working days, I understood that to mean they did not wish to review the document.

Once the transcript was set, I shared a copy with my coding partner. My coding partner and I coded the transcript independently, and then I compared the codes. I met with my coding partner to review differences in our coding. The criteria for my coding partner included:

- Familiarity with the coding process, i.e., having used coding through qualitative studies
- Familiarity with the importance of confidentiality and the use of pseudonyms
- Trustworthiness as it relates to both the participant and documents
- Coding partner did not work for local government

My coding partner did not "check" my work but offered an additional perspective on the data. I also used Dedoose to enter the demographic information for each participant. Because the incident is the unit of analysis in CIT (Holloway & Schwartz, 2014), I separated each transcript into separate documents so that each incident is its own unit of analysis.

Data Analysis

The constant comparative method begins with the first data collected and continues through saturation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Engaging in a constant comparative approach, I coded transcripts soon after the interview and did not wait until the end of the study to code all transcripts at once. Instead, I coded along the way. As I developed more and more codes, I then clustered related codes in Dedoose, and this helped me begin to identify themes. After further discussion with my chair, it was determined that I was working with a vulnerable population, and I would not meet saturation. I will discuss the decision further in Chapter IV.

After completing the interviews, I analyzed the data more deeply, exploring emergent themes. I considered these themes in relation to antecedent, incident, and outcome types, and possibly demographic material to see if any connections seem to be present. Finally, I considered the findings in relation to relevant literature.

Data Storage

All interviewed transcripts, consent forms, and digital data were saved on a password-protected computer. I also only used apps (such as Zoom, Otter.ai, and Dedoose) that had robust security protocols.

Ethical Considerations

As part of the ethical considerations, I received Antioch University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before recruitment. I obtained participant approval and signed consent forms before conducting interviews. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time. I omitted participant names and other identifiers from the findings and had exclusive access to the research data. Hughes (2007) provided the researcher's ethical responsibility as follows:

- Preserving participant's confidentiality.
- Respect the participant's dignity.
- Explaining the exact nature of the participant's involvement.
- Explain how the participants' responses will be handled.
- Assuring the participant that participation is voluntary.

Approach to Trustworthiness in the Study

Trustworthiness includes four elements: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Trustworthiness is established when findings are as close as possible to the meanings described by the participants (Lincoln et al., 1985). Credibility indicates that the researcher accurately represents the participants' perspectives (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Credibility addresses the issue of the inquirer providing assurances of the fit between respondents' views of their lifeways and the researcher's reconstruction and representation (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of data over time and the accurate tracking of all study processes and procedures. Klenke (2016) defined transferability as the extent to which results can be applied to another context. Confirmability concerns whether another person can corroborate or confirm the results.

Working to develop and maintain trustworthiness, I engaged in an active memoing process to document my decisions throughout the process, keep track of my emerging interpretations, and reflect on my subjectivity and its presence in the study—always with a goal of centering participants' experiences and voices. In addition, I worked with coding partners who provided additional perspectives on the transcripts which helped me expand my view and again, be mindful of my subjectivities. Finally, I engaged in constant comparison-checking to be sure the data supported my emerging thematic ideas.

Before scheduling interviews, the Antioch University IRB had approved the research. To establish and maintain a high level of trust, participants were fully briefed on the research questions, data collection, and data protection measures before consenting to participate. Participants were also afforded the opportunity to ask questions or voice any concerns they may have had. Prior to the coding process, all transcripts were made available for review and approval by the participants. Lastly, all participants were required to complete a consent form (Appendix D).

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the CIT procedures and the use for the study, including the research design and procedures linking the study's purpose and approach. I had a clear understanding of the importance of selecting participants who fit the purpose of the study and would share their meaningful experiences. This chapter also discussed the importance of ethical considerations and trustworthiness for conducting the intended study.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This study explored the meaningful interactions of leader-follower relationships in local government. Capturing meaningful interactions from the staff's perspectives is essential, and CIT has the potential to elicit an understanding of the experiences of frontline staff as they engage with leaders. The participants came from a vulnerable population, which posed challenges to acquiring participants. The final sample was 11 nonleadership frontline workers in local governments throughout the United States. From the interviews, 42 interactions (incidents) emerged. This chapter reviews the data collection, analysis, and participant demographics. Next, I examine the antecedents, incidents, and outcomes themes that emerged through data analysis. Participant quotes will support the themes.

Data Collection and Analysis

Challenges in Recruiting Participants

The participants I sought for this study would have worked in local government for at least two years. All participants were non-leaders with no direct reports and were considered front-line staff. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss challenges in recruiting and provide a summary of the final sample.

After several attempts to recruit participants through LinkedIn, public leadership forums, the Antioch University PhDLC community, snowball sampling, and other referrals, I realized the targeted population was more vulnerable than anticipated. Despite reminding each participant about the importance of confidentiality and the use of pseudonyms, it became clear early on that I was working with a vulnerable population. Vulnerable populations are groups of individuals who face an increased risk of experiencing disparities, often due to social, economic, and environmental disadvantages (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). This study revolves around

non-leadership staff members working for local government within a bureaucratic framework. Concerns expressed by potential participants indicated that local government staff are a vulnerable population. Ellard-Gray et al. (2015) outlines various strategies that researchers can employ during different research stages to address or reduce challenges. For instance, broadening the eligibility criteria to encompass a wide range of categories could be effective (p. 3). In this study, my initial focus was mid-sized cities in the mid-Atlantic region. However, I successfully augmented the participant pool by extending the search to cities across the United States. I report participant demographics in the section below.

Data Collection

Several potential participants clarified this vulnerability in initial conversations and decided to refrain from interviews, even after a reminder of my commitment to confidentiality. Participants shared a few reasons for declining, including fear of retaliation and a lack of trust in the system. I began considering my experiences working in local government and the influence of local government culture, which added to potential participants' hesitation. In consultation with my chair, I determined that this study was exploratory, and I would likely not meet saturation. Instead, I worked toward goals in the CIT literature appropriate for exploratory studies and studies with vulnerable and reluctant populations (Schwartz & Holloway, 2025). I collected and analyzed data until I had a thematic understanding of antecedents, incidents, and outcomes and could make recommendations for future practice and research.

An open-ended interview approach was appropriate for collecting and categorizing the data inductively without referencing preexisting theories (Bradley, 1992). Individual interviews were the selected means of data collection. Developing an open rapport and trust with interviewees was crucial, as the participants might have been more willing to discuss sensitive

information. During the interviews, I asked each participant to describe interactions to minimize the likelihood of respondents recalling adverse experiences (see Dasborough, 2006). I used analytical memoing to write ideas during data collection and analysis.

Data Analysis

The analytical memoing process assisted with describing, classifying, and interpreting the data into themes. The open-ended interview questions all relate to the participants' meaningful interactions with leaders and were as follows:

- Please describe the incident.
- What led to the incident?
- What was the outcome of the incident?
- What makes this incident memorable?
- Why was the incident impactful to you?

Otter.ai was the transcription service used to transcribe all interviews. I used Dedoose software for coding and then worked with a coding partner to confirm the identified antecedents, incidents, and outcomes. I shared a copy of the transcript with my coding partner, who then coded the transcript independently from me. I met with my coding partner to review differences and compare the codes. My coding partner did not check my work but offered an additional perspective on the data. The last step of the process was to interpret the data and report the findings. A constant comparative interpretive method was appropriate to categorize all codes into groups, where themes emerged by antecedents, incidents, and outcomes. The following section presents participant demographics.

Participant Demographics

As discussed in Chapter III, the requirements for the study included the following:

1. Work for a municipality in the United States that do not have direct reports.
2. Have worked in local government for at least two years.
3. Have no prior relationship with the researcher.

Participants who met the requirements received consent and demographic forms. Each participant provided a pseudonym instead of a name to maintain their confidentiality. The demographic questionnaire included age, race, gender, job title, state, and time working for the local government. According to the questionnaire findings, 10 participants identified as female and one as male. According to the World Economic Forum (2023), women make up almost half of the overall workforce at approximately 47%. At the time of this study, I was not able to find national statistics regarding the demographics of the local government workforce. The participants were asked on the demographics form Gender: Female, male, non-binary, gender-fluid. Only one participant refused to answer the question while the remaining identified as female and one male.

Participants were in Connecticut, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia and aged between 30–39, 40–49, and 50–59. The time working for their cities ranged from 5 to 30 years. Table 4.1 presents detailed demographics by state and characteristics. I noticed differences in responses to the city size, such as better connections with leaders and differences in leader titles. In Connecticut, thus, I considered the size of the city and how the participants responded to the questions.

Table 4.1

Participant Demographics

State	City size	Ages
Connecticut	(2) 138,909	(1) 20–29
North Carolina	(1) 144,090 (1) 173,542	(3) 30–39 (5) 40–49 (1) 50–59
South Carolina	(3) 136,632	
Virginia	(2) 137,148	

Note. City sizes represent the cities of participants interviewed in the state column. Ages appear for all participants by the number of participants for the age group. When there was more than one city in a state, the parenthetical numbers represent (1) = first city, (2) = second city, etc.

I excluded one set of interactions from the analysis because the incidents did not meet the incident criteria (i.e., in line with the constructivist CIT practice of incident review; Schwartz & Holloway, 2025). The excluded incidents came from a participant who talked only about her experiences and achievements and would not discuss interactions with her supervisor. These interactions did not meet the criteria for the research question, meriting their exclusion from the analysis. The following section provides an overview of this study's antecedents, incidents, and outcomes.

