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# Transformative learning theory for leadership development coaching in an automotive manufacturing organisation in South Africa

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**2021**
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# Transformative learning theory for leadership development coaching in an automotive manufacturing organisation in South Africa

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**A research report submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management in the field of Business and Executive Coaching**

**Johannesburg, February 2021**

**ABSTRACT**

The business environment faces constant change, complexity and ambiguity. Leaders are faced with unprecedented times in which they have to navigate uncertainty, yet they are expected to lead their teams from a knowing position. In addition to this formidable challenge, in the South African context, are the covert struggles of inequity. The lack of equitable representation on all levels, within the organisation being studied, as is the case in other South African organisations, inspired this research. This study focuses on the application of transformative learning theory during leadership coaching to facilitate an organisational culture centred on diversity, inclusion and equality, which is meant to improve employee engagement.

Equality and diversity practices, for the purpose of workplace inclusion, are common in improving business performance within the modern organisation. Moreover, global movements in response to racial, gender, sexual orientation and other forms of prejudice beg the question: should a different approach be explored in overcoming obstacles to employee engagement, so as to enhance organisational culture and a sense of belonging? In the automotive manufacturer employed for the purpose of this study, challenges on diversity and equality affect promotion, development and employee engagement, all of which require leadership intervention in order to attract and retain talent for organisational viability.

To investigate leadership's role in workplace inclusion, the study used a qualitative action research approach to gather evidence on the application of transformative learning during leadership development coaching so as to improve employee engagement. The leaders selected for participation in this study work within the same division but operate at various levels of seniority – that is, middle, senior and executive management. Their direct reports participated in focus group sessions prior to the commencement of leadership coaching, in order to elicit existing organisational contexts and background on leadership behaviour pertaining to workplace inclusion. After the leadership coaching intervention, focus group sessions were hosted to confirm changes in leadership behaviour related to inclusion practices.

First, the findings show that the application of transformation learning theory during leadership development coaching is multifaceted; in this respect, stimulating a disorienting dilemma can be incremental, taking time for transformation to be observed. Second, coaching for social change – an emerging field in coaching – challenges the traditional paradigms of the role of the coach; this finding was tested during coaching, as the coach could not always remain neutral on personal worldviews. Third, the research findings suggest that leaders need support in dealing with workplace challenges related to inclusion and equal opportunities. The lack of transparency perpetuated an environment perceived as extending favouritism and bias.

The value of the research is that it demonstrates that shifts in leadership behaviour using transformative learning, however complicated, are possible. It creates opportunities to explore alternate mechanisms of dealing with workplace inclusion, other than traditional organisational development initiatives.

***Keywords:*** *transformative learning theory; coaching for equality, diversity, inclusion; leadership development coaching*

**DECLARATION**

In terms of Rule G9.8 of Wits University's Faculty of Commerce, Law & Management Rules and Syllabus (2021), I, Genevieve Jozaffe-Naidoo, declare that this research report is my own work, except as indicated in the references and acknowledgements. This research report is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management in the field of Business and Executive Coaching at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. This research report has not previously been submitted for any degree or examination, to this or any other university. The research ethics protocol number for this project is: WBS/BA2286925/870.

Name: Genevieve Jozaffe-Naidoo Signature: 

Signed at Port Elizabeth on the 10th day of June 2021.

## DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to my husband, Michael Naidoo, my daughter, Kayla Naidoo, and my best friend Karen Morkel. Throughout this journey, you all reminded me that I always have your love and support. Thank you for believing in me.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

First and foremost, I am grateful to God for walking with me during this challenging journey.

I extend my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Rajohane Matshedisho, who invested himself in my research journey, always challenging me to think critically and encouraging me to insert my voice into my writing.

Thank you to all my colleagues and peers at the organisation in which the research took place, those who participated in this research and those who supported me throughout my study. I also extend my heartfelt gratitude to my leader, Adriaan Higgs, for his encouragement, and for being an exemplary leader who appreciates my individual contribution and who lives workplace inclusion.

To my employer, thank you for granting me the permission to conduct research within the organisation; moreover, thank you for your financial and material support in the completion of my Master's degree.

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# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this research is to explore the application of transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching, in order to improve employee engagement in an automotive manufacturing organisation. This qualitative study, using participatory action research, investigates whether there are changes in the leaders' points of view on diversity and equality, which led to an improvement in habits of workplace inclusion and changed organisational culture after leaders' participation in transformative coaching. The research findings suggest that transformative coaching supports an incremental nature to a disorienting dilemma. During coaching sessions, leaders welcomed platforms for deeper conversations to make meaning and to understand the research topic. Employees confirmed that there were shifts in the manner in which they were engaged during and after coaching.

## 1.2 Context of the study

The application of transformative learning theory to leadership coaching was employed in order to challenge the leader's frames of reference on race, gender, sex, and the like. To gain a deeper understanding on how these frames of reference are formed, it was necessary to pay attention to the impact of socialisation. Critical theory was used to support the conceptual framework of knowledge so as to affect a disorienting dilemma during coaching. Foundational to critical theory is the understanding that knowledge is shaped by the interests of different people and systems, as well as how race, gender, religion, class, social institutions and cultural dynamics intersect to construct social systems (Wang, Torrisi-Steele & Hansman, 2019). These constructs are made problematic when they are taken for granted in culture, for the purpose of social justice (Wang et al., 2019). Critical theory acknowledges the existent and historical power imbalances in society and represents a dialectic methodology that requires interaction between individuals who demonstrate mutual respect for the diverse insights each person contributes (Wang et al., 2019). Mutual respect, however, should not be a precursor to challenging social systems that

perpetuate social injustices. This because, by its very nature, there is conflict of interest between the relevant parties; therefore, harmonious engagement is not always possible.

In support of this argument, Mariotti (2012) writes that apartheid imposed socio-economic constraints on four racial groups, thus concluding that transformation in the labour market was a result of White economic incentives. Moreover, Mariotti (2012) emphasises that it was not a result of White preferences regarding racial segregation in the workplace, nor was it a consequence of civil or political opposition to apartheid. South Africa's apartheid legacy, that is, the engrained values, beliefs and frames of reference that manifest discriminatory behaviour, is still prevalent today and has eroded trust in the workplace, especially between leaders and their teams. A leader of people from diverse backgrounds deals with daily issues of organisational and social cohesion, often finding it challenging to navigate the landscape that creates a truly inclusive environment.

Apartheid socialisation informs the values and beliefs of both leaders and employees, which creates a predisposition towards accessing equal opportunities in the organisation, thus impacting the employee experience. To engage the heart, minds and hands of employees, leaders are required to critically reflect upon and possibly create new meaningful experiences for themselves and others, so as to shift performance and generate a truly engaged workforce. The application of transformative learning theory during leadership coaching is intended to create new meaningful experiences for leaders dealing with workplace inclusion, which would ultimately lead to employee engagement.

Furthermore, cultural blindness makes it challenging to understand the distance between oneself and others on issues related to cultural norms and values. We do not question our cultural norms, we accept them as given. We also cannot see through them, as "cultural heritage is something we are, not something we have" (Palmer & Whybrow, 2018, p. 332). In this regard, South Africa's history of racial segregation, the manifestation of which still resembles a workforce with unequal access to opportunities, has fragmented inclusion driven by compliance and unsatisfactory

attempts at employee engagement – all of which affect all employees of the automotive manufacturer being researched in this study.

Considering this historical background, definitions of diversity do not include South Africa's history of systematic racism. However, South African organisations have a unique opportunity to appreciate all forms of visible and non-visible diversity, to move past negative exclusionary criteria such as race, gender and disability, and instead replace it with the appreciation, acknowledgement and utilisation of leadership commitment to achieving the organisational diversity agenda (Daya, 2014). In agreement with Daya (2014), understanding and leveraging these individual characteristics by appreciating the value of diversity has the potential to shift organisational culture on an intimate, personal, level – especially between leaders and their direct reports. Coaching sessions underpinned by transformative learning theory were designed to unlock this leadership potential for appreciating individual differences for the purpose of employee engagement.

Culture, both organisational and societal, can influence the manner in which leaders engage their teams. To this end, Mezirow (1991, p. 18) proposes that "culture can encourage or discourage transformative thought." Socialisation entrenches values which are challenging to change; however, shifts in the reflection of values and the meaning of experiences have the potential to create new meaning in adults, thus augmenting a new reality coupled with modernization (Mezirow, 1991). It creates a need for transformation in adult learning, which results in the capacity to possibly develop more critical awareness of and reflection on preconceived ideas (Mezirow, 1991). In other words, by shifting our expressions of identity we can change our personal values and beliefs to undo the negative socialisation of apartheid that continues to affect organisational culture and workplace inclusion.

This research focuses on managers who lead people within an automotive manufacturing organisation in South Africa. This manufacturer supplies original equipment fitment to car manufacturers in South Africa. Original equipment fitment refers to the tyres produced for the Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM) (Tiger Wheel & Tyre, 2019). In the past, the employer implemented transformation and

inclusion initiatives at the organisational level, however, at the interpersonal and individual levels, the employer struggled to create and sustain an engaged workforce characterised by inclusion. To a large extent, the relationships between leaders and employees appear transactional, and are characterised as lacking meaning and sincerity. Employees are limited in their ability to influence their work, and access to opportunities remain at the leader's discretion. For the modern organisation and to address this challenge, a transformative coaching intervention that aimed to address the meaningful perspectives of individuals, created an opportunity for the researcher to investigate ways to justify an alternate approach to create workplace inclusion and engagement so as to impact business performance.

Leadership effectiveness, through a transformative coaching experience, produces a need for transformation in adult learning (Mezirow, 1991). Thus, adult learning theory underpins coaching; it can be significantly challenging for the coach to promote change in the meaning perspectives of the client (Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck, 2009). Definitions of coaching frequently extend beyond adult learning, to include expressions of a transformational experience; thus, transformative learning theory is critical to both adult learning and coaching as it encourages a change in thinking (Cox, 2015). In addition, transformation theory is built on two sets of assumptions: humanistic and constructivist assumptions, that focus on the individual as a unit of analysis; and assumptions drawn from critical theory, which focuses on the social as a unit of analysis (Flemming, 2018).

Transformative learning theory purports that individuals learn by observing others and constructing meaning from personal experiences, whilst analysing the way in which society is structured and sustained by people in power so that injustices and inequalities are understood; this is underpinned by critical theory, as its defining characteristic is transforming systems so that they become more just (Flemming, 2018). In order to effect learning on the meaning constructs or perspectives that individuals hold, Palmer and Whybrow (2018) state that critical reflection and the interrogation of assumptions are at the heart of Mezirow's theory. These authors emphasise that a coach can create transformative learning by moving the coachee's

interests beyond their expressed needs; instead, through understanding the reasons for personal values and beliefs, as well as the manner in which psycho-cultural factors shaped the interpretation of their worldview and that of others, the coach is able to ultimately transform the coachee's actual way of knowing. It appears, then, that coaching is a powerful platform to stimulate a change in thinking, and a safe space to challenge an individual's socialisation, which has influenced their worldviews.

Therefore, considering the cultural historical challenges in South African organisations, specifically related to diversity, equality and inclusion, the purpose of this study is to explore the application of transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching in order to improve employee engagement in an automotive manufacturing organisation. The research aims to investigate whether there are changes in leaders' points of view on diversity and equality that have improved habits of workplace inclusion and changed organisational culture – after leader participation in transformative coaching.

### 1.3 Research Problem

Unsatisfactory employee engagement levels hinder business performance within the automotive manufacturing organisation. Hence, this study aims to understand the manner in which the application of transformative learning theory, during leadership coaching, helps South African leaders move past negative, exclusionary criteria. This is done by challenging their points of view on diversity, equality and inclusion so as to improve workplace culture and, by extension, business capability.

Daya (2014) emphasises this argument by stating that the extreme misrepresentation of particular demographic groups in South Africa requires attention; therefore, transformation for inclusion needs to take place at three levels: organisational, interpersonal and individual. First, organisational climate, senior leadership, communication as well as transparent recruitment, selection, promotion and development represent the organisational context for transformation. Second, the interpersonal refers to the relational level between a superior and their direct report, in which the direct report is treated with respect, acceptance and dignity, and in which

there is a relationship of trust (Daya, 2014). Third, individual factors that influence inclusion are personality, locus of control and self-esteem (including confidence and power) (Daya, 2014). Unexplored within the organisation are coaching programmes that address interpersonal and individual challenges to attaining workplace inclusion. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, leadership development coaching buttressed by transformative learning theory – to create an equal, diverse and inclusive workforce – was applied in the research investigation.

## 1.4 Research questions

The main research question, and two sub-questions, that guide this study are:

1. In what way does the application of transformative learning theory create sustainable change in leaders?
    a. How can leadership coaching enhance an equal, diverse and inclusive workforce?
    b. How can coaches use transformative learning theory in leadership development coaching?

## 1.5 Significance of the study

Taylor (2007) highlights a gap in the existent literature, in that much of the research on transformative learning emphasises critical reflection at its core, namely, a disorienting dilemma that would act as a catalyst for change. However, parallel research has revealed the need for greater attention to the role of context, the nature of catalysts of transformative learning, the increased role of other ways of knowing, relationship importance and the overall expansion of the descriptive outcome of a transformation of one's perspective (Taylor, 2007). Taylor (2007) further adds that there has been little practice to develop transformative learning. One avenue by which to explore Taylor's assertions is coaching. Bluckert (2005) defines coaching as a process centred on learning and development, with the coach facilitating personal growth or change; moreover, executive coaching enhances action-learning, which consequently increases reflection and learning agility. Canvassing the theory reveals that the existent literature on transformative learning theory is largely associated with

adult learning and education, yet its practical application in leadership development coaching is less readily available.

Hence, the contribution of this study is understanding the application of transformative learning theory, and the role of the coach as an instrument thereof, supports the investigation of workplace inclusion at an interpersonal level in order to impact employee engagement. The research aims to add experiential approaches to the theoretical understanding of transformative learning within the South African context.

The aims of this study are:

- To provide insights into the application of transformative learning theory and leadership development coaching, as well as its ability to facilitate habits of equality, diversity, inclusion and employee engagement.
- The study supports alternate ways of contributing to initiatives focussed on workplace inclusion, other than organisational interventions.
- An inclusive culture supported by meaningful employee engagement, between leaders and employees, can enhance business performance when established on a relationship of trust.

## 1.6 Delimitations of the study

The delimitations of this study are:

i. The study is limited to an automotive manufacturing organisation that makes tyres for car manufacturers in South Africa.
ii. The study is restricted to incorporate coaching sessions and responses from first line to executive level managers, as well as responses from their direct reports in focus groups.
iii. The study is confined to transformative learning theory and its application in coaching.

## 1.7 Assumptions

People often hold beliefs that cannot be proven, for example, the belief that everyone will answer the questions posed to them honestly. Nevertheless, assumptions are required to enable any researcher to conduct a study (Simon & Goes, 2013). The

current study aims to add value to leadership coaching by justifying each assumption through the manner in which the research is conducted, in order for the topic to be relevant.

For the purpose of this study, the following assumptions were made:

i. The participants will be honest regarding their experiences both in and outside the organisation, particularly in relation to the meaning perspectives.
ii. The participants have an understanding of the research topic.
iii. The coaching participants are able to freely participate in the leadership development coaching.
iv. The focus group participants may not keep the content of sessions confidential, which may impact participation from the leaders who are to be coached.

## 1.8 Structure of the report

This report consists of six chapters. Chapter One provides an introduction to the purpose and significance of the application of transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching, with the intention of catalysing change on the meaning perspectives of equality and diversity. The aim of this to improve workplace inclusion so as to enhance employee engagement. Preliminary research findings suggest the following:

1. The nature of learning and what catalyses a disorienting dilemma is incremental;
2. Platforms for discussions and learning on issues of equality, diversity and inclusion are welcomed; and
3. Employees observed shifts in leader–employee engagement behaviours.

Chapter Two (Literature Review) explores, investigates and debates theory pertinent to the research focus. The chapter provides an overview of the three main theoretical areas of research (adult learning theory, employee engagement, and organisational culture and leadership development coaching) and five sub-theoretical areas (transformative learning theory, equality and diversity, inclusion, coaching for social change, and coaching skills). Literature on transformative learning theory relies on the

original exposition of Jack Mezirow's theory from 1978 and little empirical research has been published on the application of the theory in coaching (Terblanche, 2018). Adult learning and transformative learning theory are developed through the application of coaching, outside of its traditional field of education. However, the literature review forms the body of knowledge relevant to this study, sets the scene for the research and underpins the practical application of transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching in a contemporary organisational context within which leaders need to operate.

Chapter Three (Research Methodology) provides the rationale for using participatory action research, a discussion of the sampling, data collection and analysis methods employed in the study. In addition, this chapter provides a discussion of the limitations of the study, and the trustworthiness of the study. To work through personal biases, the practice of reflexivity was taken on as a conscious and deliberate effort to maintain the integrity of the research.

Chapter Four (Findings) presents the findings of the research and, in the process, intends to answer the research questions by deconstructing themes. This allows the researcher to better understand the role of context, the nature of the catalysts for transformative learning, the role and impact of other ways of knowing, and the importance of relationship in understanding transformative perspectives.

Chapter Five (Discussion of the Findings) aims to explain, evaluate and assess the research findings, within the context of the literature review, in order to determine whether the application of transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching is possible and supports an incremental nature to a disorienting dilemma, as leaders fastidiously express and converse on their frames of reference, thus making new meaning.

Chapter Six (Conclusions and Recommendations) comprises two sections. The first section summarises the research in relation to the research questions, objectives and aims. It will demonstrate how the research questions were answered, research objectives accomplished, and research aims achieved. The last section of the chapter

proposes a set of recommendations for implementing the findings, as well as suggestions for further research.

# CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1 Introduction

This comprehensive vast extent of the literature review will outline the theory relevant to the application of transformative adult learning theory within leadership development coaching. Literature on transformative learning theory relies on the original exposition of Jack Mezirow's theory from 1978 and little empirical research has been published on the application of the theory in coaching (Terblanche, 2018). Adult learning and transformative learning theory are developed through the application of coaching, outside of its traditional field of education. Uniting transformative learning and leadership development coaching creates an opportunity for dialogue, that is, a reflective process by which new meaning is created, and which is reiterative. This amalgamation has the potential to impact leaders' perspectives on the socialised norms of equality, diversity and inclusion to which they prescribe; this is aligned with the aim of the study. Coaching conversations facilitate and create critical moments for reflection, referred to as a "disorienting dilemma", that can catalyse change in the values and beliefs of leaders, the purpose of which is to affect an inclusive work environment. The three theoretical frameworks that will be critically discussed in this chapter are: (a) adult learning theory with a specific focus on transformative learning; (b) leadership coaching to improve employee engagement; and (c) theory on culture, with an emphasis on equality, diversity and inclusion.

## 2.2 South African organisations can lead workplace inclusion practices

In South Africa, the transformational process that led to the historic demise of apartheid placed extraordinary demands on the leaders of South African organisations. This has thrust business onto the global arena and has, concomitantly, caused significant change in the power balance between races. Undeniably, the apartheid system shaped the life experiences and identities of black and white leaders in different ways; with its end, a major challenge for all South Africans, including strategic leaders, was adapting to and understanding the new identities to emerge after the fall of the apartheid state (Nkomo & Kriek, 2011). The contextual influences

on leadership at the national, organisational and individual levels necessitate an understanding of the frames of reference held by leaders – especially since these frames of reference affect the manner in which they engage with the people with whom they work.

Supporting the research argument, Nkomo and Kriek (2011) highlight that, in dealing with strategic leadership change, there is a scarcity of knowledge in South Africa, especially regarding the influence that the socio-political environment has on organisations. In this regard, Mezirow (1991, p. 17) proposes that "as adults, we are caught in our own histories". Socialisation, which is our shared culture, can support or oppose transformative thought, values and predispositions that are inherently inequal. Moreover, in light of the dichotomy of oppression and freedom, as well as the diversity of beliefs, values and social practices in modern society, adults need to acquire new ways of knowing, not simply adapting, in order to gain a holistic understanding and control over their lives (Mezirow, 1991). DeSapio (2017) supports this sense of connectedness which forms our identity, while also maintaining that buy-in to an organisation's purpose or commitment to principles of equality and fairness can transform individuals; thus, consequently, changing their identity. An organisation's ability to transform requires cognitive and behavioural agility amongst leaders, which includes an openness to and the acceptance of change (Nkomo & Kriek, 2011).

Our accepted ways of seeing and understanding, as shaped by language, culture and individual experience, join forces to set restrictions to future learning (Mezirow, 1991). Furthermore, these accepted ways of seeing and understanding create our connection with communities and organisations. This makes it difficult to address the equality, diversity and inclusion challenges experienced in an organisation, however, it supports the leveraging of coaching platforms as a means to effect change.

It is important to note that leadership does not take place in a vacuum; therefore, one must be cognisant of the impact that organisational context has on the complexities within which leaders operate (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006). Fassinger, Shullman and Buki (2017) refer to a Volatile-Uncertain-Complex-Ambiguous (VUCA) world. Stelter (2014), when considering this complexity and ambiguity, proposes that there is a need

for leadership coaching that can help prepare individuals to manage this chaotic and fast changing world. Coaching can play a role in facilitating leadership development and, through the employment of various techniques, the coach and coachee co-create new meaning, with the aim of making sense of the hyper-complexity that exists within business (Stelter, 2014).

A leadership coaching methodology that incorporates transformative learning, and which acts as a catalyst for change in thinking on socio-political matters, can generate new knowledge and understanding for organisations in the South African context. Schuitema (2011) purports that the key to success for any organisation is the degree to which its members are willing to make discretionary effort towards achieving organisational objectives, and it signifies the sort of leadership that creates conditions that are not only focused on personal excellence but also on mobilising others. The automotive manufacturer investigated in this study, a German holding company, faces significant challenges related to equality, diversity and inclusion. These challenges are largely due to the ineffective relationships that leaders have with their employees, in which feelings of powerlessness and neglect are experienced by employees. Representation is much like that of the broader South African context, with the majority of black employees in lower level positions, while senior positions remain predominantly occupied by white managers.

Transformation has been slow, and employee sentiment is that no solution exists for the deep-rooted inequity that prevails. Over the years, many organisational cultural interventions have been applied, however, issues of inclusion have evolved over time whilst interventions pertaining to organisational culture have not. Coaching programs have remained largely unexplored in terms of their ability to capacitate leaders to cope with and manage the complexities of the organisational context. Therefore, this study motivates for the application of transformative leadership coaching to acquire new ways of knowing and being, potentially creating a newly shared organisational culture, which crosses racial and hierarchical divides, thus creating opportunities for workplace inclusion for South African organisations.

## 2.3 Adult learning theory

Transformative learning theory, an adult learning theory, forms the foundation for the application of leadership coaching for this study. Knowles, Holton and Swanson (2012, p.153) write that “building leadership capacity is a learning process”. They further indicate that adult learning cannot be defined simplistically, because it has multiple uses. Therefore, these authors define adult learning in a nuanced fashion: “(1) the acquisition and mastery of what is already known about something; (2) the extension and clarification of meaning of one’s experience; or (3) an organized, intentional process of testing ideas relevant to problems” (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012, p.153). This definition appears exclusionary, as it suggests that learning is one of the three cognitive distinctions, and that cognition is the only activity in the adult learning process. Merriam (2008) puts forward that adult learning is a complex phenomenon; in this respect, it is believed that a reductionist explanation would erode its value, because learning is not only a cognitive activity. Merriam and Bierema (2013) therefore defined adult learning as a shift in human temperament or capacity that continues over an extended period of time; it is thus not simply accredited to processes of growth, as it can add knowledge (cognition), a new skill and/or matters linked to emotions and attitudes. These definitions complement and contribute to cognitive processes that qualify leadership coaching interventions for adult learning, as its practice includes the complexity of adult learning at an individual and interpersonal level.

In support of adult learning theory for leadership development coaching, Cox (2006) has identified the following eight adult learning theories – from the existent body of literature – that are applicable to leadership coaching:

1. *Andragogy*, defined by Malcom Knowles (1978), as the art and science of helping adults learn;
2. *Transformative learning* theory, largely developed by Jack Mezirow (1991);
3. *Reflective practice,* which is the process of reflecting deeply on the nature of experiences;
4. *Experiential learning,* developed by John Dewey (1910), Kurt Lewin (1947) and Jean Piaget (1976), which is comprised of four stages (concrete experience,

reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation), in which;

5. *Learning styles* developed by David Kolb (1984) add the individual's orientation towards knowledge production, as highlighted in the experiential learning cycle;
6. *Lifecourse development,* which makes use of life cycle theories from Levinson (1978), by exploring different phases of human development for learning;
7. *Values and motivation,* wherein values are the ideas that guide one's perception of good and bad, and motivation (linked to Maslow's theory) drives how we act according to our needs and values; and
8. *Self-efficacy,* developed by Albert Bandura (1986), which is the belief that people have in their capacity to accomplish tasks.

These learning theories are grounded in reflection and the coaching process, as it stimulates reflective engagement. However, the adult learning theories most popular for coaching include andragogy, experiential learning and transformative learning, as these incorporate more than cognitive processes (Cox et al., 2009; Illeris, 2018; Knowles et al., 2012). Each of these theories will be explored in greater detail below, in order to strengthen the selection of transformative learning theory as the construct for leadership development coaching for this study. The aim thereof is to facilitate shifts on the meaning perspectives that adults hold on matters of equality, diversity and inclusionary practices.

First, andragogy, according to Merriam (2001), has five assumptions concerning the adult learner: (1) has an independent self-perception and directs their own learning; (2) has a wealth of life experiences enriched with resources for learning; (3) their learning needs are associated with changing roles; (4) is focused on problems and the immediate application of knowledge; and (5) motivation for learning is intrinsic rather than driven by external factors. In contrast, in support of Cochran and Brown (2016), many scholars argue that andragogy is not a theory; instead, they suggest that it is a list of standards of good practice for adult learning, which is further supported by Knowles (1978) who indicates that andragogy is comparable to assumptions rather than theory. Moreover, critical reflection to stimulate adult learning is not mentioned to support his study's imperatives.

While recognising Knowles (1978) as the largest contributor to andragogy, Loeng (2018) criticises Knowles's separation of the learning process and the individual from the social, economic and historical context. In this regard, Knowles ignores the relationship between the individual and society in his assumptions and, therefore, does not consider the effect of privilege and suppression attached to race, gender and class influenced learning, presupposing that all humans, with their cultures, values and ideas of individualism, self-actualisation and independence fail to critically analyse society and organisations that do not challenge the status quo. Within the South African context, understanding this relationship is key to adult learning, especially its effects on organisational leadership, which drives employee engagement. Loeng (2018) supports Pratt's (1993) earlier claims that, while andragogy is useful as a starting point in understanding the depiction and philosophical ideas of adult education, absent in its theory is an understanding of the processes by which adults learn, and consideration of the social and historical context.

In support of the above, understanding the learning process is better explained using Kolb's (1986) experiential theory. According to Palmer and Whybrow (2007), the coaching engagement is effectively a learning process called the learning wheel, which consists of a concrete experience, reflection, abstract conception, and action. It is an adaptation of Kolb's learning theory, which is supported by Sheehan and Kearns (1995) who argue that Kolb's experiential theory of development is the process of learning from experiences that shape and actualise development. Bolstering this statement, Kolb and Kolb (2009) buttress the experiential learning theory model with two dialectical modes of grasping experience (i.e. concrete experience and abstract conceptualisation) in addition to two modes of transforming experience (i.e. reflective observation and active experimentation). They describe experiential learning as a process that extracts the learner's personal beliefs, which are integrated into new ideas (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). In this regard, when coaching the learning wheel, the process of a concrete experience provides the coaching client with an understanding of how they may respond to a situation or problem; they are given the opportunity to reflect on the lessons learnt from that experience, understand the how and why of the experience, decode this understanding into a meaningful thought, and take action or

make a decision on any of the previous three stages. Absent in this theory is an understanding of the role of context and the dilemma created regarding the meaning perspectives which have caused the problem.

Kelly (1997) postulates that learning requires purpose, goals, intentions, choice and decision making, all while recognising that it is not clear where these fit in the learning cycle. Furthermore, Heinrich, Habron, Johnson and Goralnik (2015) point out that today's complex societal issues require critical thinking and engaged citizenry, while also noting that critical thinking is not part of every experiential process. The researchers achieved results such as critical thinking through intentionally placing critical thinking exercises into the learning process, so as to scaffold learning. To this day, Morris (2020) critiqued Kolb's model by adding that the key issue that remains unresolved is the interpretation of exactly what is meant by concrete experience, as learning cannot take place without experience, and scholars disagree on the criteria that qualifies as 'experience'. This supports the conclusion that concrete experience lacks consideration of social context, which the current study highlights as central to experiential learning theory.

