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## Times of Uncertainties Require Embracing Leadership and Feedback


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## Times of Uncertainties Require Embracing Leadership and Feedback

### Abstract

Mid-level managers of multinational corporations often struggle to find a leadership style that helps build a high-performance organizational culture. This paper discusses the research question of what strategies some mid-level managers in a multinational corporation in Asia employ to create a high-performance organizational culture. The authors chose six mid-level managers of a multinational Fortune 500 IT corporation in Singapore to participate in this case study research blended with techniques of miniethnography. The authors looked for qualities and approaches required for leaders to build and lead their teams to high-performance standards in times of uncertainty. The study concluded that successful leaders who apply the embracing leadership style encouraging a culture of free-flowing feedback in times of uncertainty would build high-performance teams which are highly influential to the company's success and competitive advantage. The authors conducted this study during the peak of COVID-19 in Singapore. The challenges they faced are reflected in this paper. In this study, the authors came up with qualities required for leading teams for high performance in times of uncertainty and volatility. Business leaders who focus on meaningful accomplishments, improving performance, and shaping the company's organizational culture will strive for excellence and promote feedback.

### Keywords

miniethnography, case study, blended study, leadership style, employee feedback, uncertainty, organizational culture

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## Times of Uncertainties Require Embracing Leadership and Feedback

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Mid-level managers of multinational corporations often struggle to find a leadership style that helps build a high-performance organizational culture. This paper discusses the research question of what strategies some mid-level managers in a multinational corporation in Asia employ to create a high-performance organizational culture. The authors chose six mid-level managers of a multinational Fortune 500 IT corporation in Singapore to participate in this case study research blended with techniques of miniethnography. The authors looked for qualities and approaches required for leaders to build and lead their teams to high-performance standards in times of uncertainty. The study concluded that successful leaders who apply the embracing leadership style encouraging a culture of free-flowing feedback in times of uncertainty would build high-performance teams which are highly influential to the company's success and competitive advantage. The authors conducted this study during the peak of COVID-19 in Singapore. The challenges they faced are reflected in this paper. In this study, the authors came up with qualities required for leading teams for high performance in times of uncertainty and volatility. Business leaders who focus on meaningful accomplishments, improving performance, and shaping the company's organizational culture will strive for excellence and promote feedback.

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For decades researchers and practitioners have discussed the role of a leader and explored different leadership styles. However, most of this literature discusses leaders and how they act in everyday situations. There is a gap in the understanding of leadership in times of uncertainty and crisis (Dirani et al., 2020). For years, consensus considered mid-level managers bureaucratic, a change-opposing layer in an organization (Belasen & Belasen, 2017). Is this true? Huy and Guo (2017) stressed that mid-level managers play a crucial role in building and executing organizational strategy. Shufutinsky et al. (2020) argued that, despite geographic location, all leaders in an organization might protect or sink the entire firm, depending on their resilience to crisis and uncertainties. The pandemic has created a need for a different leadership style (Cuhadar, 2022). As there is little existing literature, there is a need to expand on this topic.

Our study adds evidence to Huy (2011) and Huy and Guo (2017) on how mid-level managers can apply strategies to influence organizational culture. In the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, shareholders expect the leaders to develop the team's resilience for embracing challenges and change (Grint, 2020; Schoemaker et al., 2018). Participants of this study are employees of a global multinational giant. In the regional company's hub, they represent different cultural backgrounds. Leaders face the challenge of

interacting with different personalities and varying cultural foundations, typical of global corporations.

The COVID–19 pandemic reached its first peak in May of 2020, beginning the data collection stage for the study. The pandemic added relevance to the findings and helped to expose specific aspects of dealing with uncertainty. This paper focuses on leadership from the specific aspects of multicultural embracement, resilience to change, and constant flowing feedback.

### **About the Authors**

The first author had previously worked for 15 years with the company under our research. During his tenure with the company, he had working relationships with the study participants. There was an 18-month gap between when the first author left the company and the beginning of the research. During this time, he had no contact with the study participants and no access to insider information. However, the first author's knowledge of the rules, structure, and culture helped to focus the research questions. The second author, a reputable scholar and practitioner in performance management and leadership, was the academic committee chair reviewing doctoral research.

The prior experience of the first author with the company caused some unconscinded biases, such as the perceived knowledge of processes, understanding of motivation, and non-objective interpretation of events and behaviors. The authors were aware of the biases. The role of the second author was to act as an objective mirror to the first author, asking factual questions, and helping to minimize the personal impacts of the first author. The first author approached the Regional Head of Business to obtain permission to conduct the doctoral research and subsequent studies. Many would see mid-level management as bureaucratic and an unmotivated layer that slows down a company's progress (Belasen & Belasen, 2017). The authors' motivation to observe the reality versus perception of mid-level managers formed the foundation for writing this paper.

### **Literature Review**

In our fast-changing world, it is essential to stay current. Although there is abundant literature on different leadership styles, most of it does not cover the most recent challenges of a multicultural environment and remote communication. The same goes for feedback – providing effective feedback several thousand miles away from the event or on an event through a virtual communication space is entirely different from doing it through a face-to-face environment. Therefore, we focused our literature review on the most recent papers. Most of the sources we reviewed in this literature review (90%) are five or fewer years old. Another 9.8% represent seminal books that we used for references and discussion.