Incident Overview

I invited participants to share four interactions with their supervisors and received 42 incidents across the sample. Upon analysis, categories and themes emerged for each antecedent, incident, and outcome, and several transcripts had more than one antecedent or outcome. Although the data included positive and negative incidents, I did not ask for specific positive or negative information. Pre-existing questions were prepared to guide the participants in providing

antecedents, incidents, and outcomes and each participant was asked to provide four separate meaningful incidents they had with leadership. I review antecedent, incident, and outcome themes in the following sections.

Antecedent Themes

The antecedent led to the incident. There were 91 antecedent codes, 14 categories, and four major themes: leader offers opportunities, COVID-related duties, work-related duties, and work-life balance. Table 4.2 shows the antecedent themes and specific interactions within them. The supervisor initiated these antecedents, and the participant initiated others.

Table 4.2

Antecedent Themes

Leader offers opportunity	COVID-19–related	Work-related	Work-life balance
Asked to attend a conference	Included in COVID-19-related discussions	Asked to take on higher positions' responsibilities	Family is a priority
Asked to become certified	Asked to work from home during COVID-19	Accounts were in arrears	Became sick at work
Group opportunities	The leader had an issue with working from home	Overbooking appointments	Could not take a vacation with family
	Transferred during COVID-19	Work overload	

Theme 1: Leader Offers Opportunities

Some participants perceived leader-offered opportunities as growth opportunities. In other cases, the participants saw the opportunity as additional unwanted work.

Asked to Attend a Conference

Participant Ann was very proud of her accomplishments. She spoke highly about how much her leader appreciated her, how the leader noticed what she could do, and how he had confidence in her work and skills. She discussed attending a conference with her leader, saying,

"My prior boss selected me to go to a conference with him. Thus, I took that as a sign of respect and one to educate me and support me in my role."

Asked to Become Certified

Ann was asked to become certified for additional duties as a grant administrator, and she explained how she feels more secure in her job as she learns and grows. During the interview, I noticed how important Ann felt when asked to obtain certification or given opportunities to advance her skills. The outcome for Ann was that she felt more valuable to the organization. The most emphasized comments from her interview included the importance of being noticed and showing respect and confidence in her. Ann also described feeling supported in her role and the leader's trust in her. The key word for Ann was *confidence*. She provided more details:

> I felt overwhelmed and a little out of place yet excited because, you know, it is not my usual role. Nevertheless, it was also nice to be educated and learn more about different functions that could support my role and my boss more, you know, to get a general sense of various topics I might have yet to have. It gave me a better understanding of specific perspectives.

Ann did not mind receiving additional responsibilities, which she perceived as allowing her to grow and learn simultaneously. I noted the importance of the leader having confidence in Ann, making their interactions meaningful.

Group Opportunities

Violet, another participant, described opportunities offered in a group setting. Violet explained that the opportunities presented to staff included meeting with the leader, who suggested that everyone participate in a vision dinner. The dinner allowed staff to discuss their vision for the department and individual goals for the department, with questions such as, where do you see yourself as it relates to the organization's vision? Violet perceived the vision dinner as an opportunity to be heard and included in the vision for the department overall. She offered the following:

> When [the leader] sat with me, he was attentive and open to ideas. Receptive to possible criticisms about the vision. When he sat down with me to find out what my vision was or what I would do to fulfill the vision, or as a team player, he was very open and receptive to any feedback I could give. Each year's outcome is that we reached the goal, and in many instances, we surpassed the goal. OK, but he equipped all of us with the necessary feedback and tools to achieve those goals.

Ann and Violet believed their interactions were meaningful because they felt included in making decisions and being a part of departmental growth, not just their individual development. Violet described her leader as the only transformational leader she had the pleasure of working with, and team exercises allowed for better communication within the department.

COVID-19 was another common theme discussed in several interviews. Communication and decisions during COVID-19 led to conversations about future unavoidable situations, showing how leaders communicate and often make decisions. The following section presents the participants' interactions with leaders during COVID-19.

Theme 2: COVID-19–Related

Included in COVID-19–Related Discussions

Participants described how COVID-19 changed the dynamic of local government processes. COVID-19 impacted other industries, affecting day-to-day operations. As a result, local government leaders needed to make decisions that affected organizations, staff, and citizens. Communicating effectively with staff was just as important. Not every decision applied to every situation. For example, Henry, a human resources staff member, expressed concerns about how working in the office could affect families:

> The first is when we realize the impact of COVID-19. The pandemic sticks out because there was a conversation with leadership about keeping the office open. I was against this. It is heading one way their way. We all had to consider how working in the office would affect our families, not just the organization. I felt our concerns did not matter. There were a few individuals who have yet to return to the office. It is almost like the light bulb came on. This was memorable to me because we lost some dedicated workers.

Describing how COVID-19 impacted the day-to-day operations, Henry continued,

> Moreover, many things that negatively impacted the office, such as interactions, employee resignations, and other issues, were all up. Besides, even though all those things are true and matter and whatnot, you know, the nature of the city is to have people in the building.

Asked To Work from Home During COVID-19

Emily, another participant, described an interaction related to COVID-19. Emily worked for the city for 5 years, but it was not until COVID-19 that she started to develop a picture of leadership in a way she had never seen:

> During COVID, we had to use the work-from-home model, and the agency that I worked for said that it was up to the supervisor if I came back into the office right now because they would start doing it in phases. Well, my supervisor just wanted everybody in the office. That did not go over well. It was very frustrating because she just liked to have people in the office so she could sit around and talk because she did not like being at home with her kids. So, it was a personal selfishness of not wanting to be at home dealing with her kids and husband. I will come into the office as needed because I will be alone. That is what it came down to. Furthermore, we picked up on that. OK, and so people were not happy, but we did it.

Issues With Working from Home

During her interview, Emily explained that sometimes the supervisor was reluctant but had no choice but to accept them working from home due to other circumstances. She said,

> A couple of us are parents. Sometimes, when schools shut down, students were still at home and not back at school. We had to work from home and do things like that. Her response was, OK, that is fine because she could not control the school schedule. So, she could not say, figure it out, leave her kid at home, or whatever.

Transferred During COVID-19

Another participant provided a personal instance during COVID-19 that helped her realize how unhappy she was in her job. Suzette had worked for the city for 25 years, beginning directly after high school, but she was not old enough to retire. Although she enjoyed her job, she only sometimes agreed with how things were done, particularly during COVID-19. Suzette explained how COVID-19 led her to transition from one city to another:

> If COVID-19 had not happened, we would not have had a COVID-19 event I attended, which is where I got hurt. I was out of work for a year when I got hurt. Um, and during that year, it made me realize how unhappy I was that I needed to make a change. Moreover, what that change was going to be, I was surprised to find out. However, I just happened to be on the phone with a friend who worked for another locality one day; the other friend said, "Hey, Suzette, you probably just need to come on and work with us."

Suzette discussed her smooth transition and the differences between the two localities. Communicating the importance of being a good listening leader, she recalled,

> Furthermore, he came by, told me, and said, "I look forward to you being around here. And that made me feel good. Oh, wow. The supervisor continues to be supportive in that way. Oh, yeah. He is always saying, "Hey, how are things going? Do you need anything?" This is the first time I have had a leader like that.

Suzette said this encounter was memorable because of the changes made for her and how COVID-19 had been challenging but brought about a positive result.

COVID-19 continues to have long-term effects and may continue to cause unforeseen changes in business and personal lives. Staff sometimes saw opportunities as unfavorable, specifically when asked to assume additional responsibilities. Requests to do someone else's work or change how work is processed could become an issue.

The following section presents meaningful experiences as examples of participants' issues with work-related conversations with leaders.

Theme 3: Work-Related

Another antecedent theme centered on work-related interactions. Leadership may approach or be approached about work-related processes and task-oriented concerns. The approach to the conversation could vary and be interpreted differently by staff. The meaningful interactions perceived by staff showed what could later become broader conversations. Tasks could fall in the context of experience or title. During participant interviews, it became clear that the division of work among staff may depend on the interpretation of the individual completing the task. Janet, a fiscal administrator, had worked for the city for 12 years. She has also worked

in various positions and always understood what specific tasks or duties she was to complete or provide.

Asked To Take on Higher Positions Work

During her interview, Janet described an interaction with her supervisor, who had assigned her a task she had never done that was typically performed by an individual with a senior position. She said,

> The position I was hired for was limited to specific tasks by position. For example, I was employed for one position. Still, I was doing all the work for a much higher position. OK. I was doing the work. However, the supervisor responded to the work, "Oh, I am surprised." Her comment left me with this taste in my mouth. Like, "Why are you surprised that I am capable of the work?" I was like, "Are you surprised I am capable of the work? Because I am young? Are you surprised that I am capable of the work? Because, I mean, you are a woman, too." I did not know how to take her comment, and she never explained. A simple great job or thank you would have been sufficient.

This experience was memorable for Janet because she did not know what the supervisor meant by "I am surprised." She explained later that her concern was not the assignment of senior-level work but the unclear feedback she received, which she perceived may have been gender- or race-related. The outcome for Janet was that she continued to work for the department but started documenting her concerns for performance evaluations. Although Janet received no explanation for her supervisor's comment, she had similar work-related interactions with other supervisors and different outcomes.

Violet discussed starting a new position, cleaning up work her predecessor had not completed, and the effect it would have going forward with her current responsibilities.