In agreement, Morris (2020) supports the notion that highly contextualised primary experience on the part of the learner, in unforced real-world situations, emphasized place (community, societal, cultural and social) and time (present and/or historical), all of which are absent in the concrete experience of experiential learning theory. Experiential learning theory captures how adults process and consider their worldviews, philosophies, values and beliefs, which can stimulate life-long change. Transformative learning seeks to understand this process.

### 2.3.1 *Transformative learning theory*

Transformative adult learning theory is a specialised adult learning theory aimed at studying phenomena related to deep structural and permanent changes within adults. This is a process in which values, beliefs, assumptions and perspectives are questioned in order to increase self-awareness, foster reflection and the realisation of agency (Terblanche, 2018). Mezirow (1991) explains that learning from our culture

and the idiosyncratic requirements of our parents is rewarded, and accepted; he further suggests that these approved ways of learning and understanding language, culture and personal experience all collaborate to set limits on our future learning. Therefore, Mezirow (1991) notes five propositions associated with socialisation that involves inherent inequality:

1. Social reality is collective, maintained and incessantly negotiated through dialogue;
2. Socialisation constructs an individual's subjective self in a unique way that sets up interpretational rules for making sense of everyday life;
3. The social world is learned and experienced by the individual as everyday life and natural – it is taken for granted;
4. Interaction with significant others establish the individual's self-concept. This means that knowledge is not only socially shared but understanding the relationships between those who share that knowledge is equally important; and
5. Intentionality drives human consciousness, which assures that socialisation is not predestined.

Based on Mezirow's propositions, outlined above, it is then reasonable to propose that there is an instinctive drive for humans to make meaning of life, as there are no lasting truths, change is constant, and we cannot always be assured of what we believe or what we know to be true (Taylor, 2017). Literature on transformative learning theory relies on the original exposition of Jack Mezirow's theory from 1978 and little empirical research has been published on the application of the theory in coaching (Terblanche, 2018). These five propositions anchor the application of transformative learning theory during leadership coaching, so as to facilitate an organisational culture that is centred on equality, diversity and inclusion – all of which are meant to improve employee engagement.

Ambiguities created by fast change, diverse beliefs, values and social practice are a hallmark of modern society. Adults need to remain steadfast so as not to be overwhelmed by change; therefore, instead of simply adapting to change, acquiring new viewpoints in order to gain a holistic understanding of changing events places a

higher degree of control over adult lives (Mezirow, 1991). Christie, Carey, Robertson and Grainger (2015) argue for Mezirow's theory by postulating that individuals struggle to alter their worldviews as they are unconscious frames of reference built in the habits of the mind, wherein it will take a powerful human catalyst, a forceful argument, a disorienting dilemma, in order to catalyse change. Mezirow (1991), therefore, states that transformative adult learning and its opposed static nature has not been fully recognised by scholars and practitioners of adult learning. This study therefore aims to provide insights into the association between transformative learning theory, leadership development coaching, and its impact on the frames of reference that inform equality, diversity, inclusion and employee engagement.

Christie et al. (2015) critique the influence of context in transformative learning; they recognise that critical reflection is important, but that there are other ways of knowing which need to be explored. Moreover, they suggest that diversity in terms of class, gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation has to be tackled. Dirkx (1998), in reference to the work by Paulo Freire, refers to transformative learning as *conscientization* which is guided by political liberation and freedom from oppression. Freire states that critical consciousness requires questioning, analysing and actioning contexts of society, politics, culture and the economy through conversations and problem-solving; this would foster greater awareness around structural bias, inequality and oppression, thus creating a deeper understanding of how these structures shape and influence our ways of thinking – about ourselves and the world. The leadership coaching sessions instituted for the purpose of this study endeavoured to accomplish this conscientization by bringing about a mindfulness on how these constructs play out in the workplace.

Affirming Dirkx's contribution, Taylor's (2007) research findings conclude that a better understanding of the relationship between action research and transformative learning is required. Christie et al. (2015) supports this finding by noting that the intention of action research is continuous improvement, therein making it both partisan and transformative as it involves a connected process of planning, action, observation, analysis, reflection and evaluation. This will make the process progressive and

interwoven as improvements can take place in any of the prescribed steps. The authors add that action research is often initiated by a professional dilemma; likewise, individual transformation can begin with a disorienting dilemma (Christie et al., 2015).

Opposing this claim, Mälkki (2012) initiated a study that explained how a disorienting dilemma could be stimulated amongst adults by having them complete a values survey on contentious issues that could trigger changes in attitudes, values and beliefs, after which they were required to debate these controversial topics. This led to engaged, stimulating conversations on the manner in which society, class, religion, politics, economics or family upbringing impact upon their worldviews – thus translating into transformative learning and thought (Mälkki, 2012). More interpersonally then, instead of a professional dilemma, a personal dilemma appears to be more appropriate as it affects the depth of one's habit of mind and, quite possibly, one's frame of reference as values are deep rooted topics that stimulate much debate – this is evident in the findings of the current study. Understanding whether transformative learning can be put into practice has shown that a values exercise – or discussing personal values within controversial topics – demonstrates that it can be done. Differences in our values exist, and discussing those differences can either support or hinder learning; therefore, combining action research and transformative learning yields benefits (Christie et al., 2015). Discussing personal values formed a key component of the coaching conversations that formed part of this study. Based on these dialogues, leaders reached a personal dilemma concerning the ways in which they lived these values in the workplace.

Another key component of transformative learning is reflection (Mezirow, 1991). Mälkki (2012) states that this is no surprise, as reflection has become a critical component of the development of knowledge and higher order thinking skills; moreover, stimulating reflection can often be a cognitive conflict or challenge individual assumptions that stimulate learning. Therefore, it is evident that what stimulates reflection is a disorienting dilemma. Mezirow (1991) theorises that reflective learning becomes transformative when we evaluate and re-evaluate assumptions that are found to be

misrepresentations, unauthentic or invalid; therefore, all reflection encompasses critique.

Mälkki (2010), however, notes two problematic questions when confronted with reflection and the meaning perspectives, namely, that reflection entails awareness of meaning perspectives in an effort to deal with chaos in the world. This is a metacognitive application of critical thinking about one's thoughts, emotions and actions; however, since thinking is guided by the meaning perspectives, it must have a role in reflection. Therefore, it is subjective and limiting. Furthermore, tension exists between the meaning perspectives, which aim to manage complexity, by relying on the self-evidence that reflection aims to challenge. One can thus conclude that reflection is not an activity that is willingly taken up and followed through – this does not necessarily imply that there is an unwillingness to change – instead that meaning perspectives are the life support that helps to make sense of the world, and to abandon these meaning structures could be perceived as having dire consequences. Taking the above into consideration, reflections of meaning perspectives can be assumed to be better understood and explored through dialogue, much like a coaching conversation in which the client sets the agenda of the discussion and the coach acts as a powerful catalyst for change.

### 2.3.2 *Conceptualisation of transformative learning*

A number of scholars have contributed towards understanding the transformative learning process (Taylor, 2007; Dirkx, 1998; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006; Mezirow, 1991), the most prolific of which is Jack Mezirow whose contribution is marked by his conceptualisation of transformation in adults. Taylor (2007) states that transformative learning continues to be the most researched and debated theory in adult education and learning. Undoubtedly, transformative learning theory has played a prominent role in adult education, with its popularity having both positive and negative consequences. The positive is that it has initiated debate and dialogue on the potential of adult learning, where it could make significant changes in adult lives. Despite this, the most valuable and arguably valid critique is that the theory refers to any form of learning in adults, and detracts from the established theoretical frameworks, causing it to be an

incoherent theory (Hoggan, 2016). As a result of this debate, transformative learning was selected to shift the meaning perspectives of adults in an effort to enhance workplace inclusion practices.

In defence of transformative learning theory, Poutiatine (2009) writes that Mezirow developed a structured theory of the transformational process of adult learning, since 1978. Given the significant amount of time that Mezirow has dedicated to transformative learning in adults, much of the literature presented (including this study) was predominantly focused on Mezirow's theory, and will give credence to the contribution that he has made to transformative learning theory. Further, Mezirow's transformative learning theory was used as a lens to explore the application of transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching, in order to facilitate an organisational culture that is centred on diversity, equality and inclusion, which is meant to improve employee engagement. Thus, specific focus is given to Mezirow's theory in the ensuing discussion.

Mezirow (2009, p.92) defined transformative learning as "the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) sets of fixed assumptions and expectations to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change." In addition, these frames of reference are improved as they are able to generate objective beliefs and opinions that will provide further justification so as to guide action.

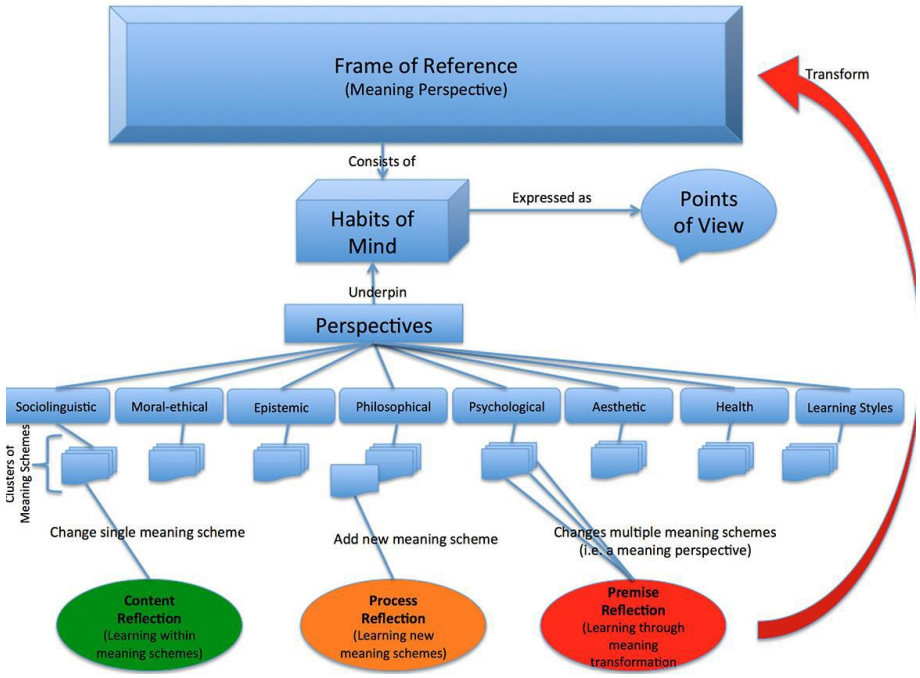



**Figure 1**: Mezirow's transformative learning typology (Terblanche, 2018, p. 39)

Figure 1, above, provides a graphical representation of Mezirow's theory. Terblanche (2018) states that Mezirow proposed many meaning perspectives, as seen above, which include: psychological (relates to understanding the self and how we are formed by self-concept, defence mechanisms, psychological preferences), sociolinguistic (relates to social norms, the use of language, cultural codes that underpin our assumptions, and can lead to prejudice, stereotyping, judgements), moral-ethical (involve moral norms, values and conscience), philosophical (worldviews, political and religious views), health (views related to health issues), political (relates to power and influence), aesthetic (judgements about beauty, taste, attitudes and standards) and epistemic (frames of reference that connect with what and how we know things, which is embedded in the developmental phase through cognitive or sensory preferences). These meaning perspectives, as seen in Figure 1, are then expressed as points of view and, according to Terblanche (2018), adults interpret and make meaning through life experiences by using a set of filters referred to as meaning perspectives or frames of reference.

Frames of reference are explained by Mezirow (2009) as the composition and arrangement of culture and language through which we interpret meaning by ascribing

lucidity and significance to our life experiences. In this regard, frames of reference, as represented in Figure 1, are powerful filters that can shape and define our presuppositions by influencing our intentions, beliefs, expectations and purposes. Once fixed, they set a predetermined mental or behavioural path that leads us to reject ideas that oppose or fail to fit our preconceptions. In order to address frames of reference, Mälkki (2010) supports Mezirow's theory that articulates reflection as the process of becoming aware of and evaluating the validity of one's meaning perspectives. Exploring the leaders' frames of reference was key to the coaching conversations conducted for this study, as it challenged them to reflect on the beliefs that have influenced how they have been engaging with their teams.

Terblanche (2018) buttresses the theory that meaning perspectives or frames of reference comprise habits of mind, which are expressed as points of view, as these categorise experience, beliefs, opinions, people, events and oneself through a set of rules, structures, criteria, codes, schemata, standards, values, personality training and dispositions upon which our thoughts, feelings, opinions and actions are based. According to Mezirow (1997), frames of reference incorporate reasoning, conative, and emotional components, and are made up of two dimensions: habits of mind and points of view. An example of a habit of mind, provided by Mezirow (2009), is ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is the predisposition to regard those outside of one's group as inferior, untrustworthy or less acceptable, which results in a point of view that is governed by negative feelings, beliefs, judgements and attitudes regarding individuals or groups who have different characteristics from our own. Mezirow (2009) adds that a positive experience with an individual or group who is different from our own may change an ethnocentric point of view, but not necessarily change one's ethnocentric habit of mind regarding other groups.

Considering this example, habits of mind are broad, abstract, habitual ways of thinking, feeling and acting that are influenced by a set of assumptions that make up a set of codes which are cultural, social, educational, economic, political or psychological. They are expressed as a point of view, that is, the collection of the interpretation of these codes that generate beliefs, opinions, judgements, attitudes and feelings.

Mezirow (2009) concludes that frames of reference result from cultural integration and the idiosyncratic influences of primary caregivers. Moreover, habits of mind are more durable than points of view, which are subject to ongoing change as we continue to reflect on content or processes we use to solve problems and identify the need to modify assumptions as a consequence of trying to understand actions that do not work as we anticipated. Therefore, we can experiment with someone's point of view but not with their habit of mind; this is because points of view are more accessible to awareness and feedback from others. This raises questions regarding the expression 'changing one's mind', which may require a more fitting explanation such as 'changing one's point of view'.

Anchoring the unwavering influence of habits of mind, Hoggan (2016) writes that these are formulated from meaning perspectives or frames of reference, which is a broad set of assumptions. When these habits of mind or worldviews are challenged, it creates what Mezirow coined a "disorienting dilemma," thus forcing adults to re-evaluate their basic assumptions so that they may embark on a process of change. Hoggan's (2016) research confirms that transformation encompasses structural shifts in thought, feelings and action, and that this shift impacts the foundation of thought, feelings, actions, consciousness and ways of being. Challenging the leader's habit of mind in leadership development coaching provided a reflective space and trusted partner with whom they were able to share their thoughts and opinions, and shape a new way of knowing.

Understanding the ways in which adults learn, Mezirow (1997) credits Jürgen Habermas to help us appreciate that learning may be clustered into four categories:

i) Instrumental – learning that is manipulative or done to control the environment or other people, in order to enhance effectiveness in improving performance;

ii) Impressionistic – learning to improve one's impression or others' perceptions when presenting oneself;

iii) Normative – learning that is directed towards common values and an epistemological sense of entitlement (members of a certain group are entitled to have behavioural expectations); and

iv) Communicative – learning in order to understand the meaning of what is being communicated. This typically involves two persons who want to understand the justification or interpretation of a belief.

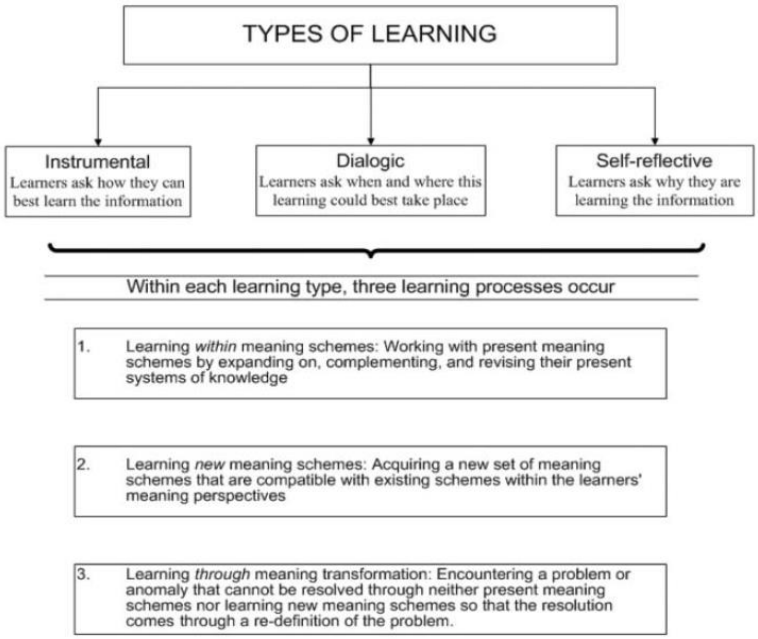



**Figure 2: A diagrammatic representation of Mezirow's (1985) revised Transformative Learning Theory (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 111)**

Figure 2, above, represents a diagrammatic representation of how Mezirow (1997) builds onto Habermas' categories by adding the following four processes to learning: (1) expanding on a prevailing point of view by seeking further evidence to support, expand or intensify the initial bias towards a group (learning within meaning schemes); (2) learning to establish new points of view by creating new meaning schemes that are compatible with existing points of view (learning new meaning schemes); (3) learning to transform our points of view by critically reflecting on our misconceptions (learning through meaning transformation); and (4) transforming one's habits of mind by increasing awareness and critical reflection of our generalised biases (learning

through meaning transformation) – the latter of which is most uncommon. Therefore, it can be concluded that not all learning is transformative.

Mezirow (1997) purports that transformative changes are not made in the way in which we learn as long as what we learn fits comfortably into our existing frames of reference. Terblanche (2018) supports this by stating that when a person encounters a challenge that cannot be resolved in the first two processes (to expand an existing meaning scheme or to learn a new meaning scheme), the problem dictates that assumptions and meaning making must be transformed. Therefore, transformation is possible when critical self-reflection occurs and the experience is interrogated through discourse, which is explained as a dialogue dedicated to assessing reasons and supporting dialectic interpretations by critically evaluating evidence, arguments and alternate points of view (Mezirow, 1997).

Critical reflection appears to be a developmental process grounded in experience. Engaging in rational discourse is necessary for transformative learning (Taylor, 2007). Taylor gives credence to Mezirow's theory (1997) that adult learning is perceived as enhancing the capacity to validate learning through reflective discourse and to action the resulting insights; this moves the individual to a more inclusive, differentiated openness to other points of view and integrated meaning perspectives, while aiding adult development. The critical reflective discourse supports the application of transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching, as the vehicle for these conversations, with the setting being a relationship of trust that is guarded by confidentiality.

Dirkx (1998) reinforces Mezirow's work by confirming that transformative learning theory is grounded in cognitive and developmental psychology. Moreover, central to Mezirow's conceptualisation of transformative learning is the process of making meaning from our experiences through critical reflection and critical self-reflection, which he eventually named perspective transformation, so as to demonstrate change within the core meaning perspectives or structures that are made up of beliefs, values and assumptions acquired through life experience. Furthermore, Merriam (2008)

claims that critical reflection is necessary for transformative learning, for developing brain capacity as well as confronting power and politics in workplace learning.

Contextualising transformative learning and the expected experiences of an individual undergoing transformation, Terblanche (2018) highlights 10 phases a person may experience when undergoing Mezirow's transformative learning theory. These phases are depicted in Table 1, below, with the eleventh phase added later for logical progression. It is important to note that, for transformation to occur, it is not required that a person experiences all eleven phases, or that they are experienced in the order presented below.

**Table 1**: Mezirow's eleven phases of transformative learning (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 105)

| Phase | Experience |
|---|---|
| 1 | Disorienting dilemma |
| 2 | Self-examination |
| 3 | Critical assessment of one's epistemic, sociocultural or psychic assumptions |
| 4 | Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change |
| 5 | Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions |
| 6 | Planning a course of action |

| | |
|---|---|
| 7 | Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans |
| 8 | Provisional trying of new roles |
| 11* | Altering present relationships and forging new relationships |
| 9 | Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships |
| 10 | Reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective |

*Phase 11 added after the initial 10 phases were developed to demonstrate logical progression.

Cox (2006) states that to grow is to question, which is not possible to articulate without help from others. This is where the work of the coach lies: in questioning the basic assumptions and beliefs that uncover the meaning perspectives proposed by Mezirow. Therefore, it is a convincing theory to apply to shifting socialised values and leaders' beliefs, and explore the possibilities within the coaching process so as to create a "disorienting dilemma" that catalyses reflection.

Anchoring this process, Kitchenham (2008) states that straightforward reflection is an intentional assessment, whereas critical reflection includes the nature and consequence of individual actions as well as the associated circumstances of their origin. Therefore, Kitchenham (2008) introduces three types of reflection and their roles in transforming meaning schemes and perspectives: content, process and premise reflection. These are outlined in Figure 3, below.

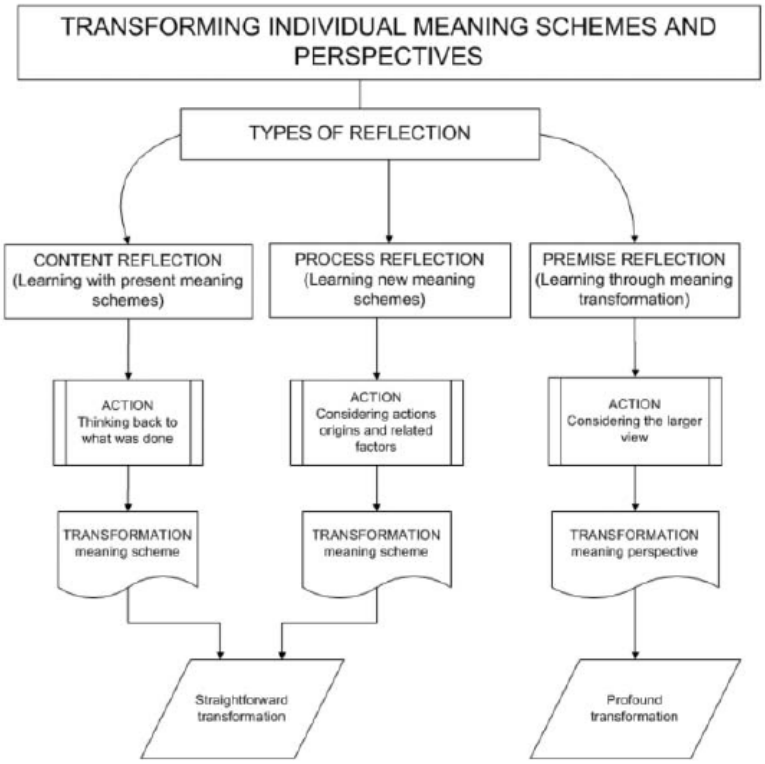



**Figure 3: A diagrammatic representation of Mezirow's (1995) three phases of reflection (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 115)**

In Figure 3, above, Kitchenham (2008) defines content reflection as thinking back on what was done; this may involve transformation of a meaning scheme. Mezirow (1991) describes content reflection as becoming aware of or thinking back on one's feelings, perceptions, thoughts and actions, and making a decision or judgement in the present based on what can be learnt. Process reflection, as seen in Figure 3, according to Mezirow (1991), is an examination of the aetiology of feelings, perceptions, thoughts and actions, as well as an evaluation of other factors to be revealed. Terblanche (2018) supports this definition by stating that it is an evaluation of the origin of one's actions and factors related to those actions in order to learn. Premise reflection, according to Kitchenham (2008), considers an in-depth view of what is occurring within one's frame of reference, and could transform a meaning perspective rather than a meaning scheme. In light of these definitions, content and process reflection can potentially change a meaning scheme, but premise reflection may change a meaning perspective.

Exploring the nature of a disorienting dilemma, a critical finding in Mezirow's theory, Calleja (2014) writes that Mezirow's original finding in transformative learning was a disorienting dilemma and is assigned as one of the major phases for personal transformation. However, according to Mälkki (2012), it remains unclear how a disorienting dilemma leads to reflection. Calleja (2014) defines a disorienting dilemma as experiences that can challenge invisible and unquestioned assumptions that determine self-knowledge or our interpretation of the world around us; Mezirow, however, attributes a disorienting dilemma to a life crisis or major transition.

Another suggestion offered by Carolyn Clark (1993) is that a trigger can go beyond a single event or emotion; one can be triggered by 'integrating circumstances' which is defined as "indefinite periods in which the persons consciously or unconsciously search for something which is missing in their life, when they find this missing place, the transformation process is catalysed" (Calleja, 2014, p. 129). The claims of Carolyn Clark are supported within this study in that the nature of learning was incremental and culminated in a disorienting dilemma; this is not experienced as a crisis but a gradual transition to the consideration of an alternate worldview.

One can then reasonably state that a disorienting dilemma, the main phase for transformation, lacks clarity in its definition, and what constitutes a disorienting dilemma could perhaps be defined by the individual who experiences the transformative process. In support of this claim, Poutiatine (2009) has a multifaceted definition in which he describes it as when the individual encounters something that creates tension in their dominant narrative of how the world is or how it works; it could be triggered by new information, new behaviour, a new way of thinking or feeling. Whatever the dilemma may be, it creates an experience of disorientation that does not fit the current worldview or meaning perspectives of the individual.

The individual then chooses to either ignore, devalue, discredit or discard the new information, or engages with it constructively, thus choosing to work through the implications of new information or experience through a transformational process. John Dirkx (2006) is, however, not convinced that the choice to engage in the transformational process may be a conscious one; still, during the transformational

process, acceptance transitions into the individual's conscious awareness (Poutiatine, 2009). A disorienting dilemma, as defined by Mezirow, is not the only way of experiencing transformation; it could potentially be a life crisis and some other event that engages the individual in alternate worldviews over a period of time.

### 2.3.3 *The application of transformative learning theory during coaching*

The action research method is supported by Cox et al. (2009) who describe transformational coaching as an enabling process for coachees, which creates fundamental shifts in their capacity by transforming their ways of thinking, feeling and behaving in relation to others. The ability to shift meaning schemes (beliefs, attitudes and emotions) during coaching, which leads to a perspective transformation, is based on Mezirow's insights into transformative learning theory, wherein he clarifies the processes by which adults learn and change behaviours (Cox et al., 2009). Mezirow defines transformative learning as "the process of learning through critical self-reflection, which results in the reformulation of a meaning perspective to allow a more inclusive, discriminating and integrative understanding of experience. Learning includes acting on these insights" (Cox, 2006, p. 27). Mezirow's theory is critical to both adult learning and coaching as it catalyses shifts in thinking by inducing comprehensive change in the client and learning experiences; these shape the client and have a significant impact or cause paradigm shifts that affect the client's subsequent experiences (Cox, 2006).

The disorienting dilemma within a client's meaning perspective creates reflection and, consequently, a client who is more coachable and ready for a transformative coaching process (Cox, 2006). Supporting the argument of a coaching platform, Gray (2006) postulates that transformative learning argues that we can never make interpretations of our experiences that are free from bias. Therefore, exposing those ideas and thoughts in reflective discourse by engaging those who are best informed, who can offer critical assessment and can arrive consensually at the best judgement, creates a platform for which a coach is ideally positioned; however, he continues by saying that critical reflection is not the call to action on the part of the client, instead it is the disorienting dilemma. As indicated by Mezirow (1991), most critical reflection occurs

within the context of problem solving, reflecting on problem content, the process of problem-solving and the underlying premise of the problem; this often takes place through a process of action research in which learners engage in a collaborative process with others in order to shape new perspectives that can include organisational belief systems and cultures.

Gray (2006) adds that transformative learning can be significant for workplace environments, through coaching, and is distinguished between instrumental learning (learning to control or manipulate) and communicative learning. Instrumental learning involves problem-solving and learning from experience, which is often done by shop-floor employees; it is necessary to pay attention to how managers and professionals learn this way. Therefore, Gray (2006, p. 489) proposes that "coaching for competence involves cultivating the learner's (coachee's) ability to negotiate meanings and purposes instead of passively accepting the social realities defined by others."

Complexity in the workplace necessitates investigating alternate forms of developing leadership competence to help cope with constant change. This is supported by Brooks (2004) who states that increasingly complex and diverse, fast-paced and rapid change places pressure on workers to respond to workplace challenges such as racism, sexism and the requirement for workers to self-manage; these challenges need employees to reconceptualise their identities, values, beliefs and behaviours, which is exceptionally difficult for managers who are expected to know what is and what is going on. Gray (2006) proposes that critical thinking attached to dealing with such complexities can be facilitated through coaching dialogues that encourage adult thinking towards increasing complexity. The coaching dialogue aims to set the scene to transform a client's thinking and behaviour through a mixture of support and challenges, thus creating a disequilibrium in the coachee's thinking, but not so much that confidence and motivation are threatened. Creating this disequilibrium is buttressed through the application of transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching.

Developmental coaching is described, by Cox et al. (2009), as an inherent assumption of movement from where the client is now to where they want to be in relation to

practical changes in the work environment. In responding to changes from emotional pressure or making changes to levels of understanding, and responses to what is happening around them, the coach is not only focusing on problem solving but also on increasing client capacity which is scaffolded through problem solving. It can therefore be viewed as a natural progression from skills to performance-focused coaching, wherein coaches work across a spectrum of contexts to develop people; as their functioning improves, so does their confidence and self-efficacy, and they learn more about themselves (Cox et al., 2009).

