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### Vol. 1 No. 1 (2022): ἀρετή (Arete) Journal of Excellence in Global Leadership

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# SLOTT: Student Learning Outcomes Tracing Tool

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## Abstract

**Background:** Assessment programs across many higher education institutions have been developed, grown, changed, and restructured. The resulting data analysis from the critical thinking, creative, cultural, and communicative institutional outcomes mapping data should serve as a catalyst to revise action plans to improve the student learning experience. **Objectives:** During a recent assessment data analysis, Kishwaukee College identified a low number of assessed cultural Institutional Student Learning Outcomes (ISLOs) in comparison to the other three ISLOs in the college assessment program. **Approach:** The Student Learning Outcome Tracing Tool (SLOTT) was developed utilizing Excel™ Pivot Tables/Charts and Dashboards to be a broad data visualization filtering tool for all aligned and mapped courses. Using SLOTT the course outcome mapping data was analyzed from the course syllabi. **Results:** The SLOTT provided an easy visualization of the mapped and aligned outcomes, to determine if the low amount of entered data was due to a low number of courses that aligned to the cultural ISLO. **Conclusions:** The results of this study were unexpected and changed the approach of the Assessment Committee's actions.

**Keywords:** Assessment, Cultural Competency, Data Analysis, Student Learning Outcomes, Tracing Tool

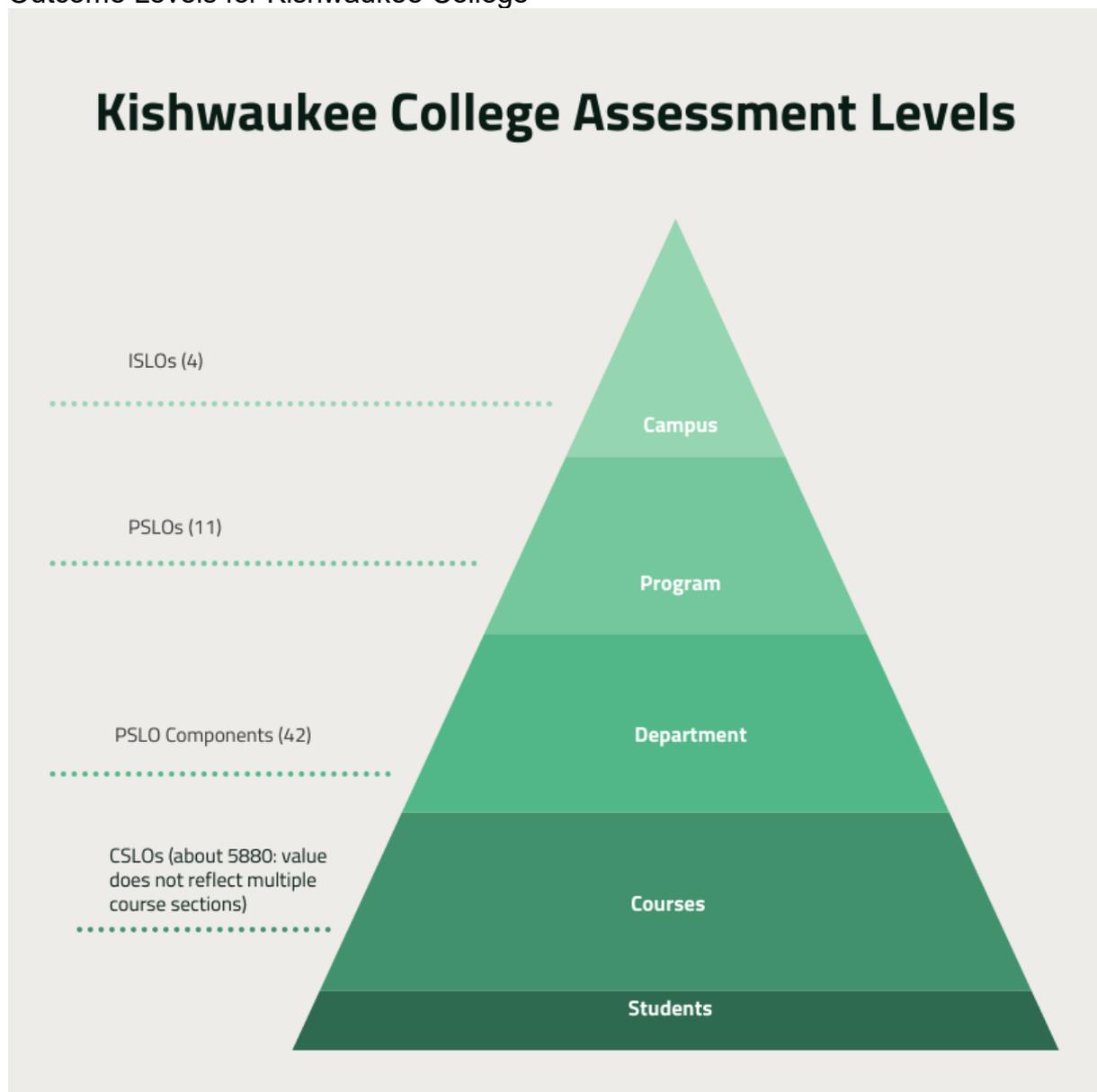
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## Introduction

Assessment takes place at four levels for Kishwaukee College (College): the institutional level (whole college), the program level (degrees and certificates), the program component level (departments), and the course level, which all flow up through connections to the top level (Figure 1). The College collects data on four Institutional Student Learning Outcomes (ISLOs) and includes cultural competence outcome, critical thinking, creative, and communicative competencies. The cultural competency ISLO reads that “learners will recognize the various factors that shape individual and group identity, with an emphasis on the various components of culture and learners will demonstrate the capacity to engage difference in various social settings” (Kishwaukee College, revised 2018).

*Figure 1*  
Outcome Levels for Kishwaukee College



Source: Authors' Illustration

The Assessment Committee noticed a lower level of entered data at Kishwaukee College for the cultural competence outcome when compared to the other three ISLOs, critical thinking, creative, and communicative competencies. This lack of data could be attributed to two possible problems as seen in Figure 2:

- the lack of courses that map and align to the cultural competence may be low (low data amount reflects the low number of course student learning outcomes (CSLO) that connect to the ISLO), or
- the lack of entered data results into the database system (low data due to the lack of results being entered into the database).

Figure 2  
Example of Course Mapping for Gap Analysis

		Course Outcomes Mapped to Institutional Outcomes			
Courses		Critical Thinking Competency	Creative Competency	Cultural Competency	Communicative Competency
Course 1		✓	✓	✓	✓
Course 2		✓	✗	✗	✓
Course 3		✓	✓	✗	✓
Course 4	Gap →	✗	✗	✗	✗
Course 5		✓	✓	✗	✓
Course 6		✓	✗	✗	✗

↑ Over Exposure
↑ Under Exposure

Source: Authors' Illustration

Barriers to the collection of cultural competencies are all too common in education and assessment programs globally (Kruse, 2018). Many educational institutions recognize the importance of cultural competencies expected by a more global society; however, many institutions struggle to assess competencies meaningfully or teach these competencies effectively. With society more globally connected through emerging technologies and advancements, the importance of cultural competencies cannot be overstated. Thus, effectively teaching and assessing these competencies throughout an educational degree is of vast importance when transitioning from student to employee.

During a study at the University of Virginia, a barrier to assessing and teaching cultural competencies became very clear. After creating a circular instruction module for teaching the importance of cultural competency during medical treatments, the

University found that students often had an emotional impact from the cultural topics that resulted in unexpected reactions that hindered the learning (Worden, 2018). Instructors may avoid the teaching and assessment of cultural topics to not hinder the learning of other processes. While hampering learning is never positive, creating a safe environment to discuss cultural topics that can spur emotional responses should not be avoided. One suggestion would be to separate the learning outcomes for the lesson: one lesson on the cultural outcome and one lesson on the technique or methodology. To avoid too many emotional responses the instructor could set the stage of the lesson upfront as to not shock the students. With an understanding of the reason why the topic is vital set forth upfront, students are less likely to become so emotional that it obstructs the learning behind the topic (Worden, (2018).

Additional barriers for cultural competency assessment include alignment mapping of issues and learning outcomes that must be worded clearly for the instructor to meet the goal (NILOA, May 2016). The language of the outcomes should serve as a director for the student’s learning as they progress into their careers (NILOA, January 2017). Personal assumptions also provide a barrier when analyzing assessment results and should be avoided. This bias can also influence the data that is collected and used for the assessment of cultural competencies (NILOA, January 2017). With just these few examples of assumptions and barriers for assessment of cultural competencies, it is not surprising that Kishwaukee College’s cultural competencies assumptions and barriers follow similar trends.

The assumption at the beginning was to find out the reason for a low collection of cultural outcome data. The assessment committee expected to find that a smaller number of courses mapped to the cultural ISLO. They did not expect to find faculty not taking or not entering the data. The measurement of ISLOs is fundamental to the quality of learning. Kishwaukee College as an institution and the Assessment Committee need to discuss whether the College can claim that their students are hitting this benchmark outcome as part of their degree path through their degree or certificate program. Another assumption was that the only courses that map to cultural ISLOs are optional courses (elective courses based on area of study) or general education courses (core courses that everyone takes). If this is the case, can a student get a degree without technically taking a single course that maps to a cultural ISLO? If this ends up being the case *can Kishwaukee College claim that their students have reached a level of cultural competence?* The Assessment Committee identified several other issues that may contribute to the problem. These include issues like the lack of confidence in the Outcomes by Anthology Incorporated (previously Campus Labs) software program that is used to house Kishwaukee College assessment data. If these assumptions were proven true, as an assessment committee and college; Kishwaukee College would then need to reorganize the ISLOs or find additional ways to incorporate cultural ISLOs into mandatory coursework.

Therefore, there is a clear need for the Assessment Committee to generate a gap analysis of the student learning outcomes mapping. This needs to be done to determine if the low data collection

in the cultural ISLO is due to the faculty not entering data, or a limited number of

The tracing tool gains a name.

The *tracing tool* was given a name by Dr. Jennie Mitchell, as the Student Learning Outcome Tracing Tool or **SLOTT**.

general education courses, or courses that map outcomes to a cultural ISLO are low. With a large number of courses offered (588), each with an average 8-10 course outcomes (~5,880 outcomes) the sheer amount of mapping data is overwhelming and difficult to analyze through conventional means. These approximately ~5,880 outcomes are collected from the course syllabi under Course Student Learning Outcomes (CSLO) and will be utilized to generate the SLOTT, to analyze the data more easily.

## **Better Assessment Needs Better Tools**

Many educational institutions have used tracing tools and programs to filter and visualize large amounts of mapped/aligned learning outcome data. For example, Santa Clara University used concept and clustering mapping to outline and develop the framework for their library student learning outcomes (Branch, 2019). The concept mapping tool allowed for the University to come up with a wide number of student learning outcomes (Branch, 2019). Then the library used the tool of cluster mapping to narrow the number of outcomes and get rid of duplicated outcomes. This allowed the library to come up with their program student learning outcomes (PSLO) (Branch, 2019).

At the University of Piraeus in Greece, they developed a tool (web-based) that uses Liferay, a Java-based component and open-source software, for their faculty to be able to map course outcomes to student outcomes. This program housed the data at the course level and was able to aggregate it to the student level (Ibrahim, 2015). The web tool was successfully implemented from their assessment committee to the whole faculty. Using this Liferay tool, the assessment committee was able to easily observe data gaps and action plans were developed when the benchmarks were not being met. However, challenges of the open-source Liferay software is the need for a trained Java programmer to utilize, which for other institutions could equate to hiring a new position and additional costs associated with the new position.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill built two methods to map and analyze the efficiency of their co-curricular outcomes. Using Extracurricular Involvement Inventory (EII) and heat maps the authors of the article were able to determine that most of the outcomes mapped to either communication or ethical skills. While the authors did not specify how they were going to address the gaps in the other outcomes, the tools used to generate the mapping data of their outcomes was extremely successful (Zeeman, 2019).

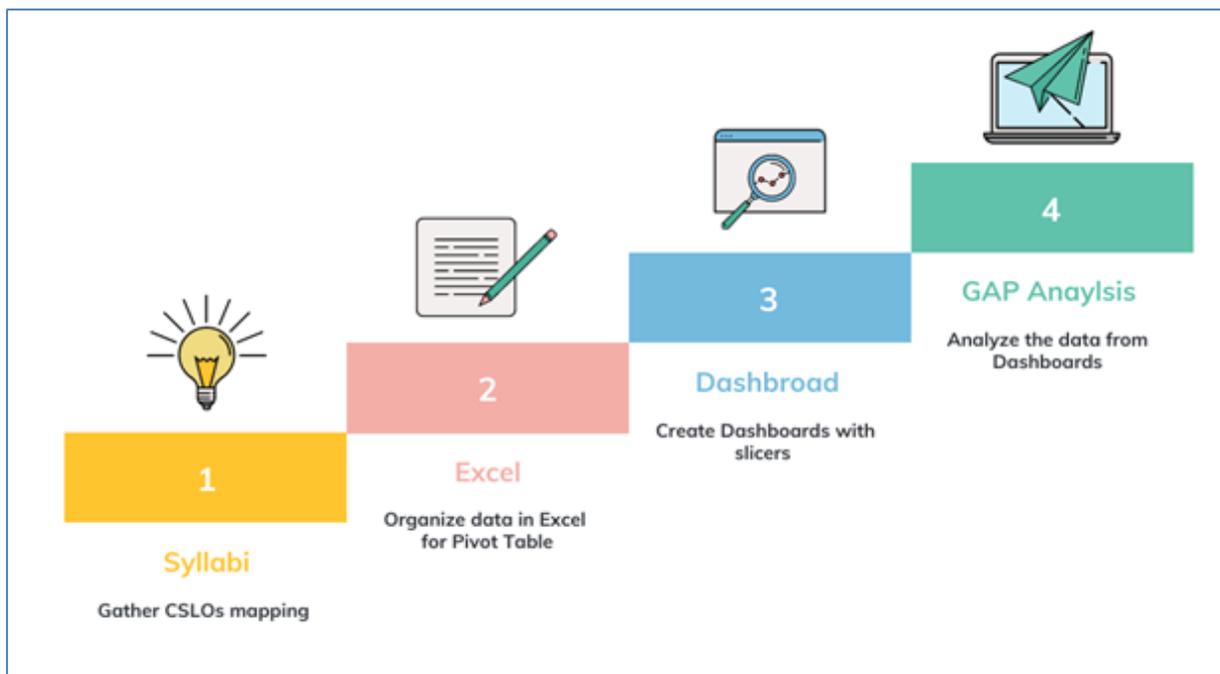
The University of Canberra in Australia used frequency surveys to view gaps in how often their outcomes were measured (Lee, 2019), based on a value system of 1 through 4 on how often an outcome was measured. The mean and standard deviations of these values were then reviewed, and gaps in the measurement of outcomes were identified. The frequency surveys did have an element of subjectivity and further standardization of the 1 through 4 values would create more meaningful data. Creating tools to easily visualize data is not a novel concept but creating an easily utilized and modifiable tool presents a challenge.

## Development of SLOTT and Analysis Using SLOTT

To address the possible cause of a low number of mapped/aligned CSLOs to the cultural ISLO for Kishwaukee College, a mapping trace of all course outcomes will need to be evaluated, through the design and use of a modifiable tracing tool in an Excel™ Pivot Table/Chart and Dashboard. A Dashboard is used to display large amounts of data visually that can be filtered using slicers. This *tracing tool* will pull the CSLOs and mapping details from the syllabi for all campus courses. The data was gathered by William Michels (Assessment Teaching Chair) from 588 course syllabi individually. The data was then used to develop the Excel™ table, converted into a Pivot table/chart, and the subsequent dashboard. The tracing tool will have the ability to trace the outcomes at all four levels, within the college: the institutional, program, department I, and course. Using filters (slicers), the mapped/aligned tracing data will be easily generated for this cultural outcome, as well as many others. The slicer tool allows for the filtering of data in the Excel™ visual tables. Thus, the slicer will allow for filtering of the data that most pertains to the query. It will filter the courses, departments, repeated course sections offered, and the number of enrolled students for the cultural competency outcome. The slicers will also allow for the same questions to be answered for the other three ISLOs for comparison and gap analysis.