Accounts in Arrears

Violet had worked for the city for 5 years. She described her experience:

> I just started a new position, and the accounts were thousands of dollars in arrears. Um, and the leader of that department did not take the steps or the proper initiative to ensure that the accounts stayed at a current standing; they let it fall by the wayside. My first impression was that it needed to be more conducive to a good leader. When I talked to him about it, he said he was short-handed. He only had time to employ people if a new employee or employer contacted a temp agency because he was in the field. He could have gotten someone else, possibly. He could have delegated that responsibility to someone else to keep the accounts current and not as far in arrears. OK, the outcome of the incident is that it was a time crunch to get them before the end of the quarter. We had a time crunch, so it was overtime. To bring the accounts into good standing and acceptable standing.

The antecedent was that Violet initiated the conversation with the leader, about the accounts being in arrears. She was new and had instantly developed a negative impression of the leader. I began to understand both sides while interviewing with the participant. Strong leadership requires being proactive, yet the supervisor needed more staff to review the accounts. There are times when departments are short-staffed; however, leaders still must focus on other aspects of being a leader. Violet explained how the interaction made her confident in approaching her leader and expressing her concerns. During COVID-19, unexpected changes such as early retirement and career changes left some departments understaffed and some individuals overworked.

Work Overload

A 13-year veteran of working for the city, Giovanna described how she knew her supervisor would overload her with other work in the department:

> Whenever my supervisor would schedule something else too close for her, it was intentional that it was expected to close; that was a way of tricking me into doing their work. I could not say no because it is your job, not mine. My job is to work with the department. She would also use me if they were out, like out for surgery, sick or something, or whatever, to include death in a family. She would come to me and ask me to cover some of the work I needed to be trained in, some of what I was asked to complete. It became work overload for me. I tolerated that for years. I always had my

> work up to date. Nothing was overdue, and no one had to complain about my work; keep singling me out because you had an issue with me, and I knew it was just with me.

When I asked how this made her feel, the participant responded, "I was angry. Again, I could not talk to her and feared losing my job." When auditors came in, they began asking questions about other workers' timelines, and procedures started to change regarding the workload and separation of duties. The outcome was thought-provoking because it took another internal process to end Giavonna's feeling of work overload.

There were a few comments throughout the interviews about requests to take on additional duties, some short-term and others added to existing responsibilities; however, the participants did not perceive all of the requests positively. Giavonna explained,

> [My supervisor] would ask me to help someone else with work, knowing they still needed to complete it. For one thing, we stopped having a clock-in system. You did not have to clock in or clock out of work. So, they came in late in the morning. We had one to go as far as coming in at 11 o'clock, maybe two. The supervisor just walked in and spoke to her about it. No one asked where she was. Furthermore, the supervisor knew this. She did not address it. She knew that when they got behind on something. I was the first one she came to, saying, "Can you help with this?"

Giavonna described trying to communicate with the supervisor about how the added work would impact her current duties. The outcome in this incident was that Giovanna's voice was not heard, and she continued to work with the hope that another position would open up in the organization.

Theme 4: Work–Life Balance

Several participants mentioned the importance of work–life balance in local government. This section provides the participants' experiences related to work–life balance, including the unforeseen circumstances that arose. In the following subsections, participants described their meaningful interactions regarding work–life balance. Workers may struggle to focus on responsibilities while dealing with family emergencies and health issues. Not all work–life balance conversations were the same, and the outcomes varied based on individual perspectives.

Family Emergency

Participant Thomasina was eager to discuss how her leader was empathetic and wanted to assist in alleviating her concerns. She said,

> I had a family emergency; I went in to let her know that because it was close to the end of the year, we had reports that we had to get done, and I let her know about the family emergency and my concerns about work. So, she took the time, was very empathetic, and listened. She listened very thoroughly to what my concerns were and what the nature of the situation was. Instead of delegating another coworker to help me with my reports, my supervisor offered to do it herself. She felt this would alleviate some of the stress I am experiencing at the job, aiding me in handling emergencies outside of work.

Thomasina shared that employee absences would impact the department because creating year-end reports was a joint effort. Sometimes, the supervisor could not join in and assist, but this was one time they needed her help. Thomasina said the interaction was memorable because "she put herself in my shoes or looked at me as human and not just a machine cranking out. The outcome was that I have gained a better respect for my supervisor, as a person, and as a leader." Employees need time off for different reasons; however, the reasons discussed by the participants were unexpected.

Became Sick at Work

Participants' meaningful experiences were not always based on the interaction itself but on its impact. At times, situations arise outside of a worker's control, no matter the deadline or the department's goals. Thomasina had a family emergency when a coworker became sick at work. She described this as an experience she will not forget.

> I was working, and I had suddenly become ill. Another department head came over and noticed that I was not feeling well. They had to have my blood pressure checked at that time. It was 200 over 145 or something; I was struggling. They had the ambulance come, and I was taken to a local hospital to be seen, but before that, I mentioned it to my direct department head. They were like, well, did you have something to take? She was more concerned with getting the work done and having a body available so that if she was not concerned about whether I was going to pass out and whether I was faking it, the conditions were terrible. She was my direct manager.

When asked what made this situation memorable, Leslie stated, “People need to work and should not put their health on the line because of someone else’s opinion of getting the work done.” Leslie described another interaction with the same leader.

Could Not Take Vacation with Family

Leslie wanted to take a vacation with her husband. However, her supervisor waited until the last minute to deny her leave, saying her job might not be there if she went on vacation. The outcome of the interaction was that Leslie did not go on holiday with her husband. When asked what made this interaction memorable, Leslie said, “It was Thanksgiving, and I will never forget that.” Leslie was one of three participants who shared interactions with the same leader: the other eight discussed interactions with current and former leaders.

The participants discussed in the antecedent section felt passionate about workload, work-life balance, and other work-related interactions. There are other work-related concerns in this research’s incident and outcome sections, and there will be further definitions of the importance of each. I did not ask participants to describe negative and positive interactions. During the interview, they did not need to discuss whether the interactions were negative or positive, only what made them memorable. The following section presents the main themes for interactions provided by participants regarding conflicts with leaders, feedback interactions, and positive leader behaviors.

Incident (Interaction) Themes

The next area of coding was incidents. There were 42 incident codes, five categories, and three major themes. Although I asked all participants to describe four interactions, a few shared more than four. The three major themes for interactions were conflict with the leader, workload conversations, and positive leader behavior.

Table 4.3 presents each theme and individual interactions aligned with the themes. Most participants discussed individual interactions, and a few described the incidents occurring in a group session. The participants considered incidents in the group setting memorable based on the participants' perceptions.

Table 4.3

Incident Themes

Conflict with leader	Workload conversations	Positive leader behavior
I met the leader about a toxic coworker.	Discussed confidentiality policy	Welcomed to the organization
The decision caused conflict.	Requesting a meeting about the error	He cared about my safety
I felt embarrassed at the meeting.		Considering my professional goals

Theme 1: Conflict With the Leader

A few participants discussed times when a leader requested a meeting with them and times they requested a meeting with the leader. Participant Thomasina provided an example of requesting a meeting with the supervisor to discuss the team's concerns regarding a toxic coworker.

I Met with the Leader About a Toxic Coworker

Thomasina asked to meet with the supervisor to discuss a toxic coworker who caused problems with the rest of the team. She explained that she was not coming in to speak only for herself but on behalf of the team. The conversation included details about the issues everyone had experienced. Thomasina explained,

> So, when I discussed the toxic coworker with the supervisor, the supervisor advised me that he would talk to my coworker. OK, we were looking for a resolution; instead, the supervisor favored her in the incident. So, my other coworkers saw this as the supervisor not taking the problem seriously enough to alleviate animosity, yet the supervisor rewarding her for her bad behavior.

Relating to this incident, Thomasina added that the individual caused the department's morale to go down. She and her coworkers began to shut down and lose trust in the supervisor. When asked her thoughts about this outcome, Thomasina stated, "That my concerns, as well as my coworkers, were invalid, and [the toxic coworker's] bad behavior was dismissed." Sometimes, morale can go unnoticed if the work is completed on time. Conflict with leadership was prevalent among several participants, and not all interactions were resolved in the same manner as Thomasina's.

The Decision Caused Conflict

Participants discussed receiving extra work or having too much work. There were several comments related to additional work. Giavonna described a request to write a letter and attend a meeting the director should attend. Although the deputy director was responsible for the letter, the director forwarded the request to her. This action became a conflict because Giavonna felt it was well beyond her qualifications and role. When asked how this made her feel, Giavonna responded,

> It angered me because it was out of my area of responsibility. I was not a supervisor. I was not a director. It made me angry. I am saying this because she did it to me. Then, when he found out, she said he gave it to me; he did not object.

Giavonna explained that, when working with grants, it is essential to follow the required processes, and the overall conflict would be checks and balances if audited. The outcome of this incident went unresolved until the director retired, and the new director followed the appropriate processes, hiring an assistant to help with additional duties. During participant interviews, I discovered how perceptions varied according to interactions. Some participants were eager to learn additional duties; others felt the opposite. Communication with leaders could bring about a better understanding of individual goals. Sometimes, the memorable moments occurred in group settings.

Embarrassed in Meeting

Sarah recalled memorable interactions in a group setting. Sarah described a group meeting in which the leader introduced a new hire who had just graduated from college and had the same title as her. Her supervisor commented, “It is ironic, but at the same time, it is nice to have a real analyst on staff.” The individual had a master’s degree, and Sarah felt belittled because she lacked the degree but had the same title. When asked how this made her feel, Sarah commented, “[My supervisor] discredited my accomplishments.”