Schoemaker et al. (2018) suggested that today's leaders might need special skills to develop strategies for organizing the dynamic capabilities of teams. This is especially true in the VUCA environment. Leaders do not always have all the answers. In times of uncertainty and crisis, the odds of this are even higher. However, leaders need to have strategies for delivering on the state of reality, even if the news is unfortunate. Grint (2020) and Sull et al. (2020) published research on 689 large business organizations in the US. Although most organizations declare their corporate values, the employees' understanding showed weak or no correlation to the displayed values. The employees did not see their leaders' behavior aligned with the declared corporate values. In other words, the leadership did not “walk the talk.”

The environment, the method by which people communicate with each other, and even something presumed trivial, such as the color of office furniture, might make a difference to

the organizational culture. The communication style and relationship among colleagues are ultimately important. Business leaders are responsible for setting high-performance standards, enforcing a supportive corporate culture, and promoting excellence (Kim & Thapa, 2018; Wang & Hackett, 2016). In recent decades, scholars and practitioners have paid more attention to high-performance organizational culture, connecting the dots between a corporation's success in performance and the core of organizational culture (de Waal & de Haas, 2018). Bolander et al. (2017) defined organizational culture as a holistic system or the gluing layer representing foundations, values, norms, strategies the company builds, approaches to employees, and future development.

Although there appears to be abundant literature on organizational culture, leadership styles, and the power of feedback, Kontoghiorghes (2016) noted that there is not enough clarity in the definitions and core practices of high-performance. In fact, Kontoghiorghes argued that high-performance organizations have a sociotechnical learning approach that invests in existing and attracts new talents. Leadership's job is to address systematic conditions that impair individuals' and teams' ability to fulfil their stated purpose (Winter, 2018). Leaders initiate changes in norms, values, and behaviors that become a new organizational culture. When dealing with the team, leaders should demonstrate the values and norms they declare (Aitken, 2007).

In days of crisis, more than ever, employees look to leaders to walk the talk. In today's VUCA world, there is an expectation of the leaders to develop the resilience of the team to embrace the challenge of change (Grint, 2020; Schoemaker et al., 2018). In the change-driving process, mid-level managers are crucial in conveying the strategy onto the ground and being the most visible ambassadors of change. Researching global human resource development organizations, Dirani et al. (2020) recommended that leaders demonstrate strict adherence to the company's core values, communicate openly, and share leadership. Shifutinsky et al. (2020) introduced the Shock Leadership Development program to prepare leaders for dealing with potential crises and uncertainties. Leaders with mindfulness, abilities to comprehend, apply different styles and approaches, behave proactively, and communicate openly earn employees' trust (Shifutinsky et al., 2020).

Leadership style and organizational culture have an influence on each other. Leaders carry their personal values and apply them in interactions with their teams. On the other hand, corporate culture might impact the leadership style (Schein, 2010). The leaders communicate to different personalities. This communication might be more challenging in multinational corporations as people come from various cultural foundations. Manley et al. (2019) asserted that organizations where leaders promote a safety culture and encourage team members to openly express their fears and concerns benefit from higher efficiency and well-being. When managers view employees as people before their roles, it encourages employees to go the extra mile. This dynamic creates a positive cultural foundation within the organization (Curry et al., 2018).

Developing a process and encouraging feedback is part of organizational culture (Ross & Stefaniak, 2018). In the Behavioral Engineering Model (BEM), Gilbert (2007) defined feedback as one of the most prominent tools to indicate worthiness and accomplishment. Gilbert wrote that organization leaders should evaluate worthy achievement under the context of the culture of performance (purpose, goals). Gilbert (2019) discussed four essential characteristics of feedback: (a) work-related – not personal or judgmental, but rather related to a specific event at the workplace, (b) immediate – as close as possible to the event, (c) specific – focused on details, not vague, and (d) educative – carrying an informative message that an individual could benefit from use in the future. Mannevuolo (2018) stressed that timely and accurate feedback could significantly influence an individual's performance in his recent

revision on the Hawthorne effect. D'Souza (2018) and Ruark (2017), in their studies, referred to feedback as a vital tool for setting expectations.

It took time for the world to adjust itself to the new requirements: restricted in-person interactions, mandatory health tests, face masks, etc. The new normal dictates different rules. While the principles of feedback and effective leadership remain, implementing them under the current reality requires significant adaptation of methodology. Adequately set expectations and timely information on progress can change the performance of the individual or the entire team. The process of doing it in a global multicultural environment, which is often a virtual set, differs from those we knew of before.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The authors chose Gilbert's (1978) Behavior Engineering Model (BEM) as the conceptual framework for this study. Introduced by Thomas Gilbert in 1978, the BEM postulates that one's performance is based on one's behavior (Gilbert, 2007). To improve one's performance, it is necessary to do things that change behavior (Winiiecki, 2015). The framework of the BEM includes two primary layers responsible for behavior and environment. Managers are accountable for providing employees with essential information and instructions: accurate job descriptions, norms and behaviors, and expectations. They also should make the necessary instruments available and offer incentives to these employees. Employees will gain knowledge from the data, the capacity to perform the task from the instruments, and gain motivation from the incentives (Gilbert, 2007; Winiiecki, 2015). Data and knowledge help the manager and employee to define the specific task. Instruments afford employees the efficiency to capture the most of their individual capacity. By offering incentives the company influences individual motives and efforts on the task.