SLOTT will show the number of courses and outcomes mapped up through the four levels of the Kishwaukee College Assessment program leveraging visualization to help answer the Assessment Committee’s questions. Not only will SLOTT trace the cultural outcomes, but all outcomes that are mapped by Kishwaukee College. SLOTT is also easily modifiable for course additions and deletions. The development of the tracing tool is beneficial for this assessment problem but also is flexible enough to map other gaps and issues. The four-step process for the development of SLOTT is seen in Figure 3.

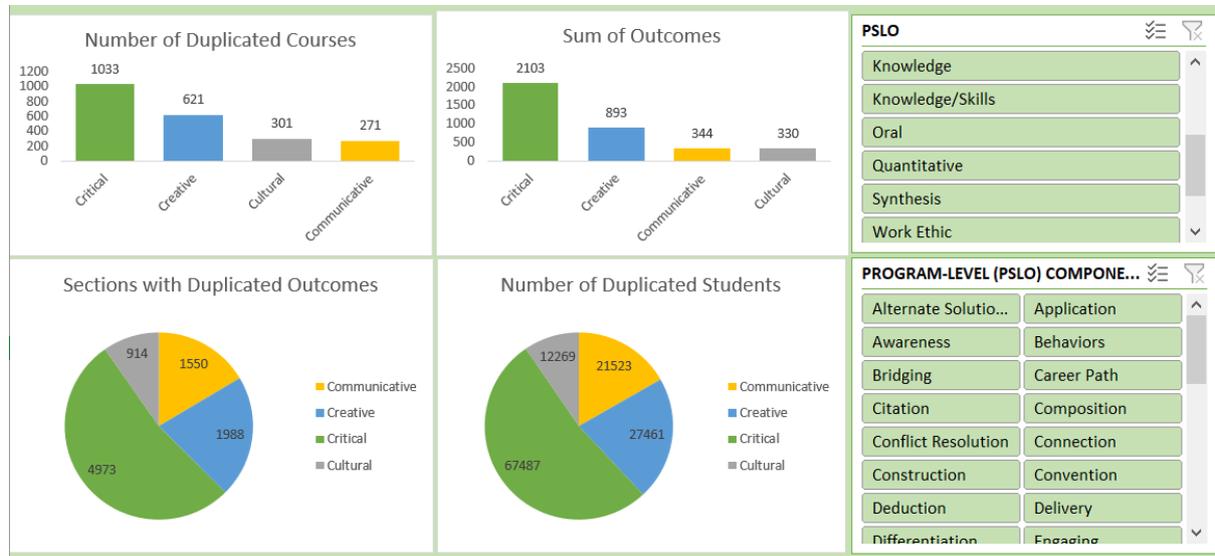
Figure 3  
4 Steps in SLOTT Development



Source: Authors' Illustration

## SLOTT Dashboard in Action

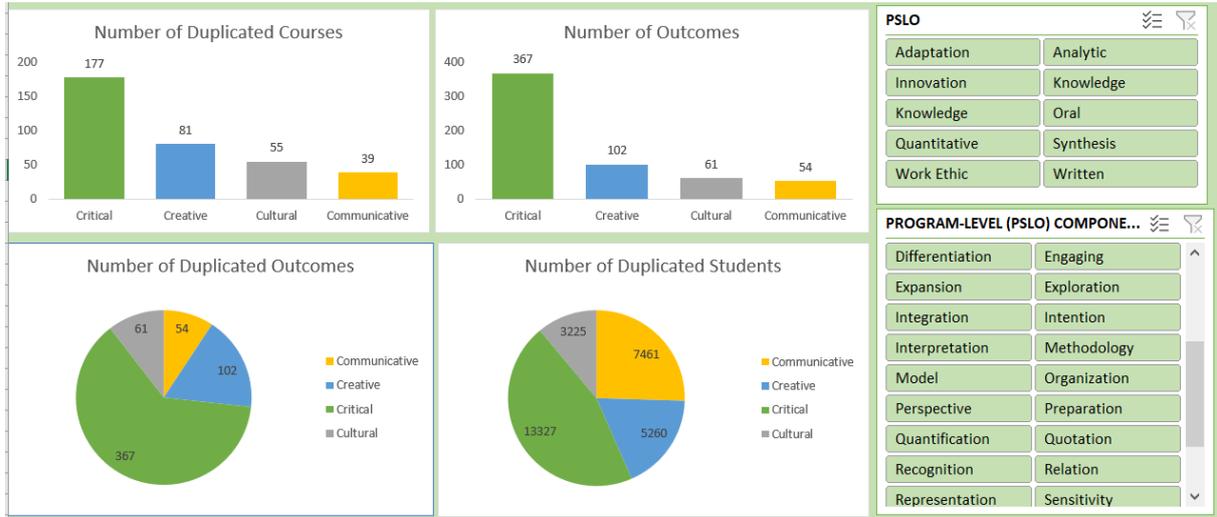
Figure 4  
SLOTT ISLOs for All Courses FY18



Source: Authors' Illustration

This first SLOTT (Figure 4) clearly visualizes the mapping data for all courses, duplicated outcomes, FY18 (Fiscal Year) duplicated section outcomes, and FY18 duplicated students in sections that could have been assessed for the learning outcomes. FY18 was chosen to analyze as it was the year the Assessment Committee requested if any faculty have any CSLOs that map/align to the cultural ISLO to enter data. This year was further picked for analysis as it was the first year that there was a faculty request for certain data and the noted low number of results generated a concern with the Assessment Committee, At the time of the request for 2018 data, the lower number of data collection points was assumed to be low number of cultural competency courses, not a lack of entered data. Slicers on the dashboard allow the viewer to take the four ISLOs and filter for certain PSLOs and PSLO components, refer to Figure 1. As shown in Figure 5, the data for the general education core courses were put into a similar dashboard as Figure 4.

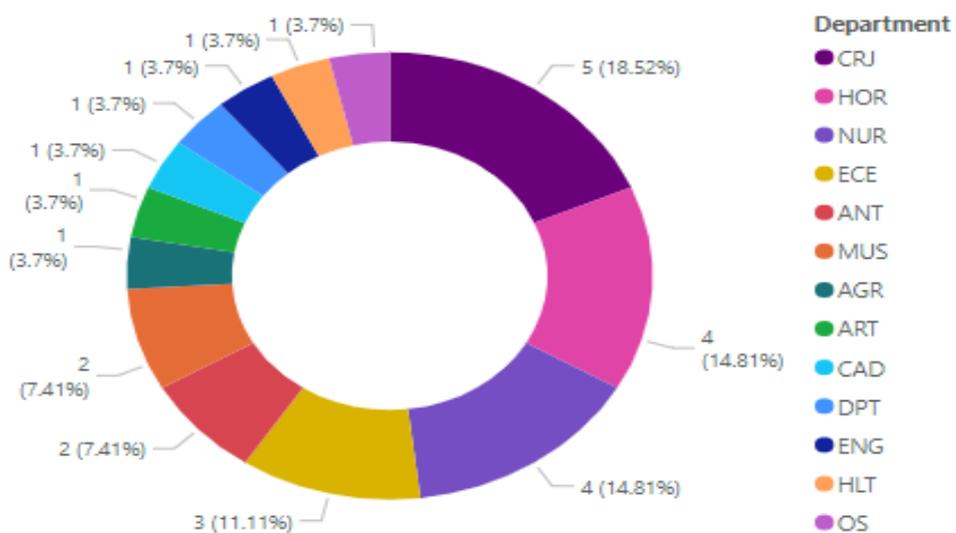
**Figure 5**  
SLOTT ISLOs for General Education Courses FY18



Source: Authors' Illustration

When taking the Excel™ spreadsheets from the original data set the organization of the data needed to be heavily revised in order to upload it to Power Business Intelligence™ (Power BI) correctly. As a result, the charts that were generated in Power BI™ only showed the departments mapped to the PSLO Components, but not the PSLOs or ISLOs levels, as seen in Figure 6. While this data was useful it did not fully answer the question on whether courses could be queried for the complete outcome mapping data at multiple levels for the purpose of gap analysis.

**Figure 6**  
Excel SLOTT into Power BI SLOTT for PSLO Components FY18  
CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE Sensitivity by Department



Source: Authors' Illustration

Power BI™ in combination with Excel™ was needed to query which courses and/or departments mapped the most to certain ISLOs, PSLOs, and PSLO Components, thus providing a complete mapping picture of all the course outcomes at multiple levels within the institution. With the addition of slicers, the Assessment Committee could identify where the mapped outcomes were mostly housed, within the courses and within multiple levels of the institution. This would answer the question of whether the only courses that mapped to the cultural ISLO are optional courses. Basically, the assessment committee wants to know if a student could get through a degree or certificate and not be assessed in a certain ISLO or PSLO.

Thus, the third dashboard in Excel™ was created to gain the complete outcome mapping data. This third SLOTT allows for the tracing of mapping of ISLO, PSLO, and PSLO Components to the division, department, and course levels. The two previous SLOTTs (Figure 4 and 5) did not allow for this. The SLOTT in Power BI™ (Figure 6) somewhat allowed for the trace of mapping data done to department level and PSLO Component, but not the course level.

In Figure 7, the SLOTT allows for tracing the mapping data from the ISLO level to the division, department, and course levels using the slicers that filter the data. This SLOTT will show how many CSLOs map to each ISLO based on narrowing it down to first the division level. Through this filter, the cultural ISLO is mainly mapped to courses in the Arts, Communications, and Social Sciences (ACSS) and Career Transfer, Electronics, and Business (CTEB) divisions. This was not surprising as these divisions house humanities, social sciences, and career transfer courses. The majority of the ISLOs that map to the Math, Science, and Nursing (MSN) division are in the Critical Thinking competency.

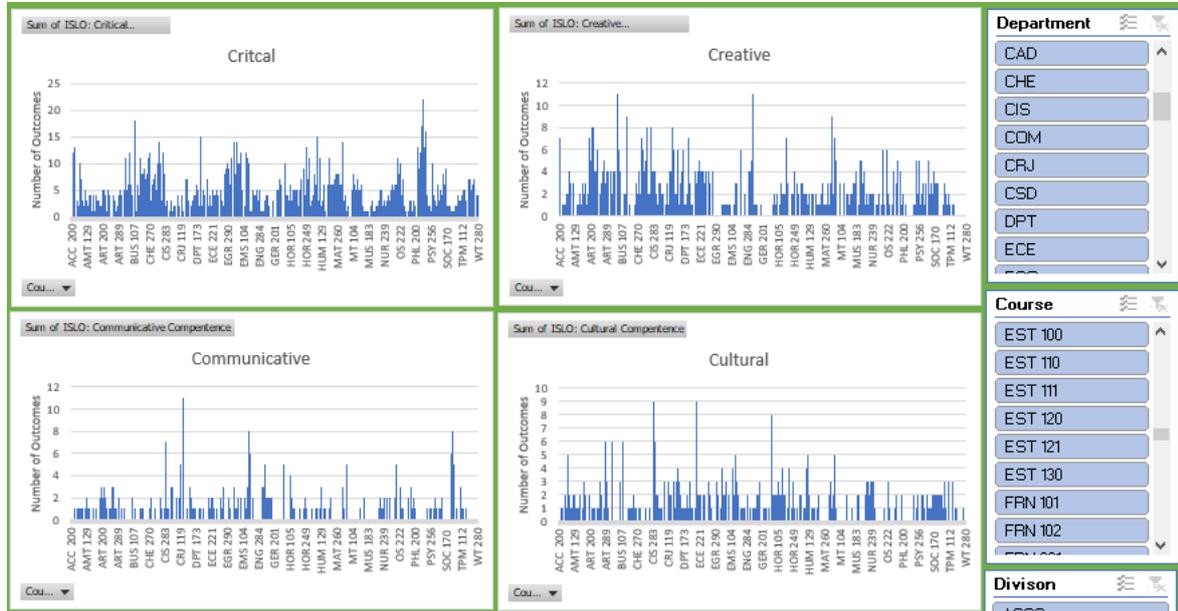
Question Answered
This SLOTT information reflects that there is no need to reorganize the SLO mapping structure and that students are being taught and should be assessed for cultural competency.

The SLOTT in Figure 7 reflects about 5,880 course outcomes for all the current courses offered in the course catalogue which is a large amount of data causing the image to be hard to read. The embedded video link demonstrates how the filter works to narrow the data in Figure 10. The slicer filters allow for the number of cultural ISLOs to be viewed by the department and course levels. When the filter was applied, the departments with the most CSLOs that map to the cultural ISLO were mapped to the Horticulture department, which is a certificate program. Communications (COM 100) and Early Childhood Education (ECE 161) courses have the most CSLOs that map to the cultural ISLO as a single course. Each course has 9 CSLOs that map up to the cultural ISLO, see Figure 1. COM 100 is a general education course that is required by all degrees and most certificates, which means that the majority of students are able to be assessed for cultural competency, which was an earlier concern of the assessment committee. This SLOTT information reflects that there is no need to reorganize the

The Important Question
Basically, the Assessment Committee wants to know if a student could get through a degree or certificate and not be assessed in a certain ISLO or PSLO.

SLO mapping structure and that students are being taught and should be assessed for cultural competency.

Figure 7  
SLOTT ISLOs for All Courses



Source: Authors' Illustration

In Figure 8, the SLOTT allows for the tracing of PSLOs to division, department, and course levels. While the information generated by this SLOTT was not needed to determine where the cultural ISLOs were mapped it will filter the data for the PSLO level. This SLOTT information will be useful if Kishwaukee College, after COVID 19, returns to the 4-year Assessment plan. The 4-year Assessment plan is a cycle of what ISLOs and PSLOs are to be measured in a certain year. This plan ensures that all outcomes will have measured and reported data every 4-years. This SLOTT could be utilized to determine which courses would need to assess CLSOs based on the cycle rotation for PSLOs. This rotation is important as it ensures that every PSLO is assessed in a certain time frame to report to the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). The HLC is the accrediting body for Kishwaukee College.

Based on the results shown in the SLOTTs in Figure 4, Figure 7, and Figure 8 a student will be evaluated on each ISLO and PSLO based on the general core education courses' maps, which shows HLC that every student is assessed for each within the mandatory core courses. Elective courses then provide additional mapped outcomes to the ISLOs and PSLOs that are student concentration (major/certificate) focused.

Figure 8  
SLOTT Distribution of the 11 PSLOs Across All Courses



Source: Authors' Illustration

In Figure 9, the SLOTT allows for the tracing of PSLO Components (department level) to division, department, and course levels. While this information was not needed to determine the GAP data for the cultural ISLO, it would be useful for departments for program reviews and department annual goals. The program reviews are on a 5-year cycle and assessment is a large part of the review. Being able to ensure in the 5-year cycle that all CSLOs for courses offered were measured is important. This is an HLC requirement to show that all outcomes are measured within a certain timeframe. This Figure 9 SLOTT could be utilized to ensure all components that map to the department are measured. For the annual department goals, this SLOTT can help guide the assessment goals for the year.