Sarah was embarrassed because her supervisor made the comment in a group meeting. She wondered if anyone else felt this way about her. She recalled that other employees also started discrediting her. The second interaction theme emerging from participant interviews was interactions where participants received evaluations or requests to meet with their leaders to provide feedback on a particular task.

Theme 2: Feedback Interactions

Workers often do not know if they are meeting their job requirements or reaching their goals until they receive feedback or annual evaluations. A few participants mentioned an interaction while meeting with a leader for feedback.

Discussed Confidentiality Policy

How leaders provided feedback varied. Participant Henry described the importance of confidentiality when working in human resources. He was new in the department and had to address a situation involving an employee. Henry’s boss sat with him to discuss any concerns about the situation and company policy on confidentiality. Henry stated,

> I spoke to the supervisor about handling the investigation and what was needed from our department. My boss sat with me to make sure I was aware of confidentiality and other things. She asked if I had any concerns about the process. She knew I was nervous about

> how to handle this situation. My boss was confident in what I could do, so I did not take it any other way.

After Henry described this interaction, I recalled another employee who may have taken the boss's conversations differently. However, Henry saw the interaction as his boss understood that the situation was new to him. The supervisor asked if he felt comfortable or had questions before working with the employee. When asked what made this interaction memorable, he stated, "She knew I was nervous about handling this. My boss was confident in what I could do, so I did not take her feedback any other way." Henry reiterated how much he loved his position and how he was being heard, which was part of his enjoyment. His position could be challenging, yet his boss was also open and receptive to his feedback. Henry said he understood that things do not always change, but being heard matters.

Request a Meeting About an Error

Another participant interaction was related to feedback after a participant found an error in the work she had already submitted. Rather than the leader requesting to see the employee, the employee was honest enough to admit her mistake and requested to see the supervisor. Because the error would directly impact the department, it needed to be caught and corrected. Janet was surprised about how the interaction went. She said, "The supervisor commented, 'Do you know what they will say about me because of this?' Like, 'You must be kidding me. Are you serious right now?' Oh, my gosh." The participant expected a different response because she was doing the right thing. When asked how the boss's response made her feel, Janet said she lost self-confidence after making the error and was disappointed by the response. The outcome was that the task was reassigned.

The interactions participants shared showed how they felt about receiving and sharing feedback, with their feelings falling on different ends of the spectrum. The participants provided

a view of how leaders and followers are either open or not open to feedback. However, this study's data did not lean toward negative interactions, leaving room for participants to share meaningful interactions. While conducting the interviews, I began to find that participants perceived interactions differently based on several aspects—for example, leader style, leader communication, and the importance of being heard. The following section presents interactions based on positive leader behavior.

Theme 3: Positive Leader Behavior

Welcomed to the Organization

Participants spoke highly of leaders who were interested in their individual goals. The interviewees also described other positive leader behaviors that did not involve them. Some participants acknowledged how busy their leaders were with projects and meetings, but they were most impressed by leaders who took the time to connect with them. Suzette identified her leader as rare, exhibiting a type of leadership she had not yet experienced. Suzette had transitioned from one locality to another and explained how the supervisor never wavered from the initial meeting through the interview process. She stated,

> Even after my interview with him or the team that day, I had to sit in the conference room and finish the paperwork. He came by and said, "I am looking forward to you being around here." And that made me feel good. Oh, wow. He continues to be supportive in that way. He is always saying, "Hey, how are things going? Do you need anything?" This is the first time I have had a leader like that.

The importance of communication with her supervisor became apparent during the interview. Suzette shifted locations during COVID-19. Although the move was unplanned, she realized she needed it. Interestingly, she was initially hesitant to participate in the study. A little into the interview process, I noticed there was so much she needed to say. A few other participants also realized they had more to discuss than expected. The outcome for Suzette is that

she felt comfortable enough to communicate concerns with her new supervisor and looked forward to working with him.

The interactions allowed each participant to establish what was meaningful and why. As the participants provided feedback or ideas about supervisor interactions, it was evident they were able to develop their perspectives in those moments. At times, there was pride in their voices as they spoke, particularly when they expressed ideas or opinions about whether they were heard, which provided a sense of free expression. At other times, the outcomes were not what they had hoped for. In the following section, I present the prominent outcomes described by the participants.

Outcome Themes

I ended each interview by asking the participants about the outcomes of their interaction. The participants reported positive changes, negative changes, and even outcomes leading to them leaving the department. During the interviews, I began to look forward to hearing the outcomes. It became clear that each outcome provided the answer to what made the interaction meaningful. Table 4.4 summarizes the outcomes by four categories: positive emotions, negative emotions, personal learning experiences, and staff leaving the department. All the categories were prominent responses and could provide an overall idea of how the participants perceived leadership and how the interactions could have an impact.

Table 4.4

Outcome Themes

Positive emotions	Negative emotions	Personal learning experience	Staff leaves position
Feeling trusted Feeling respected Felt cared for	Not supported by the leader I felt my concerns did not matter	Learned to be empathetic Learned to take on responsibility	The stress was too much Work conditions caused me to leave The department was not healthy for me

Sometimes, a participant would use one word to describe the outcome, and I would have to ask, "Can you explain how that made you feel?" The follow-up question allowed the participant to describe or provide more details about the outcome.

Outcome Categories

Theme 1: Positive Emotions

Feeling Trusted

Before I asked about the outcome of the interaction, some participants incorporated trust into their responses. Trust was a common topic when the participants described what was important in a leader. Participants needed their leaders to trust them, which became part of the outcome. Earlier in this chapter, Ann described how her leader made her feel trusted by asking her to become certified. The antecedent was the request to attend a conference and become certified; these counted as two separate interactions. Ann felt trusted because her leader asked her to take on responsibilities outside of her realm of work.

Feeling Respected

In discussing one of her interactions, Ann mentioned how important it was to feel respected by her leader. She recalled the leader saying, "What was the outcome? Were you able

to tell what the outcome was?' Because it was a show of respect and confidence. Yes. So that did make it memorable."

This participant's interview indicated the importance of respect, confidence, and recognition from a staff member. Although employees should have respect and confidence in leadership, they should expect the same in return. Ann reciprocated the leader's trust and confidence as she recognized that her leader trusted her and continued to learn and grow.

Feeling Cared For

Other positive outcomes showed the participants' emotional side. Recalling her leader's transparency in their interactions, Violet described feeling cared for.

> What makes it so memorable is that he is the only transparent leader I have had before in the city. He is the only transformational leader; it shows he cares. Um, he went beyond the managerial protocol for the city to ensure that you are proactive not only in the municipality or at work, which is well beyond what is in your personal life. You are successful in your personal life.

Violet described her leader as transparent and transformational, which was fascinating. Few participants could describe what they saw in their leader from the perspective of the leader's type. However, Violet simultaneously discussed her emotions and described what she saw in her leader.

Theme 2: Negative Emotions

My decision not to lead the participants' answers with specific positive or negative interactions enabled authentic responses. Some participants discussed positive interactions with adverse outcomes; others provided a mixture. Using the participants' responses, I created a spreadsheet to separate the type of response by positive and negative outcomes. The following subsections include the negative emotions expressed by a few participants, whether the interaction had been positive or negative.

Not Supported by Leader

Participant Suzette reported not feeling supported by a previous leader by comparing that individual with her current leader. The incident was positive for Suzette because she transitioned from one locality to another; however, during her interview, she incorporated the difference in leadership into the outcome:

> I was going to say that transition. How do I want to describe it? It was a positive one. Nevertheless, had I not been bold enough to take that leap? You know, I may have been still, you know, over where I knew I wanted to leave, you know, which I think was a locality that no longer wanted to support me. You know and have not supported me for a long time.

Suzette found it essential to describe her transition, but she wanted to clarify why she left the old locality and the importance of feeling supported. The outcome was positive because she felt supported in her new role; however, not feeling supported had caused her to leave her previous location. The participants mentioned several other emotions throughout the interviews, specifically as outcomes.

I Felt My Concerns Did Not Matter

Thomasina described an interaction with a supervisor where she spoke up for the team. She felt the supervisor had not provided enough information when assigning a project to the team. The supervisor's response gave Thomasina the perception that the team's concerns did not matter. She recalled,

> I went in to ask the questions that my coworkers and I had about the project so we could complete it as thoroughly as they asked. So, the supervisor got upset and felt that he had given us enough information that we should be able to hit the ground running with the project, so he dismissed our concerns. I feel as if our concerns did not matter.

Thomasina further explained how the interaction impacted the department. When the department heads received the report, they returned it to the supervisor to add additional information and resubmit. Thomasina also explained that, as a department, the return made them

look incompetent. Although Thomasina still worked in the department, the team members learned to ask questions sooner rather than later.

Theme 3: Personal Learning Experience

Learned to be Empathetic

One interaction with a leader focused more on what another coworker was going through and how the interaction had a lasting impact. Emily was having a conversation with another coworker; the leader overheard the conversation and commented,

> However, for us to help you, we are here for that. We want to create a safe space where you feel comfortable sitting in those feelings, expressing them, processing that trauma affecting your community, and being available when you return to help you in the working environment.

Emily found this experience memorable because of the leader's response to the coworker. The conversation could not continue in the department. However, the leader was empathetic and reminded the staff that the administrators wanted to create a safe space for everyone. Although Emily went into more detail about the topic, I focused on the outcome. Emily learned from her leader the importance of empathy. Individuals might not understand or relate to what another person is going through, but they can try to be empathetic.