### **Research Question and Research Purpose**

In the original research, the first author's doctoral dissertation focused on exploring strategies mid-level managers in Singapore use to create high-performance organizational cultures. The first author conducted his doctoral research in the Fortune 500 IT global giant's Singaporean office. The theme of leadership style and feedback came up in the doctoral study. In this paper, the authors decided to make a deeper analysis and answer a question about the role of leadership style and feedback on creating a high-performance organizational culture in multinational corporations operating in Singapore. The authors invited six mid-level managers working in a global high-tech corporation in Singapore to participate in this study. Each participant demonstrated successful strategies in building an organizational culture to achieve and maintain a competitive advantage for at least three years.

### **Methods**

Leaders build strong cooperation and engagement with their teams to create, maintain, and evolve organizational culture (Ali Taha et al., 2016; Kontoghiorghes, 2016). The authors chose managers with over three years of experience to participate in this research that represented different functional departments of the business. Among ten managers that met our criteria, we chose six that represented different functional departments of the same business unit. The personal connection of the first author allowed access to the company and ensured immersion in the company's cultural environment. The second author stayed in the background to provide course-correcting guides and feedback throughout the process. The second author actively revised the interview questions and potential in-depth follow-up based on the guides

to make them more effective and unbiased. The authors recorded interviews and observations. During the review, while preparing for member checking, the second author asks questions that help to neutralize emotions and effects that may result from the first author's prior knowledge of the organization. Throughout the course of the research, the second author repeatedly questioned the first author for the purpose of his questions. This act would trigger an emotional response from the first author. He would deny any inclination of interpreting the information before being open to consider the possibility that he was doing that. This would happen when transcribing the interviews. The first author would have a tendency to use words that could potentially influence the interpretation of the information gathered in interviews. The second author identified this habitual action as the result of a bias formed from having prior knowledge and experience of the environment. After several iterations, the authors were able to remove personal interpretations, thereby preserving the integrity of the research's objective and the truthfulness of the information obtained.

### **Method and Design of the Study**

Since the beginning, we have focused on understanding people's actions and intentions. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) and then Gerring (2017) suggested a qualitative method for exploring phenomena and implications. While there are many qualitative design methods, the authors decided on the three most suited: (a) phenomenology, (b) case study, and (c) miniethnography. As the authors decided to focus on exploring the business problem instead of the individual's understanding and experience of the phenomenon, they ruled out the use of phenomenology. Case studies offer the opportunity to understand complex issues within an actual state (Runfola et al., 2017). Fusch et al. (2017) suggested a blended design of miniethnography and case study utilizing the advantages of both methods: the width of miniethnography coupled with the depth of the single case study protocol. Ethnographic research can last up to a year or even more. Ethnographic research is an exploration of cultural artifacts over long periods of time. The ethnographic researcher observes and learns everything that is available for observation, with learning not limiting the process to one specific topic or question. Miniethnography is a short, in-depth immersion into a specific problem situation, learning from people about their experiences using interviews and observations. The main differences between ethnography and miniethnography are the length and focus of the latter on specific problem or question. Miniethnography doesn't aim for the transferability of the findings (Amaechi & Fusch, 2019). Hsieh et al. (2016) described miniethnography as an effective way of studying organizational culture. The research question of the initial study was about creating culture. The authors focused their study on a specific unit for in-depth explorations. The depth of the interviews, member checking, follow-ups, and observations made during three intensive weeks of studying participants' behavior in different situations contributed to a broader, more profound understanding of the research question.

### **Participants and Sampling Method**

The first author chose six mid-level managers with a minimum of three years of management experience. Purposeful sampling is a deliberate process where the researcher picks participants for their specific qualities (Etikan et al., 2016). Morse (2015) asserted that selecting the informants who best meet the information needs of the study is the proper way to secure the representativeness and appropriateness of the research. In support of using purposeful sampling for qualitative ethnographic research, Benoot et al. (2016) claimed that purposeful sampling could provide a similar level of information richness as exhaustive sampling. Fusch and Ness (2015) discussed that the quality (richness) and quantity (thickness)

of the data are more critical for data saturation than the sample size. The participants in this study were six mid-level managers working in the Asia-Pacific region, representing a business unit of a global Fortune 100 IT Company, each with management experience and a proven record of building an organizational culture that drives high performance. The six mid-level manager participants represented varying functions within the company that included Sales, Operations, Supply Chain, Services, Human Resources, and Manufacturing. The Regional Head of the Business approved this study, giving access to some internal documents and confirmed that participants were high performers, determined based on their financial performance, customer satisfaction, and employees' satisfaction results achieved over the last two years. A personal connection and established trust between the first author and the participants ensured openness to the discussion. Knowing the company's jargon and general processes assisted the first author in focusing on asking questions that further deepened the discussion. The participants volunteered to take part in this study.

To enhance our discussion of the miniethnographic case study experience, we would like to introduce the six participating midlevel managers: Darren, Jim, Lee, Luis, Sam, and William (pseudonyms). Although there was a female in the study group, the authors decided to reference all participants as male to avoid the possibility of disclosure of the company's identity or that of the participants. The authors chose participants based on their consistent accomplishments over three years of experience on the job. The participants with only a professional working relationship between them represented six separate functions within the company's regional structure.