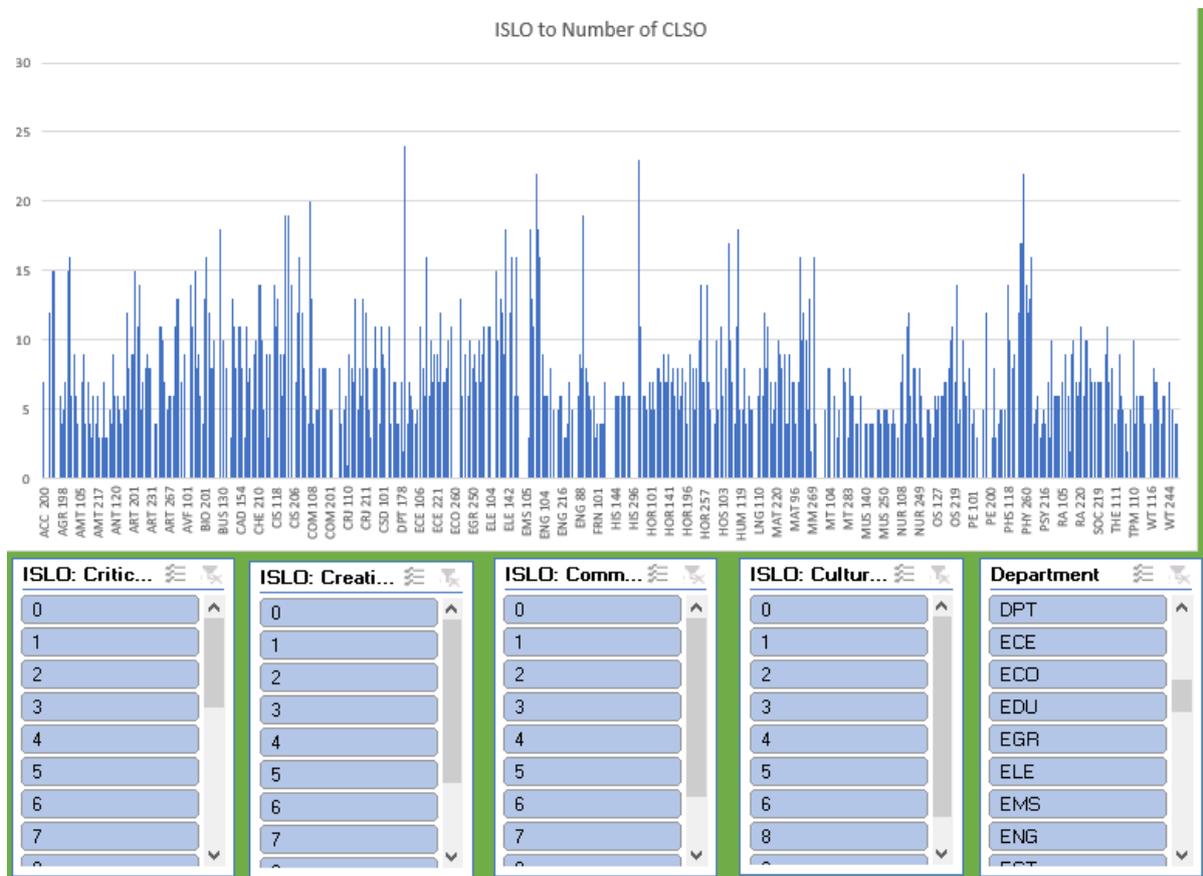
Figure 9  
SLOTT PSLO Components for All Courses (partial dashboard)



Source: Authors' Illustration

The final SLOTT is Figure 10; this allows for the ease of tracing ISLOs to the courses. This SLOTT provided the information about the COM 100 and ECE 161 courses having the most CSLOs mapped to the cultural ISLO in a much more streamlined manner than Figure 7. While not providing any additional information this SLOTT filtered much quicker to answer this query of, “what course maps the most CSLOs to the cultural ISLOs?”.

Figure 10  
SLOTT ISLO to CSLOs by Department



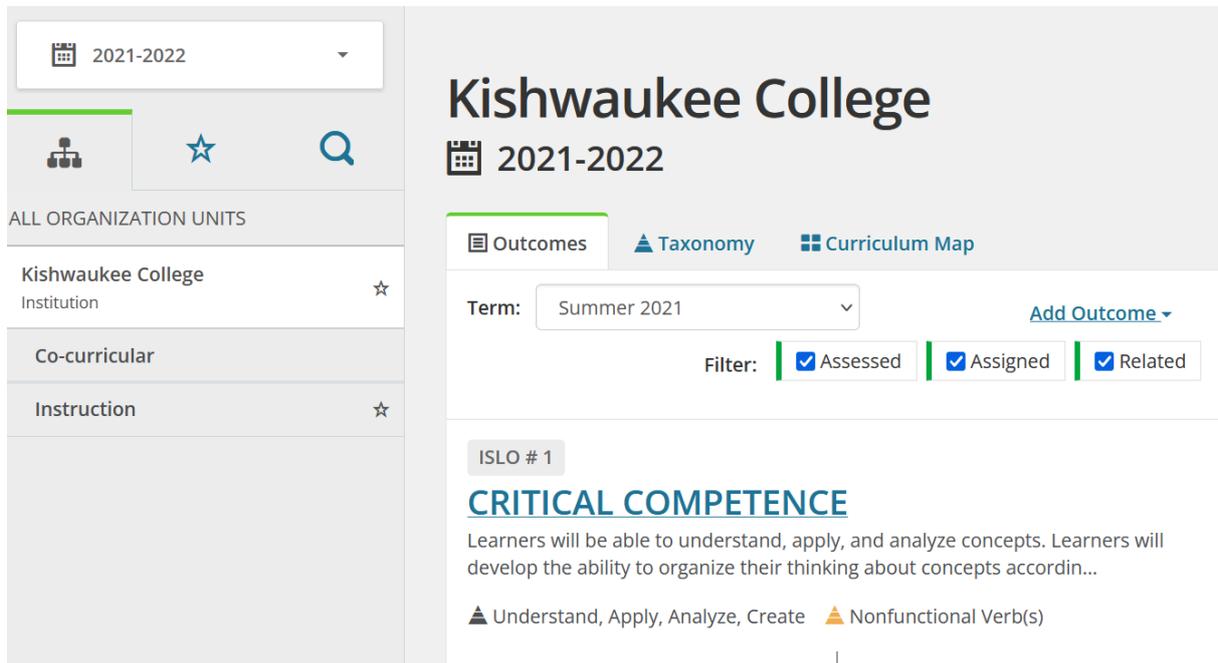
Source: Authors' Illustration

With the SLOTTs completed the GAP analysis of the cultural ISLO could be easily and visually analyzed by the Assessment Committee and can be utilized to answer any mapping SLO questions for any of the other SLOs, not just cultural. The SLOTTs will become a very useful tool for the Kishwaukee College assessment committee and program for future queries and GAP analysis.

## Conclusion

The strategy was to create several SLOTT dashboards through Excel™ and Power BI™ to find out if the reason for the low amount of cultural ISLOs that were assessed was based on lack of mapped outcomes. In FY18, the 319 assessed outcomes are an extremely low number of outcomes assessed compared to the next closest ISLO, creative at 1,312 assessed outcomes in the same year. The same year communicative ISLO was assessed 3,299 times and critical thinking ISLO was assessed 2,176 times. These results were generated by Outcomes by Anthology Incorporated (Outcomes) as seen in Figure 11. This was a very unequal distribution of the collection of data per ISLO. This was concerning to the assessment committee because that same year the committee requested faculty to collect data for any CSLO that mapped to the cultural ISLO. If the data collection occurred that year then the number of assessed cultural outcomes should be higher than the previous year, instead of similar.

Figure 11  
Outcomes by Anthology Incorporated for Kishwaukee College



Source: Authors' Illustration

The cultural ISLO was significantly measured less than the others, even when faculty were asked to report on any outcomes in their courses that mapped to a cultural ISLO. While the Power BI™ dashboard gave interesting data in regard to departments that measure certain PSLO Components, the amount of time taken to clean up the data so it would be usable, makes this a task for the future. The tool that worked for the assessment committee was SLOTT. SLOTT clearly showed that the initial assumptions of the Assessment Committee were incorrect. The assumption was that this low number of cultural outcomes being assessed was due to a lack of outcomes that mapped to a cultural ISLO. However, in Figure 10, the charts in the dashboard show that CSLOs, PSLOs Components, and PSLOs that map up to the cultural ISLO are about equitable to that of the communicative ISLO.

In Figure 5, the Assessment Committee assumed the majority of the cultural ISLOs would not be represented in the general education core courses attributing to the low data collection, the dashboard shows that each of the four ISLOs in the general education core courses are about 15% of the total courses offered in Figure 4. The general education core courses have about the same distribution of course outcomes as all the courses offered at Kishwaukee College. This disproved the Assessment Committee's previous assumption and showed that the mapped outcomes for the cultural ISLO were not contributing to the lower number of assessed outcomes in this ISLO. In fact, the communicative ISLO has about the same distribution as the cultural ISLO but has the greatest number of assessed student outcome data reported. While this could be partially due to the higher number of students in this outcome that could be assessed in the general education core courses in Figure 5, this gap narrows when looking at all the courses in Figure 4. While the data that Power BI™ could have shown exactly which courses mapped to the cultural ISLO, the SLOTTs provided a clearer

picture that the number of mapped course outcomes is not why the amount of data assessed and reported in the cultural ISLOs assessments are so low.

In conclusion, the gap analysis from the SLOTTs showed that the lack of courses mapping to the cultural ISLO was not low in comparison to other ISLOs. The reason for the low amount of data entered into the Outcomes database was caused by some other factor. Based on earlier assumptions by the Assessment Committee this must then be due to the lack of faculty entering data into the database. After the SLOTT results the Assessment Committee has changed the focus from the mapping outcomes to increasing the data reported by faculty. These action plans have taken two different paths to increase the cultural data reported over FY22. The first route taken was the development of several quick resource YouTube™ videos to provide quick tutorial resources for technology Outcome database questions. These videos are further going to be developed into a Kishwaukee Assessment Academy online course shell within D2L Brightspace™. The Kishwaukee Assessment Academy course will be available to all faculty and provide ease of access to all assessment-based training and information on campus. The second route taken was the development of Assessment Parties, which are small group assessment training sessions based on a monthly topic requested by the faculty. Preliminary findings show that at the end of spring 22 the amount of cultural data reported has increased. These efforts will continue into the next year and the data analyzed based on the effectiveness of the action plans.

## VIDEO

The following video shows how the SLOTT tool works.



### SLOTT: Student Learning Outcomes Tracing Tool

By

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# Exploring Global Leadership Storytelling for Efficacy and Wellbeing among Organizational members

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## Abstract

**Background:** Organizational members are exposed to storytelling around the globe and emerging literature is beginning to discuss this phenomenon. Little is known about storytelling within global organizations. **Objectives:** This essay discusses the need to gather knowledge around global leadership storytelling and whether its use increases feelings of self-efficacy and wellbeing in organizational members. It calls for a qualitative examination of storytelling by encouraging further study of leaders in Greece, Ireland, and the United States. These locations were chosen for their rich storytelling history, civic engagement, social change, and Hofstede (2022) scores on individualism which reflect different ways that cultural members approach group interactions. These nations serve as the first part of a global component of western and non-western locations informing on storytelling and global leadership. This essay also contends that global organizations can examine storytelling as it occurs internally and suggests a model and series of questions to help evaluate that influence. **Approach:** Narrative Paradigm Theory, offered by Fisher (1985), allows humans are storytellers and are surrounded by communication making sense of the world and creating shared meaning. Narrative Paradigm Theory may provide a significant way to better understand the narration, narratives, stories, and storytelling used by global organizational members. Literature on self-efficacy and wellbeing suggests that various group interactions have positive influences on both outcomes and offer considerations for a model to help measure the effectiveness of global leadership storytelling. **Conclusion:** This essay offers strategies to help organizations better understand the significance of global leadership storytelling on their members.

**Keywords:** global leadership; storytelling; story; communication; narrative; narration; self-efficacy; wellbeing; organizational culture

**Paper type:** Critical Essay & Perspective

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## Introduction

In two recent study abroad trips in Greece and Ireland, this author observed that speakers in nearly every visit to a location, utilized storytelling to describe historical accounts, relate cultural legends and myths, or explain the origin story of key organizations, initiatives, projects, or people. These speakers connected with audience members by discussing stories of accomplishment, hardship, and perseverance. The author, who grew up on a United States consumption of history, fiction, comic books, and vintage pop culture, marveled at the pervasiveness of storytelling in these cultures. As observed, these stories extended deeply into a multitude of subjects using some of the same adventure, amusement, legend, myth, and love of the protagonist as their fictional counterparts. These observations encouraged the author to follow-up with further study in Greece, Ireland, and the United States to begin to understand global leadership storytelling across organizations and learn even more about its effect on self-efficacy and wellbeing on the part of members. Since committing to the project, research and lay colleagues began to flood this author with the ways that storytelling was emerging in their work, occurrence in the organization, and observations of other cultural moments where the story was key to the interaction.

These observations on global leadership storytelling are supported by its common use across cultures. Each day, a global plethora of organizational members go about their days submerged in storytelling from the moment they wake until that moment their day ends with slumber. These same leaders, may then, in turn, use storytelling to connect with organizational members, inspire teammates, and navigate demanding situations. There is little known about global leadership storytelling at a worldwide scale and the extent that it connects organizational members. It is not known if leaders perceive utilizing the functions of such storytelling as helpful or if they even admit that it is occurring. More specifically, it is not fully understood whether perceptions of self-efficacy or organizational fulfilment towards a sense of wellbeing increase from such efforts.

This essay offers that more should be learned about global leadership storytelling. At its root, this essay contends that storytelling, as that strong communicative device helping create identification between speaker and audience, deserves greater study and consideration beginning in follow-up studies in Greece, Ireland, and the United States and with a series of key inquiry that can be continued across organizations. This work uses Narrative Paradigm Theory to offer that these stories exist in numerous forms and can be evaluated and utilized robustly to the betterment of organization and audience, alike (Fisher, 1985). The essay contends that understanding such storytelling may begin to inform of its effects on feelings of self-efficacy and wellbeing among organizational members while offering a model and series of questions to evaluate these processes.

## A Framework for Examining Global Leadership Storytelling: Narrative Paradigm Theory

Storytelling is intrinsic in the cultures of the world and has been present since the dawn of civilization reaching every facet of individuals, as they combine and organize, and the shared meaning they make while informing experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Josselson et al., 2002; Lieblich et al., 1998). Organizational communicators and

the global leaders that rely on it are not immune from this omnipresent tradition of storytelling as ways to convey their craft, discuss their work and products, or offer other takeaway observations about phenomena to be navigated (Houston, 2000). Therefore, consumers, organizational members, managers, and even non-attentive bystander audiences are routinely exposed to narratives that “create order in, and make sense of, the real world and the past by telling stories... ordering reality, assigning causality, and constructing meaning” (Hansen, 2012, p. 696). Scholars have a history of using both story and narrative as interchangeable terms (Auvinen et al., 2013). For the purposes of this essay, story, storytelling, narrative, and narration then become a fluid set of terms placed under a banner of global leadership storytelling that describe processes by which global leaders account for past experiences, cast certain dream-casting visions for the future, justify values through examples from organizational life, and discuss leadership examples through verbal or written artifacts (D’Abate & Alpert, 2017, Hansen, 2012). The question remains: among all this narrative action from such fluid terminology, how do we comprehend and review the storytelling around us in a systematic way?

Fisher’s seminal work on Narrative Paradigm Theory can help with reviewing global leadership storytelling and serves as a strong theoretical basis for analyzing common themes across cultures. Narrative paradigm theory operates from the basis that every speaker, both knowing and unknowing, is a storyteller (Fisher, 1985). Fisher argues that humans, at their very nature, are narrative beings who connect via storytelling over logic or ration. Narrative paradigm theory allows that as humans are exposed to stories, they choose to connect with those in which they agree, understand, or find conflict and in do so, create shared meaning. From there, humans make appropriate decisions related to storytelling by placing themselves in a narrative approach that allows for perspective “for different people, at different times, and in different places” (Goby, 2021, p. 606). What action or perception does the listener take, due to the telling of the story? What perceptions should change, because of the vantage point given in the story? The answers to these questions and opportunities can become limitless because of the flexibility of the theory (Goby, 2021).

Fisher’s work even hints that the power of storytelling in narrative paradigm theory is so great, that it could potentially surpass Aristotle’s rigid proof centering on ethos, pathos, and logos for its effectiveness (Fisher, 1985). This argument reinforces the narrative strength within the workplace example, case study, story problem, or background that is often used to explain a difficult situation in specific contexts. Narrative Paradigm Theory could displace other leadership theory in applicability by demonstrating that their confines create additional and unnecessary steps to navigate for authors seeking to tell their story, easily and simply as they have heard stories across their lifetimes. Imagine removing the trait analysis or competency measurement from Trait Theory or a Clifton Strengths assessment and instead encouraging leaders to simply tell their stories to offer their candid experience to other organizational members. As the next section of the essay explores, approaches to storytelling are already under way in business communication, global leadership, and other multi-disciplinary examples that demonstrate a growing recognition of importance and add support for the additional research called for in this paper.