Learned to Take on Responsibility

Emily described a unique circumstance that may not happen in every leader-follower interaction. Kayla discussed a personal learning experience of learning to take responsibility early on in her new position. Kayla's first day on the job was not what she expected. On her first day, her leader left the job. Although other employees had been on the job, none could function without the leader. Not knowing how to work without a leader was not helpful for Kayla, who recalled,

> We had to take on a lot more responsibility and almost run the office ourselves. Moreover, he left, and he never even said goodbye. So that was one of my big memorable moments when I started working here. Furthermore, I did not know, you know, is this normal? Does this happen? Moreover, my coworkers, like, no, I think it has more to do with a character flaw in the person than the actual job or leadership or whatnot. So, I remember that was one of the significant memories from when I first started. The outcome was that I learned to take responsibility when things become unexpected.

Kayla's experience shows that leadership can impact daily operations in positive and negative ways. Kayla explained that her experience prepared her for her new leader and how learning to become responsible would benefit her, the new leader, and the team. Through my own experiences, I have seen leaders and staff leave the department and move on within the city. The fourth theme addresses interactions involving the outcome of leaving the department or locality.

Theme 4: Staff Members Leave Position

The Stress Was Too Much

Leslie spoke of multiple interactions with the same manager. However, she received help from other managers outside of her department who stepped in to assist her in her time of need. Leslie explained that her experiences taught her to appreciate and trust that leadership still existed. One manager caused her stress to the point where she left the department. Leslie stated,

> So, my health and state of mind were more important than just being there as an extra body to accomplish a job. And the thing about it was, my evaluations were always, always good. Furthermore, what about dealing with management that did not seem to care? For lower management, it was just ridiculous. The primary outcome of the incident caused me to reevaluate whether I wanted to stick with that department, and I ended up leaving it.

Earlier, I mentioned Leslie's illness and her immediate supervisor's request to continue to work. However, another manager called an ambulance and transported her to the emergency room. Leslie's experience shows that leaders' actions can affect an entire organization or department. Not all localities function or respond similarly, and experience dictates staff

members' perceptions of leadership. Leslie explained that most staff remain with the city until retirement. Staff members rarely left; if they did, they found another locality to work for. There were other outcomes where participants left because of similar experiences.

Work Conditions Caused Me to Leave

Sarah spoke about the overall conditions that led her to leave her department:

> I already lacked support. However, I already felt like there was no respect for my position. When I say the conditions were terrible, I mean the supervisor only doing what was best for her, and when I had a death in the family, she put work before my personal needs. I began to ask why I was here; I had been through so much negativity, and because this was not just my feeling and there was no room left for change, I left the department.

Giavonna had a similar outcome. Although she left one department for another, she explained that she loved what she does, and leaving the city was not an option; leaving because of leadership in her department only meant leaving the department. Giavonna attributed her decision to leave to "abuse by her leaders." Her supervisors constantly forced her to do others' work, and at one point, her department head left her out of a celebration for staff who met their accomplishments. Her leader was aware of her recent accomplishments but did not include her. When asked how that made her feel, Giavonna stated,

> It made me feel helpless, [and leaving] was what I needed to do. It made me feel like I was being punished and had not done anything. It made me feel that I did not have any help. I think God blessed me with the ability to stay there. And I walked out with a smile. Because I felt it behind me now. And God has blessed me not to see her. However, she has been lovely there since I left there and pushed on.

Giavonna later explained that she would never leave the government and anticipated retiring from the city. However, some interactions lead to employee departures. I noticed that all participants learned from their interactions, and there were various outcomes. The participants allowed themselves to be vulnerable during the interviews and, at times, provided more than they expected to share.

Chapter Summary

Chapter IV presents the findings of this study. The interview data of all 11 participants elicited themes for the antecedents, incidents, and outcomes. The data provided insight into the interactions between leaders and administrative staff in local government. Chapter V will be a discussion of the research question, implications, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This exploration of 11 nonleader workers' meaningful experiences with leaders presents a novel perspective on relationships within local government. Discussions of leader-nonleader interactions provided exploratory findings to potentially equip local government leaders with an understanding of what followers in local government find meaningful in their interactions with leaders. The critical incident technique approach, a well-established and rigorous method, was employed, including collecting data through semi-structured individual interviews to find interactions deemed meaningful by staff.

This study added to the limited literature on followers' experiences in local government. The overarching research question was, what are the meaningful interactions identified by local government staff working with their supervisors? The study produced critical findings about real experiences and outcomes of the relational aspect of local government, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of meaningful leader-staff interactions and the relational practices in local government. Local government leaders could apply this understanding to enhance their leadership approach and enhance their interactions with staff, potentially improving local government functioning. In this chapter, I explore the following: the importance of relational practice in local government, location and the importance of understanding local government, recommendations for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Revisiting the Local Government Context

The bureaucratic context of public leadership often gives rise to viewpoints and procedures distinct from those observed in the private sector. For example, local government leaders provide feedback to the city administrators. Bureaucracy in local government is established to fulfill the community's needs by providing public services, upholding social

responsibilities, and enforcing statutory regulations for all citizens (Ejersbo & Svara, 2012). State regulations regarding budgets and other aspects of local government can impact processes and leader-follower relationships throughout local government. Bureaucratic systems can be found in governmental agencies; they can be applied to any system, organization, country, or company (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.) The terms complex, division of labor, hierarchical coordination, and control are often associated with bureaucratic systems. These terms tie to the leader-staff relationships and meaningful interactions explored throughout the study.

At times, a fast response to city managers and mayors is necessary to inform the public, and this may take priority over attending to staff questions and concerns. This study's findings indicate the importance of relational practices in local government leadership.

In my experience working in local government, I found that establishing a positive relationship with a supervisor or leader can be challenging due to strict bureaucratic processes and resistance to change. Employees have unique motivations for working in this field, whether contributing to the community or obtaining a job with good retirement benefits. Although salaries may not match those offered in the private sector, job security is often a significant factor in employee retention. This research has shown that from the staff perspective, interactions between staff and leaders are crucial in day-to-day operations and job satisfaction. Although this study addressed leadership behaviors as part of the interactions, the leaders' behaviors were sometimes the antecedents that led to positive or adverse outcomes. For example, presenting additional duties can be perceived as positive or negative. The findings suggest that similar interactions often created different outcomes and reactions to leadership in local government. Thus, participants may receive additional responsibilities differently (e.g., positively or negatively). Looking into a follower-centric perspective on leadership and the

meaningful experiences of frontline staff in the local government suggested questions about trust and motivational factors. The following section will discuss the importance of relational practice in local government.

Importance of Relational Practice in Local Government

The importance of relational leadership in local government, as evident in the current study, align with the work of Uhl-Bien (2006), who defined relational leadership as "a social influence process through which emergent coordination and change (e.g., new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviors, and ideologies) are constructed and produced" (p. 654). Leadership as a top-down influence is well suited to a bureaucratic organizational structure, which incorporates layers of hierarchy to control work performance (Clarke, 2018). Understanding more about how leader-follower relationships affect everyday decisions and how the two parties interpret one another is necessary. Given the relational aspect of reported incidents, Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) and High-Quality Connections (HQCs) provide a helpful theory to understand the current findings more deeply. Neither RCT nor HQCs were part of the literature review. However, as I analyzed the data and saw that the interactions were not purely transactional but typically contained relational qualities and emotional texture, I decided to draw on RCT and HQCs to further explore the findings. Using literature after the analysis that was not part of the initial literature review is common practice in constructivist research (Schwartz & Holloway, 2025). In this section, I connect key findings to relational-cultural theory RCT and High-Quality Connections (HQCs) concepts to deepen the understanding of relational practice in local government: single interactions, mutuality, disconnection in local government, and how the relational elements align with the findings in the study.

RCT indicates that people can feel a strong sense of self-worth, accomplishment, and fulfillment by engaging in authentic and mutually supportive interactions (Fletcher & Ragins, 2008; Lenz, 2016). RCT also suggests that people grow and develop through meaningful interactions and relationships (Fletcher & Ragins, 2008; Jordan, 2017). Jordan (2017) identified relationship authenticity as openly sharing one's genuine experiences, emotions, and thoughts in a relationship while being mindful of how these disclosures may affect others. The concept of mentoring episodes (Fletcher & Ragins, 2008) provides another helpful frame from which to explore the findings. The participants shared what they felt were meaningful interactions and how they perceived the relationship with their leader. In local government, relationships often follow distinct patterns influenced by bureaucratic structures.

Understanding how leader-follower dynamics impact day-to-day decisions is crucial. Furthermore, rather than merely experiencing the effects of change, most employees view themselves as active participants in ongoing transformation efforts (Seijts & Roberts, 2011). Effective leadership in the public sector significantly influences citizen satisfaction and trust and the overall reputation of local government (Vigoda-Gadot et al., 2008). In this study, some participants expressed connections and clear communication; others chose to disconnect from leadership because of the leaders' responses or actions.

Single Interactions

RCT provides a framework for studying developmental relationships at the granularity of a single interaction or mentoring episode (Fletcher & Ragins, 2008). The importance of single interactions appeared throughout this study. For example, one participant (Violet) recalled a single interaction when her supervisor asked her for feedback. She shared:

> When he sat with me, he got my feedback on his vision. Um, he was very attentive, and he was very open to any ideas. When he sat down with me to find out what my vision

> was or what I would do to fulfill the vision, or as a team player because I wanted to fulfill the vision, he was very open and receptive to any feedback I gave.