The authors obtained the Institutional Review Board's approval before beginning the data collection process, which included six semi-structured interviews followed by member checking, 50 hours of direct observations, and company document review. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the observations and interviews were conducted via a virtual video platform.

### **Data Collection Process**

During a period of three weeks, the first author observed different types of interactions: one-on-one meetings, different level team meetings, project runs, and virtual communications on ad-hoc subjects. The emergence of global teams presented a challenge for miniethnography researchers. The need for concepts and tools for ethnographical research in the virtual/remote world grew after the late 1990s in response to globalization (Hine, 2000). People behave in a virtual environment as they do in the actual world. They communicate, arguing or agreeing with each other, all the while feeling and expressing emotions. Effective communication involves more than just expression through words. People communicate with body language and nonverbal cues, both of which are inherently hard to decipher. However, with current advancement in communication technology, virtual platforms such as Zoom with high-definition cameras and high-quality sound equipment provide excellent experiences of presence that are critical for immersion into the virtual environment. Hine (2015) suggested that the internet has legitimately become an embedded part of the modern person's everyday life. The physical set-up of a virtual observation allowed for the authors to perform an undisguised naturalistic observation of the entire group under study through a single screen. It drives focus and attention to the objective as physical distractions are not present (Barendregt, 2017). In the observation process, the authors used the Zoom virtual platform. The authors obtained an agreement from participants to keep their cameras on and their consent to the recording of meetings. This would allow the first author to observe facial expressions, deviations in voice tones, and the level of attention given by participants.

On top of individual interviews, the author observed participants in different situations that represent their typical routine: formal staff meetings with their supervisors, formal staff



meetings with their direct reports, and one-on-one sessions with direct reports and peers. As participants were operating out of home offices, there were only scheduled routine meetings. The authors asked the participants to inform them about any ad hoc meetings during the research period. This is how the authors were able to decide on relevance and observe some ad hoc meetings on emerging subjects, for instance, a delivery crisis or an escalation about a customer's dissatisfaction.

The participants kept their cameras on during these meetings. The authors recorded these meetings based on the participants' consent and the company's agreement. The authors observed their level of attention, facial expression, body language, and preparation for these meetings – data they collected, questions they came prepared with, etc. The authors noted a high level of concentration and expression of presence even when the discussion seemed less relevant. The authors could see the concern on the faces of participants when the Supply Chain Manager reported a potential delivery problem that could result in the potential delay of an installation project. The Service Manager proactively stepped up to offer a solution through an adjustment to the installation schedule that would make up for the lost time; this act was evidence of good collaboration and team play.

Qualitative research aims to make sense of and recognize patterns among empirical materials that depict the problematic aspects of life (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Leung, 2015). Empirical materials are materials that researchers collect in the field. Hennink et al. (2017) argued that the qualitative researcher focuses on the quality and richness of the data. Yin (2018) mentioned several data collection techniques available to the researcher that may increase the reliability and validity of the study. The authors used the data from semi-structured interviews followed by member checking, direct observations, and company document reviews for methodological triangulation. As part of the company document reviews, the authors looked into customers' and employees' satisfaction survey information, quarterly financial reports, and some information that participants shared with us from internal review reports. In these documents, they looked for factual evidence of performance, such as the customer loyalty index or financial results (revenue, profitability, year-over-year growth). The authors also looked for cultural artifacts such as the employees' engagement levels and their assessments of their managers. They read all documents made available to them and analyzed all relevant information collected before concluding from it an encompassing overview.

The fact that participants were from different departments of a single business unit helped to secure richness in the information collected and ensured consistency in the terminology used. While the overall goal was aligned with the larger business, the individual departmental objectives were unique to their own and would sometimes contradict other departments. To give an instance, the sales department emphasizes sales agility and ingenuity to close as many sales opportunities as possible in the shortest period, in contrast to the supply chain department, whose focus remains on cost efficiency and supply chain resilience, features which rely heavily on the adoption of a strict structured approach. In their own way, both departments work to achieve the goal of the business unit's financial success, but their individual departmental objectives do pose a challenge to each other. While the authors observed different objectives between the departments they studied, they found that the overall culture remained the same among study participants: seeing the business unit's success as the overarching goal, having an openness for change and an acceptance of different opinions, conducting themselves with empathy, and encouraging feedback.

## **Data Organization**

Hancock and Algozzine (2017) emphasized the importance of concurrently organizing, examining, and interpreting data throughout the qualitative case study process. Yin (2018)

discussed the need to maintain an organized raw materials database to increase the reliability of the study. The authors organized the data to enable comprehensive and compelling analysis, an effortless way to code it, and a quick and effective way of finding written concepts and ideas from it. The authors transcribed the audio recordings of interviews and created an initial list of codes considering the research subjects. With each additional interview transcript or observation summary, the authors would revise the list of codes. They updated the list of codes with emerging clusters and themes. Each new piece of information was analyzed against the overall collected data. The authors verified the information they obtained from interviews and observations with facts presented in the company's documents. The iterative process of review and update continued until the authors could no longer discover any new information. Yin guided researchers to study the outputs of computer-assisted to comprehend the reoccurring concepts and ideas. The authors reviewed and compared the different codes and then interpreted and categorized them into key themes.