Corrie and Lawson (2017) combine executive coaching and transformative learning into their model of transformative coaching, which works with the coaching story. This model is presented in Table 2 and Figure 4, below.

**Table 2**: Mapping Dingman (2004), Mezirow et al. (2000) and Transformative Learning Coaching (Corrie & Lawson, 2017, p. 54)

| Dingman's (2004) Six Generic Stages of Coaching | Transformative Learning Model of Coaching | Mezirow's (2000) Ten Phases of Transformative Learning |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Formal contracting | Stage 1 – Rapport building and listening. Developing a safe place and trust – creating a liminal space. Allowing the coachee's story to be heard, listening, enabling ventilation. Finding the coachee's disorienting dilemma. | 1. Disorienting dilemma |
| 2. Relationship building | | |
| 3. Assessment | Stage 2 – Critical reflection. The coachee hears their own story. | 2. A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Suspension of normality. Critical reflection and making sense of the story. | 3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions. |
| 4. Getting feedback and reflecting | Stage 3 – Making meaning from the story. Testing problematic frames of reference, critical self-reflection, exploring alternative perspectives. Meaning making, developing a clearer picture, and starting to reframe. | 4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared, and that others have negotiated a similar change. |
| 5. Goal setting | Stage 4 – Working with meaning. Re-framing, new knowledge/skills developing new perspectives. Developing a plan of action. | 5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions.<br><br>6. Planning a course of action.<br><br>7. Acquisition of the requisite knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans.<br><br>8. Provisional trying of new roles. |
| 6. Implementation and evaluation | Stage 5 – Integration and investiture. The coachee's new story has been accepted | 9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | and integrated into their worldview. | 10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective. |

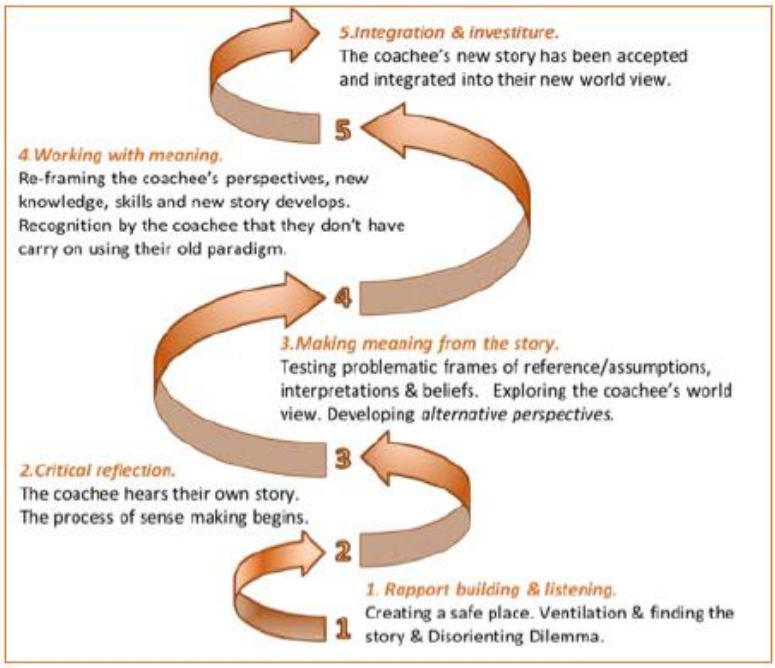



**Figure 4: Proposed Transformative Coaching Model (Corrie & Lawson, 2017, p. 55)**

Table 2 and Figure 4, above, demonstrate the separate processes of generic coaching, and that it can complements or fit into transformative coaching. Each of the steps that link generic coaching to transformative coaching are matched. Furthermore, the 10 phases of transformative learning theory correlate with a coaching process. This demonstrates that practically combining transformative learning theory during a coaching intervention is possible. According to Corrie and Lawson (2017), early application of the transformative learning coaching model in coaching interventions, especially where the client experienced conflict with the organisational goals, proved

to be positive in closing the psychological gap; in addition, the transformative learning approach focused the coaching intervention on the person and, in so doing, enhanced the environment.

The literature suggests that adult learning theory is foundational to coaching. Furthermore, in order to create disequilibrium on the meaning perspectives of adults, that is, stimulating critical reflection that creates new meaning, is possible through transformative learning theory. Transformative learning theory has theoretically substantiated its practical use for application during leadership development coaching by combining coaching processes and the 11 phases of transformative learning to shift the frames of reference (values, beliefs, worldviews and opinions) by moving the coachees to a new way of knowing.

### 2.3.4 *Proposition 1: Transformative learning theory and coaching can impact adult learning and change*

This proposition aims to answer the research question: in what way does the application of transformative learning theory create sustainable change in leaders? Leadership development coaching, through the application of transformative learning theory, can create a disruption, a disorienting dilemma, in the meaning perspectives of adults so as to facilitate an organisational culture that is centred on diversity, inclusion and equality, which is meant to improve employee engagement.

## 2.4 Employee Engagement and organisational culture

Eldor and Vigoda-Gadot (2017, p.1) define employee engagement as “an active, fulfilling and work-related state of mind that includes a strong identification with the organisation and self-expression.” They add that “engagement refers to involvement, passion, enthusiasm and energy” (Eldor & Vigoda-Gadot, 2017, p. 3) Statements of employee engagement make claims that it has the potential to shift organisational performance, however, understanding its explicit meaning lacks clarity, as will be demonstrated in the ensuing literature review. Serrano and Reichard (2011) suggest that employee engagement, a leadership responsibility, refers to the cognitive, emotional and behavioural interaction, that is, the investment employees make in their

work roles and tasks. This has a strong positive link to organisational commitment, job satisfaction, physical well-being and financial returns. Given the apparent benefits thereof, guidance is needed for practitioners who are training and coaching leaders, as well as leaders themselves, on the need to focus on employee engagement as a strategic imperative (Serrano & Reichard, 2011). The hypothesis of employee engagement is that the right kind of leadership energises and mobilises employees which, in turn, drives organisational development. In support of this premise, Ladyshewsky (2010) states that coaching leaders can boost organisational productivity, and that the manager as coach role is a strategy for organisational development as it focuses on changing the relationship between the manager and the employee.

Driving cultural change using leadership coaching, to achieve employee engagement, necessitates attention (Rock & Donde, 2008). Schein (1983, p. 14) defines culture with the aim of explaining the process of learning culture and the evolution of culture: "a pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration – a pattern that has worked well enough to be considered valid and taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems."

Much like transformative adult learning theory postulates that our socialisation within a given culture forms our habits of mind, the definition of culture provided by Schein supports the notion that organisational culture is a culmination of the meaning perspectives of those within the organisation, that is, those patterns of behaviour they have created and deemed to be correct. Leaders play various roles in culture creation, maintenance and evolution; however, it is important to note that once a culture is created leaders maintain it or become a product of it – or the type of leaders recruited are based on the culture. In light of this dynamic, when the culture is dysfunctional, leaders need to actively engage themselves in its evolution (Schein, 2017). Reflection needs to be given to inclusion, identity and authority. In South Africa, equality, diversity and inclusion provide an opportunity to move past exclusionary criteria (Daya, 2014). The unfortunate legacy of apartheid means that workforce representation in South

African organisations remains imbalanced (Daya, 2014). A consequence of this imbalance is a dysfunctional organisational culture in which some groups enjoy greater privilege than others.

### 2.4.1 *Employee Engagement*

Employee engagement provides organisations with employee sentiment on their sense of belonging; it is usually the main avenue by which employees can express their desire for change. Macey and Schneider (2008), however, suggest that the meaning of employee engagement is ambiguous amongst scholars and practitioners alike. They therefore draw on diverse literature, and offer proposals concerning: (a) psychological state engagement; (b) behavioural engagement; and (c) trait engagement, and the effects of job attributes as well as the impact of leadership on behavioural engagement, as seen in Figure 5, below. Common to the various definitions offered, employee engagement is a desirable condition, has organisational purpose, brings involvement, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, focused effort and energy, demonstrating it has both attitudinal and behavioural components – thus, suggesting that employees contribute more and are less likely to voluntarily separate from the organisation (Macey & Schneider, 2008). In contrast, Saks (2006) purports that engagement is not an attitude, but can be conceptualised as the extent to which an individual is attentive and absorbed in the performance of their roles. Nonetheless, employee engagement appears to provide empirical evidence of the link between employee sentiment and organisational performance. Paying attention to indicators of employee engagement, through the application of transformative learning during leadership development coaching, can help to facilitate an organisational culture centred on equality, diversity and inclusion.

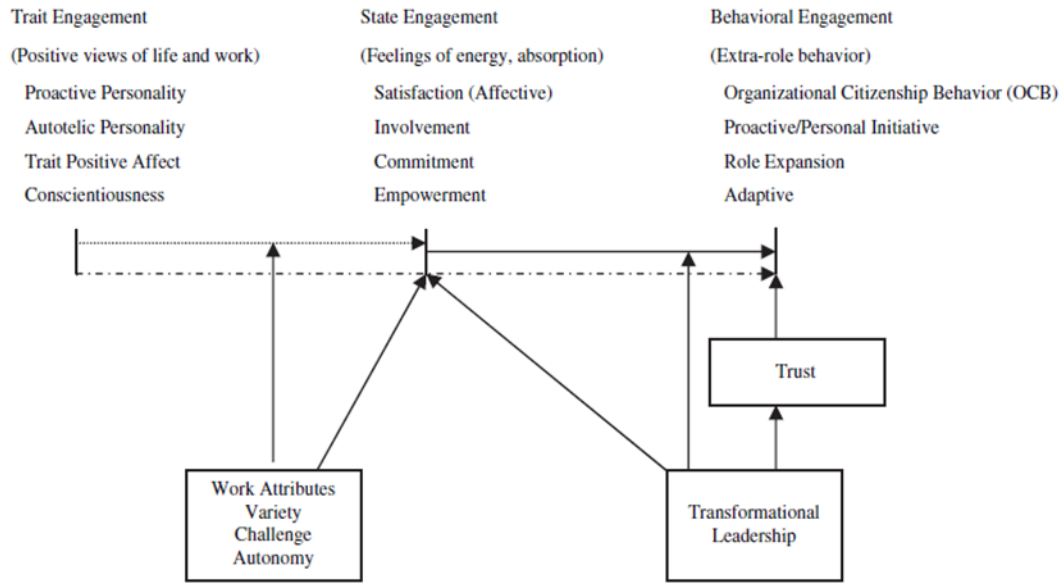



**Figure 5: Framework for understanding the elements of employee engagement (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p.6)**

Figure 5, above, demonstrates employee engagement as a disposition, namely, trait engagement, and as a predisposition to experience the world from a particular point of view which is largely positive, characterised by feelings of interest and excitement, which is therefore reflected in psychological state engagement, a precursor to behavioural engagement, which is defined in terms of discretionary effort (Macey & Schneider, 2008). The characteristics of work – such as its challenges, variety and the nature of leadership, especially transformational leadership, which have a direct effect on trust – show that work has a direct impact on state and behavioural engagement (Macey & Schneider, 2008). In providing clarity on trait engagement, Dalal, Brummel, Wee and Thomas (2008) distinguish between measuring traits and states; they explain that traits tend to focus on differences between people (individual differences) and that the studying of states tends to focus on differences within a given person over time (intra-individual differences). This approach acknowledges that the employee may be engaged on some occasions and disengaged on others, which affects performance, thus highlighting what Macey and Schneider (2008) refer to as a state that has actually been measured exclusively as a trait. Therefore, it is misleading to name this state behaviour, however, the researchers acknowledge that state behaviour studies do not exist due to the onerous nature of the research. While the naming convention of Macey

and Schneider (2008) may create confusion, there is value to their research as they have made a significant contribution towards understanding employee engagement as a psychological state.

In support of the statement that there is value to understanding employee engagement as a psychological state, Eldor and Vigoda-Gadot (2017) propose that employee engagement includes psychological empowerment and psychological contract, as it shares characteristics of active attitude, enthusiasm, involvement, passion and energy. Kahn (1990) suggest three psychological conditions that influence employee engagement: meaningfulness, psychological safety and psychological availability. Building onto Kahn's theory, Macey and Schneider (2008) propose engagement as a psychological state that embraces ideas of absorption, attachment and enthusiasm relating to categories of job involvement and satisfaction (meaningfulness), organisational commitment (psychological availability) and psychological empowerment (psychological safety). Therefore, engagement extends beyond basic concepts to include the willingness to invest in and expend one's discretionary effort in order to help the employer succeed (Macey & Schneider, 2008). A leader's ability to unlock their mental oppressions of diversity and equality through transformative learning, during leadership development coaching, and learning to engage their people through appreciating their individual differences, has the potential to shift organisational culture and business performance.

As depicted in Figure 5, psychological state engagement is central to trait and behavioural engagement. Behavioural engagement is described by Macey and Schneider (2008) as that which is directly observable behaviour, displaying discretionary effort that can be defined as extra time, brainpower and energy. In this description, frame of reference is implied but not made explicit, thus allowing one to conclude that engagement behaviours are evident in employees who are innovative, demonstrate initiative, proactively seek opportunities to contribute and expend their energies beyond what is, within specific frames of reference, typically expected or required. A recent study by Kwon and Kim (2020) support this statement, in that they identify creativity and innovation as distinguishing factors for contemporary business;

moreover, they state that organisational success requires extensive cognitive, psychological and physical exertion.

Kwon and Kim (2020, p. 2) define innovative behaviour as “the intentional proposal and application of novel and improved ideas, processes, practices and policies aimed at organisational effectiveness, business success and long term sustainability.” This is distinguished from creativity, which entails novel ideas and innovative behaviour that encompasses an inter-individual socio-psychological process concerned with the execution of ideas, and which often occurs with planned change. Innovative behaviour is often associated with job performance, typically broken down into in-role and extra-role job performance, in which extra-role performance often refers to discretionary behaviours and enriches organisational functioning (Kwon & Kim, 2020). Macey and Schneider (2008) concur that engagement behaviour is inclusive of those behaviours categorised as organisational citizenship behaviour, which includes role expansion. It then appears that engagement unlocks creativity and innovation, thus making it essential for the continued economic participation of the organisation.

Expanding the concept of citizenship, Saks (2006) proposes that a key construct of employee engagement is organisational citizenship behaviour, which Macey and Schneider (2008) describe as behaviours that support or enhance the social and psychological environment necessary for individual task performance. In concluding their research on engagement behaviour, Macey and Schneider (2008) propose that behavioural engagement is adaptive and intended to serve an organisational purpose, be it maintaining the status quo, or responding to actual or anticipated change.

As a dispositional construct, engagement refers to a personality characteristic or the experience of state affect over time, which can affect proactive behaviour and initiative. It thus encompasses a number of interrelated facets such as positive affectivity, conscientiousness, a proactive personality and an autotelic personality – all of which experience work in a positive, active and energetic way and are able to behave adaptively, while displaying discretion in supporting the organisation attain its goals (Macey & Schneider, 2008). The authors add that transformational leadership has a specific influence on state and behavioural engagement, in which leaders can

attitudinally and behaviourally shift workers to be more engaged. According to Shuck and Herd (2012), employee engagement research suggests that leadership behaviour can influence many factors related to engagement; however, there is a labyrinth of research associated with each construct individually, which highlights the significance of being able to synthesize the literature and propose a conceptual framework.

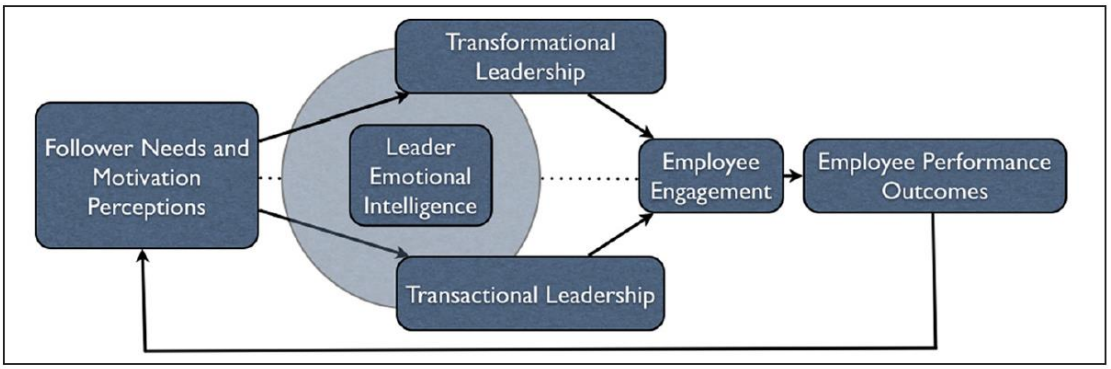



**Figure 6: Conceptual model of leadership and employee engagement (Shuck & Herd, 2012, p.172)**

The literature review has addressed employee engagement thus far, therefore, this discussion with focus specifically on the influence of leadership on employee engagement, in an effort to understand its relational constructs. In reference to Figure 6, above, leadership and engagement operate differently in various settings, systems and/or contexts. In some situations leadership is required to be direct, blunt and commanding (typically associated with an organisational threat), while other situations may call for softer approaches that are developmental, subtle and emotionally sensitive – thus, creating a stagnant or restrictive leadership construct is both exclusionary and reductionist (Shuck & Herd, 2012).

Furthermore, Serrano and Reichard (2011) purport that the ability to create an engaged workforce is important to talent retention, increased productivity, and customer loyalty. Leadership's role in employee engagement is an important aspect of overcoming a lack of employee engagement (Serrano & Reichard, 2011). It supports transformational leadership as a suitable theory to conceptualise behavioural

engagement in a leadership context, which could be described as an antecedent to employee engagement (Shuck & Herd, 2012).

In contrast to transformational leadership, transactional leadership is described as "a set of behaviours that motivate and guide followers in the direction of goals by providing clear expectations and resources for the completion of work" (Shuck & Herd, 2012, p. 165). Transactional leadership creates equitable exchanges with employees through goal setting and the provision of rewards.

Transformational leaders influence through idealised influence (personal charisma), inspirational motivation (setting challenging goals, and creating confidence in their followers that these goals can be achieved), intellectual stimulation (conceptualisation, comprehension and discernment of the nature of problems) and individualised consideration (building personal relationships with followers, thus providing individual attention) (Shuck & Herd, 2012; Serrano & Reichard, 2011).

It is evident that transactional and transformational leadership are required for employee engagement, as both are necessary for enabling employee performance. As shown in Figure 6, the building blocks for employee engagement are the follower's needs and motivations; leaders use emotional intelligence skills to connect with employees and, in turn, employees use their perceptions of the leader's emotional intelligence skills to make decisions regarding the type of leader with whom they work and to analyse the organisational climate (Shuck & Herd, 2012)

### 2.4.2 *Organisational Culture*

Al-Najem, Dhakal and Bennett (2012) explain that before evaluating organisational culture, it is necessary to examine those factors that can have a direct impact on organisational culture. These factors include: history, goals and objectives, size, location, management and staffing, primary function and organisational environment, and acknowledging that culture and leadership work simultaneously to drive organisational success. Schein (2017) writes that every culture is embedded in some larger culture, and can only do what the larger culture affords, tolerates or supports. In the current study, the organisation's dominant German and European/Western

culture operating in South Africa presents unique challenges which are observed in the findings.

In confirming cultural complexities, Plowman, Solansky, Beck, Baker, Kulkarni and Travis (2007) write that organisations are complex systems that do not exist in equilibrium. In their view, the ongoing interaction of system components leads to emergent and self-organising behaviour; hence, understanding the role of leadership in systems wherein change often emerges in unexpected ways, suggests that leaders enable rather than control the future. Although the degree of ambiguity is high, it is still expected that an organisation's leaders should know what is going to happen next, as if leaders can eliminate the ambiguity that characterises much of organisational life (Plowman et al., 2007). Willcoxson and Millett (2000) claim that although organisational cultures are dynamic to the extent that circumstances can lead to incorporating new patterns of behaviour or ideologies, these are still overlaid on existing core assumptions. Therefore, a culture may exhibit complex ambiguities or paradoxes until new behavioural adaptations to the environment promote a new belief system and a new set of core assumptions. Culture thus determines what a group pays attention to, how it monitors the external environment, and how it responds to this environment (Willcoxson & Millett, 2000).

Organisational culture is shaped when leaders embed their values, beliefs and assumptions through primary embedding mechanisms and secondary reinforcement, as well as stabilising mechanisms. Primary mechanisms are characterised as those areas to which leaders pay attention, measure and control on a regular basis, as well as the manner in which they respond to critical incidents and organisational crises. It also refers to the allocation of resources and rewards, status, as well as recruitment, selection, promotion and excommunication, together with deliberate role modelling, teaching and coaching (Schein, 2017). Organisational design, structure, systems, processes, physical space and stories about people and events, creeds and charters are secondary mechanisms (Schein, 2017). Therefore, Schein concludes that the mechanisms interact and reinforce each other if the leader's own beliefs, values and assumptions are consistent. There are many ways in which a leader can communicate

their assumptions; thus, much of the socialisation process is embedded in normal working routines and is evident in the behaviour of leaders.

Further to this, Sharma (2016) confirms that globalisation has forced changes in the demographic characteristics of the workforce. Individuals who have unique cultures, aspirations and expectations feel the urge to be respected in the workplace; thus, maintaining workplace harmony is important for organisational productivity. Daya (2014) confirms that the key inclusion elements that need to be transformed at an organisational level are senior leadership, organisational climate and belonging, communication, transparency of talent management practices, engagement that includes decision-making authority, access to information and the individual's relationship with the organisation's vision and values. Therefore, Sharma (2016) states that effective diversity management requires an organisational culture that is inclusive and which nurtures teamwork, participation and cohesiveness. However, the intricacies of inclusion need to be better outlined so that an employer's call for action is deliberate and intentional.

### 2.4.3 *Delineating the conceptual frame of equality, diversity and inclusion*

The literature on employee engagement substantiates the role of the leader as pivotal to shifting the employee's discretionary effort. The leader's desire to engage with their direct reports in a more interpersonal manner requires a deepened understanding of the values and beliefs of equality and diversity in the South African context, as they impact upon workplace inclusion practices that affect organisational culture. Hollins and Govan (2015) write that Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) are for those leaders who seek a transformative leadership role in organisations. The relevance of EDI in the workplace can be practiced in a myriad of complex ways due to social, political and cultural practices (Èzbilgin, 2009). The conceptual frame of EDI needs to be dealt with separately, as each has a distinct dimension: equality speaks to power within the workplace and access to opportunities; diversity refers to the multiplicity in human difference; and inclusion adds the strategic and purposive interventions that are planned in order to deal with the powers and differences at work – all of which impact upon employee engagement (Èzbilgin, 2009). In support of this statement,

Holloway and Schwartz (2018) write that diversity is understood through the demographics of a group or organisation, while inclusion comprises employee involvement and integration of diversity into organisational systems and processes. However, as diversity covers a myriad of individual characteristics and differences, its term being positioned as inclusive, diversity often waters down the specific challenges that need to be addressed within an organisation.

In the South African context, Daya (2014) notes that, in South Africa, equality, diversity and inclusion are often viewed through the lens of employment equity legislation, without focussing on organisational and individual change. Moreover, Daya (2014) states that research on inclusion is lacking in the South African body of literature on this subject. Yet again, the unique position of South African inclusion is complex and undefined, thus needing practitioners to experiment with workplace inclusion. Roberson (2006) notes that organisations have come to realise that the extent to which they efficiently manage demographic workforce changes will impact upon organisational functioning and competitiveness, as well as the removal of barriers that block employees from utilising their skills and competencies, in order to espouse a focus on inclusion in the management of diversity. Ahmed and Swan (2006) ask, if diversity does not necessarily appeal to our sense of social justice, then what exactly is its appeal? As the terms diversity and equality have replaced other vocabularies that are no longer used in policy debates – such as equal opportunity, social justice, antiracism and multiculturalism, all of which are terms with complex histories – diversity has become the catchall term for this array of concepts, thus diluting their importance which is bound up in a history of political movements. If the language of diversity is being used to replace other kinds of language, then it is important that we question what it is that diversity does, what are its effects, and what difference does it make? This use of the language of diversity to silence other discourses is therefore problematic as it individuates difference, conceals inequalities and neutralises the history of struggle (Ahmed & Swan, 2006). Similarly, Roberson (2006) adds that even the movement from diversity to inclusion has a limited understanding of material change in organisational actions and outcomes. Is it simply changing phrasing? One

of the primary defences for the use of the term ‘diversity’ is its inclusiveness, however, it may still conceal how race and gender work (Ahmed & Swan, 2006).

### 2.4.4 *Equality and diversity*

Systemic bias creates leadership challenges for equality in the workplace. This is because employees do not perceive access to promotion, development and benefits as equal, due to historical bias. Remedying the historical bias through structural reform presents opportunities for equality; however, if leaders are not aware of or lack competence in dealing with issues of equality, the employee experience does not shift to that of engagement and inclusion. As societal issues evolve, so do issues of inclusion. Hence, Sharma (2016) shows that there is empirical evidence that highlights the challenges faced by managers when managing diversity and equality. There is an idea that time plays an important role in understanding equality, in that progress towards equality takes place over time; however, without intervention, time can provide greater levels of inequality and discrimination (Èzbilgin, 2009). It can therefore be assumed that, without the redress of inequity, issues of equality and diversity do not disappear.

According to Gagnon and Cornelius (2000), the introduction of diversity management and equality support equal opportunities in the workplace; they add that equal opportunities canvass topics that are deeply rooted in rights and legal compliance in order to remove discrimination and create access to opportunities for women and under-represented groups in senior management positions (as seen in Table 3, below). Alternatively, diversity management focuses on equality and differences on an individual level; this refers largely to an intervention using business case arguments that support organisational development (Gagnon & Cornelius, 2000).

**Table 3**: Equal opportunities and managing diversity: A comparison (Gagnon & Cornelius, 2000, p. 69).

| Equal Opportunities | Managing Diversity |
|---|---|
| Legal frameworks prohibiting discrimination form the bases of workplace programmes | Depends on organisational initiative |
| Compliance | Proactive and internally driven |
| “Melting pot” result, equality is achieved through sameness, based on the merit that | Takes equality further through eliciting contributions from ethnic minorities, disabled persons, and other groups |
| Aims to increase the proportion of under-represented groups in senior roles | Moves beyond statistical valuing of differences, to recognising the organisational benefits that diversity can bring |
| Main focus has tended to be gender | Maximises employee potential |
| Liberal approach | Is about groups and individuals |
| May include positive action to redress past discrimination (radical approach) | Mosaic result, equality through difference |

Table 3, above, compares and distinguishes between equal opportunities and diversity. Tatli (2011) states that academic work fosters a dichotomous understanding of equal opportunities, as it prioritises ethically and legally protected groups. However, managing diversity focuses on business performance whereas, in professional practice, diversity management is perceived to be an evolution of equal opportunity processes that focused on the legal rights of minority groups, as opposed to diversity

which nurtures inclusiveness. Gagnon and Cornelius (2000) suggest the following series of dichotomies relating to equal opportunities and diversity management: (a) liberal versus radical approaches; (b) equal opportunity versus equality of outcome; (c) equality through 'sameness' versus equality through difference; and (d) equality for the purpose of social justice versus equality for 'competitive advantage' or business reasons. This gives one the impression that equal opportunities are very different undertakings and that its actions are separate from that of diversity management. It is essential to care for the needs of minority groups in order to provide them with equal access to opportunities. Diversity management supports initiatives for greater cohesion and does not observe the mandatory attention to issues of equality.

Pérotin and Robinson (2000) claim that equal opportunity practices affect individual and organisation productivity through much of the same mechanisms as other human resources practices, such as incentive schemes, career development, fairness and opportunities for releasing creativity. It includes a variety of measures from company policies committing to non-discrimination, to comprehensive measures to track patterns of discriminated groups, identify and correct sources of discrimination and improve opportunities from discriminated groups. Equal opportunity policies espouse fairness, organisational effectiveness and may increase psychological commitment as discriminated groups feel less undervalued (Pérotin & Robinson, 2000). Jewson and Mason (1986) note a theoretical distinction between liberal and radical conceptions of equal opportunity. Drawn from different notions of society, in the context of intellectual debate, they are easily distinguishable – however, in the practice of making relationships with others in specific social contexts, confusion looms. Table 4, below, depicts the main differences between the liberal and radical approaches to equal opportunity. Based on the table below, organisations that apply their efforts toward the creation of equal opportunities can distinguish and gauge their liberal and radical efforts of internal equal opportunities. It provides a benchmark against which to observe equal opportunity practices.