Violet said she had never worked with a leader who would ask for suggestions, and this leadership approach (asking direct reports for feedback and inviting their ideas) contributed to a positive relationship between supervisors and supervisees. This single interaction can set the tone for future interactions. For example, now that Violet trusts her opinion is valuable, she has become confident and hopeful in her relationship with her leader. For the working relationship to be mutual, both individuals contribute to the other's development and the overall relationship (Jordan, 2017).

Mutuality

Several participants described feeling supported and confident when a leader trusted them with new roles. According to RCT, growth-fostering relationships are essential for both people in the dyad (Fletcher, 1998). The study's findings align with RCT, as the participants described interactions they perceived as mutually beneficial for them and their supervisor. Although this study did not include interviews with supervisors, the indication of mutuality that emerged from staff interviews, as articulated in RCT, suggests both practice implications and an area for future study. However, several other interactions shared by participants did not reflect this mutuality, leaving the participants feeling unfulfilled and without a sense of accomplishment. This finding suggests a potential for improvement in leader–follower relationships. Mutuality, as understood in RCT, manifests when both people are learning from each other or at least acknowledging they are both influenced by the relationship (Jordan, 2017). This form of mutuality is particularly important in relationships where there is a power differential, such as supervisors and staff. While the person with more power still holds on to their role clarity and understands the power differential (Schwartz, 2019), the person with more power does not act as if they are above the

relationship or as if they have nothing to learn from the person with less power. This mutuality can bring the person with less power into a more active place in the work relationship. For example, in this study, Violet's experience, as described above, shows that when a supervisor seems to authentically seek a staff member's input and feedback, the staff member feels valued and is encouraged to make future contributions to the work. Mutuality can only happen when the person with more power is willing to acknowledge they have something to learn from the person with less power (Schwartz, 2019).

Violet noted that her leader exhibited the same behavior toward the rest of the team, indicating that it was not an isolated incident. This positive experience gave Violet the confidence to speak up about other interactions that did not yield positive results. While mutuality can describe positive interactions, as noted in Chapter IV, trust and communication were lacking in many of the studied interactions, leading to a disconnect between participants and leaders, as was the case for Leslie.

Disconnect in Local Government

RCT indicates the need to recognize and address disconnection (Jordan, 2017). Leslie discussed learning her request for time off had been denied a few days before the date:

> I was upset, disappointed, and hurt because I never took time off. I usually go to work, but I put in my time appropriately. Furthermore, I thought it was inappropriate for her to tell me so close to the time I would have been leaving to go out of town.

There was a clear need for improved communication between Leslie and her leader, a theme that arose throughout the study. Effective communication is crucial in any relationship, and how both parties communicate can significantly impact their interactions. Leslie expressed feeling deliberately uninformed by her leader, who waited until days before her trip to deny her vacation request. Disconnection was a crucial finding. I emphasize the importance of addressing any disconnect between leaders and staff, as misunderstandings may lead to feelings of exclusion and

emotional pain (Fletcher & Ragins, 2008). For Leslie, the disconnect meant missing out on a family vacation and experiencing ongoing concerns with her leader.

A lack of connection between local government leadership and frontline staff is not always deliberate. Such organizations' complex bureaucratic processes and culture may place significant demands on leaders, even those who wish to take a relational approach. Local government leaders must meet the demands of higher-level administrators, such as city managers and council members. This study presents the valuable insights gained from participating frontline staff. The most significant discovery is the need to integrate relational practice, which could align the needs of leaders and staff, thereby creating a transparent and consistent path toward fulfilling their commitment to citizens. The following section will align the five elements of Relational Cultural Theory to integrate relational practice better.

Relational Elements (Five Good Things)

The five good things, an RCT framework for understanding the experience and outcomes of growth-fostering relationships (Fletcher & Ragins, 2008), are evident in many of the positive interactions shared in this study. The five good things are zest, empowered action, increased sense of worth, new knowledge, and the desire for more connections. Fletcher and Ragins (2008) found that single interactions do not need to include all five to be considered growth-fostering. Fletcher and Ragins (2008) defined the five elements as follow:

- Zest: The connection creates an increase in energy and vitality.
- Empowered action: The interaction motivates the ability to put into practice what was learned through the relational interaction.
- Increased sense of self-worth: The interaction increases feelings of worth from the interaction and creates mutual growth in connection.
- New knowledge: Learning comes from engaging while contributing thoughts and being open and receptive to others.

- The desire for more connection: To continue the connection and growth, fostering connections beyond the initial participants. (p. 386)

Ann shared an experience that included three of the Five Good Things. Her leader asked her to participate in a conference and become a certified grants administrator, and Ann expressed her excitement.

> Another time, I was asked to participate in a regional meeting on their behalf. Again, this was a huge sign of confidence and trust in me. It is not that I was expected to participate or make any decisions, but the fact that I was one to have a seat at the table meant a lot.

Ann's experience included an empowering action, an increased sense of worth, and new knowledge, three of the five elements of growth-fostering interactions. Ann further described how becoming certified would expand her knowledge and allow her to contribute to her department and leader.

Suzette spoke highly of her leader and described one meaningful interaction, demonstrating a slight increase in self-esteem, increased energy, and a desire for more connection. Suzette transitioned from a different locality. Her new leader was a strong listener during her initial interview and has remained consistent.

> And he came by, told me, and said, "I am looking forward to you being around here." That made me feel good. Oh, wow. Furthermore, he continues to be supportive in that way. Oh, yeah. He is always saying, "Hey, how are things going? Do you need anything?" This is the first time I have had a leader like that.

Although not all of Suzette's interactions were with the same supervisor, her excitement during the interview indicated that her relationships with leaders could be mutually beneficial. Suzette indicated that she loves the department and has left behind the negative interactions from her previous job.

Growth-fostering interactions can serve to strengthen local governments' leader-follower relationships. These relationships are beneficial and rewarding and can lead to a more

harmonious and productive work environment. Leaders and staff alike may benefit from an introduction to RCT and coaching regarding relational practice.

Location Provides Important Context to Understanding Local Government

I recruited participants from local governments on the East Coast. The findings indicated potential variations in local government staff's meaningful experiences in different settings. There were differences in response to the questions based on state, municipality size, and number of employees. For example, smaller localities had a slightly different process than larger localities. Small cities, often called boroughs or towns, had populations of less than 100,000. Two participants worked in a small town, where leaders differed from those in larger cities. One example was the election of the department head, a process different from the mayor and council positions in larger cities. Growth opportunities were limited; therefore, the participants were pleased when offered the chance to grow. The downside of having elected positions in the smaller cities was that the staff sometimes had a shorter time working with one leader, requiring them to learn a new supervisor and leadership style. Only one participant identified small-town leader turnover as an issue.

High Quality Connections

HQCs help us understand how connection brings energy and vitality to individuals and organizations (Dutton, 2013). According to Dutton (2013), high-quality connections can provide positive regard and active engagement (p. 3). Before engaging in the literature, one might believe that high-quality connections require a deep understanding of someone or frequent interactions. However, the HQC framework shows that even brief encounters, such as a simple email exchange, can lead to meaningful and high-quality connections. HQCs can positively impact

leaders, staff, and the overall organization. Dutton (2013) describes the five major strategies of HQCs:

- Being Present – Includes being open, focused and attentive
- Being Genuine – Kind and caring without being told to be kind and caring
- Communicating affirmations – Recognizing the other person's position
- Effective listening – Listening that engages another respectfully
- Supportive Communication – Communicating what we say, how we say it, and how our communication is understood.

Being Genuine, Kind and Caring (Leslie Interaction #3)

Leslie explained how the department head was more caring than her manager and felt comfortable talking to him. The following interaction described by Leslie is an example of being kind and caring.

> I called them on my phone and said, "Listen, the water is extremely high. I'm going to turn around and go back home." And so, fortunately, the department manager at that time told me, do not worry about coming in; your safety is more important. Go home. This department head was fair and understanding regarding the employees and things happening. And this manager told me he said go back home. When you say your safety is more important. So, the outcome was that I ended up going back home. And, of course, by the time the next day the flood, the waters had receded, and I could go back the next day. Okay.

Supportive Communication (Janet's interaction #1)

From her first day, Janet felt that her department head wanted to support her by connecting her with people who would impact her work. This example shows how the director would support her even by telling Janet always to feel free to talk with him. Leslie stated she felt early on the importance of communication and connection with her boss and the rest of the team.

> On the first day, my supervisor introduced me to people who impacted the work that I was doing, asked if I had questions, took me into the office, and explained everything. They explained that if something was a little off or was wrong, I should let her know, but

> this is what is needed instead. And this is how you look for this. This is what you should use instead of that kind of thing. Okay.

Effective Listening (Henry Incident #3)

Henry described an incident related to COVID-19 and how meaningful it was when leadership listened to the employees. This incident was memorable for Henry because he felt that leadership listening would better affect how the department transitioned from working from home to returning to the office.

> I prefer being at home rather than commuting to the office. Additionally, many things negatively impact my productivity at the office. Impacted the office, such as interactions, employee resignations, and other issues, were all up. And even though all of those things are true and matter and whatnot, you know, the nature of the city is to have people in the building. I appreciate how the administrators and leadership listened to the employees' concerns about returning to the office, and we had a voice regardless of the outcome.