Yin suggested that the researcher use software tools for data organizing and analysis. The authors used an Excel spreadsheet to organize and track the data, which included access permissions, consent forms, interview transcripts, observation notes, meeting schedules, and logistics detail. The authors used the NVivo software to create a database of the concepts and ideas, which were built of interview narratives, reports from observations, reviews of internal company documents, and audio recording files.

### **Data Analysis**

The authors employed different data collection methods to enhance the credibility of the results. Researchers use methodological triangulation, which includes more than one data collection technique for crosschecking data, such as interviews, observations, and company documents (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Kern, 2016; Yin, 2018). Using Marshall and Rossman's (2016) five-step data analysis process, the authors transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews and restructured the notes the first author took from the observations for further clarity. Thereafter, they created a list of codes based on the concepts and ideas obtained from the written materials. They repeatedly reviewed the coded list of themes to reduce the risk of missing any significant points. Initially, the subtheme of "Understanding and respecting individuals" was made secondary to the theme of "Safety and trust" (Table 1), but as the authors collected more data, they created another theme – "Embracing leadership style." After the member checking follow-up interviews of participants, the authors realized that the aforementioned subtheme was more consistent with leadership style. Woods et al. (2016) suggested that NVivo could see the portrayal of concepts and ideas, forming a base for initial analysis and sense-making. The authors used the NVivo software graphical models to conduct critical research of the data and text word queries against the list of codes to categorize participants' responses and identify the themes of their study. Morse (2015) noted the validity of qualitative research stems from continuous analysis. The authors reviewed emerging themes and concepts several times to ensure consistency in the results and inclusion of all critical information.

### **Results**

The overarching research question of this study was: what strategies do Singapore's mid-level managers use to create a high-performance organizational culture? For three weeks, the authors conducted six semi-structured interviews followed by a member checking process and approximately 50 hours of observations. The first author conducted interviews and made observations using the Zoom platform, where participants' cameras were kept on. The authors

scheduled interviews in advance. To support focus and ensures minimal interruption, quiet rooms were used for the discussions. The participants shared their weekly schedules with the first author, and he was invited to join meetings to conduct his observations. In the first introductory conversation with participants, the first author made a request to be invited to at least one meeting on an unexpected event that they encountered during the research period. He promised to make himself available to meet the spontaneous nature of such events. The first author was invited by four out of the six study participants to emergency meetings that were either related to customer complaints or delivery crises. In addition to that, the authors obtained access to performance review documents, recognition and feedback notifications, employee satisfaction survey results, and company policies. They substantiate the data they got from the participants against written policies and other documented evidence.

The authors followed Marshall and Rossman's (2016) five-step data analysis process: organizing, immersion, coding, analysis, and themes development. Their study revealed four key themes: (a) creating an environment of trust and safety; (b) the way of doing things matters; (c) embracing leadership style; (d) enforcing a culture of work-related, immediate, specific, and educative feedback; (e) alignment on purpose; (f) performance important; (g) tools and environment; and (h) training and development. Although qualitative researchers value all responses received, the authors decided to focus this research on the most predominant themes. The authors determined the predominance of themes by the count of their occurrence as evidenced in interviews, observations, and company documents review (Table 1) to identify their research priorities. They published an in-depth discussion on the first two themes in the *Performance Improvement Journal* (Lapshun & Fusch, 2021). In this paper, they would like to focus on embracing leadership style and the value of feedback in creating an organizational culture of high performance in uncertain times.

**Table 1**  
*Emerged Themes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Appearances</b>
<b>Way of doing things matters</b>	Culture, norms, teamwork, proactiveness, professionalism, transparency	49
<b>Creating an environment of safety and trust</b>	Clarity, feeling of belonging, honesty, integrity, norms, transparency	65
<b>Embracing leadership style</b>	Empowerment, healthy competition, ethics, fairness, investing in yourself, protecting your team, understanding and respecting individuals	42
<b>Enforcing a culture of work-related, immediate, specific, and educative feedback</b>	Rewards and incentives, appraisal, improvement, recognition	39
<b>Alignment on purpose</b>	Alignment with corporate objectives, customer focus	17

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<b>Performance important</b>	3
<b>Tools and environment</b>	2
<b>Training and development</b>	4

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Lune and Berg (2017) suggested that qualitative data is a product of various situational factors that provide information and ultimate knowledge but not absolute truth. Qualitative researchers observe and collect real information. However, thinking of this information as unchanged or the absolute truth is not correct. Qualitative researchers talk about patterns and tendencies rather than facts. The authors ensured the quality of the research by preserving the credibility, validity, and transferability of data.

Supporting evidence from multiple sources may prove validity (Yin, 2018). The authors looked for evidence in the information they obtained from conducting interviews, observations, and reviews. Credibility refers to the overall believability of the study (Hays et al., 2016) or, in other words, how reliable the results are in the representation of the participants (Connelly, 2016). Throughout the entire research process, the authors examined the believability of their sources by exploring or inquiring about alternative sources. They did not discover any discrepancy in representation from the documents reviewed or chicanery from participants they observed and interviewed for the research. Connelly stated that qualitative research supports the transferability of the findings with a rich, detailed description of the content. After collecting and reading the information, the authors built a visualization of the organizational culture and processes of the business unit. The inference was very detailed and included examples of interpersonal relationships as well as emotions of dealing with challenges and uncertainties.