## Business, Leadership Multi-Disciplinary Approaches to Global Leadership Storytelling

This essay makes the case that a greater examination of global leadership storytelling is necessary to begin to understand its usage from a larger perspective. More recent research is already demonstrating the power of storytelling in the organization. In fact, research centering on the storytelling and narratives inherent to Narrative Paradigm Theory bear out the reality of its richness in both business communication, leadership, and multi-disciplinary opportunities and further support its promise.

### *Business Communication*

Narratives and storytelling have received greater attention in recent years in business communication. Wachtman & Johnson (2009) contend that storytelling helps companies to market and brand themselves persuasively and serve as a fundamental way in which to relate to audiences. Storytelling has been used to promote brand awareness about products to consumers and used to discuss how corporate websites can offer narratives on family-owned businesses (Woodside, 2010; Herskovitz & Malcolm, 2010; Canziani et al, 2020). Dailey & Browning (2014) studied repetitive narratives in organizational culture, including multiple efforts by management scholars seeking to define strategic management and identity (Parada & Viladás, 2010; Dunford & Jones, 2000; Soneshin, 2010; Brown et al., 2005; Chreim, 2005; Down, 2006; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). This serious attention to the various forms of narratives as part of storytelling in the field of business demonstrates its use and growing part of discussion. It also indicates that there is a serious need for examining storytelling at every opportunity. Margherita & Verrill (2021) have done just that, creating a systematic way to evaluate entrepreneurial storytelling and business pitches.

### *Leadership*

Theorists like Gardner (1995) have posited that storytelling or narratives may play a greater role in the way that leaders foster relationships with followers. The author used storytelling to illustrate how global figures like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ghandhi were able to foster relationships between leader and follower. Borrowing again from history and considering issues of ethics, other research has focused on specific case references to historical figures who came to power via the art of manipulation of audiences through storytelling (Takala & Auvinen, 2016; Auvinen et al., 2013). Other research has utilized the lens of cultural mythologies as common stories with context to inform on common leadership traits (Wong-Mingji et al., 2012). Such research effectively demonstrates the power of global storytelling through mythology and the need to understand greater context and meaning per culture. While those global approaches describe major political figures and even larger cultural mythologies, less focus has been given to storytelling within the organization. Writers like Denning (2021) have offered that storytelling takes on magic-like effects and is the precisely the domain of leadership study due to its inspirational effect. Other practitioner-motivating research contends that storytelling is a priority, can empower and create empathetic leaders, and should be done well (Berens, 2022; Ready, 2002; Plush, 2013; Aponte-Moreno, 2020). Beyond this performative and presentational aspect of global leadership storytelling, no studies have specifically reviewed it as an interactional model fostering self-efficacy or wellbeing on the individual in the organization.

### *Multi-Disciplinary Approaches*

Storytelling also has multi-disciplinary successes that point to a wide succession of non-conventional ways to reach audience members. Goby (2021) contends that business curriculum should borrow from these multi-disciplinary approaches to make a full adoption of narrative towards strong global citizenship and engagement on the part of students. As an example, the use of narrative interventions in a single-case study contributed to cognitive growth in children with autism spectrum disorder (Laing Gillam, 2015). Burns (2015) observed that storytelling narratives can influence college choice in higher education systems. Johnson (2017) wrote that storytelling can be utilized by attorneys to better connect with clients and courtroom, alike. Peterson & Garner (2019) studied how dominant organizational narratives could be fostered and countered in large mega-church communities. This intersection between narrative paradigm theory and faith, education, science, and law, further demonstrates narratives' multi-disciplinary capabilities has a wider span of use that transcends strict academic confines.

### *Criticism of Storytelling through Narrative Paradigm Theory*

Beyond these practical examples of its use, it is important to note that from its inception, Narrative Paradigm Theory received early criticisms because of the contention that its loose and omnipresent condition is so limitless and impractical to make it unworkable (McGee & Nelson, 1985). Researchers such as Lucaites & Condit (1985) indicate that there is little distinction about which medium stories take or whether such narratives be in verbal, written, or other forms as a consideration for best practices. Despite this criticism, organizations continue to invest hours and dollars into coaching that helps with presentations tips, self-esteem building, and knowledge that is limited by the examples communication as conceived in times past (Maier, 2019). This desire to communicate more succinctly and reach audiences effectively may not be lost on practitioners who find favor in the stories they consume via books, podcasts, and social media.

Storytelling is also receiving greater worldwide acclaim among practitioners. Within the last 20 years, mass media authors and speakers have focused in on *The 10 Stories Great Leaders Tell* and the *Seven Basic Plots* of every story (Smith, 2019; Booker, 2004). These lay materials convey a message to worldwide audiences that good communicators have a story to tell and a variety of ways to do it. Given this attention and pervasive use of storytelling in popular culture, global leaders, scholars, audience members, and collective organizations, may find help in considering how they may communicate more effectively using global leadership storytelling. In the next section of the essay, a model will be offered that contributed to existing literature on self-efficacy and wellbeing to offer guidance to the organization in how global leadership storytelling may be evaluated by both factors.

## **A Model for Evaluating the influence of Storytelling on Self-Efficacy and Wellbeing**

Once global leadership storytelling begins to be considered, it is appropriate to evaluate its possible affects on organizational members. Essential exploration answers whether self-efficacy and wellbeing is influenced by its use. This section explores both self-efficacy and wellbeing in the organization and provides a model to

guide inquiry in which both outcomes can be considered in relation to global leadership storytelling.

### *Self-Efficacy*

Innovative leaders rise to moments of challenge and crisis through a series of adaptations that fulfill their greater sense of self-efficacy as a cognitive approach (Luszczynska et al., 2005). Luszczynska et al. (2005) offers a definition of general self-efficacy (GSE) that allows for the broad range of challenges that can preoccupy leaders and place stress on leader and organization, alike. This self-efficacy can be a task or domain specific and building on Bandura (1997) and social cognitive theory, can be influenced by perceived self-efficacy and forethought where an individual believes they can achieve the change they need to perform in key moments. GSE occurs across multiple domains and functions where context is less specific and yet throughout, leaders retain their belief in their own competence (Luszczynska et al. (2005).

Other researchers, such as Marsh & Craven (2006) note that self-efficacy helps the individual to reach the fullest in their human potential and to perceive their own success in the organization. Pillay et al. (2022) studied the role that self-efficacy played in resilience for South African women involved in higher education. The results of the study did demonstrate that self-efficacy had a relationship with empowering resilience as a further skill of leadership (Pillay et al., 2022). Groundbreaking research by Meyer (2022) demonstrates the role that self-efficacy plays in overcoming COVID-19 stressors at the onset of the pandemic when misinformation, confusion, and doubt plagued world communities about ways to combat the illness with a public health response. The researchers concluded that higher senses of self-efficacy among those surveyed lead to reduced stress levels to the benefit of the organization and situation, further confirming and validating previous findings by prior research (Zajacova et al., 2005; Shahrouf & Dardas, 2020; Mo et al., 2021; Meyer, 2022). In summation, self-efficacy sustains leaders as they have forethought for change, practice empowered resilience, and overcome steep stressors in difficult situations.

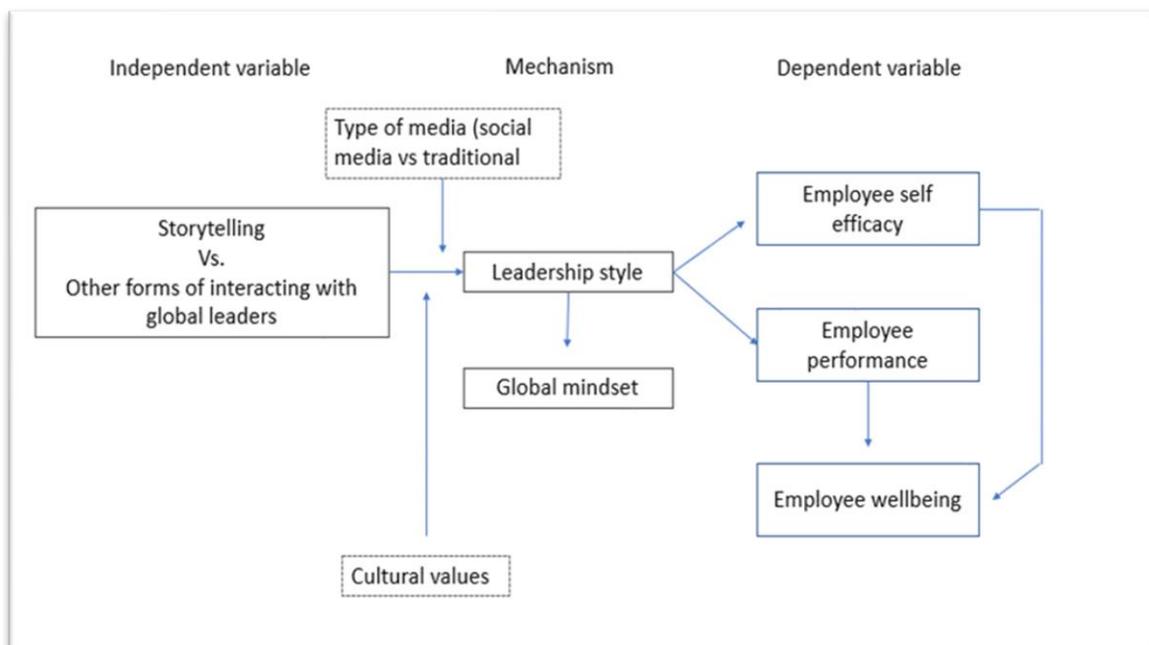
### *Wellbeing*

While self-efficacy promotes the idea that leaders see their positive influence on the organization, wellbeing describes a mental state among those that are positive about work and committed and involved with organizational efforts (Siqueira et al., 2014). Psychologist researchers Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) offer that the social and behavioral sciences can help predict which actions support the overall notion of wellbeing. They contend that wellbeing can include collective considerations where actions benefiting one person cannot override the needs of the many within the organization (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Guest (2017) offers then that managing the needs and wants of individuals gives a natural priority for organizations to follow ethical guidance in doing the right thing, support members against external challenges and threats, and bring benefits to the group. Nielsen et al. (2017) argue that organizations can ensure that leaders affix wellbeing throughout the organization as a priority that members then champion. They contend that varied factors are related to wellbeing and deserving of commitment of institutional support through resources (Nielsen et al., 2017). In a complimentary contrast, research by Thakre & Kawde (2021) offer that organizational stress detracts from individual wellbeing and contributes further to

psychological burnout. They also state that human resource professionals can give greater concentration to the role that stress plays in organizations.

Beyond institutions, individual leaders play a strong role in influencing wellbeing themselves. Ahmed et al., (2015) contends that multiple leadership styles with theoretical bases have influences on the employee wellbeing in corporate and higher education systems and deserve greater cross-the board review and comparison by researchers. They further offer that “despite the commonalities and differences among leadership theories, there is evidence that leadership style strongly but separately influences employee well-being” (Nyberg et al., 2011; Ahmed et al., 2015, p. 444). This combined evidence points to the need for further research regarding how global leadership storytelling might influence perceptions of self-efficacy and sense of wellbeing in the organization. A model simplifying this approach can be helpful in that same effort and is shown in Figure 1.

*Figure 1*  
Working Model for Evaluating Effects of Global Leadership Storytelling



Source: Author’s Illustration

## Applying the model across cultures and to the organization

This model and approach for analysing global leadership storytelling provides opportunities for additional research across cultures, beginning with this researcher’s upcoming efforts in Greece, Ireland, and the United States. The model also allows for organizations to similarly ask questions that explore their own use of the same.

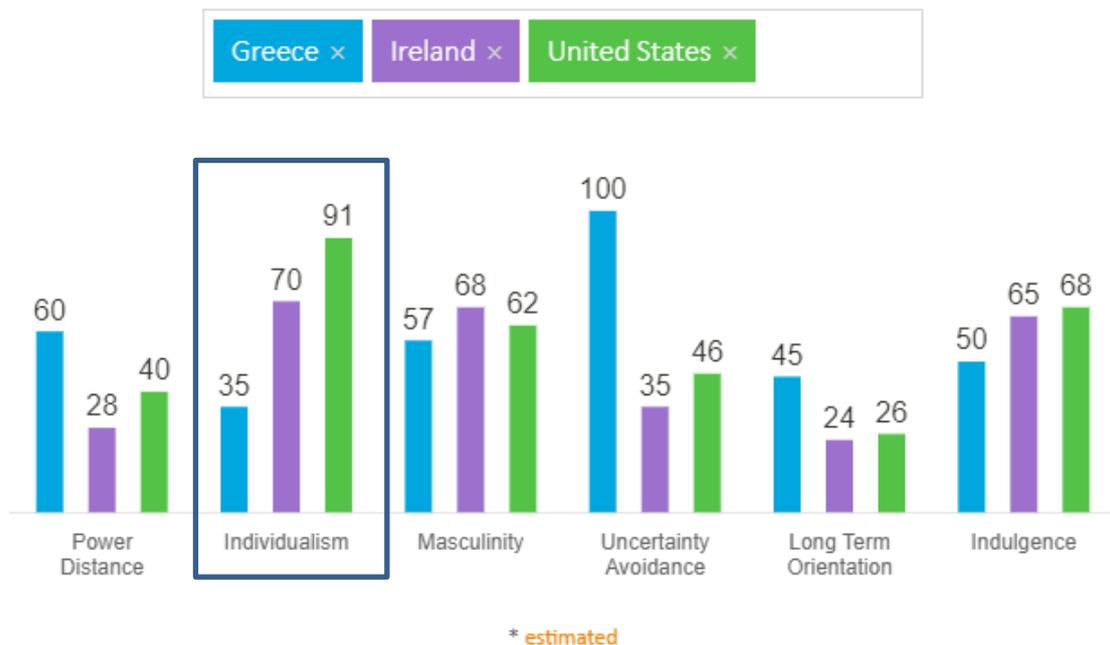
### *Applying the model in Greece, Ireland, and the United States*

Similar to Wong-Mingji et al. (2012) and the study of the effects of storytelling myths on leadership types across cultures, an examination of global leadership storytelling should appropriately take place in different cultural settings. This researcher is motivated by observations from study abroad experiences in Greece and Ireland along with prior experiences in the United States to begin more formal global leadership

storytelling research in those locations. During a virtual study abroad in Ireland, location visits consisted of speakers reaching audiences by using global leadership storytelling as defined in this essay through narratives, narration, story, or storytelling. While on a traditional visit to Greece later in the year, the observations were the same as various cadres of visitors and hosts gathered together under generous amounts of global leadership storytelling. Even in the researcher’s home culture in the United States, similar storytelling is used copiously around the classroom settings, faculty lounge, and professional development opportunities of his employment.

Beyond familiarity with these three regions as a source of comparison for future global leadership research, it is important to point out differences among the nations when comparing the cultural dimension of individualism (Hofstede, 2022). Hofstede is recognized as a leader when comparing cultural dimensions and compares a cultures propensity to be more individualistic or collectivist. By Hofstede’s measure, rank for each nation when presenting strength of individualism were United States (91), Ireland (70), and Greece (35) (Hofstede, 2022). These cultural dimensions, as shown in Table 2, are consistently different across all three countries compared to the other cultural dimensions.

*Table 1*  
Comparison of Cultural Dimensions between Greece, Ireland, and the United States



Source: Hofstede Insights, 2022

These differences, which serve as a representation of individual perceptions of the group or organization, support the effort of studying these different cultures for strong comparisons on global leadership storytelling.

### *Other Applications for the Organization*

Organizations and their leaders can also seek to understand global leadership storytelling within their institution by following some introspective questions the author

of this essay crafted to guide implementation of the model into further research. Use of these questions embraces the find-and-see approach of a qualitative study that permits the researcher to be a seeker and interpreter of vast sources of knowledge supplied in interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative data collected from interviews or artifacts allows for the study of phenomena as they occur in their natural state from the perspectives of those being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 2002) Some of the strategies that researchers, organizations, and leaders can begin the process of addressing in their own form of qualitative inquiry are:

- Determining the number of times that global leaders in the organization use storytelling to reach audience members, internally and externally.
- Exploring the way that global leaders perceive storytelling in the organization and whether they think they are effective at using stories.
- Finding commonalities and comparisons that emerge from the use of storytelling across culture and gender within the organization.
- Ascertaining whether value is given to storytelling as a skill or competency that is necessary for global leaders.
- Learning whether perceptions of self-efficacy or sense of wellbeing are boosted by such stories.