Dutton's (2013) HQC framework also offers another lens through which to explore negative interactions. For example, Thomasina approached her supervisor because the supervisor's instructions were not clear, and the outcome of the interaction was not positive. It was missing five significant elements, leading to what Dutton describes as a "corrosive connection" strategy based on the response from the supervisor:

> Okay. One of my supervisors had a project that he presented at the last minute; we had a tight deadline. The instructions were vague. So, I went to the supervisor's office to get clarification because that was the lead on the project. I went in to ask the questions that my co-workers and I had about the project so we could complete it as thoroughly as they asked. So, the supervisor got upset and felt that he had given us enough information that we should be able to hit the ground running with the project and dismissed our concerns. That was disrespectful as a leader.

Thomasina understood the importance of communicating the team's concerns about the project; the supervisor's response was an example of what Dutton (2013) describes as a corrosive connection that can damage the individual and create disrespect and mistrust (p. 9).

While this study revealed a significant lack of trust and disconnect between leaders and staff, it also highlights a promising future. The potential of high-quality connections (HQCs) to

bridge this gap is underscored. HQCs, which encompass establishing trust and how strong connections can bolster individuals' sense of belonging and commitment to the organization, offer a hopeful and inspiring conclusion to the study. This should help leaders and local government staff feel the importance of fostering such connections in their organizations.

Recommendations for Practice

This study aimed to gather valuable insight on local government leadership from the perspective of administrative staff. A great leader nurtures the growth and development of their team members, and an exceptional follower contributes to the success of their leaders (Chaleff, 2009). This notion from leadership literature aligns with the concept of mutuality in RCT (Fletcher, 1998). Leadership is challenging in all settings, and the public sector poses unique and nuanced difficulties that require specialized skills and development. Armed with this knowledge, individuals can better appreciate and support the leaders who work on their behalf (Ferguson et al., 2014). The following are practice recommendations for local government leaders and staff to navigate their relationships effectively. As noted previously, a relational approach, based on frameworks such as RCT and HQCs can help leaders and staff approach these interactions and their relationships with intention. The following sections offer recommendations for leaders and staff.

Recommendations for Leaders

The findings of this study center on government staff members' experiences, which could help leaders better understand employee perceptions. Understanding these positive and negative experiences provides learning opportunities for local government leaders. This study showed that individuals may perceive interactions differently depending on behaviors, leadership approaches, and multiple experiences with several leaders. In some interactions, a leader's handling of a

specific issue or concern created a negative response; however, some participants did not communicate how they felt about the leader. The following are recommendations for leaders in local government.

Work to Increase Staff Feelings of Job Security

This study revealed the vulnerability felt by staff in local government. Job security may vary based on several factors, including economic downfalls. Local government, unlike for-profit organizations, where profits contribute to job security, may rarely shut down or close. Most staff are aware of the benefits and advantages and disadvantages of working in local government. One of the significant findings was the need for trust in relationships. This aligns with Dutton's (2013) HQC framework. Trust is a middle step that impacts significant behaviors, attitudes, and relationships, either strengthening or diminishing them (Burke et al., 2007). To increase staff feelings of job security, consistent communication and trust may be key to maintaining the feeling of job security. The participants' perceptions of trust and how it may affect their perceptions of their leaders were critical to the study. This led to findings that could impact departments' and organizations' overall goals.

Set Aside Time to Listen

This study showed the importance of communication and what helps staff feel appreciated. The participants admired leaders who recognized their needs. Although not all participants directly mentioned communication, the antecedents, incidents, and outcomes they discussed suggested the problematic influence when leaders lack listening skills or do not take time to listen. Leslie reported discussing her concerns with another department head who was more accessible than her immediate supervisor. When Leslie could not make it to work due to a storm, she hesitated to speak with her supervisor. Leslie described her prior interactions with her

supervisor, which made her uncomfortable or afraid to call in. However, another department head took the time to listen to Leslie's circumstances and suggested she return home; her safety was more important. Her outcome was one of relief. Henry discussed an interaction related to COVID-19 in which the staff was asked for suggestions about working from home. Henry stated, "I appreciate how the administrators and leadership listened to the employees' concerns about returning to the office, and we had a voice regardless of the outcome." Leaders should recognize how the staff feels about being heard and take the time to listen. Effective listening is one of the qualities of HQCs (Dutton, 2013).

Create Team-Building Opportunities

Communication can be addressed individually or in group settings. Team-building exercises may benefit staff who need help communicating effectively with their peers and leadership. While in local government, I found communicating easier when others spoke up about something I was also feeling. In their interviews, the participants discussed a few incidents in a group setting. The participants found these interactions meaningful because of the outcomes. One participant stated:

> Our leader would have vision dinners, mainly around the Christmas holiday. He would take the group out and share his vision for the upcoming year with those in the department and the goals he wanted to achieve. He often sat with each employee for feedback on his vision and where they saw themselves. I am reaching those goals.

The group setting allowed the department head to communicate the vision and ask the team for their individual goals. Although the event was a vision dinner, there was room for feedback, communication, and fun. Staff work at the street level in some local government departments, and team-building exercises may have multiple benefits.

Encourage Staff

Most organizations have an evaluation system allowing for feedback from leadership and staff. Participants reported that leadership would offer opportunities, whether for growth or improvement. Leaders should ask staff if they see the opportunity as a step toward their goals or something they would be interested in. This interaction would contribute to a better understanding of the individual's feelings about additional duties. Van Wart (2011) stated, "Setting minimal objectives and anticipating low standards of achievement consistently reflects ineffective leadership" (p. 52). Communicating the achievements of leaders and followers can benefit both individuals.

Empower Employees to Achieve Goals

Goals do not have to be enormous or life-changing. Employees can be empowered to meet daily, weekly, monthly, or annual goals that allow them to see progress. Typically, goals are discussed during the evaluation process. However, leaders reaching out periodically to ask about progression could be another way of showing staff that goals matter, an approach that aligns with HQCs (Dutton, 2013).

Encourage Growth

RCT includes growth-fostering relationships. According to Jordan (2004), "In order for one person to grow, both people must grow" (p. 3). Growth-fostering relationships enable opportunities that benefit both the leader and the follower—offering development opportunities for employees who express a need or desire to learn more shows that staff development is an asset to the department and the organization. Leaders should let staff members know why they were chosen for the additional duty, which encourages growth and an increased sense of worth.

Leader-staff growth-fostering relationships allow both individuals to be moved and changed by the other (Jordan, 2017).

Reward Success

Rewarding success does not have to be monetary; the participants appreciated their leaders' recognition of achievements, even verbal acknowledgment in meetings. Certificates of recognition, being awarded employee of the quarter, and receiving recognition for excellent customer service could make a difference. Despite her leader's awareness, one participant was not recognized for completing school; others received mention during an office meeting, which was a negative experience for the participant.

Recommendations for Staff

In this study, frontline nonleader staff work directly with the public and internal customers (other city workers) and do not hold management or leadership roles. These positions include clerks, fiscal administrators, accounting coordinators, and permit clerks. The interactions shared by participants suggested the feelings and perceptions of staff, and the findings of this study lead to recommendations for staff.

Offer Suggestions

Staff members are integral to local governments, contributing to the stewardship of a county's or city's citizens. Therefore, staff are encouraged to communicate concerns, suggestions, or ideas about their work with their leaders. Staff can provide examples of how their suggestions will benefit the department. Staff may also support the leader and help build their connection with the leader by sharing positive aspects of the work. For example, leadership may be unaware of positive interactions with internal and external customers and appreciate hearing about these direct-service experiences.

Seek Professional Growth Opportunities

Several participants in this study shared positive experiences with opportunities for professional growth and development. For example, one participant learned to be receptive to her leader's input after he asked her for feedback regarding his leadership. Other participants reported that they interpreted being asked to take on additional responsibility as a message that their supervisor saw their potential. Staff interested in growing professionally can work to be open to supervisor feedback. In addition, staff may look for opportunities to take on more challenging work, attend skill-building and professional development training, and even ask to sit in on meetings that will expand their understanding of the work and operation.

Recommendations for Future Research

Follower-focused studies remain essential. Carsten et al. (2010) emphasized the importance of understanding diverse perspectives on followership. There is a particular need for more studies regarding followers' perspectives in local government. A positive relationship between local government leadership and staff is essential to the stewardship of citizens.

As noted, local government is an understudied area so future researchers could also explore local government supervisors' experiences of leading staff. Additional study could provide insight into the challenges and rewards experienced by local government supervisors.

Finally, scholars could investigate the experiences of local government staff members and their commitment to serving their communities to understand how they developed a passion for the job and the experiences that contribute to their sense of fulfillment.

Scope

Participation criteria included non-leadership employees in the United States who had worked in the same locality for at least two years. The study centered on local government

contexts, excluding state and federal governments. As noted previously, local government staff are a vulnerable population, and so finding participants was difficult. Thus, the participants were from four states on the East Coast and not from a narrower context (such as one region within one state) or more broadly across the country.

Reflections

I transitioned from the private to the public sector to make a difference. I prepared myself for the unknown, wondering how working for the city would be different. Nevertheless, I was thrilled to be there. I did not leave the private sector because I was unhappy; there were many positives to working there. Early in my transition, I learned that some of those positives did not come with working for local government. Each sector had advantages and disadvantages. All that mattered to me was serving the citizens in the public sector. Public employees not only directly mold the policy through their professional actions but also influence the decision-makers who grant them authority and guidance (Kaufman, 2001). The significant differences are still with me today. Although there are necessary variations between leading in the public and private sectors, the public sector could incorporate a relational approach just as some leaders in the private sector lead in this way. Both sectors have stakeholders, and the key is to provide stewardship in local government. This study has shown me a new approach to local government and the day-to-day management that leads to stewardship and a desire to improve leader-staff relationships. Despite being vulnerable, I am grateful to the participants who chose to share a small portion of their experience in local government.