**Table 4**: Elements of liberal and radical conceptions of equal opportunity policies (Jewson & Mason, 1986, p. 312)

| Elements of equal opportunity policies | Conceptions of Equal Opportunity | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Liberal** | **Radical** |
| **Principles** | Fair Procedures | Fair distribution of rewards |
| **Implementation** | Bureaucratisation of decision making (e.g. training) | Politicisation of decision making |
| **Effectiveness** | Positive Action | Positive Discrimination |
| **Perceptions** | Justice seen to be done | Consciousness raising (e.g. training) |

Fleurbaey (1995) states that in order for equal opportunity to be possible, among several persons, each must have a variety of options equivalent to every other person's in terms of the prospects for preference. Luthans, Van Wyk, and Walumbwa (2004) note that South Africa's historical, social, economic and political factors increase the complexity of workplace environments for organisational leaders, and the impact that cultural diversity has on organisational behaviour. The influx of black employees into all levels of the organisation, creating greater cultural diversity, needs careful attention and proactive management (Luthans et al., 2004). It can therefore be deduced that the influx of black employees into all levels of the organisation creates the perception of diversity but may not necessarily equate to equality, as defined by Fleurbaey.

Mor Barak (2015) defines diversity by highlighting the process and consequence of diversity. He refers to workforce diversity as the separation of the workforce into different categories that: (a) have a perceived commonality within a certain cultural or national context, and (b) affect potential harmful or beneficial employment consequences such as job opportunities, treatment in the workplace and promotional opportunities, regardless of job-related skills and qualifications.

### 2.4.5 *Inclusion*

Equal access by employees to opportunities for promotion, development, benefits or any other offering afforded to one group should be equally available to another; this is foundational to driving diversity management interventions. Likewise, leaders who competently address issues of equality and diversity can strive for greater workplace inclusion and employee engagement, so as to meet business performance. Social cohesion is critical to achieving business goals. According to Sharma (2016), in order to accomplish workplace social cohesion, diversity management requires a culture that is inclusive and engenders teamwork, participation and cohesiveness. Daya (2014) supports the notion that inclusion acknowledges and utilises individual differences in the workplace to such an extent that the individual is engaged, and their performance is improved; in addition, due to globalisation and market competitiveness, there is a greater need to integrate diverse individuals through inclusion. Furthermore, Boekhorst (2015) states that inclusion, in broad terms, refers to employee involvement and organisational systems and processes integrated with diversity. Inclusion means that the voice of unrepresented groups – women, individuals from various ethnic groups, LGBQT+ employees, foreign nationals, disabled persons and those from lower social classes – are frequently represented and do not experience restrictions as a result of their individuality. This supports the intentions of the current study.

Boekhorst (2015) continues by highlighting that the importance of a climate for inclusion is largely overlooked, as a response to the growing trend of workplace diversity. Leaders who champion inclusion initiatives are instrumental to inclusion in the workplace; they engage with resistance to support a vision for an inclusive workplace. According to Mor Barak (2015), although progress has been made in terms

of diversity management, the exclusion of minority groups from circles of influence in the organisation prohibits them from fully contributing to the organisation and advancing their involvement in the workplace. In summary, inclusion-exclusion in the organisation refers to the individual's sense of belonging to the organisational system, in both formal and informal processes, such as access to information and decision-making channels, as well as lunch meetings wherein information exchange and decisions informally take place. Moreover, to feel included contains two accompanying needs: belonging and uniqueness (Mor Barak, 2015).

Social cohesion is built upon the premise that leaders are competently able to address, challenge and shift employee experiences and perceptions of equal opportunities and diversity. By using this knowledge, leaders can confidently engage in relational discourse, which is also necessary for transformative learning, so as to lead workplace inclusion. It can then be deduced that knowledge of equality and diversity can enhance leadership behaviour concerning employee engagement.

### 2.4.6 *Proposition 2: Equality, diversity and inclusion practices impact employee engagement*

This proposition aims to answer the research question: how can leadership coaching create an equal, diverse and inclusive workforce? Leadership competence in dealing with practices of equality and diversity management can shift the employee experience, which would result in a more inclusive workforce. This inclusive leadership behaviour can directly enhance employee engagement within the organisation, so as to meet its business objectives.

## 2.5 Leadership development coaching

An alternate and probable consideration to effect inclusive leadership behaviour is leadership development coaching. Kombarakaran, Yang, Baker and Fernandes (2008) define executive coaching as a short-term interactive process between the employee and the coach to improve leadership effectiveness by enhancing self-awareness and practising new behaviours. Executive coaching, according to Cox et al. (2009), is a broadly used term that describes leaders in executive to middle

management positions (it can sometimes include junior managers and high potentials) who are responsible for contributing towards the organisation's success; they define executive coaching as a personal learning and development intervention with the aim of improving performance and balancing the forces of cooperation and competition in an organisation. Ely, Boyce, Nelson, Zaccaro, Hernez-Broome and Whyman (2010) define leadership development coaching as the relationship between a client and their coach, in which the coach facilitates leadership effectiveness within the client. Common to the definitions offered is the belief that leadership coaching entails a dialogue between the coach and coachee in an effort to enhance the coaching client's current state to the desired one, for the purpose of self-improvement and to contribute to organisational effectiveness.

Understanding the criticality of leadership coaching and its unique offering, Shoukry and Cox (2018) confirm that, over the past thirty years, coaching has grown from a non-existent profession into a thriving industry. It is evident that the research conducted on coaching has mostly been quantitative, in an effort to prove the efficacy and impact of coaching on organisational effectiveness; however, there is a dearth of research that acknowledging coaching as a social process. From this critical perspective, coaching provides insights into the self that is affected by historical, cultural and social processes such as politics and power dynamics, as well as the potential to shift power and support agency, thus affecting social structure (Shoukry & Cox, 2018). This study aims to unpack the social processes than support or impede agency.

Reasonably then, the coaching process has the potential to provide a transformative experience that shifts the consciousness of a coaching client. A reflexive competence is critical for learning. Organisations need the right kind of leadership to survive; its roles and processes are critical in setting direction, soliciting commitment and aligning different groups of people. In support of this statement, Hassan and Ahmed (2011) purport that employee engagement is improved when employees believe in the competence of organisational leaders to make decisions that will assure the

profitability of the business; in addition to which, supervisory coaching can positively impact engagement.

### 2.5.1 *Coaching as a social process*

Shoukry and Cox (2018) argue that coaching takes place within the context of competition, return on investment, goal achievement and self-actualisation. Therefore, Shoukry and Cox (2018) posit that coaching simply becomes a tool for organisational and social conformity, wherein individuals receive qualified or expert support that would lead them to become more integrated into omnipresent ideologies and wherein organisational power dynamics may be at play; this makes coaching an enabler of conformity or change, and employs coaching as a process of control or resistance. According to Cushion (2018), the literature on coaching assumes and encourages neutrality on the part of the coach. Taking this into consideration, Shoukry and Cox (2018) argue that intercultural and oppressive contexts raise ethical debates on which values the coach seeks to uphold – for example, will they uphold compassion or confrontation, acceptance or criticality, adaptability or resistance? It is unlikely and unethical that coaches remain completely neutral.

Therefore, coaching for social change is an emerging field. Shoukry (2017) writes that there have been many scholars who critique coaching as maintaining oppression, however, coaching can also be emancipatory with its foundation in critical theory and postmodernism, sociology, psychology and pedagogy. In order to move individual thinking patterns, Tabarovsky (2015) adds that coaching practices have shifted the focal point from the organisational to the individual level, thus emphasising greater individual responsibility for personal development, personal happiness, and individual capacity to establish and achieve personal goals so as to facilitate company success. This places more weight on personal responsibility in exploring methods for organisational effectiveness and success, than it does on organisational culture and structure. This is associated with a neoliberal ideology, that seeks to build individualism in society. However, Tabarovsky (2015, p. 77) notes that “if coaching is functioning as a tool to reinforce the neoliberal status quo, acting as a technology of power and reproducing the existing neoliberal logic; then it is contributing to conformist

behaviour instead of encouraging creative thinking that is capable of breaking existing patterns…we must be ready to test and transform our mental patterns and practices to embrace change."

Likewise, Shoukry and Cox (2018) argue that conformity is problematic when coaching organisational leaders, as it may result in limited opportunities for influential and powerful leaders to critically examine the implications of their actions and to inquire into organisational practices. Therefore, understanding coaching as a social process could enable significant change, encourage leaders to take holistic responsibility, support a critically reflective approach to their actions by linking social perspectives with organisational goals, and promote their understanding of their role in establishing corporate social responsibility.

### 2.5.2 *Coaching skills and principles that help to differentiate coaching from other similar disciplines*

Rogers (2012, p. 7) defines coaching as "the coach working with clients to achieve speedy, increased and sustainable effectiveness…through focused learning. The coach's sole aim is to work with the client to achieve all the client's potential – as identified by the client". It is evident from this definition that the client is resourceful, the expert of their lives, and that the coach is merely facilitating their resourcefulness. According to Rogers (2012), this definition applies the following six principles: (1) the client is resourceful; (2) the coach's role is to develop the resourcefulness through a set of skills; (3) coaching addresses the person holistically – past, present and future; (4) the client takes charge of the agenda; (5) coach and client are equals (peers); and (6) coaching centres on change and action. These principles are implicit in Cox's (2015) statement that adults accumulate a reserve of experience that becomes a resource for learning at a later stage, therefore, the client is perceived as mature, motivated and an equal participant in the learning relationship.

Rogers (2012) proposes that the role of the coach is not to give advice; this principle stems from first asserting that the client is resourceful, therefore, the role of the coach is to ask meaningful questions to provoke reflection. When done well, asking the right

questions and phrasing your thoughts correctly, looks effortless; this is an exquisite coaching skill that needs to be primed and, in doing so, the coach would have cracked the most challenging barrier to effective coaching (Rogers, 2012). Although coaching is not psychoanalysis, personal experiences tend to affect the professional space; a coach who is able to understand the impact of this holistically is better able to facilitate transformation.

The next coaching principle described by Palmer and Whybrow (2007) refers to the agenda setting process as that which equates to power in the relationship; in this respect, the coach should always be mindful of who it is that the agenda serves. Rogers (2012) adds that, because the client sets the agenda, the coach allows the client to take ownership for their learning process and equalises the power in the relationship. Conversation is a predominant avenue for change (Palmer & Whybrow, 2007). If conversation is crucial in order for change to take place – as Cox (2015) explains, change is necessary for leadership that promotes personal transformation, which would create opportunities for organisational transformation – transformative learning, which is a deeply reflective process, can shift perceptions of one's self and fundamentally alter one's beliefs. Rogers (2012) indicates that clients come to coaching because they seek change; therefore, it is correct to assume that you cannot coach a client who is unwilling to change. Combining transformative learning and coaching creates an opportunity for dialogue, as it is a reflective process of creating meaning, the process of which is reiterative, and potentially impacts upon the individual's point of view on socialised norms of equality, diversity and inclusion. There is however a significant amount of tension between coaching principles and skills, particularly in relation to coaching for social change, as strict coaching principles cannot always be applied to coaching for social change. Moreover, the current study demonstrates that the agenda is not always set by the client, neither does knowledge inconclusively rest with the client; this is simply a product of socialisation and our individual ideologies that impact upon our understanding of diversity, equality and inclusion.

Furthermore, Shoukry and Cox (2018) write there is inherent tension in the three-way contract which exists between coach, coachee and the organisation; they also indicate that this tension could extend to further stakeholders who have hidden agendas and who are subject to complex power dynamics. Shoukry and Cox (2018) highlight four types of power dynamics, as noted by Diochon and Lovelace (2015), in executive coaching:

(1) Coaching as a tool of psychologicalisation – where there is an over-exaggeration on the part of the organisation seeking to make the individual the problem, rather than organisational systems, policies and/or practices;

(2) Coaching as a space for conformation – using the coaching platform as a vehicle to change the individual's behaviour so that they adapt to expected norms;

(3) Coaching as the externalisation of the management role – here coaches can be perceived as occupying functions and activities that other organisational members do not want to assume and;

(4) Coaching as a substitute for the collective – where coaching contributes to making people feel like there is a personal relationship and connection to their work and organisation without mentioning the group.

It is important for coaches to understand and reflect upon their coaching positionality in coaching conversations, that is, by contemplating who it is that they serve.

The difficulties inherent to coaching are more pronounced in contexts that imbalance cultural and socio-structural power dynamics, with the potential presence of oppression. Coaches may take different stances, the main two being the manner in which cultural diversity is understood. First, there is the ideal set of values and norms (absolutism), or the belief that values and norms are established in each cultural context and, therefore, no cultural view is dominant (relativism) (Shoukry & Cox, 2018). Second, there is the treatment of the existing social order, whether it is preferred to comply to accepted values and norms (conformism) or it is preferred to challenge their limitations and seek to change them if necessary in order to achieve a positive

outcome (criticality) (Shoukry & Cox, 2018). The positionality of coaches along these two continuums has four distinct positions that are often taken by coaches, and which are adapted from Milton Bennet's model of intercultural sensitivity (Shoukry & Cox, 2018, p. 419):

1. Denial (to ignore the social context and focus on the individual);
2. Substitution (to propose other cultural and social views as being superior);
3. Adaptation (to align coaching with the existing social context);
4. Integration and Criticality (to respect the context and work with it but help coaches to critically understand it and act on it.)

Earlier in the chapter, reference was made to leadership development coaching as a unique intervention that distinguishes itself from other organisational development interventions. Critical to its success are the coaching skills applied during coaching so as to create a disorienting dilemma, and the client's willingness to partake in such a process. Areas of equality and diversity are sensitive, and coaching provides the appropriate safe space in which leaders are able to openly share their socialised beliefs and values.

### 2.5.3 *Proposition 3: Coaching skills and client disposition matter*

This proposition intends to answer the research question: how can coaches use transformative learning theory in leadership development coaching? The client needs to have a readiness and maturity for change; likewise, the coach is required to have a specific set of skills, especially in the social context, that will motivate the client's learning and transformative journey.

## 2.6 Conclusion

Cox (2015) explains that change is necessary for personal transformation, which would create the opportunity for organisational transformation; the process is deeply reflective, can shift perceptions of one's self and fundamentally alter one's beliefs. In addition, Shoukry (2017) stipulates that social change is a form of transformation that makes society or workplaces more humanising by fostering human rights and striving towards a more just outcome, while also making them ecologically sustainable,

inclusive, empowering and peaceful. Therefore, coaching for social change and as a social process in organisations requires the integration and synthesis of various sets of knowledge and competence attached to employee engagement, organisational culture, equality, diversity and inclusion – these are embodied in a coaching experience that is transformative, for both client and coach.

This literature review has critically discussed and built on key concepts that motivate transformative adult learning theory and its application within leadership development coaching. There is no doubt that coaching conversations facilitate and create critical moments for reflection, and that they can stimulate a “disorienting dilemma” that can catalyse change in the values and beliefs of leaders – the purpose of which is to create an inclusive work environment. The main theoretical perspectives of adult learning theory, transformative learning, leadership coaching, employee engagement and theory on culture, with an emphasis on equality, diversity and inclusion, have been unpacked in this chapter, in order to provide greater context to the research undertaken in this dissertation.

Despite the literature review underpinning leadership development coaching with the foundational theoretical framework of transformative learning, additional experiential investigation has been identified as a requirement for deeper understanding. Therefore, EDI in the South African context supports the research methodology selected to answer the research question which seeks to understand the way in which transformative learning theory is applied to the creation of sustainable change in leaders.

***Proposition 1: Transformative learning theory and coaching can impact adult learning and change***

***Proposition 2: Equality, diversity and inclusion practices impact employee engagement***

***Proposition 3: Coaching skills and client disposition matter***

**Table 5**: Consistency table: Research questions and propositions

| RQ # | Research Question | Prop # | Proposition |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | In what way does the application of transformative learning theory create sustainable change in leaders? | 1 | Transformative learning theory and coaching can impact adult learning and change |
| 1a. | How can leadership coaching create an equal, diverse and inclusive workforce? | 2 | Equality, diversity and inclusion practices impact employee engagement |
| 1b. | How can coaches use transformative learning theory in leadership development coaching? | 3 | Coaching skills and client disposition matter |

## CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The previous two chapters of this study provided an outline of the context and theoretical underpinnings of the research. This chapter presents an overview of the research design and methodology deployed in an effort to answer the research question guiding this study. A research undertaking can elicit many questions and interrogate various research approaches in order to answer the research questions. Terblanche (2018) confirms that the rationale of a research approach should concentrate on providing clarification as to why the chosen approach will answer the specific research question. Selecting a research methodology is a time-consuming, personal and reflective process; therefore, critically evaluating personal beliefs and convictions on what one believes to be true and how truth is derived is important for the selection of a research methodology.

Our collective knowledge about the world in almost every subject area is incomplete, therefore, systematic research provides powerful tools, not only physical but also mental and social, that can help discover the possible answers to the research question and identify solutions for the research dilemma (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). The objective of the research is to explore the way in which the application of transformative learning theory as the underpinning system and structure, during leadership development coaching, creates a “disorienting dilemma” in the meaning perspectives of leaders. This research is a qualitative study, as the qualitative paradigm emphasises the socially constructed nature of reality, is shaped by the elements being researched and seeks to understand how meaning is attributed to these elements.

Some research questions require that we dig deeper for meaning in order to gain a complete understanding of the phenomenon that we wish to study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). The research methodology aims to trial transformative learning theory by constructing and shaping the practice of transformative coaching questions, for the purpose of growth in terms of meaning perspectives, by challenging socialised ideals on EDI. As there is insufficient academic literature highlighting the distinguishing

features of the transformative coaching process, the research approach intends to provide experiential insights in this regard.

## 3.1 Research approach

Although there are different qualitative research methods available to researchers, Leedy and Ormrod (2014) confirm that there are two common aspects within qualitative studies. In the first instance, it focuses on phenomena that are occurring or that have previously occurred in a "real world" setting and, second, it includes studying the complexity of those phenomena, while recognizing that what is being researched has many dimensions and layers that are presented in a multifaceted form. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2014, p. 253), the advantages of qualitative studies include "(a) exploration which helps to gain insights into previous research that has been a little-studied topic or phenomenon; (b) multifaceted description that reveal complex, multi-layered nature of particular situations, settings, processes, relationships, systems or people; (c) verification which allows for testing the validity of certain assumptions, claims, theories, or generalisations within real-world contexts; (d) theory development that can enable new concepts to be developed or theoretical perspectives related to a phenomenon; (e) problem identification in that they can help you uncover key problems, obstacles or enigmas that exist within the phenomenon; (f) evaluation, which provides a means through which you can judge the effectiveness of particular policies, practices or innovations."

This study assessed transformative coaching that is able to effect change in the coachee's beliefs, attitudes and values, that is, deep-rooted ideologies associated with EDI. Based on a review of the literature, the unanswered question that remains is whether, in transformative coaching, it is the process of coaching, the type of questions posed to the coachee during coaching, or the coaching skills that actually shift or transform worldviews and create changed working environments? Through the practice of coaching, which is characterised by an underpinning philosophy which holds that human beings acquire knowledge through sensory experience, the approach to the enquiry is flexible. The purpose of the investigation conducted in this study was to describe variations in a situation or issue. To this end, sample sizes can

be smaller, while covering multiple issues with information collected from fewer participants. The study explored experiences, meanings, perceptions and feelings, while the data analysis was based on the responses, narratives and observational data in order to identify the themes that are described in this report. In addition, in this study, the communication of findings tends to be narrative and descriptive in nature (Kumar, 2019).

Some disadvantages to qualitative research are that sample selection need not be random or unbiased, as it can provide detailed, accurate and complete information; the researcher is predominantly guided by their judgement, and identifying the participants could pose challenges as the sample needs to address the phenomenon under investigation (Kumar, 2019). Some other disadvantages associated with qualitative studies are that it relies heavily on the expertise of the researcher, it may require multiple sessions, and it may be influenced by researcher bias (Creswell & Poth, 2016). These advantages and limitations are taken into consideration in the design of the research approach so as to contain or limit the disadvantages inherent in the selected paradigm, and to capitalise on its advantages.

One of the habits practiced during the research process was reflexivity, which was a competence that required regular practice due to the nature of the study. There was a learning undertaking by the researcher, adopting a not-knowing position towards the possible outcomes of the process. Creswell and Poth (2016) confirm that reflexivity includes the recognition of problems inherent in representing information, as well as questions of legitimacy and authority, thus repositioning the researcher away from the position of “all-knowing analyst” to that of “acknowledged participant.”

The characteristics of qualitative research suit this study as the leadership team of one organisation was researched, therefore, only a small group of participants were sampled. Moreover, no single reality of each participant underlies the research problem –related to the lack of social cohesion and employee engagement – each participant’s reality is equally valid. In this regard, the ability to establish rapport and build trust with the participants are the same skills required for executive coaches, as well as thinking creatively on how best to address aspects of the research problem;

consequently, this manifest in a high tolerance for ambiguity. The manner in which this can be achieved is through applied research which, according to Leedy and Ormrod (2014), can inform human decision making on real-world problems by addressing questions in one's work environment, with the goal of solving an ongoing problem in that environment – this is called action research. Action research focuses on finding a local solution to a local challenge (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014).

Furthermore, participatory action research is action research that is oriented towards social change (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007). Since the research sought to understand the way in which the application of transformation learning theory creates sustainable change in leaders, participatory action research (PAR) is a qualitative research method primarily focused on social transformation (Kindon et al., 2007). The applied PAR method aimed to understand how leadership coaching can create an inclusive workforce and to know how coaches can use transformative learning theory in leadership development coaching. This was accomplished by coaching leaders in the automotive manufacturing organisation. The coach and coaching sessions were the research instrument employed in this study.

## 3.2 Research design

The purpose of this research was to investigate the application of transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching in order to facilitate an organisational culture centred on diversity, equality and inclusion; this is meant to improve employee engagement. To answer the research questions, pre-coaching focus groups were hosted with the direct reports of the coaching clients, for the purpose of soliciting context and background. The questions posed to direct reports in these pre-coaching focus groups were structured, and similar questions were presented in all the focus groups hosted by the researcher. Coaching sessions were held with three leaders from different levels of management, within the same department; these sessions followed a coaching process and a set of coaching skills. However, in order to establish trust and "flow," questions were unstructured and were not necessarily the same with each coaching client. Post-coaching focus groups, with the same set of direct reports who attended the pre-coaching focus groups, were

hosted to obtain feedback on any changes to leader behaviour. According to Kumar (2019), a research design is the procedural plan adopted by the researcher to answer questions with validity, objectively and economically. Through the design, the researcher is communicating to others their decision regarding which design proposal to use, the method of collecting information from participants, the manner in which participants are selected, how information will be collected, and the communication of findings. Kumar (2019) further explains that the appropriate selection of any research design is critical to building valid findings, comparisons and conclusions, while a faulty design can lead to a waste of resources.

The disadvantages of this approach are that the selected coaching clients work within the same department, with the middle manager reporting to the senior manager who, in turn, reports to the executive manager – moreover, the participants were aware of each other's participation in the study. In addition, the researcher who was an employee within the organisation, knew the coaching clients; therefore, it was necessary to manage bias. Argyris and Schön (1989) state that human behaviour is likely to be valid and can be ratified when the people in question participate in building and testing their behaviour, thus creating an environment in which participants give and receive valid information and make free and informed choices. This includes the choice to participate in the study and can generate internal commitment to the results of the inquiry. Therefore, the basic tenet of participatory action research is the action agenda for reform, which may change the lives of the participants and the organisations within which they live. It may even change the researcher's life, as issues facing marginalised groups – such as oppression, domination, suppression, alienation and hegemony – are of utmost importance to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Figure 7, below, outlines the research design for this study. Three leaders were selected to participate in the research; each leader occupied a different leadership level, namely, middle, senior and executive, within the same department. The focus groups were held with the direct reports to these leaders. Training on transformative learning theory was undetaken by the coach in order to gain a deeper understanding of the theorectical framework and to experience its practical application in a classroom environment. Focus groups were hosted prior to the commencement of coaching (pre-

coaching focus groups) and after the coaching intervention (post-coaching focus groups). Three focus group sessions were hosted during each round, in order to accommodate the various leadership reporting levels. Coaching sessions commenced after the focus groups. The leaders went through six coaching sessions during which data was collected. After the six coaching sessions, focus groups were hosted to ascertain whether there were shifts in leadership behaviour.

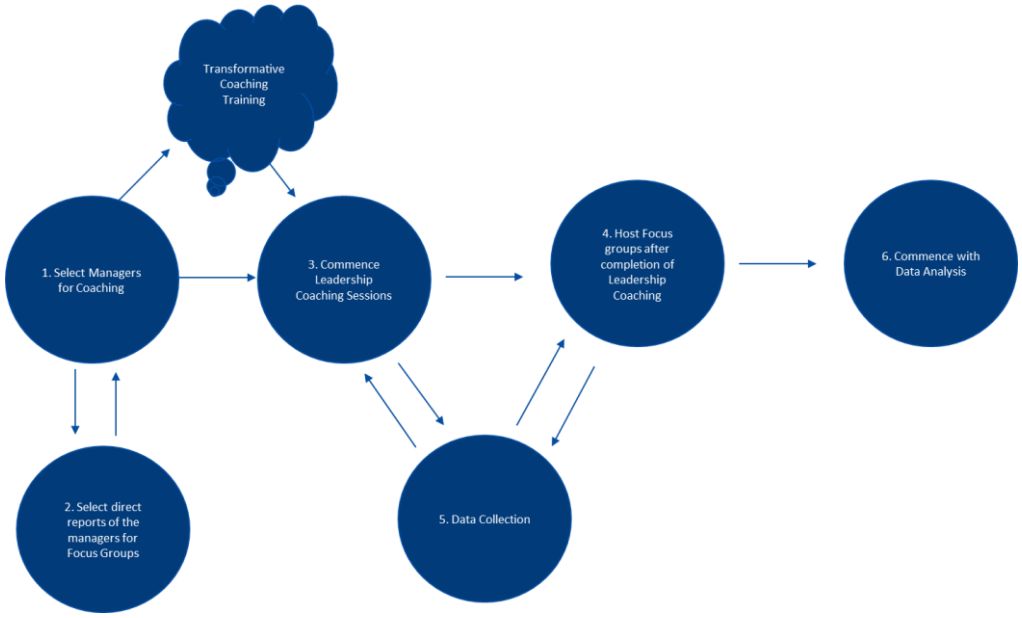



**Figure 7: Research methodology process map (Researcher's own construction)**

The purpose of the focus groups was to collect qualitative data on the direct reports' experiences of their leaders, as well as to observe mood, tone and draw interpretations and unpack meaning, as seen in Figure 7, above. The leaders subsequently received no less than six one-hour coaching sessions. The objective thereof was to collect data from participants during leadership coaching sessions, using a transformative questioning technique, stimulating critical reflection that, in turn, shifted foundational beliefs and values on issues of EDI. The intent of this process was to stimulate social change and create an improved work environment characterised by engagement and inclusivity.

This research design was well-positioned to adult learning theory, as well as leadership coaching, as it allowed for participant involvement and the co-creation of

solutions through exploratory coaching sessions. Creswell and Poth (2016) explain that participatory action research is emancipatory in that it helps to unhook people from unjust structures, and it is a practical and collaborative inquiry completed *with* others instead of being completed *on* others.

## 3.3 Data collection methods

A common method of PAR focuses on dialogue, storytelling and collective action (Kindon et al., 2007). The data collection methods were virtual meetings with camera capability. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this was the only option available to continue with the research. Sessions (coaching and focus groups) were recorded after acquiring written permission from the participants, and field notes were taken during each session. Three managers took part in the coaching sessions, and seventeen employees scattered across the reporting structure of the three managers were invited to attend the focus group sessions. While focus group participants were familiar with each other, they were initially hesitant to openly disclosing their positions; therefore, it was important for the research to establish the rules of engagement and ensure confidentiality, as well as to build trust and rapport. In the coaching conversations, participants (i.e. coaching clients) were familiar with the researcher and establishing a trust relationship took time and attention.

## 3.4 Population and sample

The target population for this study, and the sampling procedures employed in the research, are outline in the ensuing discussion.

### 3.4.1 *Population*

The population for this study were leaders in an automotive manufacturing organisation in South Africa who, by their actions, influence organisational culture and have a significant scope of control with regard to direct reports. In addition, the population constituted employees who are managed by these leaders.

### 3.4.2 *Sample and Sampling Method*

The manner in which a research sample is selected affects the accuracy of the findings. For this reason, a number of considerations need to be made when selecting the sample; these include ease of access to participants, judgement that the person has the requisite knowledge to contribute to the study, or an event that is of interest to the researcher (Kumar, 2019). Purposive sampling, according to Leedy and Ormrod (2014), is when specific people are selected for a particular research purpose. Purposive sampling was used in this study. The leaders volunteered themselves for the qualitative study as they wanted to work on issues of inclusivity and engagement within their department. These leaders have worked for the automotive manufacturer for more than five years and were part of previous organisational cultural interventions to effect engagement. They had foundational knowledge of the work being done at the organisational level, and understood the topic of the research.

The seniority and impact level of the leaders were important criteria in participant selection, as these leaders have the largest scope of control and influence on organisational culture. The justification for the selection is that layered leadership sampling stimulated a number of parallel activities and experiences across organisational levels with the aim of building momentum and creating a sense of urgency for change.