Leading a candid team discussion about something that may seem as esoteric as storytelling in the serious confines of an organization may not seem appealing to many organizations. Storytelling has only recently begun to be embraced through mass media and academic circles as expressed by *the 10 Stories Great Leaders Tell* and the *Seven Basic Plots* of every story along with some of the literature discussed in this essay (Smith, 2019; Booker, 2004). Yet, organizations committed to serious leadership often find success when they have the vision to lead through the trying of new things and candour to discuss their circumstances among organizational members. Many organizational members may choose to ignore the storytelling taking place in their organization and watch as many members go about their day supplementing their professional experience while consuming books, music, podcasts, streaming shows, and other narrative-laden devices that receive hours of their time, attention, and money.

## Conclusion

This essay makes a case for beginning greater examination of global leadership storytelling. It also contends that organizations can begin to look at the storytelling that is occurring in their global organizations and provides a model and some questions to guide further research and those efforts. The author intends to do that greater research beginning in Ireland, Greece, and the United States as a follow-up to some of the storytelling observations made during study abroad experiences. Narrative Paradigm Theory, first offered by Fisher (1985), contends that every human is a storyteller and the narratives, narration, and stories that come from such phenomena connect and make shared meaning between audience and speaker (Hansen, 2012).

While global leadership storytelling may be empowering in its nature to make for easy and quick relation within the organization, it also has its limitations. Critics have noted that the wide and loose use of Narrative Paradigm Theory, the foundation of this storytelling, can be problematic (McGee & Nelson, 1985; Lucaites & Condit (1985). It

is important to note that the use of global leadership storytelling does not offer a solution for every organizational dilemma or issue. Rather, it is important to take these limitations as an acknowledgement that such storytelling confines itself to the meaning that is shared when members and speakers interact. This embrace of global leadership storytelling as it is then contending that no single human possesses truths and returns the pursuit of truth back to a pursuit of shared meaning, connection, and understanding. A use of global leadership storytelling, then, offers the possibility to analyze any organization, leader, and situation for the rich narration, narrative, story, or storytelling influence that emerges from these interactions. The future implication and stories that will be told from further research diverging into a multitude of different global experiences is limitless.

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# The Intersection of Resilience and Global Leadership in a VUCA World

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## Abstract

**Background:** During times of significant upheaval, global leaders rely on the ability to persevere through adversity. Perseverance, or resilience factor, is most significant within the context of leadership during times volatility, complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity (VUCA) in the world. VUCA occurrences such as the COVID-19 pandemic create an uncharted territory for exploration, opening pathways for timely and significant research. The COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to a global disruption during which a novel intersection of global leadership and resilience occurred. This intersection offers researchers an opportunity to explore the construct of resilience within the context of the VUCA world as it impacts global leaders. **Objectives:** Understanding the relationship between leaders and resilience during disruptive times will increase the body of understanding of the construct of global leadership resilience, providing insight into the depth of competencies and potential new applications. **Approach:** Disruption Theory and Change Theory offer a foundation for exploring global leadership resilience. **Results:** The author offers a new model for examining the interconnectedness between the constructs of global leadership, resilience, and the VUCA world, a framework illustration that links the constructs. **Conclusions:** The literature about global leadership resilience in the VUCA world has left a wide berth for additional research into these constructs and room for potential new applications by global leaders seeking to employ an adaptive global mindset.

**Keywords:** global leadership, resilience, VUCA world, COVID-19 pandemic, Disruption Theory, Change Theory, Lewin's CATS Model

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## Global Resilience in a VUCA World

The measure of collective global leadership resilience has been tested over the past few years as leaders address issues facing their organizations resulting from global conflicts, climate change, globalization, the rise of the information age, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Bagwell, 2020). Global leaders may find themselves in the position of practicing leadership that is reactionary or progressive, or both, as they face factors of social and political unrest, financial crises, supply chain issues, lack of workforce, human capital issues, and increased competition. Today, more than ever, leaders must prepare to balance change, innovation, and disruption in the face of adversity to succeed (Bell & Hofmeyr, 2021). Resilience as a construct shows the potential to help leaders find buoyancy as they face global complexities impacting the leadership journey. Global leaders who face the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity of today's world, known by the acronym VUCA, are finding the ability to persevere after significant disruption a vital tool in their global leadership competency toolbox (Elkington, 2017). Resilient global leaders are those who not only recover from but thrive as leaders during uncertain and disruptive times.

### *Resilience and Global Leadership, Intertwined*

The research on resilience is vast; however, research surrounding leadership resilience during VUCA times is nascent, presenting gaps in the knowledge of resilience as an application for global leaders (Lombardi et al., 2021). This essay looks at these gaps using the foundation of the Disruption Theory and Change Theory. Disruption Theory posits that the new upends or undoes the former or current, thereby displacing it (Farr, 2021). Although disruption is frequently regarded for its negative factors, disruption as a factor of change has the potential to create space for growth, innovation, or progress.

Change Theory focuses on the process by which change occurs, often with an intent to minimize disruption (Reinholz et al., 2021). Kurt Lewin's (Cummings et al., 2015) foundational work in change management led to the development of a straightforward model, "changing as three steps" or CATS (2015, p. 834). The CATS model proposes a process that unfreezes and refreezes with change occurring between these two stages (Cummings et al., 2015). Both theories suggest that change is resolute or fixed following the disruption or change event. Disruption Theory and Change Theory stop short of helping researchers fully understand the multilateral and complex nature of how disruption and change are part of fostering global leadership resilience beyond the disruptive or change event.

In the case of the VUCA world, disruption is more than a single event that transcends its situational context. It is also apparent that change may not be as succinct in a disruptive environment as Lewin's CATS model proposes.

## Review of Resilience and VUCA Literature

### *Resilience*

As the world faced significant challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the term resilience frequently appeared in media reports and scholarly literature surrounding topics that included the pandemic and other global issues such as social unrest, political turmoil, financial crisis, climate crisis, and war. However, a sizable portion of the pre-pandemic literature focuses on understanding the construct's

definition, measurement, and role in developing competencies across various disciplines and, to a lesser degree, leadership resilience as an application. McLeod and Dulsky (2021) were among the researchers to look at how the COVID-19 pandemic has helped to create an entire body of research around the construct of resilience in the context of crisis leadership as they considered its impact on school leadership during the early months of the pandemic. Behnke and Eckhard (2022) explored the constructs of crisis and resilience and proposed that resilience can enhance crisis management techniques by looking at the relationship between the two systematically, including learning and trust building. The construct of global leadership resilience during VUCA times is understanding how leaders succeed during pressure and how they come back from complex, multilateral, and cross-cultural disruption on a global scale. Lombardi et al. (2021) offer that improvisation plays a role in developing resilient leaders in the face of adversity as they looked at how to apply what leaders in the hospitality industry learned about resilience as they weathered the adversity of the pandemic.

The literature varies broadly in its definition of resilience. It is a construct, characteristic, attribute, method, effect, collection of factors within other constructs, and theory. One study presents resilience as a collection of positive leadership traits, or "psychological capital components," which include "hope, optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy" that, when combined, create a genuinely resilient leader (Breen, 2017, p. 42). Fisher and Law (2020) agree that the complexity of the construct leads it to be vaguely defined as both a phenomenon and an actionable outcome. Reid and Botterill (2013) suggest that the definition of resilience during times of disruption is more than an elasticity as it incorporates the tenets of growth, adaptation, and change. Southwick et al. (2017) agree that leadership is vital to creating solid organizational resilience following times of crisis. Adaptive Resilience Theory offers leadership as one of four components of the construct (Nilakant et al., 2014). This research explores the role of leadership competencies, noting that empathy and communication are crucial to resilience recovery and renewal. Madrigano et al. (2017) used an analysis of disaster preparedness to frame how communities adapt to challenges following disasters, pointing out that gaps remain in the research about how resilience is used in practice.

Hendriks et al. (2022) looked at resilience as a capacity measure for healthcare teams during the COVID-19 pandemic to study the phenomenon of team resilience and its impacts on individuals' well-being and their ability to bounce back. Hartwig et al. (2020) concurred that the research on team resilience is lacking compared to that on individual resilience factors and that more information is needed to understand this type of resilience so that it may be operationalized in the future.

Although the resilience literature is vast, the complexity of formulating, refining, and applying the construct of resilience as an application remains a common theme. The areas of leadership resilience, organizational resilience, and team resilience leave room for further study as leaders in the workplace continue to face the impacts of global adversity.

### *The VUCA World – Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity*

The term VUCA has grown to encompass events and occurrences that create global disruption, including wars and conflicts, refugee migrations, financial crises, natural disasters, climate change, and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic (Bagwell,

2020). It is used in conjunction with terms such as threats, challenges, risks, and disruption. It is meant to provide a framework for our world and constructs, including resilience and global leadership, to be interpreted, defined, and explored. It has also come to describe a world in flux or transition as we continue to move towards an exponential speed of change concerning such issues as technology transformation and innovation (Bywater & Lewis, 2017).

Mendenhall et al. (2020) explored a vast array of leadership and global leadership competencies, categorizing them as frameworks for understanding and applying the responsible leader in a VUCA world. In a VUCA world, change is constant, according to Bywater and Lewis (2019), whose research calls for leadership competencies to be resilient. They identify four leadership agility competencies: context-setting agility, stakeholder agility, creative agility, and self-leadership agility (Bywater & Lewis, 2019, p. 3). According to Ruksana and Ahmed (2019, p. 16), VUCA is "composed of the characteristics of modern strategic dilemmas which requires a different orientation and a set of skills." The acronym has found its way into the vernacular of our time as individuals now use it to describe disruption and uncertainty in the face of global change, regarding both challenges and opportunities (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). The literature shows the need for new skills and global orientation. The proposed GLR model applied as a framework allows researchers to look at concepts for comparison and application.

Brodie (2019) contends that today's leaders may not simply rely on the past to inform the present but must position themselves to be prepared for uncertainty as part of a resilient-forward approach to leading in a complex world. Bennett and Lemoine (2014) ascertain that VUCA is part of our accepted understanding of today's world and that it will best equip leaders to lead and manage if they can grasp new leadership strategies in such indeterminate circumstances. Krishnan et al. (2022) argue that organizations have positive and negative impacts because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has impacted crisis management and organizational resilience.

Ruksana and Ahmed (2019) assert that VUCA is an accepted term for today's world and that modern global leaders must adapt and be flexible to new strategies and ways of thinking to succeed. Breen (2017) considers leadership resilience's role in a VUCA world, as leaders are challenged to embrace change and complexity while not succumbing to the pressures of stress in their roles. Ramakrishnan (2021) outlines the role of leaders in a VUCA world as flexible problem solvers who can adapt to change and think beyond the traditional borders of their knowledge.

Much of the literature is concerned with applying the VUCA world in a situational correlation rather than examining VUCA itself as a construct, concept, or theory. However, Cousins (2018) challenges us to see VUCA as a unique environment in which learning must occur for leaders to apply their new knowledge. This environment is one in which innovations such as design thinking, knowledge capacity, and innovation-first approaches will provide pathways for success as the changing and complex environment unfolds, offering an initiative-taking, positive approach rather than a reactive one (Cousins, 2018).

## Global Leadership Resilience, A New Framework

The ability to overcome adversity, also known as resilience, enables leaders to position themselves for success in an ever-changing world where they can positively affect change and persevere through challenging times (Breen, 2017). Understanding the relationship between leaders and resilience during disruptive times will increase the body of understanding of resilience knowledge as it intersects with global leadership, providing insight into the depth of competencies, providing potential new applications. VUCA occurrences such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, the war in Ukraine, and the rise of the information age, create an uncharted territory for research exploration, opening new pathways for studying global leadership resilience.

### *The Global Leadership Resilience Model (GLR)*

The body of resilience knowledge has yet to be fully understood or defined, leaving gaps in the research and application possibilities (Singhal, 2021). Various resilience surveys have been developed to measure levels of resilience for a wide range of situations and fields, which enable researchers to study, understand, and fill in the knowledge gaps surrounding leadership resilience (Ojo et al., 2021). These models are survey tools which vary in purpose, with some being better suited for the areas of human development, human relations, psychology, or the medical field, while others can help us better understand leadership, yet none consider global leadership resilience in the face of the VUCA world (Elkington & Breen, 2015).

Could global leadership, resilience, and the VUCA world be connected and intertwined as part of one fluid, transformative, and transmutable concept? Change Theory and Disruption Theory stop short of addressing how these concepts inform the change process as applied to the field of global leadership, prompting the consideration of a new way of looking at the concepts in an interlocking pattern. The author offers a new framework for understanding the complex relationship between these constructs, the Global Leadership Resilience Model (GLR). This new model is offered as an illustrative framework for examining the interconnectedness between the constructs of global leadership, resilience, and the VUCA world as we consider the following question: What is the relationship between leadership and resilience following significant times of global disruption?

The proposed GLR Model in Figure 1 provides the opportunity to look at the joined, yet fluid nature of global leadership resilience in the VUCA world as a reconfigured disruptive change framework that incorporates the simplicity of Disruption Theory while moving beyond the finite boundaries called for in Change Theory.

Figure 1  
Global Leadership Resilience (GLR) Model



Source: Author's Illustration, Copyright 2022

## Global Leadership Resilience for VUCA Times

Gray (2021) offers that the world needs to adapt to global cultural change to succeed in today's VUCA world, creating multilateral, cross-cultural approaches to global issues and crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In examining the construct of resilience in the context of a VUCA environment, the body of the research is poised to take a step forward as researchers seek to understand the phenomenon of responsible global leadership (Mendenhall et al., 2020). The literature about global leadership resilience in the VUCA world has left a wide berth for additional study into these constructs and consideration for potential new applications by global leaders seeking to employ an adaptive global mindset. Previous studies in leadership resilience and crisis management during times of adversity offer space for further investigation through the lens of the GLR model (Teo et al., 2017).

As the information age continues to unfold and predictions for future climate events are made, global leaders must position themselves to prepare for the complexities and ambiguity of today's changing world. The GLR offers leaders an interconnected, multilateral way of looking at resilience through a global lens. It also provides a structure that challenges the static, fixed understanding of disruptive change to one that is actionable, fluid, and connected to the circumstances of complex times in which global leaders find themselves. Finally, it invites a new dialogue that may lead to a better understanding of resilience in a new context. In utilizing an illustrative framework such as the GLR, leaders are provided with a tool for considering the role of resilience in situations created by VUCA occurrences. This framework provides both a space and place for future conversations and research about the intersection of the constructs of global leadership, resilience, and the VUCA world.

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## Localizing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: A Spotlight on Djibouti

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### Abstract

**Background:** The importance of Global Leadership grows stronger as societies discover the interconnectedness of and dependencies on one another and the planet. The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent global values to guide international policymaking and are the standard by which to measure international development. The literature surrounding the UN Goals include praise, critique, and exploration of drivers and challenges of implementation. A study by Geels (2002), found that developmental progress is more likely to occur in localized settings. **Objectives:** Following the call to research introduced by Jönsson and Bexell (2021) who studied drivers and obstacles of localizing the United Nation's 2030 Agenda in Tanzania, this study explores challenges of localizing the sustainable development goals in Djibouti which are not unlike small states, small island states, and post-colonial states. **Approach:** The study draws on a range of secondary sources; it is the first known study to attempt to analyze SDG implementation in Djibouti. **Results:** The political geography of Djibouti offers an intriguing case for SDG implementation. **Conclusions:** Djibouti's case contributes to the field of Global leadership by expanding the current body of country-specific literature and the ever-expanding body of research pertaining to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and their implementation.