The journey to my dissertation began with questions I was eager to answer. After 15 years of working in local government, I had my own experiences and was a part of a vulnerable population like the one in this study. I only realized the severity of the vulnerability when I

conducted this research. I started my 15-year tenure hoping to contribute to the city's success for the citizens. I had plans and goals to serve in the capacity expected of all city servants.

In studying leadership and change in my PhD program, one of my learning achievements was to conduct a case study. My case study project entailed administering an anonymous survey to followers in local government to elicit feedback about leadership and their interactions with leaders. The results of the case study left me more curious about the experience that followers have with leadership and if the survey responses were typical throughout local government. I recognized that identifying meaningful interactions may help local government leadership better understand staff and benefit future studies. Having worked in both the private and public sectors, I learned the differences between the industries and local government functions in their way.

Individuals have daily experiences that shape their perceptions of or ideas about life and the world around them. Through this study, I learned that things are not always what they seem, and what is meaningful to one may be the opposite to another. One participant worked in a department where she answered phones. Her supervisor prohibited her from doing schoolwork when work was slow, and she was upset. I was surprised that she expected to do schoolwork on the job. I quickly wondered what the supervisor would say if interviewed. Reflecting on my initial reaction, I learned to listen, not judge, and try to understand an individual before making an opposing point of view. This study was motivated by my passion for local government and the need for followers in local government to have a voice.

Conclusion

Leadership in the public sector comes with its own set of subtle but significant challenges that demand specific leadership skills and development (Ferguson et al., 2014). Understanding these challenges can help both leaders and staff in local government to approach their work

together with greater intention. While leadership theory has expanded to encompass various styles, behaviors, and models, there has been little focus on direct leader-follower relationships in local government, especially compared to private sector research (Van Wart, 2003). This study aimed to contribute to scholarly discussions on leader-follower relationships in local government.

Local government has a unique set of rewards and challenges. The central purpose of working in any government entity is to provide service and contribute to the welfare of citizens. Followers in local government share the responsibility of stewardship. To better address citizens' needs, local government leaders and followers should enhance their interactions through mutual respect and trust. There remains room for improvement, and the need for change is ongoing. Meaningful change becomes less likely without research to define overlooked concepts and unheard voices. This study sheds light on a small segment of local government practices. Cultivating and sustaining a culture of relational practices where leadership and staff continually nurture trust, respect, and growth-oriented relationships is crucial. In local government, leaders and followers mutually influence each other's work, a key aspect of relational leadership. The public sector is under constant pressure to improve service delivery and meet the diverse needs of a heterogeneous society. This has led to a significant demand for leaders who can effectively manage tasks related to change, reconstruction, process improvement, and transformation (Nkwana, 2014).

A final reflection: my doctoral experience has enriched my knowledge and friendships. Embracing my evolution, I am eager to continue making an impact as a scholar-practitioner. As I progress, I will apply the insights from my doctoral studies. Collaborating with faculty members has been rewarding; they have equipped me with the necessary resources to delve deeper into

public-sector research. Despite the sacrifices, including lost weekends and time away from family while managing a full-time job, this journey is one I will cherish forever.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT REFERRAL FORM

Subject: Seeking Participants for a Study on Local Government (Staff)

My name is Brigette Collins. I am a doctoral student in the Leadership and Change program at Antioch University in Yellow Springs, Ohio. I invite employees who do not supervise other staff working in local government to participate in a study that will allow participants to share their meaningful experiences and interactions with local government leaders. You are eligible to participate in this study if you meet the following criteria:

- Staff with no direct reports located in the United States
- Minimum two years working in local government
- No prior relationship with the researcher

You will be asked to: Participate in a 60-minute confidential interview in a virtual zoom meeting. Participation is voluntary, and you may decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any point.

Potential Benefit: Sharing your meaningful interactions will help add to understanding the experience of staff working in local government

About the Researcher (Brigette Collins): I was born and raised in Hampton, Virginia, and worked in local government for 15 years. My educational background includes attending Saint Leo University, where I received an MBA in accounting (2015). I studied leadership and change at Antioch University, where I received my master's (Leadership & Change, 2021) and am now pursuing my PhD. My passion for local government relational leadership has led me to focus on the perspective of staff in local government.

This study follows ethical practices, including the importance of participant confidentiality. I am more than willing to discuss the study's process and steps before moving further into the interviewing process.

Brigette R. Collins

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT REQUIREMENTS & DEMOGRAPHICS FORM

Title of Study: Relational Leadership –An Exploration of Leader Followers Relationships in Local Government

The following questions will help confirm eligibility for the study:

1. Do you work for the local government? ____ YES OR NO
2. How long have you worked in local government? _____
3. Do you currently supervise other staff ____ YES OR _____NO
4. Have you ever worked in a leadership position where you supervised others in local government?

   ____ YES OR _____NO
5. What size local government are you working for ____ (small, medium, large)?
6. Do you have a prior relationship with the researcher?

Your Name?
What is your job title?
Your Age? 20-29? 30-39? 40-49? 50-50? 60+
Race
Ethnicity
Gender: Female, male, non-binary, gender-fluid

State

APPENDIX C: RESEARCHER INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interviewee Pseudonym _____

Date/ Time: _____

Research Study Purpose: To Identify insights and potential to recognize the characteristics of relational leadership as perceived by the followers in a department in local government.

Critical Incident Study Interview Format

1. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. **Confirm Pseudonym**. _____
2. Confirm practice study objective, interview format, and plan to record. Record to the cloud. Participant questions? Begin recording.
3. Ask the participant to describe/ tell a story about their incidents **one at a time**. Ask clarifying questions at the end of their story as needed. Repeat the process for the next incident.
4. Close the interview by inviting any questions from the participant, review the next steps, and thank the participant again for participation.

Incident #1

- Please describe the incident.
- Why do you remember this interaction?
- Why was the incident impactful to you?
- What led to the incident?
- What was the outcome of the incident?

Incident #2

- Please describe the incident.
- Why do you remember this particular interaction?
- Why was the incident impactful to you?
- What led to the incident?
- What was the outcome of the incident?

Incident #3

- Please describe the incident.
- Why do you remember this particular interaction?
- Why was the incident impactful to you?
- What led to the incident?
- What was the outcome of the incident?

Incident #4

- Please describe the incident.
- Why do you remember this particular interaction?
- Why was the incident impactful to you?
- What led to the incident?
- What was the outcome of the incident?

End-to-End Study Questions - Notes:

1. Before we end the interview, do you have any further thoughts or reflections?

2. Thank the participant for participation. Ask if the participant has questions or concerns.

Notes:

APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM

This informed consent form is for individuals with at least two years of experience working in local government municipality organizations, whom we invite to participate in a project called "An Exploration of Administrative Staff Perceptions of Meaningful Interactions with Leaders in Municipal Government."

Name of Principle Investigator: **Brigette Collins, Ph.D. candidate, Antioch University**

Name of Project: An exploration of administrative staff perceptions of meaningful interactions with leaders in municipal government.

You will be given a copy of the Consent Form

Introduction

I am Brigette Collins, a Ph.D. candidate enrolled in the Leadership and Change Program at Antioch University. As part of this degree, I am conducting a study to explore administrative staff perspectives of interactions with local government leaders. This information may help me better understand the various perceptions of leadership from administrative staff in local government.

I will give you information about the project and invite you to participate. You may talk to anyone you feel comfortable with about the project and take time to reflect on whether you want to participate or not. You may ask questions at any time.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate. You may withdraw from this project at any time. You will not be penalized for your decision not to participate or for any of your contributions during the project. Your position in the workplace will not be affected by this decision or your participation.

Risk

No study is completely risk-free; However, I do not anticipate you will be harmed or distressed during this study. Still, recalling workplace experiences can be stressful. So, I will provide free and confidential resources should you wish to talk with someone after the interview.

You may withdraw from this study at any time. If you choose to withdraw and an interview has already taken place, the information you provided will not be used in the study.

Benefits

There will be no direct benefit to you, but your participation will contribute to this study which is intended to add to the knowledge regarding administrative staff experience in local government.

Reimbursements

You will not receive any monetary incentive to participate in this project.

Confidentiality

The list and recordings will be in a secure, password-protected digital file. All information will be de-identified. Your real name will be replaced with a pseudonym of your choice.

Generally speaking, I assure you that I will keep everything you tell me or do for the project private. Yet there are times when I cannot keep things private (confidential) if I find out that:

- a child or vulnerable adult has been abused
- a person plans to hurt him or herself, such as commit suicide,
- a person plans to hurt someone else.

Some laws require many professionals to act if they think a person is at risk for self-harm or is self-harming, harming another or if a child or adult is being abused. In most states, a government agency must be told if someone is being abused or plans to self-harm or harm another

person. Please ask questions about this issue before agreeing to be in the study. You must not feel betrayed if I cannot keep some things private.

Future Publication

This study will be published as a dissertation through Antioch University. I may also write one or more related articles and/or present the findings at conferences. Confidentiality, as noted above, will remain.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

You do not have to participate in this project if you do not wish to do so, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without your job being affected.

Whom to Contact

If you have any questions, you may ask them now or later. For more information, please contact Brigette Collins, Email: at

If you have any ethical concerns about this study, contact Lisa Kreeger, Ph.D., Chair, Institutional Review Board, Antioch University Ph.D. in Leadership and Change, Email:

DO YOU WISH TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

I have read the preceding information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

Print Name of Participant_____

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____
Day/month/year