**Table 6**: Profile of the research participants

| Description of participant | Number of participants | Number of coaching sessions | Number of focus groups |
|---|---|---|---|
| First Line Leaders | 1 | 6 | 0 |
| Middle Managers | 1 | 6 | 0 |
| Senior Managers | 1 | 6 | 0 |
| Employees | 17 | 0 | 2 |
| **Total** | **20** | **18** | **2** |

Most of the participants were male, with only three participants being female. In terms of race, the groups were mixed – this provided balance and variation in feedback pertaining to life experiences.

### 3.5 The research instrument

The research instrument was a guided list of coaching questions. The interview questions posed in the focus groups required that each participant answer the question: “why do you believe employees feel they do not have equal opportunities at work?” Participants were then able to speak on behalf of their colleagues before the conversation shifted to their individual experiences. In the coaching conversations, each coaching client was asked to share some detail of their lives growing up; the objective of this exercise was to observe where clients chose to start their life story, in order to interpret and obtain context on how participants relay meaningful life experiences.

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2014), qualitative researchers describe themselves as being the research instrument, as most of the data collection involved in qualitative research relies on their personal involvement in the setting. The intended approach to this study was for the researcher to immerse herself in the process. Assuming that perspective transformation is critical to organisational change at an individual and group level, Meyer, Donovan and Fitzgerald (2007) state that it is important to understand the best way to support this requirement while simultaneously allowing participation in and knowledge of the system to be understood. It is therefore not uncommon to combine approaches in order to create leaps in insight. Significant change can occur by combining processes (Meyer et al., 2007). Transformative learning theory formed the basis of coaching, and the focus groups were facilitated with the same underpinning. A sample of the coaching and focus group process questions are available in Appendix A (Research Instrument), at the end of this research report.

## 3.6 Data collection

The participants were approached by the researcher directly. The researcher requested their participation in coaching sessions and focus groups for the purpose of researching transformational learning in leadership coaching. An email request – see Appendix B (Example of Consent form to Leaders) – explaining the research objective was sent to the leaders selected for this study. In addition, the researcher presented the research purpose, theoretical underpinnings and research methodology to the study participants. All questions, from the participants, related to the research topic and process, were addressed prior to commencement of the study.

Focus group requests were sent via email to the direct reports of the senior and executive leaders, together with a presentation explaining the research. For the employees reporting to the middle manager, face-to-face requests were made, explaining the purpose of the research and requesting their participation in focus groups. The focus groups intended to draw qualitative data, from the direct reports, on whether they have noticed a shift in the way in which their leader engaged with them, and whether this change had an impact on their sense of belonging and feelings of inclusion.

Data collection took place in coaching sessions and focus groups. The researcher obtained permission to audio record the conversations, and took field notes during the conversations. The recordings were later transcribed for use in the research report. Coaching sessions presented many challenges for the researcher who occupied various roles in the organisation, and during the data collection phase. Suspending the researcher role, whilst engaged in a coaching conversation, created tension as the coaching sessions were an instrument to the research process. However, coaching practices call for ethical considerations, particularly in instances in which a researcher and coach driving the agenda became a conflict of interest. In an attempt to resolve the conflict, the researcher role was successfully managed due the researcher's awareness of ethical considerations and cultivation of the habit of reflexivity. In addition, supervision during the research process helped to manage challenges related to role conflict.

## 3.7 Data analysis and interpretation

According to Kumar (2019), data analysis in qualitative research focusses on narratives, observational data and participants' responses for the identification of themes. Qualitative data analysis can be divided into three categories: (1) sociolinguistic methods which explore the meaning of language; (2) methods characterised by grounded theory, which concentrates on developing theory; and (3) methods such as content and thematic analysis that describe and interpret participants' views (Smith & Firth, 2011). Thematic analysis was used in this study. Smith and Firth (2011, p. 54) explain that "thematic analysis is an interpretive process in which data are systematically searched for patterns to provide an illuminating description of the phenomenon…it can provide rich insights into complex phenomena." The thematic analysis employed in this study sought to unpack meaningful concepts that reflect various aspects of the participants' life experiences, values, beliefs, opinions and worldviews.

The following process was adopted for the study:

1. Once focus groups were completed, the audio recordings were transcribed for analysis;
2. After each coaching conversation, the audio recordings were transcribed;
3. Transcripts were outsourced, and were thereafter checked against the audio recordings;
4. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on the researcher's external hard drive;
5. Transcripts were read, emerging codes with associated questions and answers were then transferred to an Excel spreadsheet;
6. Key concepts and codes were colour coded and counted in columns adjacent to each code;
7. Field notes were captured to make note of observations, mood, body language, tone – that is, cues that may provide a different context;
8. Codes were combined to form themes; and
9. Codes evolved through an inductive process.

The coaching sessions and focus groups extracted perceptions, feelings and experiences which were best described using thematic analysis. The research aimed to capture the transformational moment (disorienting dilemma); however, according to Smith and Firth (2011), criticism of thematic analysis is that it can lack depth and transparency, and that the findings could be subjective.

### 3.8 Limitations of the study

The research employed deliberate or purposive sampling that may have created bias in data collection. However, purposive sampling was considered desirable as the topic was known and experienced by the selected sample, and greater understanding in dealing with workplace social change was necessary to the study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014).

The coaching intervention was originally planned to take place over a nine-month timeframe. This was considerably reduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on the economy. Therefore, while transformation was observed, sustainability of the change cannot be guaranteed.

There were opportunities for further expansion of constructs, by participants, where the researcher should have probed further into the participant's meaning on the construct. Due to the nature of the topic, in the South African context, leaders and employees felt uncomfortable with conversations of behavioural and systemic bias.

Furthermore, the researcher is employed within the organisation; this caused concern, which was however limited, regarding the confidentiality of the coaching conversations. In addition, the researcher has established relationships of trust with the leaders being coached, which created partial bias. The data interpretation and analysis was conducted by the researcher, which may have led to a subjective predisposition.

## 3.9 Trustworthiness

Schwandt, Lincoln and Guba (2007) argue that one of the main challenges facing qualitative research and interpretative practice is whether the interpretations are credible and truthful, and whether one interpretation is better than another. Therefore, criteria for credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are dependent on three strategies: prolonged engagement; persistent observation; and thick, rich description, as spending more time collecting data provides the researcher with the necessary time to establish trust with the study participants (Tracy, 2010). Credibility was positioned before the qualitative study started, due to the researcher's previous engagements with the participants who work in the same organisation as the researcher. Although an existing relationship was established, it was equally critical for a trust relationship to be formulated in the researcher's capacity as coach, a role unfamiliar to the coaching clients. Coaching sessions were scheduled over two to three week intervals, thus allowing the coaching clients the opportunity for reflection.

### 3.9.1 *Transferability*

Transferability is achieved when the story of the research resonates with readers, and it overlaps with their own circumstances; they instinctively transfer the research to their own experience – this is meaningful storytelling, which creates an emotional experience within the reader (Tracy, 2010). The time spent with participants is necessary to build rapport and establish trust, which is significant for quality data to be produced (Morse, 2015). Therefore, six, one-hour leadership coaching sessions and more than three hours of focus groups achieved quality data. The participants had similar experiences within the organisation, and the research spoke directly to the challenges they experienced.

### 3.9.2 *Credibility*

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2014), good qualitative researchers identify their personal biases that can affect their ability to collect and interpret data. This self-reflection is called reflexivity, and it is important for the researcher to take steps to reduce such influences. Reflection is characteristic of both coaching and adult

learning. One method of ensuring credibility is triangulation, which is defined as the "mixing of data or methods so that diverse viewpoints or standpoints cast light upon a topic, it helps to validate claims that may arise from the initial pilot study" (Olsen, 2004, p. 3). Different sources of data were considered in the research study in order to increase credibility; these sources include data collected from coaching sessions, observational data, employee engagement data and data collected from focus groups.

### 3.9.3 *Dependability*

Lincoln and Guba (1982, p. 3) describe dependability as "a concept that counts both for unreliability in the conventional sense as well as for other shifts or changes that are deliberately introduced by the investigator as the design of the inquiry emerges or unfolds". The purposively selected leaders increased the dependability of the research tool, the use of triangulation in data collection supported credibility and the researcher was under constant coaching and research supervision to further increase the dependability of the research process and findings.

### 3.9.4 *Confirmability*

The intimate and subjective manner of coaching sessions with participants presented potential risks. This was mitigated through a reflexive practice of journaling, enlisting a coaching supervisor and regular engagements with the research supervisor. Terblanche (2018) defines confirmability as the extent to which the findings are a result of the research, as opposed to the researcher's opinion, as well as being confirmed by other studies and literature.

## 3.10 Ethical considerations

As previously mentioned, the researcher and participants are employed within the same organisation. Confidentiality was afforded by signing confidentiality agreements, and explaining to the steps that both participant and researcher need to take in order to protect confidentiality. Participants received copies of these contracts that contained the contact details of the research supervisor, should a breach occur. In addition,

participants were encouraged to escalate any unethical behaviour to the executive management team within the organisation.

While no two professions are the same, with regard to ethical conduct, there are similarities across professions. Within research, however, there are certain behaviours that are considered unethical; these include causing harm to individuals, breach of confidentiality, introducing bias, using information improperly and the misuse of information (Kumar, 2019). Ethical conduct, the author adds, is to take into consideration the principles of conduct that are considered correct by a particular profession. Any research involving close relationships with participants has the potential risk of presenting ethical issues. Obtaining informed consent from participants (see Appendix B), transparency of the research methods, aims, risks and benefits, as well as the process, helped to limit unethical conduct. In addition, being a coach, the ethical considerations under the Graduate Schools Alliance for Executive Coaches (GSAEC) were applied when conducting research for this study.

## 3.11 Conclusion of research methodology

The research approach was an intentional consideration established to investigate the application of transformative learning during leadership development coaching to facilitate an organisational culture centred on diversity, equality and inclusion meant to improve employee engagement. The researcher, employed within the organisation where the research was undertaken, presented challenges for the study however noting the advantages and disadvantages of the research methodology made it possible to mitigate potential risk to the research and research participants.

Critical to qualitative research is building rapport and establishing relationships of trust with research participants. Equally, this competence is required for successful coaching practice. The research findings show the value of the practical application of transformative learning theory during coaching as an alternative intervention to address workplace inclusion that is individualised and confidential for critical reflection to take place and subsequent transformation to be observed within leaders managing diverse groups of people.

**Table 7**: Consistency table: Research questions and propositions

| RQ # | State research question | Prop # | State proposition | Data collection detail | Data analysis method |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | In what way does the application of transformative learning theory create sustainable change in leaders? | 1 | Transformative learning theory and coaching can impact adult learning and change | Coaching Sessions<br>Focus Groups | Thematic Analysis |
| 1a. | How can leadership coaching create an equal, diverse and inclusive workforce? | 2 | Equality, diversity and inclusion practices impact employee engagement | Coaching Sessions | Thematic Analysis |
| 1b. | How can coaches use transformative learning theory in leadership development coaching? | 3 | Coaching skills and client disposition matters | Coaching Sessions<br>Focus Groups | Thematic Analysis |

# CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative research conducted to address the research questions. A thematic analysis was conducted based on the data collected during coaching conversations with executive, senior and middle level leaders. Similarly, a thematic analysis of leadership behaviour was conducted for the focus group sessions to help confirm or refute shifts in leadership behaviour. The research findings are based on 18 coaching sessions and six focus groups.

The foundational relationships, frames of reference, leadership ideologies and inclusion practices, as well as relationships within the workplace and organisational culture, were the main subject of conversation in the leadership coaching sessions.

In this chapter, the research findings are presented in three phases. First, focus groups were held before the coaching intervention; three separate focus group sessions were hosted with the direct reports of the three leaders. These pre-coaching focus group themes and findings will be presented first. Second, the prevailing themes that emerged from the six one-hour leadership development coaching sessions, which were underpinned by transformative learning theory, will then be offered and discussed. Third, post-coaching focus group sessions were hosted with the direct reports of the senior and executive leaders. The focus group participants of the middle manager reported that they spent little time with their leader since the coaching intervention and were not able to confirm or deny any change in leadership behaviour. The two focus group sessions held after the coaching intervention were conducted in order to gather assertions of the employee's experiences, and to gauge whether their experiences had shifted as a result of leadership behavioural change on issues of inclusion.

The code classification represented in Table 8 was used to identify the coaching participants and focus group participants in order to assign descriptions, comments and quotations to them. For the purpose of this research report, in order to maintain

the anonymity of the study participants, each participant is labelled and distinguished according to their role or manner of participation in the study. For example, those who participated in coaching sessions were allocated a 'C' (for coaching) marker (e.g. 01C). Further, focus groups with direct reports were clustered in accordance with the three coaching session participants, that is, the leaders; therefore, Focus Group One (FG1) reported directly to coaching client 01C. Furthermore, labels were allocated to participants based on the time, or occurrence, of their focus group sessions; in this respect, focus group participants are labelled separately for both the pre-coaching and the post-coaching, even though they may have attended both the pre- and post-coaching sessions. An example of a participant in Focus Group 1 before (pre-)coaching would be BC04FG1, and after (post-)coaching would be AC04FG1. These labelling mechanisms have been put in place so that the data of each participant is presented under these pseudonyms, so as to maintain participant anonymity and ensure confidentiality.

**Table 8:** Naming conventions of participants

| **Code classification of participant** | **Code Classification** | **Code Classification** |
|---|---|---|
| Participant 1 (executive management) | 01C | |
| Participant 2 (senior management) | 02C | |
| Participant 3 (middle management) | 03C | |
| **Focus Group 1 (senior and middle managers)** | **Before Coaching Focus Group 1 (BCFG1)** | **After Coaching Focus Group 1 (ACFG1)** |
| Participant 4 | BC04FG1 | AC04FG1 |
| Participant 5 | BC05FG1 | AC05FG1 |
| Participant 6 | BC06FG1 | AC06FG1 |
| Participant 7 | BC07FG1 | AC07FG1 |
| Participant 8 | BC08FG1 | AC08FG1 |
| Participant 9 | BC09FG1 | AC09FG1 |
| **Code classification of participant** | **Code Classification** | **Code Classification** |
| **Focus Group 2 (middle management)** | **Before Coaching Focus Group 2 (BCFG2)** | **After Coaching Focus Group 2 (ACFG2)** |
| Participant 10 | BC10FG2 | AC10FG2 |
| Participant 11 | BC11FG2 | AC11FG2 |
| Participant 12 | BC12FG2 | AC12FG2 |

| Focus Group 3 (shop-floor employees) | Before Coaching Focus Group 3 (BCFG3) | After Coaching Focus Group 3 (ACFG3) |
|---|---|---|
| Participant 13 | BC13FG3 | AC13FG3 |
| Participant 14 | BC14FG3 | AC14FG3 |
| Participant 15 | BC15FG3 | AC15FG3 |
| Participant 16 | BC16FG3 | AC16FG3 |
| Participant 17 | BC17FG3 | AC17FG3 |
| Participant 18 | BC18FG3 | AC18FG3 |
| Participant 19 | BC19FG3 | AC19FG3 |
| Participant 20 | BC20FG3 | AC20FG3 |

The leadership development coaching sessions allowed for the flow of conversation and for the coaching participants to feel that they could express themselves freely in their engagement with the coach. It is important to note that the coaching clients were nominated by the General Manager of Human Relations, and subsequently volunteered, to partake in the research. In addition, the coach is a colleague, peer and executive leader, while also being a researcher who needs to collect qualitative data during each of the focus groups and coaching sessions. The tension between these roles are explained in the ensuing discussion of the research findings.

While positioned as a conversation, the focus group questions were, for the most part, the same in each pre-coaching focus group. This was to highlight whether patterns of inclusion across employee, leadership and organisational levels were similar across the various management levels of the organisation. The post-coaching focus group sessions, however, allowed for greater freedom of expression from participants and sought to obtain feedback regarding leader behaviour after the completion of the coaching sessions. It is important to note that, in presenting the thematic clusters, it was evident that a certain level of interpretation had been obtained from the literature review. The theoretical choices made in Chapter Two influenced the themes focussed on in the research investigation; these themes include transformative learning theory, personal values and practices of inclusion. However, some themes which were not anticipated and yet could not be ignored arose from the data collection phase; these themes include organisational values, emotions/feelings and attitudes towards social culture.

## 4.2 Findings from the pre-coaching focus groups

The pre-coaching focus groups were hosted in an effort to gather direct reports' perceptions of leadership and organisational context, which impacted their experiences as employees. The topics discussed in the pre-coaching focus groups were equal opportunities, values, organisational culture, leadership and inclusion; these were discussed at the individual, leader and organisational levels. It must be noted that the pre-coaching focus group participants occupied positions at the level of senior management, middle management and the shop-floor. The discussion in section 4.3, below, presents the themes drawn from the pre-coaching focus group findings.

## 4.3 Unequal opportunities prevail

Although the participants came from different racial and class backgrounds, with only three female members of the organisation participating in the study, there was no substantive variation in their answers. Participants agreed that equal opportunities appeared disproportionate, and that they were inconsistently applied as they were largely based on existent relationships within the organisation. The study participants felt that, in order to remove perceptions of favouritism and bias, it was necessary to standardise processes so that they are transparent, clearly communicated and available to employees within the organisation. The sentiments of unequal opportunity were expressed by all racial groups and genders, in addition to which the participants were adamant that white males are perceived as more eligible for development and promotion than are their black counterparts.

Interestingly, in the second pre-coaching focus group, with only white males, reporting directly to the senior manager, they did not perceive white males as being afforded privilege; moreover, they indicated that, in the past, they were denied access to promotional and developmental opportunities specifically because they were white. In essence, the participants all felt the same: opportunities were enjoyed by certain racial groups, but did not apply to their own race or gender. Even in so far as saying that, amongst black colleagues, some employees of colour are more eligible than others. The perception of white males having more opportunities than individuals from other

racial and gendered categories was a consequence of the significant number of senior positions within the organisation that are occupied by white males. The question of equal opportunities was asked in order to gauge perceptions of fairness, equal access to development, promotion, earnings and all other benefits or information that employees felt should be freely accessible to all employees at the organisational level.

In addition, previously, there were incidents of unfairness in which employees had to exercise their labour rights in order to remedy the situation, and to strive for equality; these actions are however viewed as antagonistic and regressive by both leaders and employees. Based on the comments related to access, participants expected that the financial responsibility for further education was the organisation's; therefore, when funding applications were rejected, coupled with a lack of substantive feedback, the inherent assumption was that the rejection is based on some form of discrimination on the part of the organisation, rather than the availability of funds to sponsor further education.

The disproportional spread of opportunity was described as follows:

> *Qualified shop-employees apply for positions, they are in the unfortunate position because of their African race and our historical background, that is yet to be addressed, are disqualified in the presence of other qualified employees of colour.* (Participant BC07FG1)

The perceptions of focus group participants reporting to the senior manager were no different, with Participant BC10FG2 frustratingly stating that:

> *The ratio at higher level management is not representative of the country or even the region. There is a big gap based on where we are and where we should be as many roles are occupied by white males. The concern is always there, yet progress of changing it has been slow!* (Participant BC10FG2)

The processes by which employees receive access to opportunities were stated to be unfair and biased. Employee observations confirm that access was afforded largely by leaders. Perceptions of the unfair distribution of equal opportunities meant that leaders held preconceived notions of who is eligible, and that their decisions were not based

on objective criteria. These decisions have negative implications for career prospects within the organisation.

### 4.3.1 *Career development and training*

Training opportunities were stated as more readily available for salaried and technical positions across the organisation. The provision of technical training was highlighted as an organisational strength, as it required a substantial financial investment, yet it directly addressed the business need for automation. In instances in which training was not regarded as contributing directly to the organisation's viability, applications for said training were either rejected or never even considered. Focus group participants who required technical training in order to perform their jobs more competently and efficiently admitted that they received training within an accelerated timeframe.

Employees who requested training that expanded beyond the immediate technical needs of their division, such as leadership development or business acumen training, reported that their applications were refused. Most of the participants had a technical background, but aspired to take up leadership roles. Focus group participants agreed that the organisation did well to lift technical competence, and that leaders needed to improve on granting access to training opportunities that would enhance their overall leadership capabilities.

The greatest challenge noted was that the organisational design did not make allowance for a progressive career path; this had an adverse impact on succession planning. Time for individual development was protracted, and the cost of training that would close development gaps were deemed excessive. Succession planning in the department is perceived as prejudiced because departmental leaders have preconceived ideas concerning which individuals can fulfil the role; this disqualifies any other employee who would like to be considered for the opportunity. The overriding perception is that any person not originally considered for succession planning would not be eligible for, or receive, said career opportunity:

> *There are still big gaps that needs to be addressed between the artisan and technician level. The learning, experience and knowledge gap is so big that it*

*makes the career path difficult – there is no interim level position for the artisan to progress. On top of that, people are earmarked for certain roles, especially white males. So, when the position is advertised, no-one puts their hand up cause, what's the use?* (Participant BC08FG1)

In conclusion, participants showed signs of distress when discussing career development. The training provided to employees benefited the organisation more than the employee him/herself. Moreover, succession planning policy and implementation is perceived as a process of predisposition, which discourages employees from voicing any interest in different roles.

### 4.3.2 *Individual career opportunities*

When questioned on their personal experiences of equal opportunity, all the participants from the pre-coaching focus group with senior and middle managers stated that they have not had their personal training requests approved by their direct supervisor. Therefore, they recognised training as the primary cause of inequality. Performance management systems were highlighted as obstacles to making exceptions for training requests:

*01C has never nominated me for training. Also, if the training is not in the performance management system, it is very difficult to get your training request approved. The freedom to obtain training is not available.* (Participant BC06FG1)

In contrast, the pre-coaching focus group with middle- and first-line managers regarded equal opportunity as a largely promotional category, as training was offered or approved when requested. Expressing disappointment, Participant BC12FG2 answered that:

*I think it's been said as straightforward as the person possibly could that I should maybe look elsewhere, purely because we need to get the demographics right higher up.* (Participant BC12FG2)

In the pre-coaching focus group with artisans and technicians, the discussion was tense, and participants became visibly frustrated. It was stated that opportunities were

largely provided internally, with the delivery of practical on-the-job training, whereas the employees desired accredited training. Shift work cover created challenges for employees to attend training. Participant BC17FG3 mused:

> *I do not want to say empty promises. I do not think that it is an empty promise. We are not getting there. Before the virtual training centre at the bottom, I wanted to go for training. We have this type of drive, I need to work on it. I grew up in the inside and I did not go and study. At university, you gain knowledge of the equipment. The knowledge I have gained is in the inside. Asking if I want to go on training is developing the virtual training centre. Wanting to go, it doesn't always work out; you can't go, because there is only three of us on the shift. It is an issue.* (Participant BC17FG3)

Although participants had varying experiences, they unanimously experienced perceived bias across all levels. Participants felt disillusioned and saddened by their leader's decisions and their manner of dealing with employee discontent. These disappointments had a personal impact on the employee, affected the heart. These views and feelings transfer to their level of engagement and how they engage with or treat employees who they perceive as receiving opportunities that they were denied.

**Summary: Unequal opportunities prevail**

Making meaning of equal opportunities was categorised by the participants under the prevailing concepts of training, development, promotion and organisational culture in relation to the application of policies that govern fairness, transparency and decision making. The participants shared largely similar employee experiences of equal opportunity, in that they perceived it as discriminatory and exclusionary at the leader and organisational levels. It became evident that building leadership competence in the area of giving constructive feedback is required. Furthermore, individuals perceived of different racial groups as receiving more opportunities than their own; ironically, all racial groups felt the same.

### 4.3.3 *Values create value*

Participants were asked whether they were able to freely live their values in the workplace. There were mixed responses between the focus groups. Pre-coaching focus group participants (with middle- and first-line managers, artisans and technicians) gave a resounding “yes,” as they believed that these should never be compromised. Participants were demographically diverse and notably confident in expressing their personal values. In addition, participants listed trust as one of their top three personal values. As an apt articulation of the reasons why values are important, Participant BC10FG2 enthusiastically said:

> *I would say for me to live my personal values at work, if I cannot do it, it’s not because of Continental. It’s because of my own immaturity or my own emotional intelligence not being strong enough. I believe strongly that, no matter where you work or who you are, who you know or what environment you work with, you must live your values, always.* (Participant BC10FG2)

Participants in the pre-coaching focus group with senior and middle managers did not answer the question. There was an awkward and uncomfortable silence which is, in and of itself, telling. Senior and middle managers were not prepared to admit that they were unable to live their personal values, and that it presented a conflict on a personal level. In trying to push for a response, Participant BC7FG1, who was notably irritated, asked:

> *Can we please move on?* (Participant BC07FG1)

It would appear that, the more senior their position, the more conflicted participants felt regarding their personal values. The decisions taken at this level affect livelihoods, and are often misunderstood, which takes a toll on leadership. Participants in the other focus groups expressed that, even when experiencing personal disappointments or frustrations at work, their personal values guide their behaviour and conscience to adhere to organisational or leader expectations. Therefore, if personal values are equated to one’s moral compass, how they are lived and expressed in the workplace can unearth value for the organisation as every employee is free to be themselves at work.

### 4.3.4 *Culture of delivery*

The question of organisational culture related largely to how participants felt or perceived things to be done in the organisation, and their experience of leaders across all levels. Reflective questions were used to stimulate thinking and identify the organisation to personhood and a sense of morality. Across the different focus groups, responses were parallel with minor deviations being expressed.

One overarching perception that employees held was that the organisation is process focused and, to this end, it has strong leaders with highly competent technical expertise as well as a strong drive for results. The organisation exhibits a dominant German culture, even though it is based in South Africa. Over recent years, the culture has transitioned from an overly authoritarian or militant style to one that is more engaging; therefore, change is noticeable.

All the focus group participants felt that they had to work harder to understand leadership in order to feel included and valued, as opposed to leaders actively engaging them. In addition, participants expressed concerns that the large white male leadership contingent may discourage potential racially and gender diverse candidates from wanting to join the organisation, or from remaining with the organisation once they have joined. In this regard, Participant BC07FG1 stated the following:

> *I worry sometimes about the external people coming into our company with the leaders we have. There are those leaders who go out of their way to make external people feel unwelcome and treat them [being new joiners] as though they are external or outside our company. It is evident on the turnover.* (Participant BC07FG1)

Associating character descriptors to the organisation to help participants reflect on the organisation personhood, a series of questions were asked in relation to race, gender, ethnicity, religion, language and values that the organisation exhibits. Participants across all the sessions associated the organisation with being white, male, of European descent, mostly English speaking, and agnostic. Moreover, they indicated

that the values it lives are different to those that it ascribes to itself, while also indicating that care is somewhat lacking and that a drive for results is more highly appreciated higher than any other value. These expressions do not depict a demographically diverse South Africa.

### 4.3.5 *Leadership: The employee experience*

Leadership experience varied across the different pre-coaching focus group sessions. For this theme, the findings will first be presented as shared remarks, followed by a discussion of the variations in each pre-coaching focus group. Participants were asked to describe their experiences with their direct supervisor; they were given the freedom to share as little or as much information as they wished.

Common among members of these focus groups was the perception that their leader was tough, involved in the detail of their work, and technically competent; moreover, they felt that these characteristics distracted the leader from paying attention to his people. The participants also expressed that leaders were not very skilled in sharing their vision of the department in efforts to gain commitment from their direct reports. Their experience was frustrating, as they were unable to understand the bigger picture for purposes of alignment. Since the vision was lacking from the executive manager, it cascaded down to the rest of the department. Pre-coaching focus group participants did not always know the reasons why things were done in a particular way. However, although the vision was lacking, the leader was trusted for their technical competence and the knowledge they were able to share with others in order to support technical aptitude.

Participants from pre-coaching focus groups (with senior, middle and first line managers) mentioned that a tense relationship existed between the executive and senior manager. They indicated that this affected the team dynamics within the department, while emphasising that technical competence and support sometimes overrides the need for a personal relationship.

The shopfloor employees in the pre-coaching focus group (with artisans and technicians) expressed the need for their leader's attention, yet they were also concerned for his well-being:

> *Our direct supervisor needs to be more present. It seems like he is overloaded even though he tries to take of everyone's training as well.* (Participant BC14FG3)

Members of the pre-coaching focus group (with senior and middle managers) were frustrated with their leader. As senior managers, they felt undermined due to the level of involvement of their executive leader. After some careful consideration, Participant BC08FG1 contributed the following:

> *Sometimes you don't know where you stand, he is in the detail and asks so many questions like he is trying to trick you or to see if you really know what you talking about – but it's all technical stuff, nothing personal. So, I feel like I have to constantly earn his trust.* (Participant BC08FG1)

The findings that were distinguished between the different organisational levels reflect where participants would like to see change in their leader. In the pre-coaching focus group (with senior and middle managers), the participants agreed that their leader provides constructive feedback, which supported their success. However, they experienced the relationship as strictly professional, and lacking sincerity, while they desired a personable relationship. The degree to which the leader was involved in the detail led participants to feel that they were not trusted to perform their role.