### *Embracing Leadership Style in Times of Uncertainties*

The authors studied the annual employee satisfaction survey results for findings relevant to the research. There are many ways for employees to assess their manager, but at the corporate level, the annual employee satisfaction survey remains its official method. In this survey, there are specific questions designed to allow an employee to evaluate a manager's performance in the area of equitability. The authors triggered a discussion on this topic by asking the following question: "what method did you use to assess the effectiveness of your strategies to affect a high-performance organizational culture?" and the follow-up questions, "how did you know that your team trusted you?" and, "what did you do to build this trust?" All participants declared the importance of treating staff equally without prejudice or prejudgment. William told the authors he received the highest score in Asia on equitability. The authors would later find that five out of six participants scored higher than the company's average in this area.

To encourage democratic leadership, the company promotes the values of integrity, diversity, and equality. In the employee satisfaction survey, each employee is expected to evaluate a manager's performance without prejudice. All participants unanimously and independently mentioned that equal successful treatment of each team member is the goal. From the company's perspective, this is one of the main foundations of its culture and, therefore, how they expect their managers to behave.

Mid-level managers that participated in the study shared the company's view. They added how there was an importance to filter out disruptive messages to preserve a productive

environment for their teams. To build trust with their teams, they saw no benefit in the practice of pushing blame. Instead, it was invaluable to own up to mistakes or shortcomings and demonstrate an effort to change for the better. In answering the authors' question, "what do you do when something goes wrong at the higher level?" Sam said,

I can't be responsible for what the big boss says or does. However, I am responsible for what I do and my team's results and well-being. So, I explain and, when needed, protect them from the storms from above.

The manager did not withhold information. He merely filtered it for relevance and shared it with sufficient context as to yield the result of performance improvement. Where it was justified, he did speak up to higher management on behalf of the staff. Sam purposefully protected his team "from the storms from above" creating a safe and constructive environment for staff and avoiding mediocrity. Luis added,

My strategy is to be a buffer, to hold all transactions that might be counterproductive for the team. I am trying to make sure that the team is united toward day-to-day work. We do things because we know what we do and why not because the big boss asked for it.

Almost all of the participants manage team members in remote locations. The authors found that the participants were willing to extend their business trips and take long drives to meet up with members of their team. A pattern of giving equal attention to members of the team and an establishment of emotional connection to them was identified in the observation of interviews and one-on-one meetings – the culture of respect for an individual, open-door policy, support, and empathy was evident. The assiduous attention from the participants yielded great results in the restrictive times of the pandemic. Many participants have team members located across the Asia Pacific region. Darren, the Singapore-based participant, has employees located in Thailand. When he travels there, he ensures to allot each of them one and a half hours of his time, dedicating it to their one-on-one meetings even if it requires the extra effort of commuting. He listened to their concerns and fears about the impact of restrictions, giving them as much reassurance as possible to navigate through the turbulent times of a global pandemic. During a staff meeting, Darren presented a genuine business challenge to the team – how to deliver hands-on training under COVID-19 restrictions. The customer would not allow external staff to visit the premises, and the company would not allow employees to travel. He started the meeting with the following:

I can't do this alone. I need you all and focus on the challenge that we have here. I know you are the best group of people in the company to address this challenge. You know the product, the process, and the customer. Please think. I trust you.

It was observed that the manager empowered the team to conceive a revolutionary solution to deliver training remotely using advanced video and audio platforms. All participants express empowerment as a key element of their leadership approach.

Another emphasis in leadership style when encouraging individuals to execute on their full potential is to ensure with consistency that competition within the team remains cordial and healthy. The authors discovered this when they asked: "what strategies have you used to motivate your employees to improve their performance?" One participant, Jim, mentioned that he found internal competition helpful in solving a few challenging problems with the local

distributor. They used Jim's answer as a follow-up question in subsequent interviews. The authors asked, "how do you feel about internal competition in your team?" William answered,

When the rules are clear, transparent, fixed, and the entire context of the organization and the direction, the competition within the team is healthy. I keep my team on purpose. It helps to avoid hidden agendas and maintain clarity.

We followed up with: what is your role in building the ground for constructive competition? "I am here to keep competition fair, and professional," was William's answer.

Organizational culture and leadership influence each other. The authors found that the company's mid-level managers demonstrated qualities of transformational leaders: coaching, inspiration, engaging, empowering, and driving change. The participants of this study are knowledgeable individuals who constantly invest in self-development. They demonstrate the capability to embrace change, assume responsibilities, and lead their teams through the change to a better-improved state. The participants were familiar with motivating through the use of incentives and rewards. They knew how to manage by exceptions – offering a personal touch to employees located in distant locations. They also demonstrated the capabilities of participative leaders, involving and consulting with team members on important decisions.