**Keywords:** Djibouti; Sustainable Development Goals; Geopolitics; localization; Cultural Geography, Global Leadership

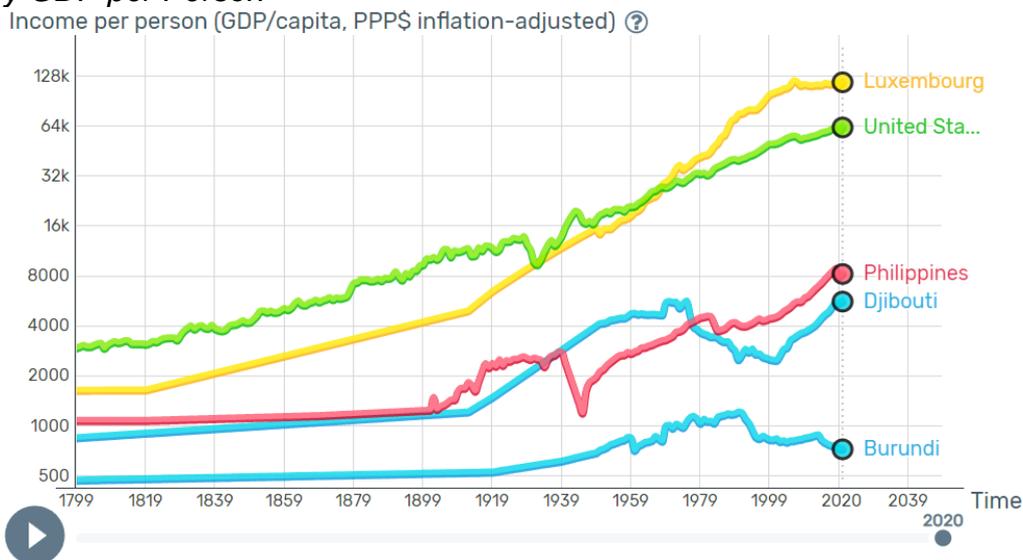
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## Introduction

Pandemics, war, and drought have been topics of discussion and worry in 2022. Despite the collective emergence into a world post-Covid-19, the weary global society continues to confront crisis after crisis. Given the current circumstances, it is difficult to keep an optimistic perspective on global success and progress. Nevertheless, global society *has* made steady progress toward a unified and healthy planet (see Figure 1). As shown in Figure 1 from Gapminder (2022), income and health depict the social progress of five countries. In 2022, Luxembourg is the healthiest and wealthiest country in the world and Burundi is the most unhealthy and impoverished. Although individual countries experience fluctuations, gradual global progress is illustrated even in the case of Burundi.

**Figure 1**  
Country GDP per Person



Source: Gapminder, 2020 (<https://www.gapminder.org/tools/>)

The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent global values to guide international policymaking (United Nations, 2016) and have become the standard on which to base the measurements of international development (Willis & Kumar, 2020). The literature surrounding the UN Goals includes praise, critique, and exploration of drivers and challenges of implementation. A study by Geels (2002), found that developmental progress is more likely to occur in localized settings. Following the call to research introduced by Jönsson and Bexell (2021) who studied drivers and obstacles of localizing the United Nation's 2030 Agenda in Tanzania, this study explored the challenges of localizing the sustainable development goals in Djibouti.

Djibouti's advantages are uniquely all its own, however, its challenges are not unlike small states, small island states, and post-colonial states which may benefit from Djibouti's case. The study draws on a range of secondary sources; it is the first known study to attempt to analyze SDG implementation in Djibouti. It is structured in two major sections. Section one provides an overview of literature on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, theories of localization from various fields, and an introduction to Djibouti. Section two then examines Djibouti specifically,

highlighting factors that set Djibouti apart and the challenges facing the country. The political geography of Djibouti offers an intriguing case for SDG realization, expanding the current body of country-specific literature and the ever-expanding body of research pertaining to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

## Background

The COVID-19 pandemic reminds us that we share progress and crises as a planet. Research continues to support the interconnectedness and dependence humans have on each other as well as on the planet we inhabit. Human success relies on global progress and sustainability. The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted to drive needed change toward sustainability and have become the standard by which to base and measure international development (Willis & Kumar, 2020). This study aims to explore the challenges of realizing the SDGs in Djibouti.

## United Nations 2030 Agenda

In 2015 the United Nations General Assembly updated the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2022b). This change reflected a shift from development as a form of alleviating world poverty to a broader and more holistic agenda connecting human well-being and progress to preservation, protection, and health of the planet. The United Nations document, "Transforming the World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" outlined the seventeen goals containing 169 targets to be achieved by 2030. The goals reflect the complex interdependency of social, economic, and environmental parameters to achieve sustainability, in turn providing a framework to measure each country's efforts toward social progress (Mabee et al., 2020; Willis & Kumar, 2020). Within the 169 targets, there are 232 measurable indicators that provide guidelines for tracking progress and for the collection of data related to SDG implementation (see United Nations, [2022a] for the complete list of indicators). However, global political, economic, and geographical inequalities engender challenges to implementing universal agendas such as the SDGs. The UN agenda has therefore been the topic of research and scrutiny within multiple disciplines and fields. By design, the agenda lacks specific guidelines for implementation. It merely indicates that individual governments are responsible for realizing the SDGs (Jönsson & Bexell, 2020). Due to these highly generalized guidelines, the 2030 agenda has received criticism for being elite (Jönsson & Bexell, 2021), for not addressing leadership roles (Guha & Chakrabarti, 2019), and for failing to take into consideration the differing needs due to global inequalities (Willis & Kumar, 2020).

Jönsson and Bexell (2021), answered the call to research listed in Oldekop et al. (2016) by investigating drivers and obstacles impacting local governances' ability to implement the SDG targets in Tanzania. Their findings offered a framework for the roles, responsibilities, and effective implementation of the UN SDGs. The 2030 Agenda was adopted at a macro-level for global change. However, to achieve global

goals, action must be implemented through localized processes. Operationalized localization of the SDGs is a reoccurring topic within the literature surrounding the SDGs. Therefore, the Djiboutian study explores factors impacting SDG localization for Djiboutians and perhaps those of similar small islands, or post-colonial states.

### Geopolitics and infrastructure

The SDG agenda is highly political. The field of political geography (also referred to as geopolitics) offers another conceptual framework for understanding the role of politics in the distribution of services, people, and wealth (the three parameters of the SDGs) which gained attention in the 1970s (Murphy, 2015). Agnew's seminal *Place and Politics* (2015) emphasized the impact local culture and geography have on social and political behavior. Oldekop et al. (2016) stressed the importance of connecting the relationships among multiple levels of governance for the "identification of inclusive and responsive development strategies" (p. 64). The interplay between these factors has been researched within the field of social geography which found that the acceptance of policy and development is dependent on local politics, culture, and geography.

Guha and Chakrabarti (2019), who studied the application of global policy at localized levels of government, drew attention to the need for localized responsibilities to achieve agenda targets because policies that reflect local groups are more likely to address local needs and reduce conflict. Hughes et al. warned in (2018) that globally adopted policies applied at a local level could lack responsiveness to local needs which Whitehead (2020) and Carlson and Mabee (2020) corroborated, highlighting geographical differences as a key component. The priorities and needs of Djibouti, for example, differ from the priorities and needs of Finland. Their respective ability and their manner of operationalization to realize the SDGs will therefore be different. Change is inherently required to achieve sustainability, but it is human nature to resist change especially if forced or imposed. Thus, it is important to meet the needs of local communities to implement change.

In a study to explore the link between sustainable development and leadership, Tripathi et al. (2019) connected trust and psychological empowerment to successful buy-in. In the same vein, if a problem isn't witnessed first-hand, it can be easily ignored or denied—a challenge to global goals. SDG targets are more likely to have buy-in at a local level where communities see the need firsthand to implement change.

Innovation is also more likely to occur in localized settings (Geels, 2002). Innovations then scale up and have the potential to become normalized. Innovation is an important factor related to technology and infrastructure on which countries' progress relies. Localizing the SDGs therefore provides the most potential for the target to scale up and become nationally realized (Calson & Mabee, 2020; Tripathi et al., 2019). Localized policies and applications meet the needs of citizens and provide a sustainable framework for future development goals—a tool to achieve sustainability (Mabee et al., 2020).

DeGhetto et al. (2016), who examined challenges and opportunities for managers in the African Union 2063 Agenda, stressed the importance of understanding country-specific variables for the ability to effectively partner with others toward a common goal. However, a cautionary example of localization is important to note; although collaborations with civil society groups and foreign aid investors often provide necessary support to meet SDG targets, there is also the potential that enduring commitments hinder progress. In the case of Tanzania, Jönsson and Bexell (2021) found that socioeconomic factors of Tanzania influenced the international collaborations that drove localization, resulting in programs and funding that represented the collaborators more than the local citizens. The decision to partner with governments or organizations requires a clear vision, transparent agreements, and strong leadership. The required diplomacy in such partnerships can be beyond the skillset and experience of leaders in emerging countries.

### Djibouti Country Facts

Literature from multiple fields repeatedly echoes the need to localize global policies. This study explores the local challenges and unique advantages of The Republic of Djibouti which gained its independence from France in 1977. Located on the Horn of Africa, Djibouti is a small country with a population short of one million people. It is bordered by Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Djibouti's coastline runs along the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden across from Yemen (CIA, 2022). Its geographical space is slightly smaller than the state of New Jersey in the United States. Djibouti is an Islamic nation; 94% of the population is Sunni Muslim. A study by Rahman (2016) suggested that Islamic beliefs are in alignment with the UN SDGs as development is a key foundation of Islam and therefore "have promising chances of success in a Muslim community" (p.8). The country is relatively stable economically, politically, and socially compared to other countries in its proximity which presents unique opportunities as well as challenges for localizing the SDGs. Djibouti is a member state of the United Nations and African Union among other affiliations which carry certain responsibilities. In 2015 the country outlined its goals and objectives in "Djibouti Vision 2035" (UNESCO, 2022) which aligned with the UN SDGs, though heavily emphasized economic plans.

Djibouti may appear an unlikely country to garner world attention, but closer examination spotlights the potential emanating from the Horn of Africa. Analyzing Djibouti's unique opportunities can shape political priorities for realizing the SDGs. The following case study devotes attention to Djibouti's influential opportunities and local challenges related to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Examining the country's potential and current challenges proposes a framework for future policies and localized plans for leaders to implement at the local level in Djibouti.

## Spotlight on Djibouti

The aim of this study was to examine the country of Djibouti to assess specific localized challenges of realizing the UN SDGs. The following study attempts to illustrate the juxtaposition of potential versus realized sustainable progress. Two distinct sections outline Djibouti's unique advantages and the local challenges. Djibouti's advantages include their geographical location, geopolitical influence in conjunction with their location, and geological activity. While on the one hand the advantages hint toward potential success, the SDG reports indicate much needed work to realize the goals.

### Geographical Location

Historically the continent of Africa has been exploited or ignored by countries with their own agendas. Post-colonial African studies are an important factor in understanding the challenges of localizing SDGs targets in specific African countries, but a discussion of this falls outside the scope of this paper (for more information see [Dahre,2007]). What should be noted is that advances in social, economic, and environmental understanding tip the scale of power toward African countries as key components of global success. To illustrate, developed countries were established with a reliance on fossil fuel energy. For such countries, the transition to achieve sustainable development requires multistage processes of updating infrastructure, policies, and lifestyles (Carlson & Mabee, 2020). Emerging countries such as those on the African continent, not only supply countries like China with resources to sustain their established lifestyle, but also have the benefit of modern technology to allow them to implement cleaner energy infrastructure—essentially skipping traditional processes associated with development. One example is in Rwanda where drone systems and drones are used for delivery services in areas where the geographical topography makes it difficult to construct roads (Ninagawa, 2019).

Despite the fact that Djibouti is located in the Eastern part of the African continent, its location on a global trade route acts as a shortcut and gateway to West Africa which is rich in resources upon which developed countries rely. For this reason, China has taken considerable interest in Djibouti, investing monetarily for multiple infrastructure projects, to secure access to natural resources sourced from the African continent. These projects included the Ethiopia-Djibouti railway, the Doraleh port and associated Free Trade Zone, the Ghoubet salt export facility, and the Djibouti Liquid Bulk Port (Chaziza, 2018; see also Dunford & Yeung, 2020; Carbone, 2020). Djibouti became an official partner of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative in 2018 (Styan, 2020b). Djibouti's global positioning also allows a close but safe location from which activities in the Middle East can be monitored.

### Global Strategic Position

Djibouti's combination of access to the sea, geographical location relative to other continents, and geographical terrain makes Djibouti a prime geopolitical location. Situated between Africa, Europe, and the Middle East *and* with ease of access to Asia, Djibouti holds a relatively central global presence. Coupled with the fact that

it's a coastal country, Djibouti holds a globally strategic location. Hughes et al. (2018) found that localized response to global policies like the SDGs was influenced by neighboring governments; successes were adopted by those in proximity to witness the process. Given Djibouti's central global positioning, its ability to successfully implement SDG targets has the potential to influence surrounding countries to follow suit.

The service industry accounts for 80% of Djibouti's GDP; its port and related infrastructure (Oil and water pipelines and railway) are an important source of revenue for the country. Located beside the Bab el-Mandeb strait, Djibouti has unparalleled access to the Suez Canal trade route—one of the world's busiest shipping routes. Global telecommunications fiber-optic cable lanes run concurrently along the shipping lanes; three international cables meet south of the Bab el-Mandeb strait adding an additional dimension of importance to the country's position (Styan, 2020b). The Port of Djibouti is key to the country's geopolitical and strategic position. Although Djibouti has few traditional natural resources, Djibouti's port gives the country some level of control over others' resources—increasing their social and economic power (Rice, 2007). Landlocked Ethiopia is equally reliant on Djibouti's port for access to the sea. The railroad connecting Ethiopia and Djibouti delivers 90% of Ethiopia's trade.

Djibouti's geographic location also makes it an attractive locale for crisis mitigation and one of the reasons foreign military installations are interested in Djibouti. Djibouti is host to more foreign military bases than any other country in the world (Boujrada, 2018). The countries with bases in Djibouti include France, Italy, Japan, China, and the United States. France has multiple bases and hosts contingents from Germany and Spain (CIA, 2022). International relations associated with the militaries extend beyond brick-and-mortar bases to include Egypt, India, Iran, Israel, South Korea, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, and the UK (refer to Melvin, 2019). Foreign military base rental fees alone contribute an estimated \$125 million annually to the country's revenue (Blanchard, 2022). The military bases also offer security and protect the busy trade routes from piracy. Active military presence creates a relatively safe and stable environment compared to neighboring countries. The pocket of relative safety also results in transient populations. More than 35,000 refugees and asylum seekers from Yemen, Somalia, and other neighboring states live in camps in Djibouti (Blanchard, 2022).

### Geological Advantages

Throughout this study the descriptive term *traditional* has been used relative to *natural resources*. The need to specify the term reflects advances in socioeconomic development. As science, technology, and societies strive for cleaner energy processes, the types of resources used to achieve those processes have expanded. Traditional resources from the African continent included gold, diamonds, cobalt, copper, etc. Djibouti lacks natural resources in the traditional thinking of, and importance given to, natural resources. The exploration of renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, or geothermal energies has not only increased the need

for, and value of, less commonly used resources but has also shifted the advantage toward countries like Djibouti whose geography produces geological activity. Its desert climate and coastal position also afford the opportunity to harness solar and wind energies.

Djibouti is part of the East African Rift System and one of the only countries on the African continent with the capability to harness geothermal energy from the seismic, tectonic, and volcanic activities (Awaleh et al., 2022). Lake Asal in Djibouti, associated with the rift, is the lowest point on the African continent and one of the saltiest places in the world (CIA, 2022). The rift is one of only two globally emergent ocean ridges, meaning one part of the ridge is below the ocean and another part aboveground (Awaleh et al., 2022). The uniqueness has resulted in a niche group of geological tourists and researchers visiting the country (Challender, 2019). The coral reefs associated with the fault line have also drawn researchers, specifically to study whale shark migration.