The pre-coaching focus group (with middle and first line managers) yielded interesting results as the tone reflected participants' sympathy with their leader for working long hours, and they were concerned for his well-being. They wanted him removed from the detail so that he could have more work-life balance and, although he was at work so often, they hardly saw him as he was either performing the role of an artisan or involved in a project that took his attention away from his team.

The pre-coaching focus group (with artisans and technicians) indicated that they want more feedback from their leader, and communication on business viability. The

participants shared that they constantly worked under pressure from production, to get machines operational. Therefore, they were unable to conduct meaningful problem-solving and troubleshooting. Repeated machine breakdowns on the same machine gave the impression that artisans are not technically competent. The artisans wanted to leader to “stand in the gap” for them, to allow them to do their work more meaningfully and efficiently, as the organisation’s perceptions of them eroded their credibility and trust. They had unspoken expectations that their leader should create more opportunities for them, however, they admitted that the working relationship was satisfactory.

### 4.3.6 *Culture of [IN-EX]clusion*

Questions related to inclusion aimed to solicit feedback regarding how the leader involved employees based on their individual differences, and the engagement that focus group participants felt in relation to performance after the conversations. Each focus group experienced this differently with their leader. Participant BC08FG1 irritatingly said:

> *He asks a lot of questions, and the way he asks the questions, I wonder why is he asking me these questions when he knows the answers? Then you have to fight to convince him you do know what you talking about. Then you might as well prepare yourself for a few more battles.* (Participant BC08FG1)

Participants of the pre-coaching focus group (with middle and first line managers, as well as artisans and technicians) expressed that they have had fairly positive experiences, where leader enquiries were relaxed and casual, while perhaps walking on the shop-floor. They noted that formal meetings were reduced, much to the satisfaction of the group, and that conversations were personal. In agreement, Participant BC11FG2 responded:

> *He reduced the amount of formal meetings that we have…he listened to us, he pulled it down to one on a Monday, which is quite important. It’s just over five hours a week we have extra to actually perform our function. So, that’s why I say it’s casual, so he doesn’t necessarily consume your time but he still manages to get your input.* (Participant BC11FG2)

Senior leaders in the pre-coaching focus group that reported directly to the executive, expressed experiences of inclusion and engagement that were distinctly different from those of the other participants. They indicated that they had a challenging executive, however, they felt that his intentions were misplaced. The tone of expression was one that led them to feel that he did not trust them and, in some respects, they felt marginalised. After the conversations, they did not feel encouraged or motivated to apply extra effort in the execution of their tasks. Instead they felt confused by the exchange, and often felt that they were being tested for competence.

The middle and first line managers who reported directly to the senior leader described their experiences as pleasant. They indicated that their leader was accommodating of their work pressure and, since the conversations were informal, in a relaxed setting, they felt more comfortable to participate. Inputs were adopted by the leader, and participants felt that they had influence over their working environment.

The pre-coaching focus group (with artisans and technicians) were invited to approach the middle manager at any time. Noticeably, however, the participants did not say that the leader engaged them on their opinions and suggestions. It is therefore evident that the leader attempted to create the perception of inclusion and engagement, however, a meaningful contribution at influencing work was still absent.

**Summary: Pre-coaching focus groups**

Senior leaders (the participants in the pre-coaching focus group reporting directly to the executive) experienced less than satisfactory leadership care from their direct supervisor, and from within the organisation. Informal engagement for personal performance was lacking, and the value of trust is a misnomer. Participants were mature enough not to overthink their negative experiences with their leader, as they felt that everyone was treated the same; therefore, even though he exhibited some undesirable behaviour, they believed that this was not discriminatory behaviour. The senior leaders expressed a desire for a personal relationship, and wanted assurance that their presence and performance added value; they wanted to know that they are appreciated.

The middle and first line managers, who are the pre-coaching focus group participants reporting to the senior leader, indicated that they have a close working relationship with their leader. The participants felt that he was a peer, rather than leading them. Although they expressed concern for his well-being, they encouraged the leader to take a more assertive approach in setting boundaries. They experienced their leader as valuing relationship and trust first, therefore, whenever they were called upon for support, they did so unconditionally. It is important to note that the participants from this focus group and their leader were from the same racial group and gender, therefore, issues of diversity were a moot point.

The shop-floor employees (i.e. the pre-coaching focus group reporting directly to the middle manager) expressed a greater desire for information and knowledge of business viability and department vision. They felt as though only their hands were engaged, and thus desired that the organisation invested in their hearts and minds. Technical training was a strength, as they felt technically competent to perform their roles. It was, however, expressed that meaningful individual engagement was lacking.

The findings from the pre-coaching focus groups provide the employee, leadership and organisational context. This set the scene for the leadership development coaching sessions which were underpinned by transformative learning theory. The subsequent findings represent the leadership coaching sessions.

## 4.4 Coaching themes

Three coaching participants went through six one-hour leadership development coaching sessions, underpinned by transformative learning theory, over a period of three months. The coaching participants are leaders within the business, who operate at middle, senior and executive levels within the organisation. The findings will be discussed under the main themes highlighted by the three participants.

### 4.4.1 *Frames of reference*

Frames of reference are formed by socialised values, beliefs, worldviews and opinions. It is hard to shift one's frames of reference as they form habits of mind that

help adults interpret and filter their everyday experiences. Transformative learning theory, as applied during leadership development coaching, allowed the researcher to use a questioning technique in order to challenge these frames of reference. Coaching participants (the executive, senior and middle managers) confessed that coaching topics were controversial and created a discomfort when referring to values, beliefs, opinions and thoughts in the South African context.

It was observed that they expressed their thoughts and opinions with ease when speaking on nationalities external to their own. This is because they had experience working with individuals from various nationalities due to their employment in a global organisation. There was a demonstrable degree of discomfort in having frank conversations on race, gender, privilege, entitlement and the like, for the local culture. This was observed by what was not said, and a marked avoidance in answering the coaching questions directly. It was also apparent that having meaningful conversations on their worldviews was unpractised. Coaching participants spent a bit of time in what can only be described as a thinking state before answering the questions, while often requesting time to think about the question.

This theme was the most spoken about as it featured in every coaching conversation, whether solicited or unsolicited. There is an unspoken desire to understand the complexities of our individual frames of reference in the South African context. Coaching participants (executive, senior and middle managers) acknowledged their need to develop a better aptitude and appetite for conversations that challenge their ways of thinking. However, foundational to these conversations is the value of trust. In the absence of a trust relationship, coaching participants expressed that they would not entertain the topic with their peers or their direct supervisors, as they appreciated its sensitivity. It was notable that all the coaching participants expressed trust as a personal value, however, each of them lived it very differently; by implication, it could be perceived as a different value. Reflective questions, using transformative learning theory, stimulated awareness of behaviour that breaks trust. Tension remains regarding what needs to be done to build trust relationships between employees and their leaders when these relationships are superseded by an organisational culture of

mistrust. Coaching participants expressed their efforts as futile when the organisation's trust deficit undermines all efforts towards building trust relationships.

Conversations on worldviews, personal values, perceptions, beliefs, as well as opinions on topics of equality, diversity and inclusion are a competence, especially in the South African context. It is a knowledge and skill built over time. The astuteness with which one knows themselves, and is therefore better able to relate to others, is developed through reflective practice; thus, understanding the motivations and justifications for one's ways of being and knowing. Challenging these paradigms can only take place through dialogue. The coaching participants do not have a trusted platform for these conversations; instead, they practice restraint on issues of EDI that affect them in the workplace. This restraint impacts relationships of inclusion in the workplace, which are demonstrated as the next valuable finding.

### 4.4.2 *Connections imprint personal values*

In Chapter Two, socialisation was highlighted as critical to the frames of reference formed by adults. Transformative learning theory foreground the relationship with primary caregivers as having a significant influence on values, beliefs and worldviews. The coaching conversations with participants confirmed this premise. Relationships featured as a critical element for the coaching participants. Descriptions of relationships during their life stages influenced how they led and engaged those around them. The foundational relationships with primary caregivers are displayed in personal values and the leadership style they possess in the present. The relationship with the organisational culture affected their engagement with their people, and relationships with their leader gave them lived examples of how to behave in the organisation, as well as what is discussed and how it is discussed, and the degree of inclusion in working relationships.

Their foundational or early childhood relationships with parents, grandparents and/or guardians had a significant influence on the coaching participants' personal values. They described their personal values as a testament to their primary caregivers who had an influence on their beliefs, opinions, experiences, expectations and purpose. In

many instances, these participants demonstrated or espoused the same values as their primary caregivers. The manner in which they were taught to engage with others influenced the way in which these managers engaged their teams. Coaching participant 01C (the executive) was nostalgic when discussing his relationships:

> *For sure, every weekend we'll go, I would call it home; go see my parents and going back to my granny; it was always a mission. The crying every Sunday afternoon when you have to pack up and get the bus, go back to granny. You want to stay with Mama and Papa. It was good, I learnt quite a lot: one of our chores was to go pick up wood. There you had to make a fire. My granny was selling vetkoeks.* (Participant 01C)

He was raised to be tough, in his opinion, and this was the premise from which he led his team. Participant 02C (the senior leader) described his upbringing as having close family relationships; this relates to the feedback received from his team in the pre-coaching focus group on their relationships with him. Moreover, Participant 03C (the middle manager) was the only coaching participant to openly discuss the effects of apartheid on his performance as a leader. While he was young, he had witnessed and experienced diverse relationships. He thoughtfully recalled his childhood as follows:

> *My father was in the army…We then moved to Bloemfontein, there was apartheid issues that I vaguely remember. I finished schooling, and by then, my dad had left the army and started his own business. I cannot remember the detail, but dad worked with a black colonel…I remember him and my dad having a good relationship…In Bloem, I just remember the fears, but I didn't understand it and there was a lot of racism. I was in a mixed-race school…My best friend was black and group of friends were diverse.* (Participant 03C)

The coaching participants (executive, senior and middle manager) leadership practice, as described in the pre-coaching focus groups, showed a clear connection between the coaching participant's upbringing and the way in which they lead their teams. Furthermore, there were no disparities between how the leader perceived he managed his team, and their feedback in the focus groups. It was however determined that the way in which leaders lived their values did not always send a clear message. The

coaching participants shared similar values, with trust once again being one of the top three values listed; however, there was a disconnect in the shared interpretation of this value. In other words, although participants listed similar values, they lived them out very differently. In turn, how they lived their values was translated into their employee's experience. Reflective questions, supported by transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching, stimulated thinking on the manner in which foundational relationships affected the leaders' engagement with their teams. The coaching participants acknowledged reciprocity between their early childhood relationships and the way they led, thus considering the implications thereof, and how they engaged their teams.

### 4.4.3 *Process over people*

The organisational culture is an expression of acceptable behaviour and processes. It is the way things are done. The application of transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching sought to improve organisational culture to one that is centred on equality, diversity and inclusion. The organisation, being a living organism, displays habits, behaviour and purpose, much like people do. The organisational culture exists in contradistinction to some of the ideologies espoused by the coaching participants (executive, senior and middle managers), thus creating a tension that they are expected to manage. Platforms for conversations on these tensions are absent. Instead, relationships between leaders and their teams are experienced through the application of organisational processes, primarily disciplinary and/or performance management processes. This creates added strain, which is lived out in the ways in which they engage or do not engage colleagues in the organisation. Organisational processes, such discipline and grievance handling, displace leader responsibility for building relationships. Therefore, an employee's contribution and self-worth is eroded over time as they feel that they are not engaged with on the basis of their individuality:

> *I know I hold people accountable and its always justified. Also, how I deal with others is that I try to gauge their intent or my perception of their intent, I guess. Sometimes it's just a communication gap but I deal with each situation*

*differently. Other times, I don't listen to people, I switch off if I think they talking nonsense or if they approach me in a way that I don't like or when I am not interested in what they have to say or I think they have it wrong so what I am saying is I can be perceived as arrogant…that it's a powerplay. I tend to have situations where subordinates are disrespectful, I am conscious about it, do self-reflect on it – I don't think it's right [implying his behaviour].* (Participant 03C)

The quality of the relationships between coaching participants and their teams are a predominant expression of their engagement. It represents their values, beliefs and opinions. Decisions made at senior organisational levels impact coaching participants personally, and created a tension in their values. This tension is experienced in the team dynamics. The unspoken expectation of organisational leaders is to be ambassadors who support organisational decisions and values. Coaching participants are handed decisions that have been made for their departments by their superiors; this undermines their input and authority, however, they are expected to comply. Participant 01C (the executive) was agitated when he described such an incident in his area:

*Originally, I did not pick my maintenance manager. I did not think that he is ready and has what is required to make a maintenance manager. For the interest of continuity, and relationships, I said that it is okay, let us go through with it. Knowing the German parts, where promises were made to him, and my previous functional Head, had discussions with him, and he insisted that he take the role, in preparation for him to go somewhere else. I did not think that he is well matured, and has enough, for him to become a Maintenance Manager.* (Participant 01C)

The relationship between the executive and senior manager was strained, and this conflict was evident to team members in the department. In this example, the executive engaged the senior manager from the assumption that he was not yet competent to fulfil the role. The leadership interaction was not inclusive. The coaching

participant's (the executive) predispositions towards his senior manager impacted how they engaged, ultimately creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

### 4.4.4 *Transformative learning*

The application of transformative learning was undertaken by the coach during the leadership development coaching sessions. Coaching participants expressed their perspectives, thoughts and presuppositions through their lived experiences. Stimulating thinking and reflection allowed the coaching participants (the executive, senior and middle manager) to view things more critically and to consider an alternate way of knowing. It is important to note that there were more instances of reflection, in that the coaching participants admitted to having moments of reflection upon their ideologies. The coach only proceeded to challenge paradigms once a trust relationship was established. Coaching participant 03C (the middle manager), after some challenging questions and critical reflection, benevolently said:

> *If I believe it, how am I supposed to behave differently? How do I portray what I am feeling inside? So, these are the types of things that I have been asking myself. To be honest, I have not asked these questions prior.* (Participant 03C)

It was through expressions like these that attempts at creating a disorienting dilemma were experimented with, so as to create a disruption in thinking patterns. These were a lot harder to do, did not occur as a traumatic event in the coaching conversation, and it was not always easy to observe when it did take place, nor were they made in the reflective statements of the coaching participants (the executive, senior and middle managers). Reflective expressions from the coaching participants indicate a possible disorienting dilemma:

> *You have hit my struggle on the head. This is the struggle that I have been having. To be honest, that is why it is eating me.* (Participant 03C)

> *The light bulb just came on now!* (Participant 02C)

> *The part of "I am tired of 01C" kind of hit me.* (Participant 01C)

The coaching participants were a lot more adept at sharing learning moments and experimentation of a concrete experience:

> *Yes, it was quite interesting to reflect and to see, that there is so much to talk about. There is so much that I have learnt…So many things that I could have done differently, so it gave me a moment of good reflection, and gave me a tear in my eye.* (Participant 01C)

Transformation was expressed in positive sentiments by the coaching participants, as though they considered their participation in the process to be an achievement. That is, they believed that the work they had put into coaching had yielded benefits. Coaching participant 02C (the senior manager) was animated when he described the relationship shift between himself and his leader:

> *Well I must admit when he now walks into my office, he's giving me the opportunity to say what I think on a topic, not telling me how it should be. And just by taking my ideas into consideration and actually listening to it, I see a bit of improvement.* (Participant 02C)

The coaching participants are experienced leaders who each have more than 20 years of experience, with a wealth of knowledge. Challenging ways of thinking, creating disorienting dilemmas was less observable, as it is a critical reflection activity, and it is internalised; its outward expression being behaviour change. It was difficult to pinpoint the moment of disorientation as the coaching participants (the executive, senior and middle manager) would go quiet, and when probed they would simply indicate that they were thinking. Moreover, the disorienting dilemmas or moments of critical reflection were incremental; there was no "big bang" moment. In each coaching session, topics of equality and diversity were discussed. Further, the coach cannot embark upon this journey of applying transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching with others, and not be impacted; nor could the coach remain neutral on topics of EDI and social change. There were significant moments for the coach, and disorienting dilemmas, in which the coach's perceptions of race and gender were transformed as well.

### 4.4.5 *Equality and diversity for inclusion*

The lack of equal opportunities and practices of diversity affected employee engagement within the automotive manufacturer. Coaching participants (the executive, senior and middle manager) all experienced discrimination – either directed at them or which they had to address – in the workplace. The findings show that leaders are still very uncomfortable confronting issues of discrimination. Furthermore, it was evident that even though they witness incidences of discrimination, they do not speak up. To speak up takes courage. Incidences of discrimination can be used as opportunities for learning. According to the coaching participants, the organisation, rather than leaders, has done a better job of protecting employees, especially females, on topics of discrimination.

For example, one coaching participant describes a situation in which he was accused of a racial slur, proven to be innocent, and there was no recourse offered:

> *I had a lot of friction with Person A when he was promoted. He had many gaps that he needed to close so he felt victimised. He swore at me, I didn't swear back…I gave him a warning for insolence, gave him an opportunity for a representative, he appealed the warning and the next thing there was rumour at the plant that I called him a baboon. I felt completely at risk and unsafe! I never said those words. He eventually admitted that he lied but by then it was too late.* (Participant 03C,)

Coaching participants (the executive, senior and middle manager) confess that racism is spoken about covertly and only among the same racial groups, due to the sensitivity of the topic and level of comfort; however, these participants also highlighted that all it does is perpetuate much of the same. The findings are that any issues of discrimination are displaced through organisational processes rather than using these as an opportunity for dialogue within the organisation. It is not addressed by the senior tiers of leadership, in addition to there being no transparency, which then leaves much to employee perception and allows for the generation of rumours.

Activities of inclusion were described as attempts by leaders to cascade information to their reports. In addition, it was felt that this limited true reflection on examples of

inclusion for decision making, for business contribution. There is much opportunity in the organisation for inclusion platforms. Platforms that encourage continued conversations will help to improve organisational social awareness. Issues are not being addressed outside of the disciplinary process as managers do not feel equipped to deal with the controversy attached to such conversations, therefore, their response is to remain silent. The lack of transparency creates the largest challenge, as employees and leaders are left to their own devices when deciding, based on their own worldviews and life experiences, what to make of incidences of discrimination in the workplace.

### 4.4.6 *Leadership challenges with organisational culture*

Organisational culture centred on diversity, equality and inclusion is meant to improve employee engagement, and is the purpose of this research. The coaching participants (the executive, senior and middle manager) agreed that their immediate superior had the technical knowledge to perform their roles. Much like what was expressed in the pre-coaching focus groups, there was agreement that technical competence is the foundation upon which leaders establish trust in the organisation. The findings however demonstrate that coaching participants have a trust deficit with their employees based on their leading roles. Even in cases in which a close relationship exists, team members felt that the level of involvement in the detail undermined trust. The exception was the executive manager, whose greatest challenge was navigating ambiguity and uncertainty in a complex business environment, as it relates to issues of social change. He receives little support from his leader in making meaning of issues surrounding gender diversity, sexual harassment, racism and matters of equal opportunity. These topics are deflected to the Human Relations Department to help the executive in these areas. The coaching participant 03C (the executive) expressed a desire to unpack these complex issues with his immediate superior, in the hopes that change can be affected through that dialogue. He mentioned that it was unfortunate that he needed to wait for the opportunity to have these discussions, that is, the pace of change made it difficult to timeously address issues of discrimination. The result being that they continue to manifest; moreover, its expression in the

business is one of marginalisation, however subtle, and disgruntlement towards the organisation's ineffectiveness in dealing with issues of social change. Coaching and pre-coaching focus group participants had gripes with their leaders on matters of social justice and equal opportunity.

The organisational culture is expressed, by the coaching participants, as having a strong German culture in a South African context, which presents dynamic and complex issues for them. Although the coaching participants are leaders within the organisation, they did not feel as though they were part of a larger cohesive unit. Coaching Participant 01C (the executive) tries to provide context on how senior leaders respond to issues of discrimination and inclusion:

> *I do not know my immediate superior very well, but I know the GM of HR. I think some of the topics of this nature, my immediate superior will shy away from them. He is not the person to dive into them and scratch them. Not that he cannot; I think it is not in his nature.* (Participant 01C)

Similarly, to the pre-coaching focus groups, the coaching participants did not feel that they could share openly with the other senior leaders or executives in the organisation. The conclusion is that, within departments, there are efforts for the leaders to drive personal values, beliefs and assumptions through various mechanisms. Again, it is important to note that the organisational culture is very dominant, thus making it difficult for leaders to drive culture change within their divisions without the appropriate organisation-wide intervention – or, at minimum, without department leaders and employees going through coaching programmes in parallel so as to create a critical mass for change.

In conclusion, the perceived dominant German culture is prevalent within the South African organisation. Although the local organisation has its independent management structures, the future of the South African entity relies quite heavily on its viability and compliance with the holding organisation. Connecting the work of inclusion to business performance remains a challenge, therefore, the organisation's view is that they will exhibit good corporate and organisational behaviour and citizenship. However, true buy-in for transformation (in the context of equality, diversity and inclusion to effect

employee engagement) remains a social sciences endeavour until it can be firmly established that greater inclusivity engenders greater engagement, thus impacting individual and organisational performance. This remains an elusive topic that cannot be tracked or monitored, except through employee sentiment, which is perceived as inconsistent.

### 4.4.7 *Coaching practice*

The application of transformative learning theory during leadership coaching was challenging, however, generic coaching practices were not hard to apply. Coaching skills and practices were applied with relative ease. Albeit challenging, the process of rapport building, critical reflection, making and working with meaning, and synthesising various inputs to create “flow” was achieved. Experimentation on coaching for social change was, however, difficult. Remaining neutral, refraining from sharing personal life experiences, values and beliefs in an effort to catalyse change was not possible. The coach’s diversity profile stood in contrast to that of the coaching participants – the very presence of which made diversity a lived experience for the coaching clients and the coach. The coach is the instrument, and habits of mind expressed as points of view impacted the coaching experience.

Since the coaching participants understood the coaching process to be a research undertaking, with the purpose of venturing into deep topics of social change, they relied heavily on the coach to set the agenda. A tension was carried on this predisposition, as it is contrary to recommended coaching practices wherein the client sets the agenda. Efforts were however made to ask meaningful questions that would allow the coaching participants (the executive, senior and middle manager) to rely on their resourcefulness in order to make valuable contributions to the conversations. The coach carried a lot of tension to help coaching participants feel at ease so as to discuss the topics at hand. Challenging paradigms, without damaging relationships, was also a careful line to be walked. The coaching participants were so uncomfortable when asked to discuss issues of equality, that it was exasperating to attempt to draw out their true thoughts.

Another finding was that being authentic helped draw contributions from coaching participants, and edified trust and relationship building. The coaching sessions were conversations, an ebb and flow of experiences and exchanges, which allowed the coaching participants to feel comfortable to ask questions. These had to be managed respectfully, with the coach being careful not to insert personal opinion and values into conversations where coaching participants felt prohibited from participating. There were many roles that needed to be carried: coach, research novice, academic student and a leader within the organisation. These roles created tension, sometimes conflict; however, I was mindful to wear the right hat in the right platform and managed boundaries that could create role confusion for coaching participants through the practice of a reflective journal.

Coaching practice highlights the number of parallel processes that occur simultaneously. Coaching for social change requires a different positionality on the part of the coach, which was unexpected in the research journey. The coaching intervention was largely focused on three leaders (the executive, senior and middle manager) in a specific department. It was primarily centred on individual experiences and practical ways of assisting the coaching participants on challenges they encounter in the space of EDI. The perceptions of organisational culture and leader engagement obtained from the pre-coaching focus groups were used to inform context and social backdrop, but the coaching participants' professional experiences remained the focus of coaching conversations.

### 4.5 Summary of coaching themes

The thematic analysis of leadership development coaching aligned to theoretical underpinnings of transformative learning theory revealed that the prescribed challenges in the theory were experienced in the field. A key finding was that the nature of a disorienting dilemma is incremental. Managers experience discomfort when discussing issues of discrimination within the South African context, thus providing platforms for safe discussions on this issue left managers feeling supported. In the ensuing section (4.6), the post-coaching focus group findings are analysed in order to

confirm whether actual shifts in leadership behaviour, to effect workplace inclusion, took place.

### 4.6 Post-coaching focus groups

Three post-coaching focus groups were hosted, with the participants reporting directly to the coaching participants (the executive, senior and middle manager). The post-coaching focus groups reported that shifts in leader behaviour did in fact take place. Areas that the focus group participants had previously highlighted as concerns, were no longer prevalent in the behaviour of coaching participants. Participants in post-coaching focus group 3 (with artisans and technicians) have however admitted to spending little time with their leader 03C (the middle manager), thus not being able to comment on behavioural change. Interestingly, they came to his defence:

> *I haven't seen him for a couple of weeks now. I have been working shifts, so we missed each other, but I also know that he is heavily under pressure in the plant.* (Participant AC16FG3)

Participants in Focus Group 1 (with senior and middle managers) shared that they were surprised they held a common opinion of coaching participant 01C (the executive), as it is not something they ever discussed. It helped them to realise that his behaviour was not personal and malicious. Post-coaching focus group participant AC07FG1 noted the following, with encouragement:

> *Change has been incremental. His mandate is now clear to me at least. He has been showing appreciation, giving feedback and says "thank you"! His relationship with the senior manager has shifted quite a bit; it is visible to everyone, and change is infectious and encouraging.* (Participant AC07FG1)

Participants in Focus Group 2 (with middle and first line managers) confirmed that they have noticed a greater work-life balance on the part of coaching participant 02C (the senior manager). Their concern for their leader was no longer an issue:

> *It is good to see him taking some time off and spending it with the family. Because he is getting more rest, he is not so stressed and just his whole*

*behaviour is more relaxed, which is nice to see. I am happy for him.* (Participant AC12FG2)

The leader's ability to set boundaries meant that he engaged his people differently. The post-coaching focus group participants felt a greater leadership presence, while involvement in the detail had decreased substantially. The post-coaching focus group participants did, however, not observe a shift across the whole department, only changes within those individuals who underwent the coaching intervention. The timeframe of the intervention created scepticism on whether the behaviour shifts will be sustainable over time. The post-coaching focus group participants did, however, notice that the organisational culture remained dominant, which affected positive sentiments of the journey undertaken by their leaders.

## 4.7 Conclusion

The application of transformative learning theory, during leadership development coaching, largely relied on the transformative critical questioning technique. Leaders can potentially enhance workplace inclusion by engaging in coaching conversations that stimulate thinking on equality and diversity. However, transformative learning is only sustainable when leaders have a readiness for change. Coaches need to persevere through the uncomfortable conversations; they need to have a good grasp of their worldviews, identity and personal values when embarking on coaching conversations for social change. It is an emerging field, coupled with the complexity of applying transformative learning theory - potentially creating confusion during the coaching conversations on the coaching objectives that needs to be achieved.

The pre-coaching focus groups helped to understand the backdrop and context within which coaching participants (the executive, senior and middle manager) need to operate. It allowed for an evaluation of the environment through the perspectives of direct reports, and not solely through the lens of the leaders. The leaders, that is, the coaching participants, are required to decode a myriad of data in order to lead during times of complexity, ambiguity and a season of heightened social frustration due to bigotry, slow progress on social issues, and the challenges of social structures that

continue to perpetuate and advantage only a select few. It was evident that leaders lacked confidence and competence on issues of equality, diversity and inclusion in order to drive transformation. They need dialogue and scaffolding in order to drive change in their leadership presence, which must become more fluid during times of volatility and transformation. The coaching participants requested to continue the conversations after the six sessions were complete, as they described it as a platform that helped them make meaning of their experiences at work.

The research process sought to apply multiple processes, structures, skills and knowledge to the subject, so that these different elements can come together in an effortless accord of a coaching experience. Pinpointing and understanding the intricacy of each phase, process and skill in the scope of the coaching journey, and maintaining the intentionality of the coaching practice, was complex. Moreover, accomplishing flow was a thought-provoking and inspiring undertaking.

During data analysis, it was critical to understand and evaluate the arenas in which the coach was trying to stimulate transformative learning theory and coaching practices for social change. The purpose of this was to apply coaching skills or techniques to stimulate critical reflection and shifts in thinking. This was accomplished by asking meaningful questions to provoke critical reflection, which is congruent to the role of the coach. Evaluating the application of a process element or criterion created space for deeper, more meaningful conversations. The purpose of the research was to investigate the way in which the application of transformative learning theory creates sustainable change in leaders, understanding how coaching can create equality, diversity and inclusivity, and evaluating how transformative learning is used in leadership development coaching. This is done with the objective of facilitating an organisational culture that improves employee engagement.