#### *Enforcing a Culture of Work-related, Immediate, Specific, and Educative (WISE) Feedback*

The theme of giving and receiving feedback was apparent in every participant's interaction. When feedback is honest and genuine, free of judgment, and aims to deliver a better future, it becomes a driver for shaping the culture and overall performance of the team (Ramani et al., 2018). The company offered a feedback platform in the form of an annual review process between the manager and the employees. Company documents provided guidelines to managers and employees on how to prepare effectively for the review. The main objectives of the employee review process were to summarize the employees' performance in the past year and based on it, create development plans and expectations for the following year. That said, none of the participants felt the frequency of this formal feedback was enough. The authors asked, "what strategies did you find worked best to change your organization's culture to one with high performance?" This was the leading question in the discussion over feedback. Lee said,

Feedback. Ultimately feedback. When it comes, it comes from the position of objectivity. I found it most effective when I emphasized the punch line – something that can be learned from the event.

"Educative," Darren stated. "I am trying to include some educational giveaways in every interaction. It works both ways – I educate and provide feedback to my team, and my team provides feedback to me."

The participants saw feedback as a critical mechanism for sustaining trust and shaping the team's performance. While characterizing the team's culture, all participants stressed a culture of feedback, meaning to say that giving and receiving evaluations, regardless of whether they may be positive, bad, or constructive, is a behavioral norm built into this organization.

The authors also found that the managers ensure continuity in the improvement process by referring to records from the prior periods for follow-up dialogue with their team. Sam told us that he used any possible opportunity for feedback – in person, by email, by phone message, etc. When asked for clarity, Sam explained that providing timely feedback as close as possible to the event itself is crucial; he also mentioned that the longer a manager delays the input, the

fewer details the manager will remember and the less relevant the content becomes. His colleague, Luis, was passionate about the same elements: feedback should be unbiased – only work-related and prompt to allow for the recipient to take remedial actions and adjust their learning. Luis added a few qualitative details: never be judgmental or cynical; always be empathetic and genuine. "Be transparent when and honest even when the news is bad," were his exact words.

Providing positive feedback is critical. Finding a way to give feedback on failure with a positive note is an art. In one scenario, one of the managers praised the effort of the employee yet did not shy from the fact that there was a failure. The employee had incorrectly assessed the situation and, as a result, made the wrong call in response to it. The outcome of the conversation was unexpected – the employee left the conversation encouraged. He was inspired to take more initiative and to be mindful to focus on details, considering potential consequences before making decisions.

To achieve a certain level of trust and a high score on the "My Manager" section of the employees' satisfaction survey, participants used a web-based platform to collect anonymous bi-weekly feedback from the team and openly discussed it during their staff meetings. William, Luis, and Sam made this process a permanent part of their staff meeting. Honest, in-depth, and specific feedback contributes to the level of trust. When there is no judgment, the feedback received from the team enhances a sense of security. Participants in this study about overcoming uncertainty have demonstrated vital support to the feedback culture and a deep understanding of all four key characteristics of good feedback. However, it was observed that the participants did lack the practice and experience to provide educative feedback. Lee and Darren admitted that they were usually less conscious of specifics when giving positive feedback and kept their feedback under a more generic tone.

Face-saving, or rather, the act of preserving one's perceived sense of dignity, is a cultural norm in most Asian countries. This is a historically widespread occurrence, predominant amongst certain cultures. Therefore, employing an identical approach to feedback in all organizations may not lead to the expected results. Organizations where their leaders practice face-saving standards will likely lose talents (Ali Taha et al., 2016; Kontoghiorghes, 2016) and competitiveness. Study participants stressed the importance of getting feedback from the team. Luis pointed out his practice: "I launched employee PULSE survey [ad hoc instant survey that provides insight on current state of thing, or level of satisfaction from the recent event] helps to get feedback on myself. It helps to see and adjust the course and the progress of the change." William and Sam stated that being a role model or walking the talk is necessary to reach the top of the mountain with the team.

While no elements of leadership described in this paper are new to the literature of good management or leadership practice, the application of all of them together is. There is no existing literature that covers them. The participants of the study were never afraid to show how they are only humans and that they have both strengths and vulnerabilities. Inviting feedback is the easier step. Sharing the feedback received with a greater audience and then discussing it with openness requires true courage. It also requires the existence of a certain level of trust and a strong sense of security to participate in such discussion (Lapshun & Fusch, 2021). The participants of the study demonstrated all qualities necessary to lead teams towards success in the difficult times of a crisis. They demonstrated a new type of leadership primarily set around the concepts of awareness and acceptance. The leadership saw that through their application of them, they were able to steer the organization away from a state of inertia and reactive thinking that was driven by emotions and tensions to pave the way for rational, conscious, and focused assessment of reality as it is and thereafter the development of a true path to success. The authors labeled this style as "Embracing Leadership," one that is required in times of instability and crisis.

## Summary and Recommendations for Action

Participants of this study about overcoming uncertainty repeatedly stressed that the culture-building process never stops. The culture-building process encompasses the strive for excellence, assumed responsibility, and leadership to the end state. The WISE feedback culture proves a robust and trustworthy relationship between managers and employees. Managers and leaders must encourage feedback on themselves and take immediate action to address it. The following table summarizes the recommended strategies for creating a high-performance organizational culture and the specific steps to create this culture.