The geological and scientific significance of Djibouti has gained attention in recent years. Chandraskeharam et al. (2019) studied and confirmed the feasibility of using Djibouti's geothermal energy to desalinate water—potentially a cost-effective solution to provide the country with permanent access to fresh water, which they posited would provide employment, agricultural opportunities, and a chance to rise above the poverty line in addition to fresh drinking water. Undeniably, geothermal processes for freshwater would directly meet the targets of SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation), 7 (affordable and clean energy), and 13 (climate action) and potentially indirectly meet targets within the remaining fourteen goals. A study by Awaleh et al. (2022) corroborated that geothermal energy is a feasible option however, they found that wind energy was more cost-effective than geothermal energy after factoring in the cost of infrastructure and manpower necessary to implement geothermal power. Nevertheless, Djibouti's geothermal resources are drawing international and investor attention. Japan has expressed an interest in extracting lithium and potassium from geothermal fluids (Cariaga, 2022a) and Iceland granted funds to conduct geothermal studies and dig the first of three proposed geothermal wells (Cariaga, 2022b). Future trends and research could give Djibouti an even greater advantage regionally and globally.

### Local Challenges

Djibouti was listed as one of the twenty fastest-growing economies by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Pham, 2021). The IMF estimates Djibouti's GDP around \$3.8 billion with 3% growth (Blanchard, 2022). Indeed, the literature suggests that both port and military base revenue contribute considerably to the country's GDP yet, despite demonstrated economic and social growth, the statistics and multiple country indexes indicate that Djibouti struggles with poverty, unemployment, and a low education rate. Djibouti's 2022 Human Development ranked 166 out of 189 which *had* increased from 2019 when it ranked 172, but the current rank is still quite low (WFP, 2019). In the SDG Index Djibouti is ranked 138 out of 165 in likelihood of realizing the SDGs. It received a country score of 53.8—meaning the country is

roughly 54% toward meeting the 2030 development goals (Sachs et al., 2021). Figure 2 is Djibouti's 2021 SDG dashboard indicating the country's progress toward realizing the seventeen goals (Sachs et al., 2021). As indicated by the arrows, Djibouti is on track to realize SDG 13 (climate action), is decreasing in realizing SDG 15 (life on land), and moderately improving or stagnant toward meeting others. Two of the goals (reduced inequalities and responsible consumption and production) do not have enough available information, reflective of the commonly reported challenge of data collection on the SDGs (Sachs et al., 2021). The background color of each goal indicates level of assessed challenges in realizing the individual goal. The abundance of red in Djibouti's dashboard visually illustrates the major challenges Djibouti faces in realizing the seventeen SDGs. The challenges are similarly represented in Assa's (2021) Multidimensional Vulnerability Index which used eleven indicators to assess 126 countries' economic, environmental, geographical, and financial vulnerabilities. Djibouti ranked 11<sup>th</sup> most vulnerable. Given the unique advantages previously outlined, the socioeconomic numbers for Djibouti seem incongruent. By way of *some* explanation, challenges commonly listed in the literature pertaining to Djibouti include the country's nascency, size, scarce resources, and lack of arable land.

**Figure 2**  
Djibouti's 2021 Dashboard for SDG Progress



Source: Sachs et al., 2021

The UN (2022) global indicator framework provides the full title of SDG 15 as “Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss” (p.17). The desert climate of Djibouti creates multifaceted obstacles in realizing multiple SDGs. For example, in Djibouti's climate, air conditioning is necessary, and high electrical costs are a barrier to economic growth (Styan, 2016). Djibouti is only able to produce 4% of its own food due to its lack of arable land and chronic drought (Blanchard, 2022) and 20% of Djibouti's population lacks access to potable water (Medouar, 2021). Djibouti relies on international trade partners and imports for more than 90% of its food and water needs. Imported foods

are costly. The World Food Programme (2021) estimated that the poorest segments of Djiboutians spent 77% of their household budget on food. Furthermore, reliance on international trade results in instability when trade partners are affected by crisis such as drought, pandemics, or war and such factors impede the country's ability to realize the SDGs (Guha & Chakrabarti, 2019).

The governmental plan 'Djibouti Vision 2035' indicates that the country is committed to country growth and success which aligns with the UN SDGs. The goals and plans within the report demonstrate intent to achieve the SDGs, though socioeconomic factors routinely prevent the country from rapid growth. Recently the World Bank approved a \$30 million grant to "protect Djibouti's poor and vulnerable communities and to increase resilience to economic shocks" (World Bank, 2022, para. 1). Djibouti's portfolio with the World Bank includes nineteen projects totaling \$436 million to finance education, health, energy, development, technology, and governance strengthening. Styan (2016) questioned who the national funds have served, noting lack of evidence of wealth being shared widely with Djiboutians; similarly expressed by Sun and Zoubir in (2016). They contended that despite growth and stability, Djibouti's population had not benefited sufficiently, listing lack of jobs and meaningful opportunities for youth. Additionally, there was concern that funds repeatedly benefited the same, concentrated income groups. Djibouti's nascency and population size likely result in related challenges. More than 50% of the population is under the age of 24; an indication that much of the population are dependents with limited human resources for economic and political employment (CIA, 2022).

Regarding the information presented thus far, it is difficult not to consider the country's leadership. There is little in the literature pertaining to the leadership in Djibouti. Since its independence in 1977, the country has had only two presidents—Hassan Gouled Aptidon and his nephew Ismaïl Omar Guelleh. Some reports suggest President Guelleh is an authoritarian leader (Blanchard, 2022; Styan 2020b) while others commend his diplomacy and ability to build international relationships which leverage the countries advantages (Styan, 2016). Continued research related to Djiboutian leadership structure and styles could provide much needed insight. Regardless, it is clear Djibouti's socioeconomic factors have affected how it prioritizes its policies. Djibouti's decision to nationalize a formally leased container terminal, which breached contract, left the country with more than \$500 million in debt (Styan, 2020a). Such debts present issues for economic and fiscal policies and its capacity to realize the SDGs. Despite country debt and poor socioeconomic conditions, recent numbers show sustained effort and upward growth toward achieving the SDGs. The incongruent information generates further questions:

1. Perhaps it is too early. Is Djibouti making strides toward country success and sustainability that are not represented or captured in the current data?
2. How does Djibouti's leadership impact SDG realization?
3. Are the proper foundations for sustainability being laid?

4. Should the country shift its goals to develop education programs or is economic progress a key step to education? Would education provide a stronger foundation for future economic growth?
5. What steps have been accomplished in Djibouti's Vision 2035?
6. What will come of the geothermal studies in Djibouti? Will geothermal activity continue to give Djibouti an advantage?

## Conclusion

This spotlight on the country of Djibouti has explored the unique advantages of strategic global positioning and geothermal activity the country can leverage to achieve sustainability toward meeting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The country's poor socioeconomic challenges were also discussed as preventors of realizing the SDGs. Despite the challenges, the data suggest continued growth and progress which generates further questions. This is the first known study to attempt to analyze SDG implementation in the Republic of Djibouti. The researcher acknowledges many limitations including lack of resources specific to Djibouti, a lack of deep cultural insight, and a lack of knowledge of Djiboutian politics—any of which should be included in future research. Djibouti's potential advantages are unique and intriguing, however, its challenges are not unlike small states, small island states, and post-colonial states which may benefit from this study. Developmental progress is more likely to occur in localized settings—future research should include comparative studies of localization in different countries to expand the current body of country-specific literature and the ever-expanding body of research pertaining to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and their implementation.

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## Microaggressions in the Workplace: If They're so Small, What's the Big Problem?

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### Abstract

**Background:** Loss of workplace productivity is very expensive to organizations. Much of this lost productivity is due to employee turnover. Often, this employee turnover is the result of regular harassment and discrimination in the workplace which creates a negative and even toxic work environment. This can manifest as overt forms of racism, sexism, transphobia, etc. However, much of this type of prejudice is much more subtle and known as a “microaggression”. A microaggression is a brief indignity, such as a comment, that references something about the other person regarding their gender, race, religion, or disability. These slights can be either intentional or unintentional. Quite often it is the latter. Sometimes it can even be intended as a compliment.

**Objectives:** This critical essay analyzes how non-dominant groups experience microaggressions as well as ways to eliminate these from interpersonal communications in the workplace. **Approach:** In addition, an easy-to-remember mnemonic is offered as a way for everyone to become cognizant of better communication. **Conclusions:** By embracing a commitment to eliminate microaggressions in the workplace, organizations can become inclusive environments where all employees feel comfortable bringing their authentic selves to their team and their vocation. This feeling of true belonging can lead to higher productivity, lower turnover, and a better bottom line for the organization.

**Keywords:** microaggression; implicit bias; discrimination; diversity; equity; inclusion; training; psychological safety; DEI

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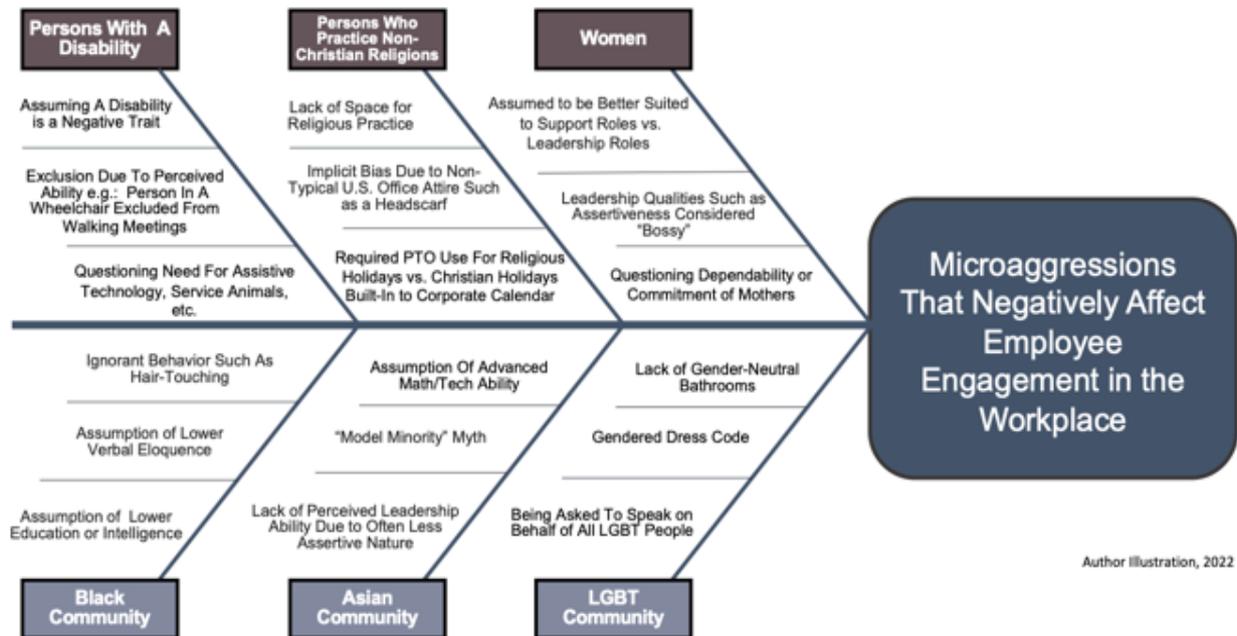
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## Introduction

As defined by Dr. Derald Wing-Sue, a leading psychologist, microaggressions are, “verbal and nonverbal interpersonal exchanges in which a perpetrator causes harm to a target, whether intended or unintended. These brief and commonplace indignities communicate hostile, derogatory, and/or negative slights to the target” (Sue, et al., 2007, as cited in Sue & Spanierman, 2020, p. 8). This has since been expanded to include people of all marginalized and non-dominant groups such as women, the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) community, the Asian/Asian American community, the LGBTQ+ community, the disabled community, etc. The word “unintentional” should be noted in this definition. Unlike overt racism, sexism, ableism, and the like, microaggressions are not only often not meant as an insult, they are sometimes actually meant as a compliment. Yet, regardless of the intention, microaggressions do not feel complimentary or inclusive to the person on the receiving end. Rather, they feel offensive and exclusionary. Jana and Baran (2020) developed the phrase, “Subtle Acts of Exclusion” to describe the insidious and often well-intentioned words and behaviors that can leave people with marginalized identities feeling excluded and are usually described by the term “microaggression”. This type of workplace behavior, even when unintentional, is harming organizations. To understand their insidious nature, it is helpful to understand where microaggressions originate in the first place. Microaggressions are manifestations of the implicit biases we all have against people from groups that are not like our own (Sue & Spanierman, 2020). These biases are based on stereotypes learned and an environment where subtle messages are received without one realizing it. Examples can include the genders and ethnicities of people either seen regularly *or not* represented in the media or children’s toys. Because these biases are deep within one’s subconscious, a person can believe that there is no bias against someone with different skin color, gender, religion, sexual orientation, etc. when, in fact, there is. This is the reason why comments or behaviors that seem innocuous to the offender, especially when he or she isn’t intending to be, can be quite offensive to the person on the receiving end.

For instance, in America people of Asian descent are often asked where they are from. When the answer is somewhere in the United States, the response is often, “I mean where are you *really* from?” Dr. Sue mentioned in a 2015 interview that this has happened to him on more than one occasion (Sue, PBS NewsHour, 2015, 1:12). He was born and raised in Oregon, and yet he said that this question causes him to feel like a foreigner in his own country. This is an example of what Jana and Baran (2020) meant by a “subtle act of exclusion”. Figure 1 is an Ishikawa diagram created to outline several of the common microaggressions experienced by people in different marginalized groups. It should be noted that this is a representative sample and not an exhaustive list of marginalized groups or the microaggressions they regularly experience.

Figure 1  
Various Marginalized Groups and the Microaggressions They Typically Experience

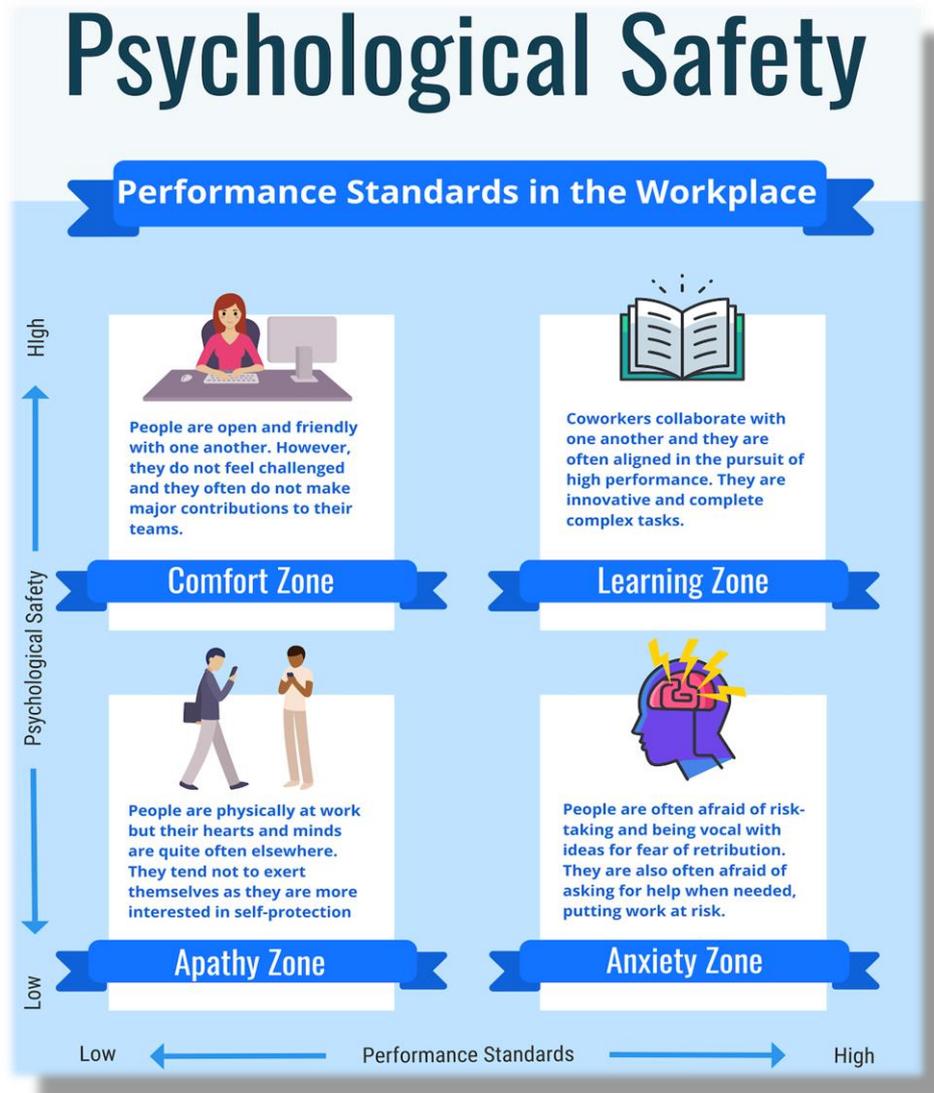


Source: Author's Illustration, Copyright, 2022

However, the person who asked the question, "where are you from" (referring to a country outside of the United States) may be completely unaware of the inappropriateness of this question based on their own subconscious biases regarding Asians and Asian Americans. The person committing this microaggression thinks he or she is just being curious about the other person's cultural heritage, without realizing that they probably wouldn't ask that question in the same manner to a person who looks more like they do.