Leadership does not take place in a vacuum. The environment is a system of everchanging complexities that affect the leadership process. Leaders both give and receive data, as they interact intimately with the system by observing, and through their behaviour and actions, whilst trying to lead and make a meaningful contribution. The organisational culture pushes its values, beliefs and ways of working into the

individual’s frames of reference, which is quite powerful as enough negative data inputs can begin to affect leader engagement. These frames of reference are then fed back into the system through the established relationships, ways of engagement and leadership behaviour. Leadership coaching supported the coaching participants to make meaning, so as to critically evaluate their interpretations of the environment; in some instances, they had deep reflective moments on the various environmental pressures they have endured and acknowledge how these have affected them. Therefore, leadership development coaching can help to support managers during times of complexity, ambiguity and change.

Coaching to effect change on the meaning perspectives of equality, diversity and inclusion, so as to improve employee engagement, is possible through the application of transformative learning theory. Key to unlocking employee engagement are the relationships that leaders build with their direct reports, to appreciate their individual contribution and to welcome their input. This requires a reconditioning of values and the way in which they are lived, as these become employee experiences that affect engagement. It is intimate, messy and complicated, and leaders must have a heart for what it means to be human in order to accomplish inclusion.

# CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to explain, evaluate and assess the research findings within the context of the literature review. The application of transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching is possible and supports an incremental nature to a disorienting dilemma. The coaching platform supports coaching participants to examine and engage their frames of reference; in doing so, they are able to make new meaning. This chapter discusses the analysis of the qualitative research that was conducted in order to answer the research questions, investigate the study propositions and further explore literature mentioned in the previous chapters. The purpose of this was to investigate the ways in which the application of transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching facilitates an organisational culture that is centred on diversity, inclusion and equality, which is meant to improve employee engagement.

The first endeavour of this chapter is to conceptualise the findings through presenting a process application model of transformative learning theory using coaching practices for social change. This visual aims to show systems thinking that affects leadership behaviour during the coaching journey. The consequent key findings of the research will be discussed under each research proposition.

## 5.2 Process application model

It was critical to understand the way transformative learning was applied during leadership development coaching to affect the coaching participants' frames of reference. It was necessary to investigate the preliminary criteria for sustainable change and the practical coaching practice or skills used during the leadership development coaching process, as this was important in creating a disorienting dilemma. Understanding these conditions would enable the coach to support coaching participants to deal more effectively with workplace encounters of equality and diversity that can create an inclusive workforce. A process application model was formulated to visualise the areas in which transformative learning theory and coaching

practice for social change took place. Figure 8, below, depicts the author's own process model. This figure is a diagrammatical representation of the process of applying Mezirow's transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching with the coaching participants.

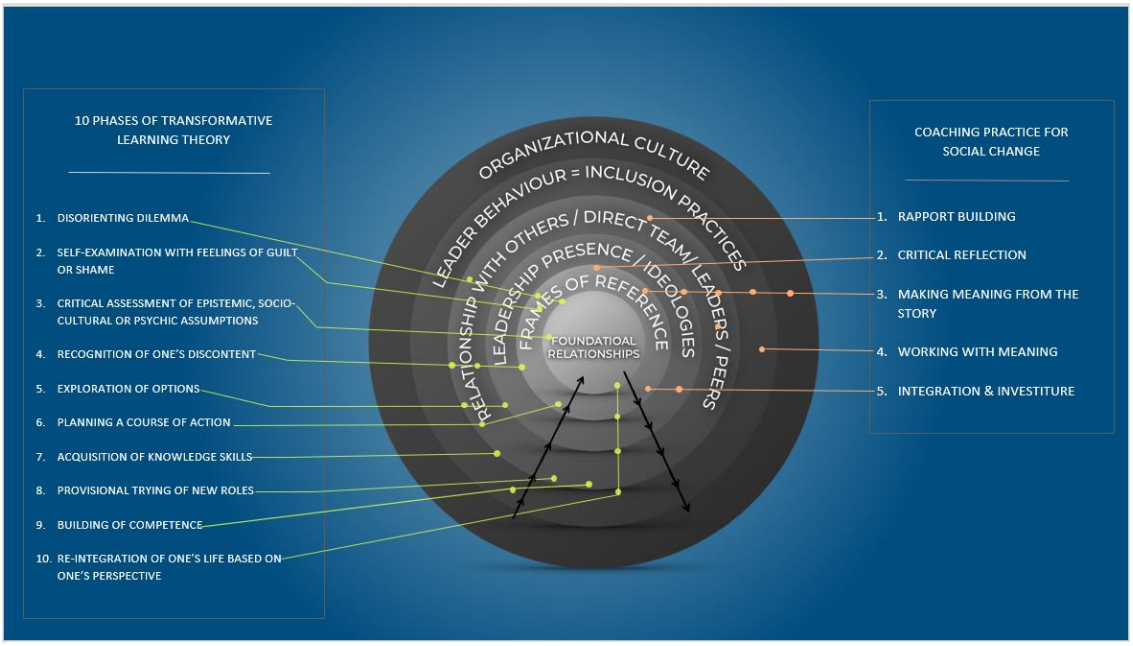



**Figure 8: Process Application Model (researcher's own design) of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory and the Proposed Transformative Coaching Model developed by Corrie and Lawson (2017).**

Seen in Figure 8, above, are coaching practices overlapped on transformative learning theory in order to demonstrate the deliberate alignment on the part of the coach during leadership coaching, so as to apply the theoretical assertions present in Chapter Two of this study. The aim hereof is to articulate practical application in order to facilitate an organisational culture that is grounded on addressing equality, diversity and inclusion within a South African automotive manufacturing organisation. The foundational relationships, frames of reference, leadership presence or ideologies, relationships within the workplace, leadership inclusion practices and organisational culture were the main areas of conversation in the leadership coaching sessions.

In order to understand the way in which transformative learning is applied, it was important to first know what it was that I was trying to shift. DeSapio's (2017)

proposition that understanding the target area of transformative learning, how it happens and how it can be implemented more specifically in workplace and social environments, was critical for this research. DeSapio (2017) adds that the theory is necessary to tackle workplace issues of equality, compassion and ethics, or social issues regarding racism, justice and reconciliation.

Transformation in leadership behaviour was observable, as the findings demonstrate, since the focus group participants noted a shift during and after the coaching intervention. The theory suggests that a disorienting dilemma occurs within the meaning perspectives or frames of reference of an individual (Mezirow, 1991). Furthermore, as presented in Figure 8, this was the target arena for the disorienting dilemma; however, this was not immediately observable or an outward expression on the part of the coaching participant. As confirmed by Mälkki (2010), the disorienting dilemma has been accepted as a valid trigger of reflection, yet it remains unclear how this experience leads to reflection which stimulates transformation. The observable criterion, as seen in Figure 8, was the behaviour shifts in the relationships that coaching participants (executive, senior and middle managers) had with their direct reports. This was confirmed by the focus group participants.

Scholars studying transformative learning theory and, more recently, DeSapio (2017) write that those engaging in Mezirow's work recognise a need to understand what it is that is targeted; without this understanding there is no repeatable way to cultivate transformational learning. During the research process, it was challenging to know at all times whether the correct areas and practices were being leveraged to stimulate critical reflection; however, it was apparent that transformative questions did in fact target frames of reference. The research suggests that coaching questions intended to stimulate critical reflection on the frames of reference can catalyse transformative thought. Observable during the coaching sessions were long periods of silence that can only be described as coaching participants being in a reflective state.

During the research, knowing how to apply transformative learning proved difficult. DeSapio (2017) notes that the existent literature lacks discussion of practitioner application within the workplace or other institutions in society. The leadership

development coaching approach applied during the coaching sessions held for this study (see Figure 5.8) presented a noteworthy parallel practice as reflection, which can be stimulated in various ways and facilitated by the coach, can be decoded by the coach and coaching participant. In Figure 8, the coaching practice applied with the coaching participants (executive, senior and middle managers) for transformative learning demonstrates the arenas in which coaching practice was useful. It was more diffiult to demarcate that understanding with all ten phases of Mezirow's theory, however, attention was primarily given to the frames of reference so as to stimulate a disorienting dilemma.

DeSapio (2017) proposes the pursuit of at least three factors as a way forward for understanding the 'how' of transformative learning. These were undertaken in this study in order to provide some insights. First, the research process application model for transformative learning combined with coaching, as seen in Figure 8, starts with the predisposition that coaching participants had a problem within the organisation, particularly in regard to equality, diversity and inclusion. Mezirow's (1991) theory is built on the problem-based approach for a disorienting dilemma. In agreement with this understanding, DeSapio (2017) puts forward the premise that the theory is appropriate in dealing with social issues, as these sensitive issues have no easy remediation.

Second, story-formed learning may inspire dramatic change in an individual's identity. The coaching platform allowed coaching participants to share their life-experiences in a safe space and a trusted relationship with the coach supported this dialogue. The coaching conversations challenged many paradigms and ways of thinking using the experiences of the coaching participants, in order to demonstrate incongruence or disassociation from those who are different to them. This critical reflection of the story-formed learning approach allowed coaching participants to express new views regarding their leadership ideologies – as reflected in phases five and six in Figure 8.

Third, an individual's sense of connectedness to an external entity is described by DeSapio (2017) as giving a measure of meaning to inidividual identities. Awakening to an idea or participation in communities of practice, such as an organisation's

mission or principles of justice and equality, can promote transformation. As a point of departure, the qualitative study used the predisposition that the coaching participants had a problem facilitating workplace inclusion within the organisation, due to its lack of transparency on matters of equality and diversity, to bring about awareness of their personal values, beliefs and worldviews. The coaching platform and transformative coaching questions gave coaching participants the space to share their stories. This was used to stimulate a sense of connectedness, with the aim of demonstrating the importance of relationships to others as the tipping point that shifts inclusion.

In Figure 8, leadership behaviour that has an impact on inclusion practices is highlighted in the making meaning dimension of coaching practice and, at the same time, is identified under phase seven (the acquisition of knowledge and skills) and phase nine (building competence). The coach's process application model, while in its premature stage of development, can be applied as a systems approach for the application of transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching. The research findings suggest that transformative learning, combined with leadership development coaching, can stimulate transformative thought within coaching participants, thus bringing about change in leadership inclusion behaviour.

### 5.3 Proposition 1: Transformative learning theory and coaching can impact adult learning and change.

Understanding the way in which the application of transformative learning theory creates sustainable change in leaders has been an academic debate for many years, which also aims to answer the first research question (in what way does the application of transformative learning theory create sustainable change in leaders?). The literature review presented in Chapter Two of this study highlights that transformative learning has strong theoretical underpinnings, however, practical application in knowing the target areas for transformation and how it happens are less explored. DeSapio (2017, p. 57) writes that Robert Kegan's critical questions of what forms transformation, which is to say "what is actually the target area of transformative learning" and ways it can be implemented in the workplace, remains of critical interest. The process application model introduced at the start of this chapter experimented with the implementation of

transformative learning theory and the target areas that it aimed to transform for the purpose of this research. Recognising that transformative learning theory and coaching can impact adult learning and change, the themes of *transformative learning* and *leadership challenges with organisational culture* will be discussed below.

### 5.3.1 *Transformative Learning*

A noteworthy finding on the theme of transformative learning was that there was an incremental nature to the disorienting dilemma. Each coaching conversation became a building block to further build constructs of equality, diversity and inclusion. In a recent study of engineering students, Tien, Namasivayam and Ponniah (2019, p. 4) wrote that "the manner of transformation may be said to occur either in a fast or in an epochal manner, or in a slow and incremental manner. An epochal transformation is considered to occur when a person's meaning perspective shifts quickly. An incremental transformation happens through small shifts in meaning schemes that over time results in a shift in a meaning perspective. The end results are the same."

The coaching participants did not experience the disorienting dilemma or moment of critical reflection as an outward expression; in fact, it was observed by the coach to be a quiet, thoughtful consideration of a meaning perspective. Each coaching session built on the new understanding in the meaning schemes of equality and diversity that were disrupted. Coaching participants actively engaged with these topics in order to grasp the new knowledge and reflect more deeply. This culminated in an observable behaviour change on the part of the coaching participant, which was recognised by the focus group participants. Dirkx, Mezirow and Cranton (2006) write that transformative learning is epochal or incremental, and possibly includes objective (task-oriented) or subjective (self-reflective) reframing. The qualitative study confirms the same for the disorienting dilemma.

The coaching conversations manifested in the form of a logical process of consideration, and a deep meaningful change in the coaching participants' consideration of their character. These highlighted leadership practices on employee engagement and potential opportunities to leverage workplace inclusion practices.

Coaching participants developed a curiosity in regard to their learning on topics of race, gender, intercultural contexts, social change and so on; this influenced their leadership inclusion behaviour. The complexity of transformative learning and the dimensions that are shifted for transformation are well captured by Dirkx, Mezirow and Cranton (2006), who explain that transformative learning is a rational process of assessment and who postulate that it is a deep meaningful process that affects matters of the soul. These researchers conclude that transformative learning is an outcome of an experience that was transformative, however, it must involve a rational process of critically assessing one's epistemic assumptions.

Because of this rational process of creating deeper meaning, coaching participants voluntarily shifted their ways of being with focus group participants. This change in leadership behaviour was shared in coaching conversations and in the post coaching focus groups, specifically for post-coaching focus groups 1 and 2 (with senior, middle- and first-line managers). Dirkx, Mezirow and Cranton (2006, p. 124) describe this awareness within transformative learning as: "(1) recognition that an alternate way of understanding may provide insights; (2) context awareness of the sources, nature and consequences of an established belief; (3) critical reflection of the established belief supporting epistemic assumptions; (4) validating a new belief through an empirical test of its claims; (5) coping with the anxiety over the actions taken and lastly, (6) taking reflective action on the validated belief." These six steps were witnessed within the leadership development coaching journey. Moreover, where the transformation of frames of reference took place, in their leadership behaviour, the coaching participants integrated new ways of knowing and behaving.

Finally, the application of transformative learning does not preclude the investigator of its processes from transforming. It was not possible to engage in transformative learning and coaching for social change, as coach, and remain neutral and unaffected. Therefore, similarly, transformation within the coach also took place. This reinforces the theory that dialogue is the vehicle to learning, as well as understanding one's sense of self through the relationships we hold with others. This is aptly stated by Dirkx, Mezirow and Cranton (2006), who ask, how can it (referring to transformative

learning) not involve the person unless it is suggested that learning is removed from what creates meaning in us? It has to involve the life experiences in the sense making process in order for it to be transformative. Leadership coaching to affect organisational culture is therefore unique, but not without its own set of challenges.

### 5.4 Leadership challenges with organisational culture

The literature reviewed in Chapter Two and the findings presented in Chapter Four place a responsibility on leadership for workplace inclusion and employee engagement. In the findings, the organisational culture, according to both focus group and coaching participants, is shaped by the leaders within the organisation. It is assumed that the organisation's leaders have the knowledge and competence to lead the charge in areas of equality, diversity and inclusion. However, the research findings demonstrate that, in the automotive organisation under focus in this study, coaching participants welcomed the coaching platform so as to gain better knowledge, support and competence on issues of equality and diversity, in order to lead during times of change. They did not feel that they were knowledgeable enough to address these topics in the workplace.

As a starting point to understand leadership competence on social issues, participants in the pre-coaching focus group expressed a trust deficit in the relationship with their leaders (the coaching participants) due their level of involvement in the delivery of tasks. The coaching participants' lived expression of trust affected the focus group participants' perceptions of unfair distribution of equal opportunities. They expressed the need for the coaching participants to improve their leadership practices on workplace inclusion through better knowledge and understanding of equality and diversity. The context provided by the pre-coaching focus group participants was that they did not feel that the coaching participants lived out the value of trust consistently, as evident in their level of involvement in daily task delivery. The lack of shared understanding of trust created the perception of unfairness. During the coaching sessions, the coaching participants (executive, senior and middle managers) expressed a lack of support from their leaders in dealing with issues of equality, diversity and inclusion, as well as organisational culture and employee engagement.

Therefore, they welcomed the coaching platform as it provided an opportunity to discuss and learn more about issues that impact inclusionary practices.

During the coaching conversations, the coach applied a transformative coaching technique that challenged coaching participants on their lived behaviour of trust. The application of transformative learning theory during the coaching conversations confronted and investigated personal values; however, it concentrated on the value of trust as this was perceived by coaching participants as an important value for relationship building and employee engagement. Other topics that were explored included workplace inclusion practices and employee engagement, and coaching participants were provoked to reflect more deeply on topics of race, gender, equality and individual differences. The purpose thereof was to draw connections for coaching participants on their leadership presence and their behaviour on inclusion. Boekhorst (2015) notes that authentic leaders behave in accordance with their morals and values, despite contradictory pressures. It was pointed out to coaching participants (executive, senior and middle managers), through the application of transformative coaching questions and dialogue, that they would appear disingenuous in their efforts of inclusion – based on their everyday engagements – if they did not shift their actions to demonstrate trust. Moreover, it was emphasised that feelings of mistrust created a discomfort within the focus group participants, which, in turn, impacted upon employee engagement.

After coaching, the focus group participants shared that the coaching participants made efforts to shift their leadership behaviours, and engaged them differently. This leadership transformation enabled focus group participants to participate differently in the workplace and, as a result, trust was beginning to re-establish itself. Boekhorst (2015) states that employees must feel comfortable; this means that the application of their individual differences, in order to be creative and to feel engaged on these differences, is a precursor to inclusion. The creation of a climate of inclusion is a leadership responsibility.

Coaching platforms were well placed to assist coaching participants to act in congruence with their convictions and moral values. Shoukry and Cox (2018) support

coaching to assist leaders as they postulate that it has the potential to move power and support agency and, in this respect, effect social structure. The authors also appreciate that there is a delicate balance with coaching participants in empowering growth and empowerment in leaders. In this regard, in the context of overwhelming organisational power dynamics, the exercising agency may make it problematic for the coaching participants (leaders) to shift a dominant organisational culture (Shoukry & Cox, 2018). As noted in the findings, the dominant organisational culture often thwarted leadership efforts.

Considering the above, Shoukry (2017, p. 178) intimates that social change begins from the inside out, in this respect: “empowerment of the self, dismantling dysfunctional beliefs, and gaining inspiration and authenticity, wherein coaching acts as an enabler for personal transformation and action, supporting individuals in understanding how society is shaping their experience and beliefs and acting to change their immediate and wider social conditions.” Coaching platforms proved to support coaching participants in areas of equality and diversity. Moreover, while organisational culture may not shift, the coaching participants chose to engage their teams differently so that they may have a different inclusionary experience. In doing so, they took agency of their leadership responsibility for employee engagement.

### 5.4.1 *Conclusion on Proposition 1: Transformative learning theory and coaching can impact adult learning and change*

The practice of transformative learning, while challenging, supports transformative thought on equality and diversity. The way transformative learning theory is applied for sustainable change in leaders is through dialogue, which supports learning. Therefore, the application of transformative coaching questions that stimulated critical reflection helped to create a transformed employee experience, through meaningful conversations at the individual level with coaching participants. Coaching platforms provided psychological safety for the coaching participants to delve into sensitive areas, without appearing to be clumsy, incompetent or insensitive. Leadership development coaching, combined with transformative learning, can produce change in leaders as it was demonstrated to be a developmental process for coaching

participants. The coaching intervention was, however, limited. Therefore, sustained change remains unobserved. Making meaning during the coaching conversations was individualistic and private to the coaching participants (executive, senior and middle managers). They were able to freely explore and consider their specific influence on practices of inclusion; it was apparent that being in a safe space made it easier to commit to change, which was the post-coaching focus group participants recognised as transformed leadership behaviour. The incremental nature to transformation compliments sustainable change in the coaching participants, as it implies that their shift in meaning perspectives have been rationalised, considered and tested; consequently, a concrete experience formed new ways of being and the decision to change was voluntary.

Coaching conversations on race, gender, promotion, development, equality and diversity were unpolished and clumsy on the part of the coaching participants, as they struggled to understand their impact on and contribution towards creating a culture that was perceived as excluding those from underrepresented groups. Coaching participants fervently debated and sought to gain deeper knowledge on these areas, so as to stimulate social change.

## 5.5 Proposition 2: Equality, diversity and inclusion practices impact employee engagement.

The research question of how leadership coaching can create an equal, diverse and inclusive workforce is a critical one. Many South African organisations, because of the legacy of apartheid, struggle to skilfully address this issue. Over and above the complexities of our historical background is the elusive nature of employee engagement. Its attributes and impact are not only associated with leadership but also with how meaningfully employees are engaged in work tasks. Shuck and Herd (2012) highlight that many factors influence employee engagement, especially as the world of work has become more complex and volatile; however, the support that leadership behaviour can add has a greater role in influencing aspects of employee engagement. To provide some insight, equality, diversity and inclusion practices were investigated in order to establish their impact on employee engagement. These matters will be

discussed under the themes of *equality and diversity for inclusion* and *connections imprint personal values.*

### 5.5.1 *Equality and diversity for inclusion*

Discrimination in the workplace is still prevalent today. The qualitative findings suggest that coaching participants are no better, today, at dealing with such sensitive matters as they were prior to the democratisation of South Africa. The coaching conversations revealed that coaching participants would witness incidences of discrimination yet not speak up as they lacked the courage to do so; further, they expressed that this left them with feelings of guilt. The coach attempted to understand and empathise with these experiences, so as to scaffold and explore alternatives that would remove feelings of blame. They expressed that, since the organisation did not transparently discuss incidences of discrimination, they were hesitant to voice their opinions. Bennett (2004, p. 62) states that "as people became more interculturally competent it seemed that there was a major change in the quality of their experience." The coaching participants welcomed coaching conversations that built competence. It was however apparent that the coaching conversations asserted the need for coaching participants to take accountability and not rely on the organisation to drive leadership responses to discrimination. These assertions manifested through transformative questions that stimulated critical reflection. The statements that the coach posed in an attempt to challenge the coaching participants were parallel to a developmental undertaking. In this regard, DeSapio (2017) writes that we still do not know how to "do" transformative learning. Therefore, the coach had to learn and do simultaneously.

As indicated in the literature review in Chapter Two, the term diversity is an inclusive concept that conceals specific struggles faced by certain races, genders and political movements. To refer to diversity is to erode the struggle *for* inclusion that many have had to endure. Bennet (2004) suggests that this concept of a "melting pot" of cultures minimizes cultural differences in order to create a universal standard without bias, yet this minimization is theoretically ethnocentric. He continues that developing a self-reflexive perspective, and the concomitant worldview, allows people to experience others different from themselves as equally human; ultimately, not becoming experts

in more than one culture, but rather adept at identifying how differences function in a broad assortment of human interactions. The coaching sessions aimed to accomplish this so that inclusion practices in the workplace led to authentic engagements with focus group participants. Developing an inclusive organisation in South Africa is factored, by Daya (2014), as the individual engagement by the direct supervisor in dialogue around diversity and inclusion, with their people being accepted and respected. This means that the senior leadership style and employee experience of that style need to be cooperative.

The coaching participants were initially defensive and resistant to conversations of intercultural difference. It was a struggle for the coach to engage in such sensitive topics without creating tension. According to Bennet (2012), this resistance is characterised by denial, and a tendency to avoid noticing cultural difference. Coaching participants often used fallacious terms in reference to race, equality and intercultural differences. Transformative coaching questions were the main tool to objectively oppose and confront coaching participants' inability to make distinctions that permit the recognition of cultural truths.

The researcher further noted the coaching participants' reliance on disciplinary processes in order to preside over perceptions of fairness related to discrimination. Organisational processes such discipline and grievance handling displaced the need for relationship building with a transactional course of action, thus removing the personal nature of leadership responsibility to intentionally build inclusive workplace practices. The macro-organisational processes of disciplinary management, being lawful, replace the ethical considerations of what it means to be human in our engagement with others. Sustainable inclusionary practices need to be embedded at the organisational, interpersonal and personal levels; however, senior leaders need to lead the charge for workplace inclusion practices (Daya, 2014). Perceptions of fairness are provided through labour law processes instead of leadership behaviour. When processes that allow access to equal opportunity are deemed inequitable, employees resort to consulting with shop stewards (Daya, 2014). Not surprisingly, the organisational climate is confrontational. Therefore, it is implied that the organisation's

disciplinary processes require significant reform so as to encourage interpersonal inclusion practices.

Daya (2014) postulates that it is easier for the organisation to address and create platforms of transparency when there is racial and gender representation across various levels of leadership, as the organisation is currently perceived as homogeneous. It would appear that, precursors to accomplishing workplace inclusion are: transparency and fairness of recruitment, promotion, development, and equal access to opportunities, that would result in more equitable representation. As linked to the research findings on leadership challenges, transparency created an opportunity for dialogue between the coaching participants and the focus group participants. In my opinion, as researcher and coach, the work on inclusion needs to occur on the organisational, interpersonal and personal levels simultaneously, so as to create a critical mass and pressure in the system for transformation within the organisation studied in this dissertation. Organisational level interventions are applied as policy, while interpersonal work can be supported by coaching programmes, and personal engagement focusses on leadership behaviour that can enhance engagement, and customised to adequately address the challenges experienced by a department or leader. The transformative learning questions posed during leadership development coaching revealed that the personal engagement of employees hinges on the alignment and expressions of personal values.

### 5.5.2 *Connections imprint personal values*

The transformative coaching questions largely sought to get coaching participants to express their personal values and substantiate why these values were important to them. Once these articulations of their personal values were shared, the participants were challenged in relation to how they engage those who are different from themselves on these values. The leadership development coaching imperative was to make transparent the ways in which coaching participants (executive, senior and middle managers) engaged with the focus group participants (senior, middle and first line managers, technicians and artisans). Coaching questions were contraversial and

confronted coaching participants by causing them to reflect on the ways in which their personal values impacted upon their relationships with their teams.

Coaching conversations and focus group discussions centred on various relationships valued by the coaching and focus group participants. The coaching participants' core relationships (parents, direct leader, peers, and their direct teams) were discussed at length. In the coaching conversations, it became evident that the participants drew parrallels between the foundational relationships that formed their frames of reference, or meaning perspectives, and their leadership behaviour. Mezirow's (1991) theory confirms that the learning provided by our culture, ways of seeing and understanding, as shaped by language and personal experience, are the approved ways of knowing from our parents or primary caregivers. This socialisation is imprinted on our values, and has become part of our identity. This identity, as described by DeSapio (2017), includes the combination and interaction between the individual and their social environment, as well as influencing the individual's understanding of themselves and the world in which they live – in order to make sense of their place and the place of others. This is a key influence on personal values, beliefs and opinions which are taken for granted and not questioned, but which foreground workplace relationships.

In seeking to understand whether the connections that coaching participants had with their teams can influence employee engagement, Xu and Thomas (2011) postulate that, while leadership is – theoretically – the key antecedent to employee engagement, research that directly links leader behaviour and follower engagement is not entirely clear. As seen in Chapter Two of this research report, psychological meaningfulness, availability and safety are precursors to employee engagement; moreover, the third antecedent condition of psychological safety offers the highest potential for leadership to influence engagement (Xu & Thomas, 2011). Therefore, it was critical for coaching participants to align their actions to their personal values. These incongruent expressions of leadership action versus focus group participants' engagement were discussed in the coaching sessions.

The theoretical work of Macey and Schneider (2008) confirm the critical role of transformational leadership in engagement. In support of this premise, Xu and Thomas

(2011) propose the following four concepts as crucial to the construct of transformational leadership:

1. Idealised influence characterised by trust relationships with subordinates, and them identifying with their leader;
2. Inspirational motivation, wherein leaders provide meaning and challenge their team's work;
3. Intellectual stimulation, which requires the leader to stimulate adaptivity and creativity in a blame-free context; and
4. Individualised consideration, which requires the leaders to support their teams' specific needs for achievement and growth.

The coaching participants were challenged to develop relationships of trust with the focus group participants, and to experiment with ways of authentically and harmoniously living their values – even in so far as encouraging coaching participants to engage the focus group participants on personal values.

Participants from the post-coaching focus groups noticed a shift in leadership behaviour, in some aspects, especially efforts in building trust relationships, the freedom to act, and building rapport. There was greater evidence of these shifts in post-coaching focus group 1 (with senior and middle managers), but not to the extent that a shift in personal engagement could be confirmed. It is important to note that efforts made by coaching participants were noticeable, and that a change in leadership behaviour was observed.

### 5.5.3 *Conclusion on Proposition 2: Equality, diversity and inclusion practices impact employee engagement*

The relationships that coaching participants formed with their teams are fundamental to employee engagement. Relationships characterised by trust, that are marked by a shared understanding between coaching participants and focus group participants, opened opportunities for discussions on inclusion. Trust relationships provided psychological safety for focus group participants to engage their leaders on their work, and the meaningfulness of their work assignments. Answering the research question as to how leadership coaching creates an equal, diverse and inclusive workforce, it

can be concluded that meaningful engagement starts with the establishment of trust relationships between coaching participants and focus group participants. The creation of an inclusive work environment meant looking past exclusionary criteria; in this regard, efforts were made to include focus group participants in decision making and soliciting ideas form them. Relationships of trust will limit the need to exercise fairness and rights through organisational processes of discipline and grievance handling.

Using transformative learning theory to encourage dialogue required flexibility in coaching skills and practice. Experimenting with ways of using transformative learning questions was a developmental task on the part of the coach. Critical to this experiment was the coaching participants' readiness for change.