**Table 2**  
*Recommended Strategies and Actions*

High-performance culture creating and maintaining strategies	Actions by midlevel managers
Strive for excellence, do not settle for mediocrity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treat everyone equally. Care of your people</li> <li>• Speak openly on challenges. Encourage teamwork</li> <li>• Encourage healthy competition</li> <li>• Encourage execution to the full potential</li> </ul>
Promote feedback – give and get	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide WISE feedback to your team</li> <li>• Encourage feedback on yourself and take actions to address the feedback</li> </ul>

## Discussion

Managers have overall responsibility and accountability for the organization's performance (Gilbert, 2007). Applying the strategies and actions the authors offered in this paper could lead to exceptional performance and a high level of individual satisfaction. Teams with high-performance organizational culture demonstrate creativity, initiative, and a high level of collaboration (Ali Taha et al., 2016; Kontoghiorghes, 2016).

Sull et al. (2020) published astonishing results from studying 700 American companies: while 80% of the firms declare their value in a loud and proud way, the correlation between the declared value and employee's perception is less than significant. More precisely, these companies and their leaders do not walk their talk. As a result, these firms struggle with talent retention and developing a sustainable competitive advantage (Sull et al., 2020). The study participants walked their talk; they continuously went the extra mile to be role models for their team members. Fusch and Gillespie (2012) and Cravens et al. (2015) discussed how crafting organizational culture is a continuous effort. Three theorems lay in the basis of BEM. The first speaks of differences between performance and behavior, and the second is about performance



improvement potential. In the third leisurely theorem of BEM, Gilbert (2007) defined managers' responsibility for creating an environment and influencing an individual's behavior to support execution at their full potential. The authors analyzed the findings through the lenses of the BEM, examining the actions of participants and the results. Livingston (2009) described Pygmalion as the person who consciously or unconsciously becomes aware of an expectation and acts consistently with that expectation. Ruark (2017) assigned a mid-level manager to reverse the Pygmalion effect – to expect the unexpected. This approach is aligned with BEM. Similarly noted in this paper – the study participants all assumed full responsibility for the performance of their team. The study participants argued the opposite. “One can't lead without assuming responsibility,” said Luis. Sam added, “Responsibility is not a burden, but a sign for a true leader.”

In concluding a study that spanned over 25 years, Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2018) stated that organizations invest in creating a feedback culture to strive for growth and improvement. The findings of the study enhance an earlier work of Ross and Stefaniak (2018), where the authors surveyed 61 managers to learn the influence of feedback on culture. The authors concluded that feedback has a significant impact on creating organizational culture. The findings of this paper can assist with the apprehension of the quality and directional drive feedback culture can have. Some participants were of opinion that high-quality genuine feedback sharpens the culture, making it grows and orientates achievements. The consensus amongst participants was the importance of giving formal, structured, and timely occasional feedback.

Schoemaker et al. (2018) examined how the intertwined qualities of dynamic capabilities, leadership strategies, and innovations support leaders in dealing with the challenges of a VUCA world. They stressed that leaders should develop the dynamic capabilities of sensing change, seizing the opportunity, and transforming the organization. These qualities are crucial for managers and leaders to navigate their organization through the turbulence of modern business. In a world where the VUCA environment becomes a new standard, the cultural resilience of an organization defines its competitive strength. An organizational culture that encourages and nurtures everyone to perform to their full potential will serve to deliver the organization with prolonged and sustainable success. In a world where general information and technology are frequent and accessible to all, it challenges the concept of how things are done, leaving much room for improvement and differentiation.

Schoemaker et al. (2018) asserted that in volatile times and with a high level of uncertainty, successful leadership is not about investing in detailed plans but rather testing different hypotheses and assumptions, looking for market reaction. The authors started this study to oppose Belasen and Belasen's (2017) conclusion that mid-level managers are a layer that slows down a company's development. As evidenced by this research, mid-level managers were promoters of the company's high-performance culture.

Participants of this study demonstrated highly dynamic capabilities – they rose to challenges and led their teams through change and uncertainties. The findings of this study shed light on the strategies that leaders might employ to create and maintain a high-performance organizational culture. Leaders might pay more attention to embracing differences to encourage excellence. Leaders should not settle for just enough. They must promote a culture of the constant flow of feedback. Organizations with such a culture will be rewarded with satisfied and engaged employees, happy customers, and a competitive advantage.

## Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Further Research

Hancock and Algozzine (2017) defined limitations as uncontrollable factors that may affect the results of an investigation. Focusing this study on a single division of the global company in the Asia Pacific region is a significant limitation because it does not necessarily represent the realities of all business-to-business (B2B) organizations. Furthermore, as the study narrowed down into a focus on only two distinct themes out of a list of eight emerged themes, the limitations are further accentuated. Thus, future research should focus on a wider representation of IT companies and business sectors, which include retail, working to consider more or all of the emerging themes. Finally, to protect the privacy of participants and not disclose the company we decided not to discuss differences of approach between male and female managers. Future study should consider on learning and disclosing this aspect.

Singapore is a global hub for professionals worldwide (Yeung et al., 2001). However, it might not represent other similar hubs, such as Hong Kong, Luxemburg, and the Bay Area in California. Future research should expand its reach to different geographies. Using a representative, statistically valid sample for quantitative analysis might increase the chances of achieving generalizability of the results (Yin, 2018). Future researchers might consider evaluating the correlation between applied strategies and the cultural characteristics of the organization.

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