But why would a racial slight such as this negatively affect organizations as a whole and not just individuals, especially since it was not intended to be hurtful? The answer to this question can be summed up by the lack of "Psychological Safety" that microaggressions such as this can create in the workplace. This phrase was created by Amy Edmonson. She defines it as, "a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves...they feel comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes without fear of embarrassment or retribution" (2019, p. xvi). Another word to describe the feeling of psychological safety is "belonging". Employees who feel that they "have a true sense of belonging" feel that they have a voice, they feel valued and seen, and they feel that they can show up authentically and be supported by others in their organization (Weber, 2022, as cited by Gonzales, 2022, para. 13). When psychological safety and a sense of belonging are lacking or missing altogether but high levels of productivity and creativity are expected, workers experience anxiety (see Figure 2).

Figure 2  
The Difference that Psychological Safety can make in the Workplace



Source: Author's Illustration. This figure is modified from an exercise from the Psychological Safety Team Workshop (2021) and Amy Edmondson's model of team culture.

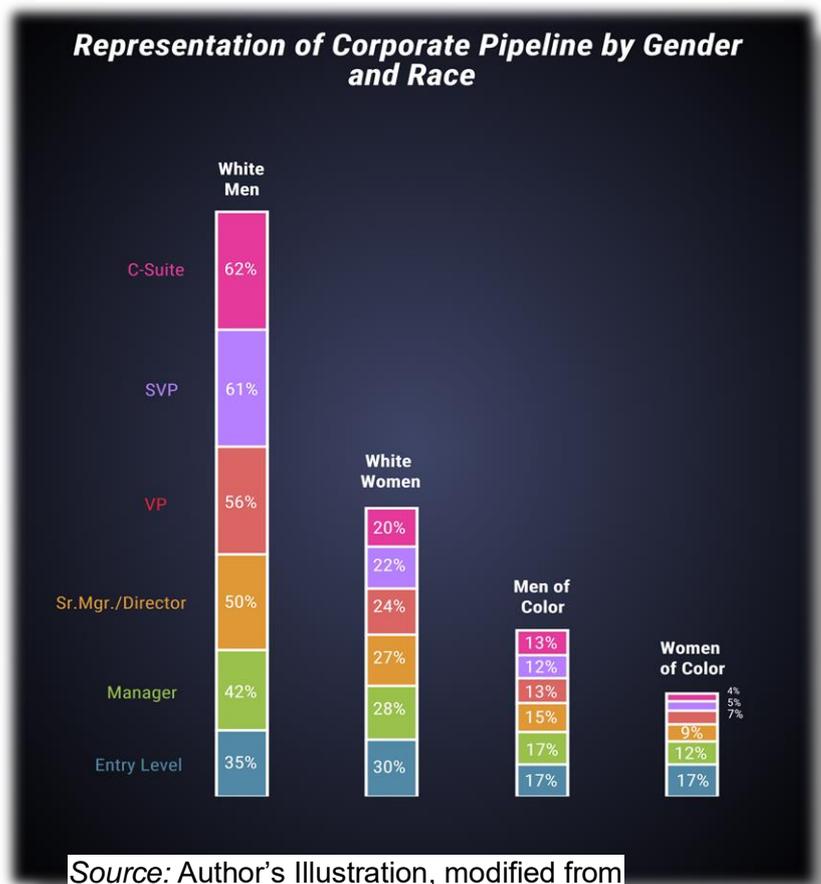
This anxiety can manifest as everything from “depression, fatigue, and anger to physical ailments such as chronic infections, thyroid problems, and high blood pressure” (Gehrman, 2019, para. 4). Constantly being on the receiving end of microaggressions leaves people feeling psychologically unsafe as well as physically and emotionally ill due to the toxic culture they create. This experience is commonly described in the literature as “Death by 1000 Cuts”. For example, in this case, the issue for Asian and Asian American people isn't being asked where one is “really from” once or twice. It is the accumulation of slights such as these that happen regularly and compounds over years and decades. Dr. Sue says that they are “constant, continual and cumulative” (Sue, PBS NewsHour, 2015, 3:51). A workforce filled with people of marginalized groups who come to work feeling psychologically unsafe with no sense

of belonging is like they are foreigners in their own organization. Generally, these employees are not able to produce their best work. And that is assuming they stay with the organization. This type of toxic culture tends to increase employee turnover while simultaneously decreasing productivity. According to Dr. Tonya Webb, this “lack of productivity is already costing corporations up to \$500B per year” (2021, 4:18). And Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP, president, and CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management went so far as to say, “Billions of wasted dollars. Millions of miserable people. It’s not a warzone—it’s the state of the American workplace” (2019, para. 2).

Furthermore, microaggressions and implicit biases hurt employees’ ability to promote into leadership roles if they are part of a non-dominant group. The dominant group sets behavioral expectations for its own group. However, they unconsciously set behavioral expectations for all other groups as well. And generally, there tends to be much more deference to and respect for those expectations in the dominant group than for those in non-dominant groups.

For instance, White men are the dominant group in most corporate offices. According to Kaskan and Ho, the gendered expectation of women is that they act in a manner that is “delicate, nurturing, and soft”. This microaggression is called a “restrictive gender role” (2014, p. 279). If a woman acts in a manner that would be considered assertive or confident for a man, she is often seen as “bossy” or “arrogant”. This is because she is not behaving in the manner expected by the males in the office based on their implicit biases regarding women and how women should be perceived. This creates a problem because the same behaviors that are lauded for a man and make him appear more promotable, are unconsciously seen as negative for a woman and thus, she is deemed not ready for promotion. However, if a woman does present as expected by men as “delicate, nurturing, and soft” as Kaskan and Ho describe, she is seen as better suited to a support role. She is not seen as leadership material and therefore, can be deemed not ready for promotion (Lisswood, 2022). People in other non-dominant groups experience the same type of double bind.

Figure 3  
Percentage of White Males in Senior Leadership Roles vs. Non-White Males



Source: Author’s Illustration, modified from the leanin.org/McKinsey report, 2021

This creates a system where there is a lack of advancement for almost everyone who doesn't present as white and male. The LeanIn McKinsey report notes that the only group that enjoys an increasing percentage of representation from entry-level positions up through executive leadership is White men. Figure 3 shows that they represent 35 percent of entry-level positions and increase to 62 percent of all CEO positions. White women start close to their White male counterparts at 30 percent representation at the entry-level, but their representation steadily declines to only represent 20 percent of the CEO-level positions. For men and women of color, the numbers are even worse. They decline to 13 percent and 4 percent respectively, at the Chief Executive level (LeanIn.org, 2021). Patel (2021) notes that as of 2019, Black people made up approximately 13 percent of the American population, but Black professionals held just 3.2 percent of all executive or senior leadership roles and only 0.8 percent of all Fortune 500 CEO positions (para. 6).

In contrast, Asians/Asian Americans are seen as highly intelligent with a strong work ethic. (Lui, 2021). While this positive stereotype may make it seem as if they do not experience negative repercussions in the workplace, this simply isn't so. This is known as an "overvalidation" and is a form of microaggression that is unique to Asians and Asian Americans. According to Kim Block, and Yu (2021), "Overvalidations are heavily influenced by stereotypes based on the model minority label (i.e., good at math, hard-working, diligent, etc.)" (p. 7). Unfortunately, this "model minority" stereotype often produces a workplace in which they are overrepresented in entry-level positions but are the least likely of all groups to be promoted into management (Gee & Peck, 2018, as cited in Kim, Block and Yu, 2021, p. 6). However, women and people of color aren't inherently any less capable than White men. In fact, according to Pew Research, between the ages of 25-34, 46 percent of women have college degrees compared to 36 percent of men (Parker, 2021). Therefore, the significant disparity in the demographic representation at the highest levels of leadership appears to be representative of the fact that those who are disproportionately in charge of organizations often have implicit biases against women and people of color. This results in microaggressions such as restrictive gender or racial roles, consciously or unconsciously dictated by White males, that hurt people who are not white and/or male throughout their professional careers.

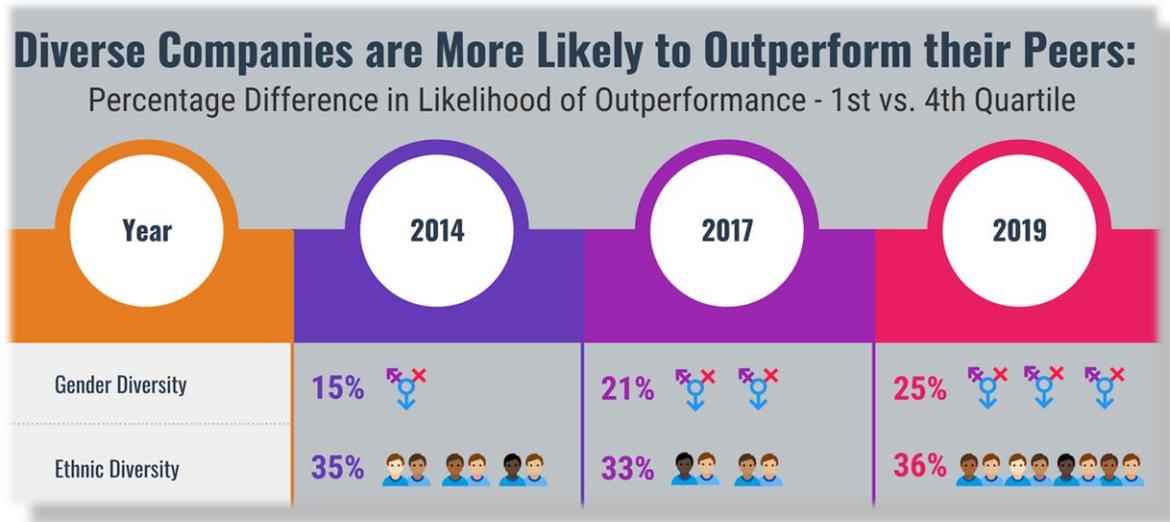
## Comparison

Companies that have promoted more women to the C-Suite (e.g., CEO, CFO, and COO titles) outperformed those that have not with a 34 percent greater return to shareholders (Patel, 2021, para. 15). In fact, having women and people from other traditionally marginalized groups in positions of leadership help organizations attract and retain top talent because those people can imagine themselves in that same leadership role (para. 14). Furthermore, "a study by leadership development platform BetterUp indicated that **belonging** was linked to a 56 percent increase in job performance, a 50 percent drop in turnover risk and a 75 percent reduction in sick days. For a 10,000-person organization, this would result in annual savings of more than \$52 million" (Gonzales, 2022 para. 21). Companies that are the most racially and ethnically diverse also financially outperform their competition. For example, as Figure 4 depicts, "companies that are gender-diverse show a 25 percent increase in performance over their competition...companies with more diverse leadership are more innovative and better able to relate and market their products and services to their diverse customer base" (Dixon-Fyle, Dolan, Hunt, and Prince, 2020, para. 17). In

other words, diverse companies that provide psychologically safe spaces of belonging for all employees enjoy greater cost savings and increased profits, both of which positively affect the bottom line.

Figure 4

The Most Diverse Companies are More Likely to Financially Outperform Their Peers



Source: Author’s Illustration, Modified from “Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters”. McKinsey & Company Report (Dixon-Fyle et. al., 2020)

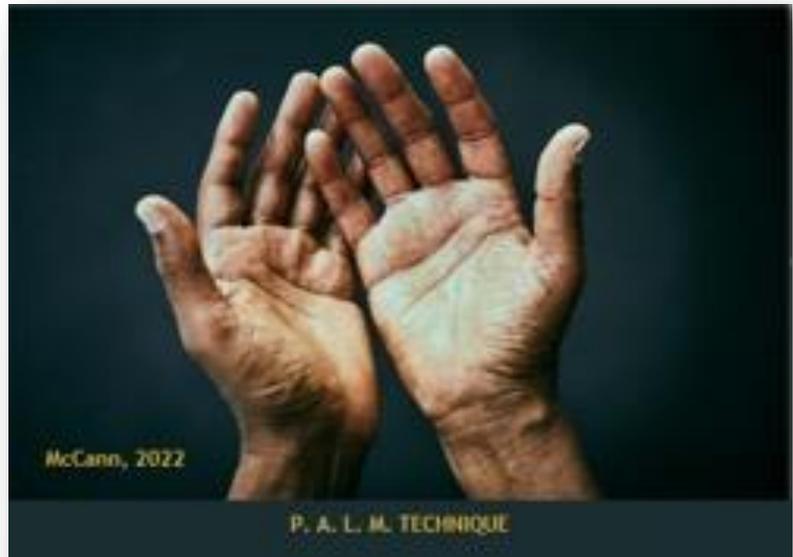
## Discussion

The term “microaggression” can be misleading insofar as the prefix, “micro” seems to suggest an aggression that is tiny and harmless when nothing could be further from the truth. A microaggression is named as such because it occurs in interpersonal interactions. A macroaggression, by contrast, denotes aggressions that are more widespread and systemic such as racial profiling by law enforcement or voter repression. But as described here, whether intended or not, microaggressions have a tremendous negative impact on organizations and the people who are employed by those organizations.

The most effective method for fostering understanding and inclusive behavior would be a comprehensive training and development program that fosters a sense of empowerment and empathy for all participants. The purpose is to motivate everyone to want to behave in a manner that creates an environment of inclusivity and belonging for all and leads to a true meritocracy. However, in the absence of a formal training program, there are steps that everyone can take to begin to break down the implicit bias and microaggression barriers that exist and create a positive organizational culture. One mechanism that everyone can implement immediately is a mnemonic called “The P.A.L.M. technique” (see Figure 5).

This technique was developed by this author based on ideas culled from various sources and then distilled into a four-step process. Also, the mental vision of an open palm denotes caring and empathy. “P” stands for “Pause”. Before saying or doing something that could potentially be detrimental to another person, take a moment to reflect. “A” stands for “Ask”. During the pause, ask yourself if what you are about to say or do fosters an inclusive interaction or one that could leave the other person feeling like they do not belong. “L” stands for “Listen & Learn”. If it is brought to your attention that you have committed a slight against another person, listen without judgment. Empathize with their concern, apologize as necessary, and use it as a learning experience to change behavior for next time. “M” stands for “Make it Right”. Ask the other person what you can do to clean up any “mess” you made. A one-on-one apology may be sufficient, or you may be asked for additional reparations. However, simply coming to the workplace (even if that workplace is a virtual meeting) with the mindset that everyone is equally valuable to the organization and deserves the same level of respect and deference can go a long way toward creating an egalitarian and meritocratic work environment for all, which can lead to higher productivity and lower turnover. This can only have a positive effect on the organization’s bottom line.

Figure 5  
Two Open Palms Depicting “The P.A.L.M. Technique” as one of Caring and Empathy  
2022



Source: Author’s Illustration, Copyright 2022

## Conclusion

Microaggressions create toxic work environments which lead to lowered productivity, and higher turnover and cause a dearth of women and people from other non-dominant groups from reaching upper levels of management. This hurts the workforce and the organization. Therefore, it would benefit organizational leadership to foster a sense of inclusion and belonging for all employees by understanding how and why microaggressions exist so that they can be eradicated from interpersonal communication in the workplace.

Instead of toxic cultures, the organization can create inclusive workplace communities with individuals who collaborate to advance the mission and vision. It only takes a willingness to understand what microaggressions are and why they are so insidious and harmful to our workplace environments. By eliminating microaggressions from interpersonal communications, employees can create a culture of inclusion and

belonging, allowing organizations to transform into entities with fulfilled and engaged workforces as well as greater profitability and financial strength.

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