## 5.6 Proposition 3: Coaching skills and client disposition matters

The final research imperative investigated how coaches can use transformative learning theory in leadership development coaching. Addressing this question required consideration of coaching practice and skills, as well as the client's disposition; that is, that their propensity for change mattered in the journey towards transformation. Coaching participants who did want to "put in the work" did not experience the full benefit of the coaching sessions. To provide context, the themes that will be discussed under this proposition are *frames of reference* and *coaching practice.*

### 5.6.1 *Frames of reference*

The key findings for frames of reference were that coaching participants experienced discomfort when discussing issues of race, gender, privilege, entitlement, and the like. By their own admission, meaningful conversations in a trust relationship helped them to build knowledge and competence. Dialogue and transformative questioning techniques were key avenues for critical reflection, and to challenge paradigms. Mälkki (2010, p. 43) confirms that "emotions and safe relationships have been shown to be inextricable factors within the process of reflection." Until confronted with an opposing point of view, the coaching participants were unaware that their ways of knowing were

unsustainable. Reflective questions stimulated awareness. From a theoretical standpoint, Mezirow (1991) proposes that the meaning perspective is the frame in which meaning making occurs; it is the place where reflection takes place. However, the conceptual connections between the cognitive, emotional and social aspects of reflection are not considered, and therefore would require conceptualisation that would "(1) explicate the presuppositions of the very process of becoming aware of and questioning one's assumptions; (2) depict the conditions for carrying it out; (3) also indicate possible barriers for the process" (Mälkki, 2010, p. 43). Moreover, according to Mezirow (1991), socialisation constructs the frames of reference and it connects us to community and relationships. In agreement with Mälkki (2010), the cognitive, emotional and social aspects are inseparable.

Initially, the coaching participants (executive, senior and middle managers) experienced the transformative learning process as an aversion. The questions posed during the coaching sessions tended to provoke the coaching participants. In support of the notion that emotions are inseparable from reflection, Mezirow (1991) writes that critical reflection of meaning perspectives is a painful process as it brings into question one's beliefs and the foundation upon which one's sense of self is created. It would then explain why coaching participants experienced conversations of race, gender and other social issues as painful, that is, because it questioned those beliefs and values that – quite possibly – require radical transformation. Associations of guilt and shame accompany this painful experience, therefore, critical reflection was not voluntarily explored. Transformative coaching questions were designed to bring about discomfort and to be controversial.

In order to cope with the painful response of reflection, Mälkki (2010) writes that emotional support is implied, which elucidates that frames of reference are charged with emotions and strongly defended. This notion would then position coaching as the ideal support platform to assist leaders through the process of unpacking and understanding challenges of equality, so as to enhance employee engagement.

Knowledge and competence on issues of race, social justice, gender discrimination and the like require coaching participants to submit themselves to a process of

reflection. Thus, by implication, creating an inclusive work environment not only relies on the coaching participants' ability to critically reflect, but also on their willingness to act. Kitchenham (2008) reinforces this sentiment by stating that these are the kind of people that can unite critical thought with critical action in order to effect change in their lives, and be a catalyst for change in the organisation. This critical action is a catalyst for employee engagement, as evident in the fact that the relationships between coaching participants and focus groups participants had shifted.

This phase not only assumes external relationships but also intrinsic ones, and it assumed that meaning is individualistic and becomes significant through critical discourse with others. This is suggestive of Kuhn and Freire's criterion of conscientisation: ultimately, when an individual interprets new meaning perspectives and meaning schemes, discussions with peers provide a vehicle for learning (Kitchenham, 2008). This supports the finding that coaching participants felt more knowledgeable and competent to discuss topics of equality and diversity as they engaged in dialogue with the coach. Dialogue is a prerequisite to building a trust relationship. Positioned as a developmental platform, the coaching conversations established relationships of trust between the coach and coaching participants. In turn, these discussions helped the coaching participants to experiment with the topic of equality with the focus groups participants. Therefore, the transformative learning theory applied during leadership development coaching became a vehicle for conversation and the subsequent transformation.

Coaching participants formed new meaning schemes, renegotiated and formed new relationships, and – based on feedback from the focus groups participants – there was a shift in the relationships between the focus group participants and their leader. Kitchenham's (2008) contribution also highlights other scholars' critique that the application of transformative learning cannot be replicated. Transformative learning is necessarily individualistic. Because meaning is created by the person who intimately engages with a frame of reference that elicits painful reactions, it is impractical to replicate as it is focused on distinct life experiences. Coaching practice focuses on

that distinct life experience and can stimulate critical reflection and critical action, based on transformative learning, on the part of the coaching participant.

### 5.6.2 *Coaching practice*

The literature reviewed in Chapter Two of this study highlights coaching principles such as relying on the client's resourcefulness, and the coach's role in developing that ability through a set of skills. In addition, the literature emphasises that coaching needs to address the whole person, while allowing the client to set the agenda, as well as stipulating that coach and client are equals, and that coaching hinges off change and action (Rogers, 2012). The coach and coaching participants knew each other as colleagues, and mutual respect was established prior to the commencement of coaching. The findings presented in Chapter Four of this study reveal that the application of coaching skills, such a rapport building, establishing a trust relationship, stimulating reflection through transformative learning theory, and making and working with meaning – that is, synthesising parallel processes in an effort to create flow – while arduous, are possible. It is however more difficult to experiment with transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching for social change in order to effect employee engagement.

Utilising transformative learning theory during a coaching intervention requires attention to processes of coaching, transformative learning, adult learning and critical questions that are design to stimulate reflection. Synthesizing these various inputs while confronting coaching participants' worldviews and perceptions of inclusion proved to be overwhelming. As previously mentioned, the coach's inability to remain neutral during the coaching conversations, and her expressions of personal values, beliefs and opinions, could have impacted the coaching experience for the coaching participants. Empathetic to this challenge, Shoukry and Cox (2018, p. 423) write that "there is a need to ask what conditions and ethical boundaries would need to exist in order for the coaching process to be assumed neutral." The authors suggest that models will need to be developed to assist practitioners to analyse and assess how socio-historical processes, organisational politics and power dynamics affect coaching participants and a coaching process that is underpinned by transformative learning.

The coach must exercise skill in deciding when to assert personal bias, introduce transformative values and emancipatory agendas – whether overt or implicit (Shoukry & Cox, 2018). The coaching participants relied on and trusted the coach to set the agenda, which proved a troublesome responsibility. The coach had to skilfully navigate and oppose the coaching participants' paradigms through the application of transformative learning combined with leadership coaching practice. Maintaining the trust relationship was a precursor to openly sharing socialised personal values. During the course of this study, it was crucial for the coach to venerate the trust relationship with coaching participants (executive, senior and middle managers). In this regard, the coach also tested and relied upon the coaching participants' degree of readiness concerning the coaching agenda.

A consequent challenge experienced by the coach was dealing with her own identity. Knowing yourself as a coach is critical for such an undertaking. Shoukry and Cox (2018) confirm that the development of coaches – in terms of how they may become more critical and aware, helping them explore issues of identity, understanding their role as social agents in challenging social environments, coaching for social change, and carrying the theoretical education into practice – is becoming increasingly challenging. A vast amount of reading on the academic literature related to transformative learning, equality, diversity and inclusion was embarked upon; however, coaching conversations with the study participants proved to be integral to the coach's learning. Shoukry (2017) proposes the following ways in which coaches can develop their skills as social agents: "(1) social, cultural and political awareness, possibly tailored to specific relevant contexts; (2) psychological concepts that relate to oppression and empowerment; (3) the ability to facilitate a critical dialogue with their clients; and (4) the ability to facilitate action in challenging social contexts." The literature review presented in Chapter Two, the research methodology outlined in Chapter Three and the findings presented in Chapter Four of this study all suggest that these proposals were adopted for the qualitative study. Moreover, the coaching dialogue and the coach's readiness to also transform were most critical to the development of the coach in applying transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching, with the aim of facilitating an organisational culture that is

centred on equality, inclusion and diversity, and which is meant to improve employee engagement.

### 5.6.3 *Conclusion on proposition 3: Coaching skills and client disposition matters*

It is not possible to embark on such a journey as a coach or coaching participant without the inclination to be transformed, no matter the scope and scale of the transformation. The coaching participants did not express significant transformation, yet the focus group participants testified that enough leadership transformation was apparent for them to notice. The findings also uncovered the fact that coaching participants' readiness for change created an environment in which they felt an adequate degree of knowledge and competence to experiment with different ways of interacting and connecting with their teams. Thus addressing the last research question of just how coaches can use transformative learning theory in leadership development coaching.

## 5.7 Conclusion

The proposed process application model presented a diagrammatical concept for combining transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching. This provided a visual representation of the target areas of transformative learning. The research applied systems thinking that investigated leadership behaviour through the application of transformative learning theory. For this study, it was much easier to establish the target areas for coaching practice. The application of transformative learning theory, using transformative questions, challenged frames of reference that affected the inclusionary behaviour of leaders.

The key findings of this study show that: first, the incremental nature of stimulating a disorienting dilemma is testament to the fact that transformative learning theory combined with leadership development coaching can impact adult learning and change. Second, coaching participants' capacity to learn new ways of dealing with issues of equality and diversity has the potential to shift workplace engagement. A precursor to this opportunity is well-established trusted relationships between

coaching participants and their teams. Third, coaching skills are complemented by coaching participants' readiness for change. This coaching partnership encouraged coaching participants, and gave them the requisite confidence, to address adversity associated with equality, diversity and inclusion.

# CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## 6.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters of this research report have examined the relevant literature and the study findings in the process of investigating the application of transformative learning theory during leadership development coaching, in an attempt to facilitate an organisational culture that is centred on diversity, equality and inclusion, so as to improve employee engagement. The key concepts of the study include: *transformative learning theory*, *leadership development coaching,* and issues of social justice such as *equality, diversity and inclusion;* and, establishing whether shifts in *employee engagement* have occurred.

This study aimed to provide insights into the application of transformative learning theory and leadership development coaching, as well as its ability to facilitate habits of equality, diversity, inclusion and employee engagement. The study also supports alternate ways of contributing towards initiatives focussed on workplace inclusion, other than interventions at the organisational level. An inclusive culture can enhance business performance, if established on a relationship of trust and supported by meaningful engagement between leaders and employees.

The study presented evidence that a disorienting dilemma has an incremental nature; that it is rationalised, logical and considered, and that transformative thought on the meaning schemes of equality, diversity and inclusion is voluntary on the part of coaching participants. The coaching sessions provided participants with an opportunity to learn about various social issues; this provides support for coaching programs as an alternate mechanism of addressing problems related to workplace inclusion. Furthermore, the coaching participants requested additional coaching sessions as they found the platform useful for navigating ambiguity and complexity within the workplace. At the end of the research, most of the coaching participants reported positive shifts in their relationship with their teams, and the focus group participants reported changes in leadership behaviour on workplace inclusion

practices. In concluding this the study, the research questions and sub-questions will be repeated in the presentation of the key findings of the study.

## 6.2 Conclusions drawn from the findings of the study

The application of transformative learning theory to development coaching provides a unique advantage for the automotive manufacturer to address the predisposition of South Africa's past as one of mistrust. Relationships of trust that result in workplace inclusion required readiness on the part of the coaching participants to engage in challenges of equality and to appreciate diversity, as well as to leverage these attributes for competitive advantage. Through these newly formed frames of reference, coaching participants changed the manner in which they engaged their teams. The way in which this was accomplished was to pay deliberate attention to the purpose of the study, and to answer the research questions through practices of transformative learning, coaching practice and the creation of trust relationships.

The study explored practical techniques in order to answer the main research question: In what way does the application of transformative learning theory create sustainable change in leaders? The researcher further sought to explicate upon the following sub-questions:

1. How can leadership coaching create an equal, diverse and inclusive workforce?
2. How can coaches use transformative learning theory in leadership development coaching?

A finding that informed the incremental attributes to a disorienting dilemma, was the design of the transformative questions used during the application of transformative learning theory; this could only be achieved through an established relationship of trust between the coaching participants and the coach. This critical reflection took place as coaching participants gained more knowledge through the process of dialogue and made meaning for themselves on the topics of equality and inclusion. This transformed thought led to leadership actions that created workplace inclusion. The coaching participants welcomed coaching platforms that encouraged critical conversations in an effort to address issues of social justice and equal opportunities within the workplace.

Leadership development coaching was a means of building competence and working through life experiences that impacted employee engagement.

Likewise, the coaching participants value trust relationships. Moreover, making meaning through those relationships meant experimenting with ways of knowing that demonstrate authentic alignment to personal values and ways of being. The behaviour of coaching participants, as aligned to their personal values, influenced focus group participants' engagement. Trust relationships were being re-established. A noteworthy reflection from post-coaching focus group participants was that coaching participants made an effort to build and gain trust based on their individual needs. This change meant that trust relationships created psychological safety for employees – a key component for employee engagement.

These findings establish the way in which the application of transformative learning theory can create sustainable change in leaders. The key challenges that impact workplace inclusion can be addressed and positively shift through leadership development coaching that is underpinned by theories of transformative learning. Critical coaching questions were formulated and discussed at length with the researcher's peers and the research supervisor. The critical questions were the main instrument considered for creating a disorienting dilemma.

The research study also relied on the willingness of coaching participants, and their readiness to address personal difficulties in dealing with bias, having a propensity towards change (i.e. an appetite to want a different way of being), and working through their predispositions in a trusted relationship that is characterised by transparency and vulnerability.

In retrospect, it is apparent that what was underestimated in the coaching journey was the coach's ability to hold the tension of the topics discussed, address the conflict it created with personal values, and honour the coach-coachee relationship as well as the relevant coaching principles. The data analysis process and conceptualisation of the application model presented implications that stood in juxtaposition to the theory of transformative learning and its practical application. Executing transformative

learning is substantially more challenging than its theoretical foundations. Finally, it was possible to address all the processes and challenges through dialogue and reflective conversations throughout the research journey, which emphasised the critical role that reflection plays in adult learning.

## 6.3 Recommendations

Based on the research findings, and the discussion thereof in Chapter Five of this report, the following recommendations are suggested to stakeholders who may want to embark on a similar endeavour in the South African context.

### 6.3.1 *Recommendations for the education of coaches*

The research highlights that coaching for social change is an emerging field. It is a critical competence that helps leaders cope with ambiguity, volatility and complexity. Shoukry (2017) emphasises that coaching for social change can be compared to critical approaches within other disciplines, in that the aim is to provide learners with tools that would enable them to challenge inequality and injustice. Other than imparting knowledge of coaching skills and practices, coaching programmes need to introduce coaching practices that challenge the typical standards of coaching. There are significant implications of coaching for social change, especially for those who are socially vulnerable. Shoukry (2017) highlights that it is taken for granted in the coaching contract that the client sets the agenda and that coaches claim neutrality; he also notes that the coachee in the organisational context could occupy a leadership role or even be socially oppressed; the challenge herein is establishing who decides what is meant by social change. Therefore, coaching for social change impedes the coach's ability to remain neutral or adhere to standard coaching principles.

In addition, challenging the coaching participants to think differently, the coach is acting politically. This may have implications for internal coaches, and "the social change coach is no longer a neutral technical expert, but an active agent who contributes implicitly or explicitly, to the definition of what coaching is trying to achieve" (Shoukry, 2017, p. 185). Resources and additional support need to be extended to coaches for social change in order to help navigate this emerging field and its

implications, which may not have been considered by the novice coach and researcher. Therefore, coaching for social change requires explicit role clarification for the internal coach, and established trust relationships amongst leaders within the organisation. Furthermore, coaches who embark upon this form of coaching should not do so without seeking a coaching supervisor.

Moreover, the coach should not have challenges with their own identity; therefore, coaching for the coach would also be recommended in order to discuss the coach's identity before coaching on issues of equality and diversity. Shoukry and Cox (2018) confirm that supporting coaches in investigating issues of identity and understanding their role as social agents can help overcome these challenges. This recommendation can support future coaches for social change and possibly create learning initiatives aimed at supporting the learner. Within the South African context, it is important that coaches are seasoned at conversing on topics of race, gender, equality and diversity for social cohesion.

### 6.3.2 *Recommendations for coaching underpinned by transformative learning theory*

As previously stated, formulating critical questions to effect transformation is key to the application of transformative learning. Therefore, this was the main instrument used to stimulate a disorienting dilemma. When discussing the importance of critical questions, Taylor and Cranton (2013, p. 39) write that "critical questioning is a central component in transformative learning theory, but this process is not usually turned onto the theory itself." Much of the theory discusses the outcome of transformative learning, however, its application processes are less understood. Formulating transformative questions requires supervision and dialogue. By understanding the target area that the coach is looking to affect, and debating the formulated questions with a seasoned coach, will help to challenge the coach in understanding which target areas the transformative questions aim to impact. Joining communities of practice can support the coach in this endeavour.

### 6.3.3 *Recommendations to the organisation*

Matters arising from issues of equality, diversity and inclusion require transparency and discussion. While dialogue that is aimed at understanding the relevant challenges and issues helps to build leader competence, it can support the organisation's institutional knowledge, competence and perceptions of dealing with the implications of lack of access to equal opportunities. Transparency in processes such as recruitment, development, training and promotion can help to remove perceptions of bias and notions of favouritism amongst certain racial groups. Moreover, releasing information related to equal opportunities can help the organisation establish a sense of transparency. Leadership development programmes are well established within the automotive manufacturing organisation, however, coaching programmes to help leaders address equal opportunities should also be considered. This will enable leaders to take the requisite actions that would lead to workplace inclusion and employee engagement practices. Coaching programmes that are centred on building capacity on workplace inclusion are a viable option for broad-based organisational development programs. Leaders have unique life experiences that influence their leadership style – both positive or negative. Coaching can advance positive leadership practice and confront less desirable behaviour in a safe, trusted relationship for the purpose of serving their teams.

## 6.4 Concluding remarks

This qualitative study provided insights into the possibilities that transformative coaching offers in terms of grappling with issues of social justice. South African organisations present unique challenges based on the socio-political legacy of apartheid, and current sentiments on prejudice. Globally, there has been a rise in overt expressions of racism and, within the organisational context, gender and racial representation remain imbalanced at senior leadership levels.

The theoretical underpinnings of transformative learning theory presented opportunities for coaching programmes which have previously been unexplored within the organisation. It highlighted the need for bespoke, individualised development initiatives for experienced leaders. It was most interesting for the researcher to

observe the incremental process of transformation, during each coaching session, and to be a witness to the change that the leaders experienced as study participants. It was a privilege to be part of that transformation, regardless of the size of its impact. This gave rise to the hope that change is possible, that transformation of the most ingrained parts of our being is conceivable as long as we have a propensity to change; the researcher was reminded that, as humans, we do not have a predetermined path. Exercising our humanity within organisations requires leaders who are interested in and who care for their people; in this regard, they need to be truly interested in the whole person and engage them fully so you (the leader) can provide meaning to their work.

Coaches have a pivotal role to play in supporting leaders in that endeavour, while simultaneously accomplishing the organisation's business objectives. The aim of this research was to contribute to the existent body of knowledge on the practical application of transformative learning theory, equality and diversity for inclusion, and coaching for social change. Helping leaders to reassert their agency and supporting them to understand the bigger context within which they operate is important to the researcher. Moreover, the researcher finds significant purpose and reward in helping leaders understand that their actions, words and engagement with others have far reaching implications, especially when these matters improve the organisation and the communities it serves.

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**APPENDIX A – Research Instrument**

1. Overview of research: Coaching dialogue protocol for transformative learning theory for leadership coaching
    - Introduce yourself, explain the research and its objective.
    - Describe the eventual outcome of the research: A research report that provides insights on whether transformative learning theory, which underpins leadership coaching, can create individual shifts on EDI to increase employee engagement in an automotive manufacturing organisation in South Africa.

2. Describe ultimate benefits: The benefit of the study may extend to the organisation as it would inform leadership coaching and its viability as an investment. Benefits for leaders and employees could be an increase in positive meaningful exchanges at work, employees being treated with respect, and trust relationships which form the basis of interpersonal exchange.

3. Consent form: Explain consent form and participants sign voluntarily.

4. Coaching sessions and focus groups will be audio recorded for the purpose of data collection and thematic analysis.

5. Coaching Session Questions (examples)

These are the types of questions that can be asked in the coaching sessions; however, it is expected that more questions will emerge during the coaching process:

- What would you like the outcome of today's session to be?
- What do you feel you need to know in order to achieve this outcome?
- What are the obstacles preventing you from achieving this outcome?
- Tell me about your life growing up?
- What do you value most?
- Do you feel you are able to live your personal values at work?
- How diverse is your world outside of work?
- Tell me about your leadership experiences in the organisation?

- Could you provide insights as to why you believe employees feel they do not have equal opportunities in the workplace?
- Can you describe the relationship you have with your employees?
- Why do you believe the relationship is like this?
- Can you describe how you engage with your employees?
- Describe the relationship you have with your leader?
- What are the next steps you could take that would have an immediate impact?
- What are you willing to practice?

6. Focus Group Questions

The following questions could be asked during the focus groups; however, it is expected that more questions will emerge during the focus groups.

Before leadership coaching sessions commence:

- Describe the relationship you have with your leader?
- Why do you believe the relationship is like this?
- Describe a good relationship with your leader?
- What could we work on immediately that would make the biggest impact in your life at work?
- What would you like to see more of at work?
- What would you like to see less of at work?
- What in this situation could you be grateful for?

After the completion of leadership coaching sessions:

- Since our last discussion, describe whether there has been any shift in the relationship you have with your leader?
- Have you learnt anything from our last conversation? If so, can you tell me more?
- What have you done to shift your experiences at work?

**APPENDIX B – Consent form for Leaders**

Dear Person A,

I am a student at the Wits Business School studying towards a Masters in Management, in the field of Business and Executive Coaching. My research topic explores whether organisational change is possible through transformational coaching. The purpose of this research is to ascertain whether a particular coaching process can shift workplace engagement, thus, ultimately improving business performance.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research by volunteering for coaching sessions. You have been selected for participation in this study as you have held a leadership position in the organisation for more than five years, and your scope of control has influence across all tiers in the business. The timing of the research project will be approximately nine months, however, your personal participation time over the period will be no more than 10 hours, spread over the full study period. I am the researcher for this study, and will be the sole party involved in presenting the coaching sessions and collecting data for the study. Sessions will take place in the workplace, unless you prefer an alternate venue.

As part of the research I would like to record the coaching sessions in order to refer back your responses, however, confidentiality will be safeguarded. Moreover, audio recordings will not be shared internally in the organisation. I would appreciate that you extend permission to record the coaching sessions using a digital device. In my final research report, I will use a pseudonym (false name) to represent your participation.

You will not receive payment for or benefits from participation in this research, and there are no disadvantages or penalties for non-participation. Should you so wish, you can withdraw your participation from the coaching sessions at any time. Should you, at any stage, experience distress or discomfort, you are welcome to remove yourself from the process. Participants are required to maintain confidentiality regarding all matters pertaining to the coaching conversations.

I am available to answer any questions you may have regarding the research, and you are welcome to make contact with me via the details provided at the end of this form. This research will be documented in the form of a written report which will be submitted to the Wits Graduate School of Business. Should you wish to receive a summary of the report, one will be made available to you.

Concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of this study can be directed to the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +2711 717 1408, email shaun.schoeman@wits.ac.za.

***Ethics Clearance Number: WBS/BA2286925/870***

Yours sincerely,

**Student:** Genevieve Jozaffe-Naidoo
Email: genevieve.naidoo@gmail.com
Tel: +27 72 544 8435

**Supervisor:** Dr. Rajohane Matshedisho
Email: rajohane.matshedisho@wits.ac.za
Tel: +2711 717 4434

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**Declaration and signature of research participant**

The information contained in this document was explained to me by Genevieve Jozaffe-Naidoo. I was given the opportunity to ask questions of clarification, all of which were answered to my satisfaction. I hereby consent to voluntarily participate in this research, and I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of participant:

Signature: Date:

**APPENDIX C – Consent form for Focus Group Participant**

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Genevieve Jozaffe-Naidoo and I am a student at the Wits Business School, studying towards a Masters in Management, in the field of Business and Executive Coaching. My research topic explores whether organisational change is possible through transformational coaching. The purpose of this study is to ascertain whether a particular coaching process can shift workplace engagement, thus, ultimately improving business performance.

I would like to invite you to take part in a focus group for this study. The purpose of the focus group is to obtain feedback regarding your involvement in decision making and feedback in the workplace, as well as the career and development opportunities provided to you by your leader. The focus groups will involve participants answering a series of questions; this should not take more than two hours of your time, for each session. Two focus group sessions will be held approximately nine months apart. As part of the research I would like to audio record the focus group sessions in order to refer back your responses; however, confidentiality is safeguarded, and the audio recordings will not be shared internally in the organisation. I would appreciate that you extend permission to record the focus group sessions using a digital device.

You will not receive payment for or benefits from participation in this research, and there are no disadvantages or penalties for non-participation. Should you so wish, you can withdraw your participation from the focus groups at any time. Should you, at any stage, experience distress or discomfort, you are welcome to remove yourself from the process. Participants are required to maintain confidentiality of all matters pertaining to conversations within the focus groups, at all times, and to not disclose sensitive information to any person outside of the focus group.

I am available to answer any questions you may have regarding the research, and you are welcome to make contact via the details provided at the bottom of this form. This research will be documented in the form of a written report, which will be submitted to

the Wits Graduate School of Business. Should you wish to receive a summary of the report, one will be made available to you.

Concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of this study can be directed to the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +2711 717 1408, email shaun.schoeman@wits.ac.za

Yours sincerely,

**Student:** Genevieve Jozaffe-Naidoo
Email: genevieve.naidoo@gmail.com
Tel: +27 72 544 8435

**Supervisor:** Dr. Rajohane Matshedisho
Email: rajohane.matshedisho@wits.ac.za
Tel: +2711 717 4434

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**Declaration and signature of research participant**

The information contained in this document was explained to me by Genevieve Jozaffe-Naidoo. I was given the opportunity to ask questions of clarification, all of which were answered to my satisfaction. I hereby consent to voluntarily participate in this research, and I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of participant:

Signature: Date

**APPENDIX D – Organisational Consent Form**

The Graduate School of Business
2 St David's Place, Parktown
Johannesburg, 2193, South Africa
PO Box 98, WITS, 2050
Website: www.wbs.ac.za

**RE: PERMISSION FOR ORGANISATIONAL CONSENT TO CONDUCT A RESEARCH STUDY**

Dear

I would like to request permission to conduct my research study within your organisation. My name is Genevieve Jozaffe-Naidoo and I am a student at Wits Business School, studying towards a Masters in Management in the field of Business and Executive Coaching. My research explores whether organisational change is possible through transformational coaching. The purpose of this study is to ascertain whether a particular coaching process can shift workplace engagement, thus, ultimately improving business performance.

| | |
|---|---|
| Research Title: | **Transformative learning theory for leadership development coaching in an automotive manufacturing organisation in South Africa** |
| Research Supervisor: | **Dr. Rajohane Matshedisho** |
| Faculty: | **Commerce, Law and Management** |

The data collection process includes hosting six coaching sessions with three managers within the organisation: one manager from each leadership level, that is, the senior, middle and first line manager levels. Two focus groups will be hosted with the direct reports of the managers – one before the coaching commences and another after coaching has been completed. Coaching sessions and focus groups will be audio recorded on a digital device which will not be shared internally with other members of the organisation, in order to safeguard the identities of the participants and the

information disclosed during these conversations. Participants are required to sign a consent form extending their permission for the sessions to be recorded. Confidentiality is a strict requirement of the research project due to the sensitive nature of the topic. The audio recordings will be stored on my personal hard drive and will be destroyed once I have graduated. In addition, the organisation will remain anonymous in my research report.

Participants and the organisation will receive neither payment nor benefits from participating in this research, and there are no disadvantages or penalties for not participating in this research. Should you so wish, you can withdraw the organisation's participation at any time, should participants at any stage experience distress or discomfort.

I am available to answer any questions you may have regarding the research, and you are welcome to make contact via the details provided at the end of this letter. This research will be documented in the form of a written report, which will be submitted to the Wits Graduate School of Business. Should you wish to receive a summary of the report, one will be made available to you.

Concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of this study can be directed to the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +2711 717 1408, email shaun.schoeman@wits.ac.za

Yours sincerely,

**Student:** Genevieve Jozaffe-Naidoo
Email: genevieve.naidoo@gmail.com
Tel: +27 72 544 8435

**Supervisor:** Dr. Rajohane Matshedisho
Email: rajohane.matshedisho@wits.ac.za
Tel: +2711 717 4434

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**Declaration and signature confirming Organisational Consent**

The information contained in this document was explained to me by Genevieve Jozaffe-Naidoo. I was given the opportunity to ask questions of clarification, all of which were answered to my satisfaction. I hereby grant consent for the organisation to participate in this research, and I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Company:

Name of Company Representative:

Title of Company Representative:

Signature: Date: