

**A Qualitative Study of Small Business Owners' Lived Experiences and Perceptions  
of Long-term Business Success Amid a Pandemic**

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## **Abstract**

The researcher explored the reasons why only 50% of new small businesses survive five or more years with the goal of determining the characteristics that led to success. This qualitative study focused on small business success with the purpose of exploring the life and career experiences of a select number of small business owners in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States. The conceptual framework and research design were based on Duckworth's grit theory, Dweck's growth mindset theory, Garmezy's resilience theory, and Bandura's self-efficacy theory. These theories were interconnected with transformation leadership theory as defined by Bass & Riggio (2006), Kouzes and Posner (2017), and Burns (1978). This study also explored the perceptions of small business owners regarding the most and least important personal characteristics needed to run a successful small business. The Seidman model of interviewing in a series served as the approach for data gathering. This approach included the following activities the researcher collected participant data using a series of interviews, observations, memos, field notes, and document analysis. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020, the research was adapted to identify changes required for small business owners to survive through a pandemic and qualities embedded in their lives before it began. Future recommendations include: conducting quantitative and mixed methods studies on small business success, using a larger participant pool, and conducting a longitudinal study to continue building best practices for success.

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I ask anyone reading this dissertation, what are you waiting for in life? If you say someday, I will do "this or that" with no real plan, it will not happen. Trust me; I have authored a dissertation on it. There is no perfect time to go for your dreams, so go after them and live without regret. Or, if not, time will pass, and it will be too late.

In conclusion, I finished this dissertation right near my 50th birthday. I look forward to new chapters of my life in the next 15-20 years. Finally, I will parallel what I said in my high school yearbook 31 years ago, as it still holds true today... "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while. You could miss it." – Ferris Bueller

## **Chapter I:**

### **Introduction**

#### **Overview**

The inspiration for this study was my fervent desire to help small business owners, and the organizations they lead, achieve success. For this study, success was defined as business owners leading profitable organizations that achieve long-term viability and remain in continual growth mode. Failure was defined as a company that does not remain viable and goes out of business. This study was of personal and professional interest to me as both small business successes and failures have impacted myriad aspects of my life. There are benefits to stakeholders of successful organizations and hardships to the stakeholders of those that fail. Therefore, studying how to help more business leaders and small organizations achieve success is critical.

Throughout my personal and professional life, I have observed small businesses succeeding for many decades and have witnessed countless others fail in their first few years. I have had the privilege of proximity to many organizational leaders. Moreover, working with business leaders through my consulting business allowed me to learn general surface-level leadership and organizational themes. However, the adequate time needed to better understand the most profound areas of small business success was missing from those efforts. Thus, interviewing a select number of small business owners (SBOs) who lead successful companies and learning from them at a deeper level is a goal of this researcher. Likewise, I have started several successful small businesses throughout

my career and have learned countless business lessons along the way. These personal experiences increased my desire to learn more from business leaders through interviews, observations, and document reviews. In addition, learning how the unprecedented and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has affected both small business leaders and the overall small business climate was studied.

### **Statement of Problem**

According to the United States Small Business Administration's Office of Advocacy (USSBA) (2018), 50% of small businesses fail by the end of their fifth year of existence. Each business failure can cause a loss of jobs, a loss of money, and emotional distress for the owner and stakeholders. To be considered successful, small businesses in the United States must remain viable, profitable, and in a growth mode. Small businesses (500 or fewer people) make up most all businesses in the United States (USSBA, 2020a). Nearly half of all jobs in the United States come from small businesses, with 64% of the nation's annual new job creation occurring in this sector (Mohsin, 2020). More specifically, in 2020, the number of small businesses in the United States reached 30.7 million, making up nearly all U.S. businesses (99.9%) (Mohsin, 2020). Moreover, approximately 1 million new small businesses began in 2018, which accounted for 65% of the net new job number; however, nearly 900,000 small businesses closed in the same year (USSBA, 2020b). If the small business statistical performance does not improve, there will be a continual flow of new startup businesses and achieving any overall national success will be negated by the startup businesses that fail. Moreover, this 50% rate keeps the U.S. economy neutral regarding a relatively equal number of successes and failures. According to the USSBA (2019) "small businesses are the lifeblood of the U.S.



economy; they create two-thirds of net new jobs and drive U.S. innovation and competitiveness" (para. 1). As well, small businesses often have a local impact, from sponsoring events to providing employment opportunities, that help keep money in the community.

Roughly 20% of U.S. small businesses fail within the first year, and nearly 50% fail in the first 5 years of existence (McIntyre, 2020; Mohsin, 2020; USSBA, 2019; Uziarko, 2019), a statistic that has remained consistent over time. Furthermore, nearly 70% of small business startups will fail by their 10th year (McIntyre, 2020). High failure rates pose a substantial problem to the United States, nationally, statewide, and individual communities. Each business collapse can cause a loss of jobs, money, and confidence for owners and employees and hardship to the community (Bonsu & Kuofie, 2019; Dennis, 2016; Perry, 2001). In addition, such failures may impact SBOs from starting or investing in subsequent new companies or other ventures. As such, the researcher interviewed six successful SBOs who started and have operated such companies for at least 5 years up and through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Predicting small business startup success is a crucial area of research because businesses that fail are costly and disruptive to stakeholders such as owners, families, investors, and communities (Van Auken et al., 2009). Cooper (2016) identified the following trend in "failure among small business owners ... including (a) resource insufficiencies, (b) inadequate management training, (c) family challenges, (d) incommensurate regulations, (e) economic conditions, and (f) disruptive technology" (p. 2) and provides a basis for the emphasis on management development and leadership skills. Other reasons for small business failure include a business running out of money (Horton,

2021). In such cases, business owners are uninformed about how much revenue they need to survive compared to the necessary expenses. Another reason for failure is inexperience in running a business (Horton, 2021). In many cases, a business that started from a person's passion, past experiences working in an industry, or a good idea, will not work without solid business acumen, wisdom, and experience. As well, some startup businesses fail because they lack an effective business plan (competitor analysis, marketing strategy, company vision (Horton, 2021).

Business owners can generally plan for a downturn in economics that affects business, but for 21st century SBOs, knowing what to do in a pandemic was unprecedented (Sanchez, 2020). Sanchez (2020) studied SBOs who approached local small business development centers or hired accountants, attorneys, or tax professionals experienced with small businesses in the first year of the pandemic that helped them gain an advantage in the adverse conditions. When Jackson (2021) researched small businesses in Georgia, the top leadership strategy focused on making employees successful in a small business. Bayram and Dinç (2015) stated "as transformational leaders, small business owners provide employees with a clear sense of guidance and aspiration, building employee commitment and trust that results in the organization's overall success" (in Jackson, 2021, p. 367). Covey (2004) argued human beings must "put first things first" and "begin with the end in mind" when planning for the future. Such planning and guidance can help stakeholders create a clear vision for the future.

Burns (1978) defined transformational leadership as an influence process that involves followers, peers, superiors, and other stakeholders. However, even transformational small business leaders did not foresee or know what to do during a once-

in-a-lifetime pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic had a remarkable worldwide effect on small businesses regarding health, revenue, staffing, supply chain slowdowns, inflation, and more. This trend has continued since early 2021 and is still a significant issue for small businesses (Breux et al., 2021). According to the U.S. Census Bureau “the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a devastating loss of life, but it has also devastated the nation's economy” (Udalova, 2021, para. 4). Therefore, with small businesses making up most of all U.S. businesses, the COVID-19 pandemic played a significant role in this study.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the life and career experiences of a select number of small business owners in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States. These leaders had successfully started and operated a profitable small business for 5 or more years up to, and through, the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher identified the most and least important personal characteristics of such small business owners to determine the extent to which such characteristics impact business success. Furthermore, the researcher sought to uncover the most significant challenges of both getting a new business started and the obstacles to keeping the company viable. Studying and learning from the small business leaders' stories and experiences will contribute to the body of literature (Dilger, 2020; Ebert et al., 2019; Hawkins & Hoon, 2020). The researcher recorded the stories and experiences of select business owners and interpreted and made meaning of the stories. The research involved interpreting the stories shared by each business owner, placing them in context, and comparing them with other stories (Patton, 2015, p. 128). Learning from these stories

may allow future small business owners to achieve higher success rates when starting and running a small business.

### **Research Questions**

The following qualitative research questions helped provide insights into select small business owners' experiences in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States and their perceptions of factors impacting small business success. Maxwell (2013) stated:

your research questions ... what you specifically want to understand are at the heart of your research design ... more than any other aspect of your design ... [They] will have an influence on, and should be responsive to, every other part of your study. (p. 73)

Thus, these research questions were designed to gain insight into the personal characteristics of such leaders. Moreover, they were designed to explore the experiences and stories of these small business owners up to and including the COVID-19 pandemic.

***Research Question 1.*** What are the life and career experiences of a select number of small business owners in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States who successfully owned and operated a small business for 5 or more years up to and through the COVID-19 pandemic?

***Research Question 2.*** What are the most and least important personal characteristics needed to successfully own and operate a small business for 5 or more years in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States up to and through the COVID-19 pandemic, as perceived by a select number of small business owners?

**Research Question 3.** What were the most significant challenges to getting a new business started and keeping it open for over 5 years up to and including the COVID-19 pandemic, as perceived by a select number of small business owners?

### **Significance**

According to the U.S. Small Business Administration's Office of Advocacy (2018), less than 50% of all new small businesses in the United States survive for more than 5 years. Additionally, as reported by Uzialko (2019), there were over 30 million small businesses in the United States, comprising over 99% of all businesses. With 900,000 out of 1 million small businesses starting in 2018 and closing in the same year, achieving high levels of small business success is a significant issue across the nation (Bonsu & Kuofie, 2019; Dennis, 2016; Perry, 2001). This study was designed to learn from the experiences and stories of select small business owners in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States. These leaders have successfully owned and operated a small business for 5 or more years up and through the COVID-19 pandemic. Learning from such successful small business owners may help future leaders and startup business owners achieve longer-term success and increase the overall success rate.

In examining SBO success and failures, exclusively considering the quantitative research outcome of 50% of businesses failing within 5 years of existence, does little to contribute to future successful entrepreneurial activities, which is more evidence qualitative research focused on success may help fill a gap in the literature. According to Mohsin (2020) "small business is a *big deal* in the United States' economy" (para. 35). The few qualitative studies that have been done about SBOs in the Southeastern United States, that shared personal experiences in participants' own words, were focused on

different sectors and did not readily identify what the leaders did to achieve success (Dennis, 2016; Ebert et al., 2019; Tanzi, 2020).

Small businesses make up most of all companies in the United States; thus, a small business leaders' ability to help it achieve and maintain success is vital to the economy and overall well-being (USSBA, 2020b). This study may benefit family, community, and organizational leaders considering starting their own business. The research may assist those who are in the early stages of their SBO journey. Moreover, the research may help future leaders learn from participants' experiences, personal characteristics, and obstacles. The research may also prove helpful to those seeking to take their existing leadership skills gained in another sector and apply them to starting and running a business.

The results of this study may positively impact small businesses and add to the research literature. The learning from this research may help increase the small business startup success percentage in the first 5 years of existence. This study may also benefit aspiring small business owners, entrepreneurs, existing small business owners, schools of business, and training and coaching firms.

### **Conceptual Framework**

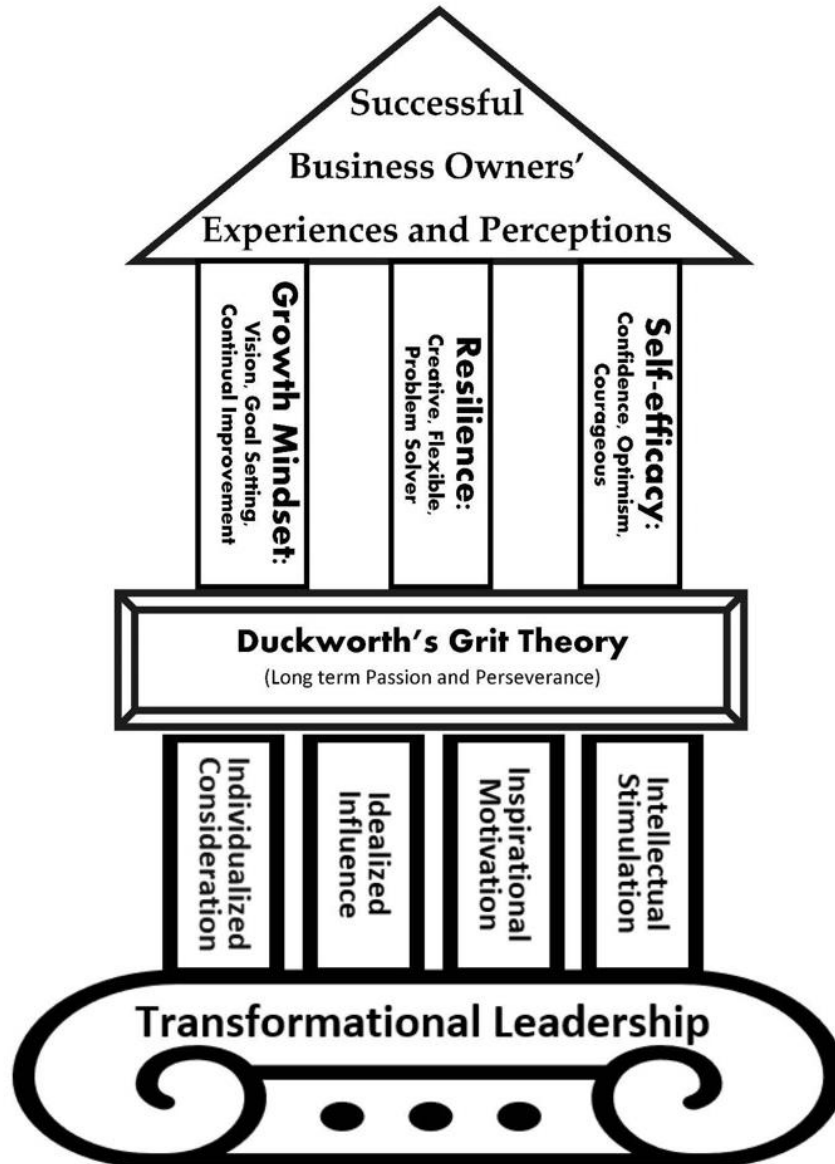
A conceptual framework can help shape the design and direction of the dissertation study and further guide its development (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). With the focus of the study being on the experiences and stories of a select number of SBOs, I developed a conceptual framework to help guide the research. Maxwell (2013) defined a conceptual framework as a "conception or model of what is out there you plan to study, and what is going on with these things" (p. 33). He argued it is a tentative *theory* of the

phenomena that one is investigating. Ravitch and Riggan (2017) defined a conceptual framework as an “argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous” (p. 5). The theory of transformational leadership is a conceptual framework built from the bottom to the top and was applied in this study to better understand how SBOs achieve success.

Transformational leadership is often identified with successful SBOs. The four components of transformational leadership are illustrated as vertical pillars in the diagram connecting transformational leadership to the concept of grit theory. In her seminal work on grit theory, Duckworth (2016) defined grit as passion and sustained perseverance applied toward long-term achievement with consistency over time. Such leaders who exhibit grit have no particular concern for rewards or recognition along the way. Instead, they have an interest, purpose, and commitment to long-term success. The vertical pillars of transformational leadership that connect to grit theory are *individualized consideration, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation*. These terms were defined in further detail. The three vertical pillars built upon grit theory are *resilience, growth mindset, and self-efficacy*. These characteristics are often associated with transformational leadership and grit theory. At the top of the diagram are a successful business owner's experiences and perceptions (See Figure 1).

### **Figure 1**

#### *Conceptual Framework*



Transformational leaders help develop a vision and strategy for an organization. Such leadership helps an organization focus on strategy and work toward achieving a shared vision, while making needed changes that last over time (Tichy & Ulrich, 1984). Burns (1978) defined transformational leadership as an influence process that involves followers, peers, superiors, and other stakeholders. In this study, the researcher used the four parts of transformational leadership described by Bass and Riggio (2006) and Lea (2009): *individualized consideration*, *idealized influence*, *inspirational motivation*, and



*intellectual stimulation*. These components served as a part of developing the interview and observation questions, allowing the researcher to identify how participants perceived their level of success.

Bass and Riggio (2006) explained *individualized consideration* as leaders including followers in the transformation process of an organization. Such consideration of, and attention to, the follower allows leaders to better understand the needs, values, and abilities of others. This process enables followers to have high levels of trust in the leader. Bass et al. (2003) defined *idealized influence* as transformational leaders who are admired, respected, and trusted by followers who desire to follow the leader's reliable display of solid ethics and values. Bass and Riggio explained *inspirational motivation* as the ability of a leader to provide meaning to a follower's work. This motivation is mainly intrinsic, inspiring followers to achieve personal satisfaction goals instead of an extrinsic reward.

According to Bass and Riggio (2006), *intellectual stimulation* occurs when leaders empower followers to use more of their abilities, challenge them to perform at higher levels, and believe they can do so. According to Bass and Bass (2008) "leaders motivate their followers by raising their follower's concerns from security and belonging to achievement and self-actualization ... moving them beyond self-interest to concerns for their ... organization" (p. 581). Thus, the intellectual stimulation component of transformational leadership has an impact on employers while simultaneously impacting the employees.

Transformational leadership has a relationship with grit theory, based on the long-term passion and perseverance required to achieve lasting success. Thus, when challenges

ensue, what often sustains leaders is their passion for their work and their will to persevere. They have participated in what Duckworth et al. (2011) called deliberate practice, or focusing on a goal or something that needs improvement and then working at it repeatedly until it becomes second nature. Furthermore, according to Duckworth (2016), talent and effort are essential to success. Talent refers to how fast one can build a skill. However, effort is more important than talent and helps build skills. In addition, effort makes skills productive and leads to achievement (Duckworth, 2016).

Grit is interconnected with *growth mindset*, *resilience*, and *self-efficacy*. A growth mindset is not settling for a fixed mindset or goal, seeking improvement to achieve new goals, and focusing on increased growth and success (Dweck, 2015). Dweck proffered an example of a growth mindset is when human beings understand that their most basic abilities can be further developed through dedication and hard work and that talent and ability are mere starting points in such development. A growth mindset can foster a love of learning and a dedication to it that is essential for great accomplishment. Dweck (2006) argued a growth mindset has much to do with framing success and developing purpose.

Resilience is the ability of human beings to bounce back from tough times, difficulties, and obstacles in life. Ginsburg (2006) explained resilience as a human understanding that they can rise above challenging circumstances and move forward with confidence and optimism in the face of adversity. Ackerman (2022) described resilience as “that ineffable quality that allows some people to be knocked down by life and come back stronger than ever. Rather than letting failure overcome them and drain their resolve, they find a way to rise from the ashes” (para. 6). Ginsburg stated “resilience is a

mindset...to view challenges as opportunities for growth rather than as catastrophes” (para. 1). Thus, resilience is the ability of a person to overcome adversity and bounce back with the toughness required to keep moving forward to achieve success.

The third vertical pillar is self-efficacy. The theory and concept of self-efficacy grew out of the research of psychologist Albert Bandura. Bandura (1994) posited a person’s belief in their ability to succeed can shape how they think, feel, and act. According to Bandura, a strong sense of self-efficacy enhances the accomplishments of human beings. Individuals with high self-efficacy perceive challenging tasks as opportunities to be mastered rather than threats to be avoided. They are committed to setting and achieving challenging goals. Such individuals work harder in the face of failure and quickly recover from setbacks to achieve success (Bandura, 1994). Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s abilities, specifically the ability to successfully address challenges and complete a task (Akhtar, 2008). Zhao et al. (2005) described self-efficacy as “the relationship between ... learning in entrepreneurial courses, previous entrepreneurial experience, and the willingness to take the risk of becoming an entrepreneur and an individual’s entrepreneurial intentions” (p. 1265). Thus, the scholars asserted self-efficacy is a key ingredient that leads from learning about entrepreneurship to becoming an entrepreneur.

### **Summary of Methodology**

In this study, the researcher used qualitative research to better understand participants’ perceptions of long-term small business success. A narrative inquiry approach drove the research that focused on making meaning of SBOs' lived stories and experiences. Narrative inquiry is more than just telling or capturing stories. According to

Patton (2015) “the beginning, middle, and end is the story ... honoring lived experiences as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (p. 128). In addition, Patton (2015) argued the goal of the research is to “treat the story as data and the narrative as analysis ... which involves interpreting the story, placing it in context, and comparing it with other stories” (p. 128). Using this narrative approach to research design correctly allowed participants’ “voices” to be heard along with the researcher's interpretation of their voices.

Sampling is “the act, process, or technique of selecting a representative part of a population for the purpose of determining parameters or characteristics of the whole population” (Merriam-Webster, n.d., p. 1). Thus, such selected cases may indicate “bias” and weakness in random sampling. Patton (2015) defined purposeful sampling as “the logic and power of ... selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (p. 264). This is a strength in purposeful sampling, as the researcher can focus on selecting cases to learn about issues that are of central importance to the purpose of the study. Thus, in this study, purposeful sampling was used to select information-rich cases to study that, by their nature, will provide deep insights into the inquiry questions being investigated.

The researcher initially planned and attempted to conduct three interviews with six SBOs who have successfully owned and operated a small business for 5 or more years up to and through the COVID-19 pandemic. The proposed plan was for the data to come from a three-part series of interviews as modeled by Seidman (2013). The researcher modified Seidman’s interview model and interviewed each participant twice. These two

lengthy interviews were decided upon after numerous setbacks to setting up three interviews. Such obstacles included COVID-19 illnesses and a lack of available time by SBOs, as all of them were understaffed. The participants gave me more time than planned for each interview. I collected enormous information-rich data from these two interviews (Patton, 2015). Each interview, once transcribed, averaged 27 single-spaced pages. The interview guide for both interviews can be viewed in Appendix A. In addition to the interviews and subsequent verbatim transcriptions, the researcher wrote memos, made observations, wrote field notes, and reviewed participants' documents.

As the researcher, I analyzed the raw data in several steps. First, I read the transcripts and wrote short notes in the margins. The second time I examined each transcript, I highlighted relevant quotes while underlining keywords and phrases that stood out in the highlighted areas. Upon the third examination of the transcripts, I completed the coding in the right-hand margins. I organized the interview notes and corresponding codes on a legal pad and then entered the handwritten information into an Excel spreadsheet. Next, I color-coded and categorized similar things and created tabs with quotes and participant names related to categories and themes. This allowed me to review and search the data to determine each interview's frequency and similarity of ideas, words, or expressions. The coding methods, memos, field notes, observations, and document reviews, brought life to the lived experiences of successful SBOs in hopes of identifying specifics to replicate in the future.

### **Limitations**

Maxwell (2013) asserted researchers are the instrument in qualitative research. Therefore, researchers must be aware of mental models and potential bias areas and

acknowledge them (which allows for better research) instead of pretending they do not exist. However, one limitation was that it is nearly impossible to keep all personal bias out of the interpretation (Maxwell, 2013).

Another limitation in using purposeful sampling was finding those who met the criteria, agreed to the interview time(s), and were from different business sectors (e.g., not all the same industry). This limitation may make it difficult to generalize findings. In addition, the businesses may be of different sizes. For example, a SBO who runs a company with 450 people and a person who runs an organization with four people (both deemed small businesses) may have vastly different stories and experiences. In addition, it may be difficult to generalize findings, as what is happening in one sector may differ in another sector. Moreover, the time of the year of the interview is a possible limitation. If the researcher was interviewing someone in a difficult moment of their business or life, the interviews may be different than if they were conducted in a slower time of the year. This timing may limit the time and energy participants are willing to share with the researcher, which ultimately was true, reducing to two interviews.

The world changed in unprecedented ways in 2020 through 2022 due to the ever-changing COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has impacted many parts of life and small businesses as well (Wilmoth, 2021). Limitations, changes, cancellations, and barriers that were once unimaginable are now part of daily life. This study was designed to be conducted in person. However, there was a concern that this would not be possible due to the uptick in COVID cases during the time of my interviews. The interviews, except one done through zoom due to a COVID outbreak, were all done in person. In addition,

neither party had to wear a mask; thus, observation cues, including facial expressions and tones were not impacted.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms are defined to help the reader of this study.

**COVID-19 Pandemic:** The name of this disease is coronavirus disease 2019, abbreviated as COVID-19. In COVID-19, ‘CO’ stands for ‘corona,’ ‘VI’ for ‘virus,’ and ‘D’ for disease (CDC, 2020).

**Entrepreneur:** An entrepreneur is a person who perceives a business opportunity and develops the business as his career choice (Barot, 2015).

**Grit:** Grit is passion and sustained perseverance applied toward long-term achievement with consistency over time (Duckworth, 2016).

**Growth Mindset:** A growth mindset occurs when a human being understands that their most basic abilities can be further developed through dedication and hard work (Dweck, 2015).

**Private Sector:** The private sector is considered the part of the economy that is run by individuals and companies for profit and is not state controlled. Therefore, it encompasses all for-profit businesses not owned or operated by the government. (Brock 2020)

**Resilience:** Resilience is the ability of human beings to bounce back from tough times, difficulties, and obstacles in life (Ginsburg, 2006).

**Self-efficacy:** Self-efficacy is a person’s belief in their ability to succeed can shape how they think, feel, and act (Bandura, 1994).

**Small Business:** Small businesses are organizations that are for-profit and have under 500 employees and been in operation for a minimum of 5 years (USSBA, 2018).

**Small Business Owners:** Small business owners are the person(s) who own an enterprise with fewer than 500 employees, and whose business size can also be measured in terms of sales volume and organizational structure (USSBA, 2018).

**Successful Small Business:** A successful small business is a United States organization of less than 500 people that started and has remained viable and profitable up to and past the 5-year marker of its existence (USSBA, 2018).

**Telecommuting and Remote Work:** Telecommuting and remote work is the practice of working outside of the traditional office, both in a temporal (time) and a spatial (location) sense (Olson, 1983).

**Transformational Leadership:** Transformational leadership is a process by which leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation (Burns, 1978).

## **Chapter Summary**

Small businesses make up most of all businesses in the United States; however, 50% of these businesses fail in the first 5 years of existence. This study was designed to learn from leaders who have started and run a viable and profitable small business for 5 or more years. As such, the researcher examined successful small businesses by interviewing six SBOs who run these companies. The researcher's goal was to learn from the lived stories and experiences of SBOs in an in-depth manner. The researcher used purposeful sampling to gather and learn from information-rich interviews. In the following chapter, the researcher will analyze the existing literature related to this study.



## **Chapter II:**

### **Literature Review**

In the United States, small businesses encompass much of the economy. Turner and Endres (2017) asserted 50% of businesses fail in the first 5 years of operation. Entrepreneurs who start small businesses are the backbone of the American economy, with the U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy (USSBA) (2021b) noting these small businesses created two-thirds of new jobs and account for 44% of the U.S. generated gross domestic product (GDP). However, these rates are only increasing at a rate of 1.4% annually (USSBA, 2021b). In contrast, large corporations are increasing their portion of the GDP by 2.5% annually (USSBA, 2021a). The USSBA (2021a) stated there are more than 32.5 million small businesses in the United States, and there was a loss of 15 million jobs during the 2nd quarter of 2020 (para. 4).

In this chapter, the researcher presented a literature review of selected sources based on the identified research questions. Throughout this literature review, factors of success and failure, before, during, and presently secondary to the COVID-19 pandemic, are examined. There was an identified need for further research, independent of the pandemic. Perry et al. (2018) stated the importance of collecting data on SBOs. With this understanding, the qualitative studies composing current research have only provided a partial outlook into a particular area of SBOs, whether constrained by geographic boundaries or by type of business boundaries.

The organization of this literature review consists of the following five strands: (a) an overview of small businesses in the United States, (b) entrepreneurship, (c) theoretical frameworks underpinning this study, (d) small business leadership theories, and (e) small business in the time of COVID-19. The chapter ends with a summary and a preview of Chapter III.

### **Overview of Small Business in the United States**

The U.S. Department of State (USDOS) (2019) identified the following factors required to be considered a small business: 500 or fewer employees, organized for profit, based in the United States, contributes to the U.S. economy via taxes, products, or labor, and is independently owned and not dominant on a national basis. However, no universally accepted definition can be consistent for every business, as organizations vary greatly depending on location and industry. As such, the USDOS definition was used for the purposes of this study.

### ***Small Business Successes and Failures***

The measurement of small business success can vary widely amongst industries and people. Thus, it is nearly impossible to find one all-encompassing framework for what may allow a business to succeed or what may cause it to fail. Success in business for publicly traded companies is defined as maximizing shareholders' value (Baron & Barbieri, 2019). However, SBOs do not typically have monetary input beyond themselves or a few partners, which complicates the issue of determining what defines success and failure. Thus, there are many different definitions and modes of measuring success, depending on the owner's preferences.

Business failure is typically related to at least one of the following categories of issues: financial, labor, management, or marketing (Beaver, 2003). Similarly, according to Watson (2007), small business failure can be related to the organization's size, governance, age, sector, financial resources, and location. An entrepreneur may be the downfall of the business if they exploit their role in a position of power (Beaver, 2003). As well, the failures of small businesses are often attributed to bad luck, poor timing, or ineffective advice (Beaver, 2003). Beaver (2003) explained “closure” of a small business does not necessarily mean failure, as many owners learn from mistakes and start again. He defined failure as “the realized return on capital investment is significantly and continually below prevailing rates on similar investments” (p. 119), giving an opportunity cost explanation of business failure. And he defined success as achieving goals and objectives agreed to in advance that meet stakeholder's expectations.

Likewise, Williams (2014) asserted successes and failures of small businesses cannot be analyzed as a homogenous group, but similarities can be found in different regards. He argued differences in the industry sector in small companies do not significantly impact their potential for survival or failure; however, revenue and overall resources impacts success. Moreover, these two factors highlight the importance of understanding the propensity for failure and what constitutes failure for small businesses.

Amankwah-Amoah et al. (2020) identified a gap in the literature regarding exogenous modulating factors for business failure, noting much of the literature overlooks environmental effects and focuses more on the individual. This factor is an important aspect to consider regarding business failure, as extrinsic shocks can transcend far beyond knowledge, power, and experience (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2020).

Exogenous factors can be defined as those that impact business originating from an external source (market shifts, inflation, COVID-19 pandemic, etc.); or as factors arising from inside the company itself (company personnel, leadership methods, etc.). However, the researchers noted this gap in the literature became primarily evident secondary to the global pandemic (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2020).

Amankwah-Amoah et al. (2020) noted small businesses are immediately at a disadvantage regarding novel shocks. They are already smaller in terms of available labor and resources, putting them at a disadvantage to larger corporations less sensitive to environmental changes. Amankwah-Amoah et al. defined business failure as one of two categories: deterministic or voluntaristic. Deterministic failure accounts for environmental factors business owners have little control over, whereas voluntaristic failure factors account for firm-specific factors, or those the owner has control over. For example, when a business is a “misfit” to its environment, there is a mismatch and no alignment between the business environment, resources, and structure in turn, does not allow it to prosper (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2020). According to Williams (2014), SBOs with less revenue and profit often find it more challenging to survive than leaders of larger companies with stocks and additional revenue sources. Further, the pandemic has been a significant factor resulting in mass layoffs, adoption of new costly processes, a shortage of labor, and business bankruptcies (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2020). Overall, the pathways of endogenous factors create a potential pathway to business failure.

### ***Entrepreneurship***

The word “entrepreneur” originated in France and when translated directly from French to English, is defined as “one who undertakes” (Dollinger, 2008, p. 10). Dollinger

described a meta-analysis of the many written definitions of entrepreneurship and identified several common themes. He stated entrepreneurship consists of creativity and innovation, resource identification and allocation, economic organization, and opportunity for gain under uncertain circumstances (Dollinger, 2008).

As time evolved and the economy progressed, defining entrepreneurship became increasingly difficult. This assortment of definitions has been well-documented by different researchers (Alegre et al., 2017; Bacq & Jansen, 2011; Bruyat & Julian, 2001), all attempting to define the conceptual framework of entrepreneurship for the field of research. Prior to 2000, most entrepreneur definitions consisted of simplistic definitions, for example, who the entrepreneur is and what they do. Yet, this did not withstand the criticism in the field, as it was seemingly incomplete and not complex enough.

Gartner (1990) defined several themes encompassing the characteristics of entrepreneurs, including innovation, organization, creation, value, uniqueness, and owner-manager. Dollinger (2008) defined creativity and innovation in entrepreneurship as something having a founding and an origin. Entrepreneurship generally does not consist of taking over or buying a business from someone else. Resource identification and allocation consists of the entrepreneur “choosing the resources for a firm, configuring these resources into a consistent strategy, and deploying the resources into implementation” (Dollinger, 2008, p. 11). Essentially, an entrepreneur must weigh the importance versus the cost of the various resources needed to start a business, then acquire and put them into existence. Economic organization consists of allocating and pursuing increased gain and growth, typically through financial aspects. Lastly, Dollinger

defined the idea of entrepreneurial risk, arguing risk must be an aspect of entrepreneurship, as the outcome is known without risk.

One of the most widely accepted definitions of entrepreneurship was defined by Shane and Venkataraman (2000) as the “examination of how, by whom, and with what effects opportunities to create future goods and services are discovered, evaluated, and exploited” (p. 2). Entrepreneurship can also be defined as a person who perceives a business opportunity and develops the business as his career choice (Barot, 2015). As there is no unanimously agreed-upon conceptual framework or definition of entrepreneurship in academic settings, a combination of various researched definitions were used when defining participants in the current study and their backgrounds.

**Entrepreneurship and Small Business.** In the United States, small businesses encompass most of the economy, and 99.9% of employer firms (Turner & Endres, 2017). Thus, small businesses are both influential and vital to the American market economy. Tuymuratovich (2021) stated, “small business enterprises in all countries of the world are the foundation of the national economy” (p. 61). The ever-growing and thriving small businesses are essentially the building blocks to creating a prosperous national economy through ongoing innovation, competition, and employment (USSBA, 2021b). According to the USSBA (2021a), more than 32.5 million small businesses are in the United States and generate 43.5% of the country’s GDP. Small businesses not only contribute to the GDP, but also, they create new jobs, help communities, spark innovation, and provide opportunities for many people to achieve financial independence and success (Skripak, 2018).

Job creation occurs through the net increase of jobs over time. In 2018, more people were being hired than fired (Skripak, 2018). Secondly, innovation is prevalent throughout small businesses, which occurs through the environments in which small businesses foster and thrive. Per Skripak (2018), small businesses “appeal to individuals with the talent to invent new products or improve the way things are done” (p. 126). As well, Skripak noted many large corporations have focused on downsizing within the last 10-15 years to “act” like small businesses or even create specialized sectors of their corporations that focus explicitly on innovation. From 1995-2020, the small business sector in the United States created 12.7 million net new jobs, whereas large businesses only created a net 7.9 million jobs (USSBOA, 2021).

Small businesses provide an opportunity for many, specifically women and minorities, to find a tangible pathway to success and prosperity (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2021), all-time highs of nearly 19% (1.0 million) of all U.S. businesses were minority-owned and 20% (1.1 million) of all businesses were owned by women. The connection between working an hourly wage job to being the CEO of a large business with complete financial flexibility and success is ambiguous (Skripak, 2018). However, small companies can change that and provide people a pathway to success (Skripak, 2018). In fact, in the past two decades, there has been a substantial increase in the number of businesses owned by women and minorities (Skripak, 2018).

In contrast, however, small business is not for everyone. Many financial resources are necessary for companies to evolve, educate, grow, and innovate. These financial

resources help small businesses remain viable and maintain a competitive advantage in the marketplace (Dyer et al., 2014).

**Entrepreneurial Personality.** To innovate, maintain, and prosper a business successfully, there are many prominent themes connected to the personality traits of successful business owners. According to Lee (2018), many scholars have shifted towards a non-cognitive approach in predicting the success of SBOs through ideas such as grit theory, resilience, self-efficacy, and growth mindset. Lee explained rather than strictly focusing on cognitive measurements, such as IQ, and other measures of intelligence, such as education level, additional mediating factors in an entrepreneur's personality and mindset may prove to be a better measure of what leads to the success of a small business.

## **Theoretical Underpinnings of the Study**

### ***Grit Theory***

The seminal theorist of grit theory is Angela Duckworth. Duckworth et al. (2007) defined grit as a noncognitive trait with two fundamental factors: consistency of passion, and perseverance over a prolonged period of time to achieve short- and long-term goals (Duckworth et al., 2007). Duckworth (2016) explained grit in terms of an organization's culture and leadership. She argued "If you want to be grittier, find a gritty culture and join it. If you're a leader, and you want your organization to be grittier, create a grittier culture" (p. 245). Duckworth et al. (2007) explained a high level of grit is achieved when passion and perseverance remain consistent over long periods of time.

Mooradian et al. (2016) described grit as "long-term diligence as well as a passion for a goal" (p. 235). Duckworth et al. (2007) conducted a study to examine why some



people are more successful than others when they have seemingly equal innate or acquired intelligence levels. Using a grit scale, Duckworth et al. indicated persons who scored higher on the scale were subsequently more successful long-term at whatever their task encompassed. These results indicated, aside from only educational background, IQ level, and conscientiousness, grit plays a significant role in the success of individuals due to the increased likelihood of achieving sustained and focused application of talent over time. Grit theory is often applied in studies concerning what differentiates a successful entrepreneur from an unsuccessful one (Mooradian et al., 2016).

A similar survey on grit was done to investigate the extent to which it played a role in entrepreneurial success (Mooradian et al., 2016). In this study, the researchers found perseverance of effort influenced performance and success in entrepreneurs in a positively correlated manner (Mooradian et al., 2016). Although grit is not the only aspect of the grit theory, it is the overarching theme. Grit theory also inspired further studies in which researchers examined other characteristics of those who possess grit.

Wolfe and Patel (2016) found individuals with higher levels of grit also possess more self-confidence, which is an easier trait to understand and qualify than grit itself. The researchers found possessing grit correlated to an increased level of self-confidence, acting as a potential source of decision-making to decipher and develop whether individuals possess or need to obtain greater skills, support, and understanding of the entrepreneurial field before attempting to start a business. Additionally, the authors found leaders with grit can more easily overcome potentially adverse situations and be more resilient in navigating these situations, increasing the likelihood of small business success. Such resilience is closely connected to grit theory.

## ***Resilience Theory***

There is a widely reviewed concept throughout the literature regarding the intersection between resilience and entrepreneurial successes. Garmezy (1991) is often noted as being the founder of research in resilience. Garmezy defined resilience as “not necessarily impervious to stress. Rather, resilience is designed to reflect the capacity for recovery and maintained adaptive behavior that may follow initial retreat or incapacity upon initiating a stressful event” (p. 459). Resilience is associated with a person who has the capacity to withstand adversity and bounce back from challenging times and life events.

Korber and McNaughton (2017) found resilience, as it relates to entrepreneurial success, is a “combination of several preliminary conditions... and is consistent with business competitiveness, vulnerability, and continuity” (p. 13). Korber and McNaughton also noted entrepreneurial success consists of the underlying traits of self-awareness, reflexivity, and continuous learning. Similar to grit theory, this indicates the idea of resilience as a mediating factor in successful entrepreneurs. Korber and McNaughton also considered smaller personality traits as the origins of resilience in one’s life, the development of resilience and choice to pursue entrepreneurship, and the actual entrepreneurship pursuit in relation to resilience (Korber & McNaughton, 2017).

Bernard and Dubard Barbosa (2016) and Hedner et al. (2011) found people typically possessed resilience after experiencing some hardship or trauma in their lives. A contemporary understanding of resilience in entrepreneurship stems from individual business owners’ responses to difficulties and failures. Bernard and Dubard Barbosa laid the initial framework regarding individuals who demonstrated resilience traits and

became entrepreneurs. In their study, when participants possessed the trait of resilience and then secondarily became entrepreneurs, they relied more heavily on the resilience dynamic. Thus, they relied on their past hardships and learned resilience to support their endeavors. Overall, the authors noted the continued focus of these learned resilience-related values was also a common theme of successful entrepreneurs in all aspects of life (Bernard & Dubard Barbosa, 2016). Hedner et al. suggested further research on process-based studies of the business successes of entrepreneurs, through concepts like resilience, may allow for a more complete overview of the successful entrepreneur.

Fisher et al. (2016) found a quantitatively significant relationship between individual resilience and entrepreneurial success at an individual level. They defined entrepreneurial success as how a person perceives their business's success. Conversely, entrepreneurial success was defined by Fisher et al. as a more numerical input through staff growth and retention, return and growth on investment, and other performance measures. However, Fisher et al. also surveyed the general population who did not identify as entrepreneurs and found the resilience score was far higher in the entrepreneurial population than in those who were not. They also found resilience may not be necessary for small business success. However, this depends on how one defines success from a monetary standpoint and is often connected with self-efficacy (Fisher et al., 2016).

### ***Self-Efficacy Theory***

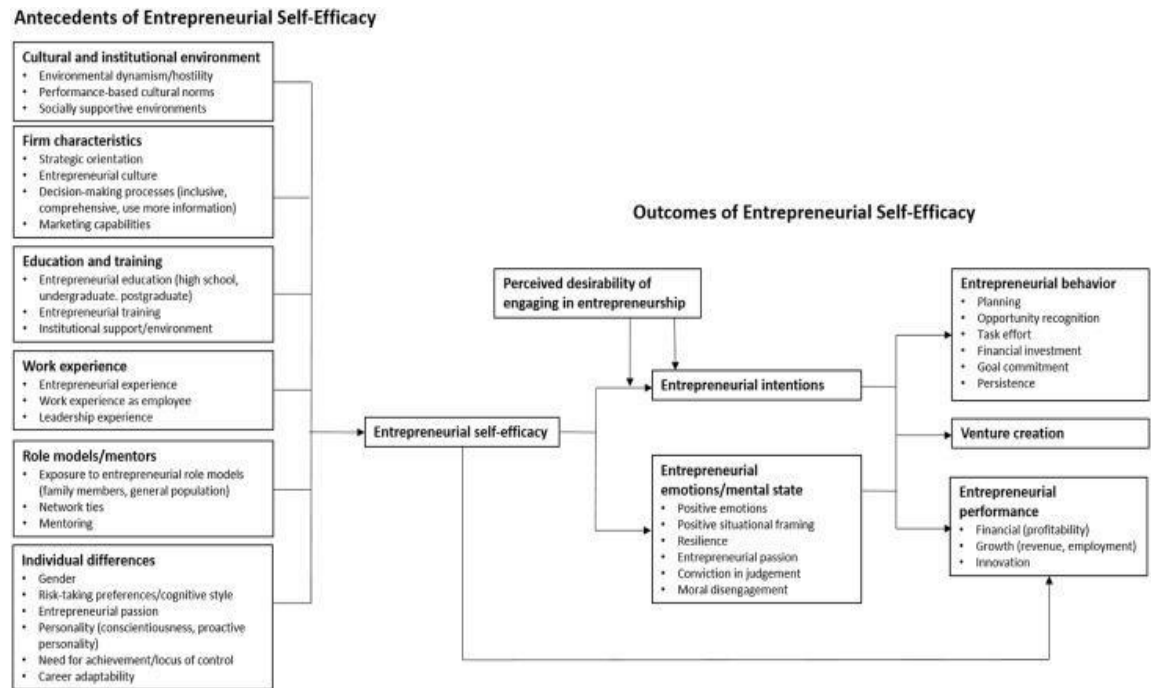
Bandura (1977) coined the term self-efficacy and explained it as a person's particular set of beliefs that determine how well one can execute a plan of action in prospective situations. Self-efficacy is a person's belief in their ability to succeed in any

situation. Entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE) is a vital characteristic of understanding possible modulating factors for business success. An individual's belief in their capabilities to be successful through the performance of various roles and tasks specific to set entrepreneurial outcomes is another way to explain self-efficacy (Chen et al., 1998). Self-efficacious behavior is one factor that dictates the extent to which someone may pursue entrepreneurship and engage in those types of behaviors (Newman et al., 2019). Without ESE, entrepreneurship may cease to exist, as there would be a lack of drive to pursue a new venturing process (Hmieleski & Baron, 2008). From an entrepreneurial standpoint, if someone is self-efficacious, they possess many traits leading to risky business behaviors. Someone who is exceptionally high in self-efficacy is far more likely to strive to achieve goals, recover faster from adverse situations, and continue to pursue their goals, just from an innate standpoint (Hmieleski & Baron, 2008). As well, small business owners who have higher self-efficacy often have positive tangible and direct effects on their revenue and employment growth (Baum & Locke, 2004).

Figure 2 is a flowchart created through a literature review of various aspects of ESE. It provides an overarching framework of factors that can lead to entrepreneurial success, a basis of this study. Through this figure, Newman et al. (2019) suggested cultural backgrounds, previous job characteristics and managerial qualities, education and training, work experience, prior role models, and other innate characteristics can be attributed as possible antecedents for ESE. Furthermore, Newman et al. argued self-efficacy, emotions, and the mental state of the entrepreneur also play a crucial role in entrepreneurial behavior, performance, and innovation or creation.

**Figure 2**

*Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy Antecedents*



(Source: Newman et al., 2019).

***Growth Mindset Theory***

Dweck (2006) coined the terms *fixed mindset* and *growth mindset* as descriptions of the numerous ways people consider their learning and future. Growth mindset theory is applicable to SBOs as well. For example, if individuals believe and understand they can become better at something, they are more apt to put in the time and effort to achieve this. Conversely, if they do not believe there is any room for growth, they tend to remain complacent and not work harder to achieve and grow to the next level. Dweck noted that people with a growth mindset embrace challenges, persist through setbacks and obstacles, perceive their level of effort as a direct correlation with their mastery of the knowledge at hand, learn from criticism, and learn lessons from others.

This same mindset can be applied to SBOs and has led to increased studies and analyses on this topic and its relation to entrepreneurship and success. Billingsley et al. (2021) analyzed growth mindset in entrepreneurship and investigated the extent to which it is related to various personality traits. Furthermore, they also examined how a growth mindset can predict the motivation of wanting to embark on entrepreneurship through starting a new business. The researchers found a growth mindset in entrepreneurship was also related to leadership, creativity, intelligence, and entrepreneurial ability (Billingsley et al., 2021). Further, they found a significant and positive correlation between entrepreneurial growth mindset, conscientiousness, and openness. They also found a correlation between a growth mindset, resilience, and the need for achievement. However, they did not find a correlation between extraversion, agreeableness, or neuroticism (Billingsley et al., 2021). As well, they did not find a correlation between growth mindset and risk-taking. They suggested a fixed mindset may increase the desire to prove oneself to others, thereby instigating greater risk-taking and potentially dangerous and destructive behavior (Billingsley et al., 2021). Moreover, risk-taking is often a primary factor of entrepreneurial predisposition and personality (Billingsley et al., 2021).

### **Small Business Leadership Theories**

The leadership styles of SBOs can help inform why some achieve success and others do not. There is a plethora of information on the optimal resources and strategies in owning a business and managing a group of people successfully. Yet, as the world continues to change rapidly, researchers must reexamine the most optimal ways to lead changes (Kotter, 1995). Kotter (1995) argued successful organizational change occurs

when organizations proceed through a series of phases with a clear and aligned vision. Such change takes time to accomplish, and internal stakeholders must remain committed to the vision to achieve success. In addition, having knowledge about resources is not enough, as the most critical factor is how SBOs apply learned skill sets (Howard et al., 2019).

Howard et al. (2019) noted the leaders of small businesses often strive to be as involved with each aspect of business as possible, and they do this instead of hiring various people to work in each area. This leads owners to be involved in nearly all the “firm's strategic, tactical, and even operating core” (Howard et al., 2019, p. 54). Thus, SBOs continue having a “more influential role in the buildup of their companies from the very beginning” (Howard et al., 2019, p. 54). By investigating various leadership theories in the literature often connected with small businesses, this researcher attempted to identify the best practices used by successful SBOs to ensure success past the first 5 years.

### ***Transformational Leadership Theory***

Burns (1978) coined the term *transformational leadership*. He described the phenomenon of transformational leadership as a process by which “leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation” (Burns, 1978, p. 1). Burns also described an effective transformational leader as “one who raises the followers’ level of consciousness about the importance and value of desired outcomes and the methods of reaching those outcomes” (Burns, 1978, p. 141). Kuhnert and Lewis (1987) added transformational leadership is focused on more than strict compliance or exchange, as it also considers followers' beliefs, needs, and values.

McCleskey (2014) provided an overview of transformational leadership and noted four components that emerged over time: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, during which leaders exhibiting transformational leadership use some combination of these four ideas to bring about change and motivation in their organization. These four ideas were further defined by Bass and Riggio (2006) who explained idealized influence represents the idea leaders represent someone who followers want to emulate, promoting increased successful behaviors in the organization. Inspirational motivation applies enthusiasm and optimism to provide a sense of motivation through shared meaning and achievable challenges. Intellectual stimulation is the idea that leaders will shape the efforts of their followers by applying new frameworks to situations and not being complacent. Lastly, individualized consideration involves assisting followers to achieve their full potential through providing learning opportunities and an open environment (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Kouzes and Posner (2017) defined a similar approach to transformational leadership, offering a five-part theory of transformational leadership: *model the way*, *inspire a shared vision*, *challenge the process*, *enable others to act*, and *encourage the heart*. Kouzes and Posner explained modeling the way is an essential aspect of leadership, arguing it is a personal responsibility to set an example for one's followers. They defined inspiring a shared vision as implementing a plan and motivating others to achieve new plans in the future. Challenging the process is a method in which learning from both successes and failures elicits a continuous change in processes and plans to create a more efficient and prosperous environment in the future (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Becoming a transformational leader enables others to act by facilitating



achievement as a group effort rather than through specific individuals (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Lastly, the authors suggested appealing to the heart of followers through appreciation and recognition of jobs well done (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Through these five practices, the workplace environment can be enhanced by transforming the culture and employees to create more effective people and organizations.

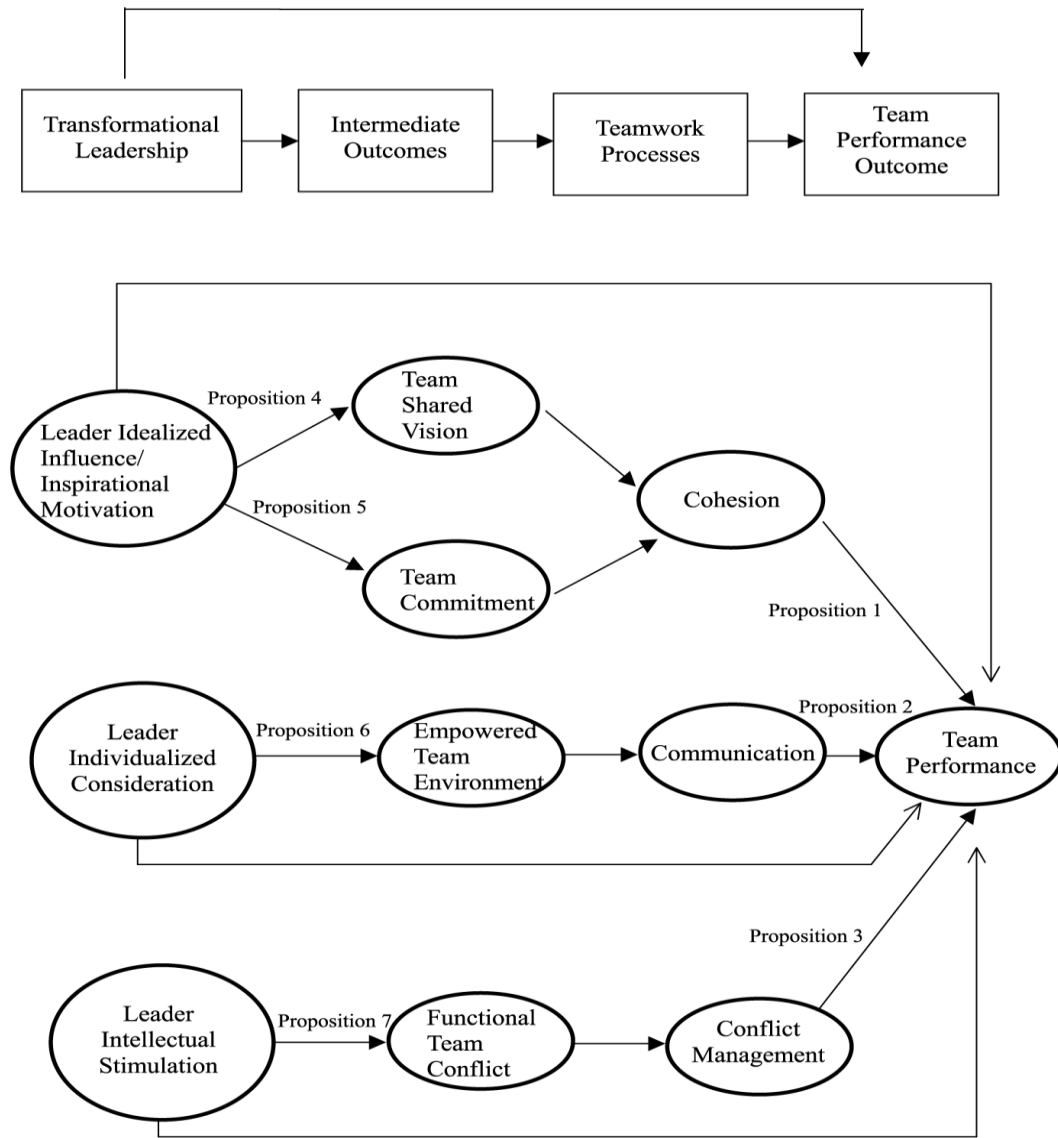
Garcia-Morales et al. (2008) claimed transformational leadership “heightens the consciousness of collective interest among the organization's members and helps them to achieve their collective goals” (p. 2). Since the introduction of Garcia-Morales et al.’s definition, myriad different styles of managerial and entrepreneurial aspects have been studied. Garcia-Morales et al. found a positive relationship between transformational leadership styles and learning as the leadership style itself. It teaches the group at large to share and transfer knowledge with one another. It alludes directly to the style of leadership of the SBO when interacting with others and its impact on the team.

Transformational leadership theory (TLT) was used as a basis to elucidate a framework to investigate a leader’s impact on a team’s performance (Dionne et al., 2004). Dionne et al. (2004) proffered various dimensions of transformational leadership partially mediate transformational leadership (See Figure 3). For example, inspirational motivation or intellectual stimulation can lead to intermediate outcomes that improve team processes and, eventually, team success. In Figure 3, three essential starting points are interconnected with various intermediate processes that lead to team performance. Regarding idealized influence and inspirational motivation, Dionne et al. noted these behaviors directly impact team cohesion via “visioning behaviors involving rapport

building and empathetic language” (p. 183) through the intermediate steps of team shared vision and commitment, which ultimately can lead to more significant successes.

**Figure 3**

*Transformation Leadership and Team Performance Model*



(Source: Dionne et al., 2004).

When the leader instills confidence and motivation via an inspirational vision of the organizational change, team members have a more significant commitment and shared vision with the team by unifying to achieve a common goal (Dionne et al., 2004).

As well, Spreitzer (1995) argued through the concept of individualized consideration, the leader addresses meaningfulness, competence, and possible impact with each member, leading to increased individual development. Dionne et al. (2004) argued through this direct line of communication and fostering these empowered relationships, the leader instills an empowered environment, communication, and ultimately greater team success.

Lastly, Dionne et al. (2004) noted that intellectual stimulation in the context of group success and conflict management in the team setting benefits the organization by strengthening relationships and producing a better solution. Additionally, intellectual stimulation allows for a setting in which members can freely question and improve the processes around them, leading to higher overall team performance (Dionne et al., 2004). Overall, this model provides a conceptual framework underlying transformational leadership theories and how various aspects, working in tandem, can lead to team performance successes.

Transformational leadership theory serves as the central leadership component of the conceptual framework in this study. The literature suggests transformational leaders empower their followers and establish an innovative climate (Jung et al., 2003). Elkins and Keller (2003) argued transformational leadership behaviors center around innovation and creativity, vision, support for innovation, encouragement, recognition, and challenge. Transformational leaders also develop creative ways to address problems in small businesses by exhibiting encouragement and optimism in problem-solving (Jung et al., 2003). In turn, such leadership stimulates and heightens the overall level of entrepreneurial behavior in small business (Müceldili et al., 2013).

Emery and Barker (2007) studied employees from the food and banking industries to examine the nature of the relationship between the leadership style of a business owner and employee performance. They found employees were more satisfied with a transformational leadership style. Moreover, they found that a transformational leadership style helped create a greater contribution to organizational commitment, and both job and leader satisfaction. The employees also reported stronger levels of confidence in their capability to perform their tasks.

### ***Transactional Leadership Theory***

Burns (1978) coined the term *transactional leadership*, describing it as “leaders approaching followers with an eye towards exchange” (p. 4). Transactional leadership is primarily focused on the compliance of followers, with the focus on something being exchanged directly in return for the service. In transactional leadership theory, leaders can effectively accomplish tangible tasks. Although it is typically not regarded as the most effective leadership theory to use on its own, McCleskey (2014) noted transactional leadership allows goals to be met through an organizational, contractual agreement between leader and follower, emphasizing extrinsic rewards (monetary, typically), and maximizing efficiency (See Figure 4). Additionally, with a clear set of guidelines on how tasks should be performed and the recommended timeframe, this leadership style has helped minimize workplace anxiety and increase organizational efficiency (McCleskey, 2014).

**Figure 4**

*Transactional Leadership Concept Map*



*Note: Retrieved from Expert Program Management (2020).*

Odumeru and Ifeanyi (2013) asserted transactional leadership focuses on supervision and group performance associated with the compliance of followers resulting in either rewards or punishments. They noted using this approach is not meant to transform processes for the future but rather to maintain them as they are. They argued it is most effective in either crisis or emergencies or when a project is organized in a precise, organized manner with a time limit. In the context of Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, transactional leadership impacts the lower half of the pyramid with rewards and punishments. In contrast, transformational leadership is required to satisfy the upper half of the pyramid, allowing for self-realization and growth within a role (Odumeru & Ifeanyi, 2013).

Transactional leaders clarify their followers' roles and tasks, understand their needs, and wants, and provide a tangible pathway to receive a reward when tasks are complete (Bass, 1985). However, there are numerous shortcomings in relying solely on this method, including time pressures, poor appraisal methods, and poor management

skills, such as being afraid of negative reinforcement, which all cause issues when using this method alone (Bass, 1985). Bass (1985) asserted transformational leadership can be used to augment a transactional standpoint to provide the best management possible.

Transactional leadership can be effective in new businesses where people need to be given specific instructions regarding tasks and responsibilities (Deichmann & Stam, 2015). The researchers argued in times of change, transactional leadership may prove effective. Odumeru and Ifeanyi (2013) explained that leaders must explain the goals to be achieved, clarification of roles, task requirements, and expectations to followers. Hence, this theory may help SBOs increase compliance, reduce resistance, and reward contributions in times of change (Deichmann & Stam, 2015).

Kark et al. (2018) studied the transactional leadership styles of business owners. The researchers found this leadership style hindered the tendency of followers to act in a creative manner. Transactional leadership tends to focus on follower's mistakes, shortcomings, and losses. Therefore, this leadership style made followers focus more on what is expected of them and their obligations and duties. The researchers found a transactional leadership style may undermine followers' ability to experiment and take risks. Thus, transactional leadership can decrease employee innovation and creativity (Kark et al., 2018).

### ***Trait Theory of Leadership***

In leadership, the trait theory is the concept that a person is born with various traits and characteristics, such as personality qualities, that lead to a specific proficiency level in leadership and can result in success due to these traits (Salihu, 2019). However, initial trait theory focuses vastly on the inherited traits of effective leaders and not on

interpersonal skills, communication skills, and other aspects of an effective leader that can be improved upon and learned (Salihu, 2019).

Putra and Cho (2019) analyzed the preferred leadership traits among managing SBOs of restaurants through the perspectives of their employees. This study was unique as it was indirectly analyzed by the employees, providing a unique outlook. The study examined nine themes through questionnaires and interviews to decipher what employees deemed essential characteristics or traits for their bosses. These nine themes consisted of the following traits, in order of most important to least essential: respectful, compassionate, effective communication skills, experienced, practical delegation skills, able to give recognition, sociable, emotionally controlled, and organized (Putra & Cho, 2019). The researchers found these aspects of leadership led to increased business performance, as it increased employee retention in an industry with high employee turnover rates.

The researchers described “respectfulness” in the context of being a manager and boss who does not talk down to employees, does not make them feel “small,” and treats them as equals. They further asserted, when respect is lost, it is nearly impossible to gain it back (Putra & Cho, 2019). Compassion was also a vital trait identified in this study and was analyzed through the lens of putting yourself in someone else’s shoes and understanding sometimes the customer is not right. The theory of the customer always being correct may be outdated customer service and trait leadership quality methods, especially when employees' mental well-being and perceived workplace safety are jeopardized by unruly or disrespectful customers (Putra & Cho, 2019). Overall, all these leadership trait studies provide insight on how small business leaders may be influential

from the perspective of their employees and to determine if someone has the characteristics needed to be a leader (Robbins & Judge, 2007). Traits can predict leadership appearance, who is likely to emerge as a leader, and what their leadership style might be (Robbins & Judge, 2007). However, specific traits alone are not likely to predict whether a leader will succeed (Robbins & Judge, 2007).

### ***Servant Leadership Theory***

The term “servant leader” was first coined by Greenleaf in 1970. Servant leadership theory encompasses the idea of the reversal of the primary boss-to-employee relationship and was synthesized due to the demand for more ethical, people-centered management (van Dierendonck, 2011). This leadership theory consists of the mindset in which organizational leaders serve their fellow employees and members (Heyler & Martin, 2018). This method of leadership has elicited positive impacts on companies, such as encouraging employees to fulfill their potential. This has been accomplished through the movement away from autocratic leadership styles to those that are more personalized, individualized, and more focused on the person, rather than their output (Heyler & Martin, 2018).

Spears (1995) denoted key characteristics of the “servant leader” as listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, and commitment to the growth of people personally and professionally. The interconnectedness of these various leadership theories can be better understood by comparing these aspects with those noted in the trait leadership section.

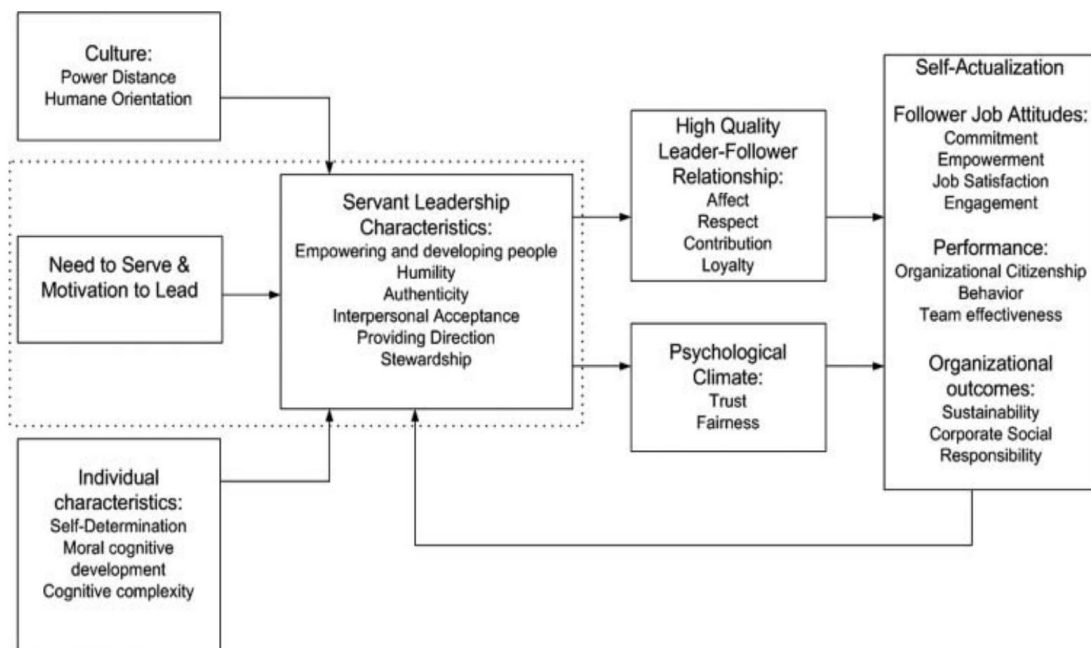
Figure 5 provides a visual of van Dierendonck’s (2011) conceptual framework, in which various antecedents form and modulate the characteristics of a servant leader,



which leads to an effective relationship between leaders and followers and, therefore, better performance and outcome of the organization. The various arrows between one another show the duality of the framework and how each trait is interconnected with the next; none of these aspects are linear, nor do they stand alone (van Dierendonck, 2011).

**Figure 5**

*A Conceptual Model of Servant Leadership*



(Source: van Dierendonck, 2011)

Van Winkle et al. (2014) concluded from their research that employees' "perceptions of being empowered will increase as supervisors' servant leadership behaviors increase" (p. 70). This study's findings imply that servant leadership theory provides followers with structural and psychological empowerment. This study's overall results support the view made by numerous scholars that servant leaders empower their followers. Followers' perceptions were found to correlate positively with their ratings of the servant leadership behaviors of immediate supervisors.

### *Situational Leadership Theory*

Hersey and Blanchard (1969) defined situational leadership theory (SLT) as the life cycle theory of leadership, arguing that no one theory of leadership is most effective and success is influenced by a combination of leadership adaptability and group's readiness level. McCleskey (2014) compared three main theories: SLT, transformational leadership theory (TLT), and transactional leadership theory, defining each theory's limitations, advantages, and disadvantages and how they work, asserted "effective leadership requires a rational understanding of the situation and an appropriate response, rather than a charismatic leader with a large, dedicated group of followers" (p. 118). Situational leadership theory highlights the importance of treating unique followers in unique ways. Thus, leaders should be aware of opportunities to develop the skills and confidence of such followers (van Dierendonck, 2011). Moreover, SLT has contributed to better understanding the importance of a leader being flexible and adaptive in a situational approach (Yukl, 2010).

Blanchard (2010) suggested leaders may improve their situational ability through training to help them tailor their leadership style to focus on follower commitment and competence. Blanchard defined commitment as the motivation and confidence a follower possesses. Competence concerns a follower's task-relevant knowledge, skills gained through formal education, and real-world training and experience (Thompson & Glaso, 2018). Furthermore, SLT underscores the relationship between the leader's actions and the amount of information given in response to the follower's readiness to learn and follow (Blanchard, 2010). As these factors shift in either direction, an effective leader must change to meet the needs of their followers (Cairns et al., 1998).

Henkel and Bourdeau (2018) surveyed managers of an advanced military leadership program to identify their situational leadership styles. They found the managers used a primary and secondary leadership style, depending on the context and situation. Findings revealed situational leadership skills are important to achieving success of the overall organizational objectives. Moreover, an effective situational leader understands there is no single solution to lead employees and teams, but a multitude of options from which to choose, depending on the context of the situation (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018).

Having reviewed these theories, the decision to use TLT for this research was most appropriate for identifying the best practices of successful business owners. While there is ample research on business theories and activities of successful business owners, there is scant research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic concerning how some businesses continued to be successful. In the following section, the researcher describes some of the impacts of the pandemic on small businesses.

### **Small Business in the Time of COVID-19**

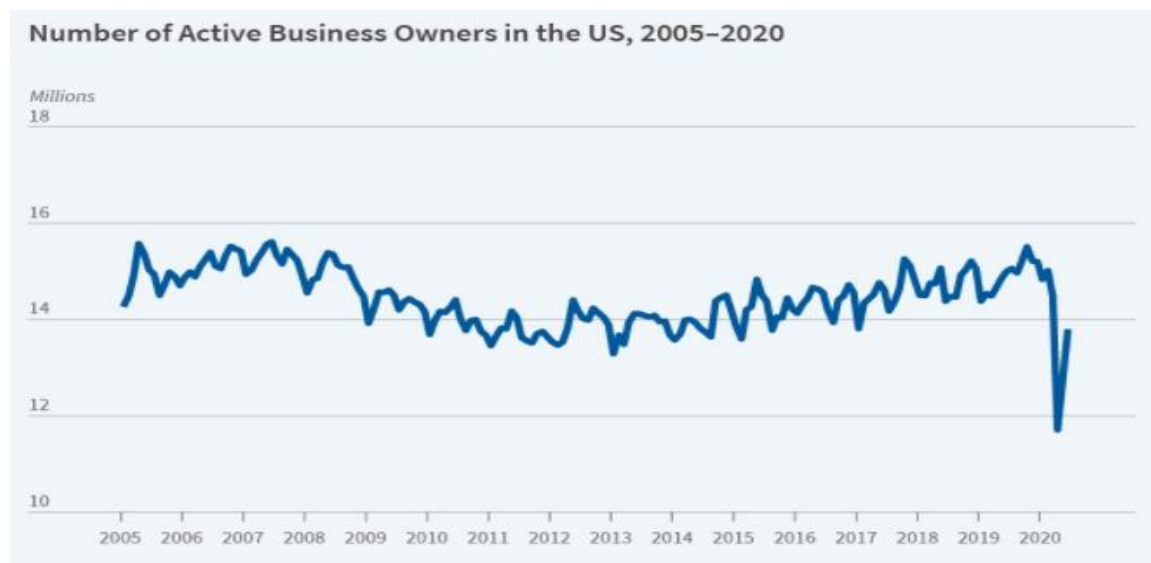
Aside from the significant public health crisis, secondary to COVID-19, the global economy has faced significant shock. Although it is a relatively new and ongoing subject of negotiation, there is emerging research on the pandemic's effects on small businesses (Fairlie, 2020). In a study by Bartik et al. (2020), 43% of businesses surveyed, temporarily closed due to COVID-19 at the initial start of the pandemic, and employment in the United States fell by 40% during this time. The number of active business owners fell by 22% from February to April 2020, making it the largest decrease on record

(Fairlie, 2020). Given the statistics, COVID-19 has played a significant role in the economy and small business sector for over 2 years.

In Figure 6, the graphical analysis indicates the shock experienced by business owners in direct or indirect response to the pandemic. The number of active business owners fell from around 15 million in early 2020 to about 11 million in April 2020. This figure suggests the steep decline the economy experienced in response to the pandemic.

### **Figure 6**

*Number of Active Business Owners in the United States, 2005-2020*



(Source: Fairlie, 2020)

### ***Financial Hardships and Government Aid***

During a pandemic, it can be challenging to ensure one's business has enough cash and resources to stay viable (Fairlie, 2020). In the Bartik et al. (2020) study, of businesses surveyed, one-fourth had enough cash on hand for less than a month of expenses, and one-half had enough money to cover between 1 and 2 months. Without sufficient cash flow, these businesses were not able to stay viable and pay their

employees. As such, during the COVID-19 pandemic, layoffs and business shutdowns occurred in large numbers (Wade, 2021).

The importance of small businesses on the economy was evident in the U.S. government's reaction when companies began closing during the pandemic. To attempt to deter and avoid complete economic collapse, the government supported keeping the economy stable through the financial backing of business owners. The largest of these programs was the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). Congress created the PPP to help small businesses receive forgivable loans, and based on recent data from the Small Business Administration (SBA), the PPP has allocated \$11.8 million in loans with a net lent amount of \$799 billion to SBOs (USSBA, 2021).

The Economic Injury Disaster Loan program (EIDL) was enacted by the USSBA (2021a), which is described as a “loan directly from the SBA that must be repaid... low-interest, fixed-rate, long-term loan to help overcome the effects of the pandemic by providing working capital to meet operating expenses” (p. 1). These loans helped small businesses that may not have qualified for or missed out on applying for PPP loans.

As of September 2021, the cap on this loan was increased from \$500,000 to \$2 million to allow further funding for the hardest-hit sectors of the pandemic such as gyms, the restaurant industry, and the hotel sector, to meet payroll, purchase equipment, and pay debt (Drew, 2021). Furthermore, many private enterprises, such as Magic Johnson Enterprises (\$100 million), the Association for Enterprise Opportunity (\$10 million), and Google (\$175 million), pledged money to support minority and female-owned businesses throughout the pandemic (Fairlie, 2020).

In late March 2020, the U.S. government passed a \$2 trillion aid package in the form of multiple stimulus checks to attempt to spark the economy through mild spending. In this bill, eligible adults received \$1,200 checks. In a study measuring the impact of the government's first stimulus package, researchers found within 10 days of receiving the check, those who had received it spent, on average, \$600 more than those who had not yet received the check (Baker et al., 2020). Additionally, Baker et al. (2020) found this stimulus payment prompted a surge of nearly 300% in the takeout and delivery industry in the first few days after stimulus checks were received.

### ***Working From Home***

As a byproduct of the pandemic, working from home has become the “new normal” for many workers worldwide. Working from home consists of four main defining characteristics: a person who is an employee of an organization, work engagement on specific work-related tasks, work being performed outside of the physical location of the company, and virtual communication with other members of the organization (Savić, 2020). Both telecommuting and remote work are considered synonymous terms for the purpose of this literature review.

Work from home models vary based on the type of business and industry, and many jobs moved to some type of virtual method of working during the pandemic. However, 53% of SBOs noted their employees could not work from home or work virtually (Liguori & Pittz, 2020). Many individuals were also forced to shift to a virtual experience, including those who had little to no experience with this and those who preferred not to work from home (Kramer & Kramer, 2020).

Some studies have indicated that working from home has adverse effects on business and employee health, such as increased social isolation and a family-work conflict, leading to significantly decreased productivity and job-related stress perceived by the employee (Galanti et al., 2021). However, the preponderance of research indicates working from home significantly improves business productivity and worker satisfaction and, thus, has become a point of contention among those businesses in which a virtual format is not possible (Galanti et al., 2021).

With continued technological improvements and ongoing studies demonstrating worker productivity in both virtual and in-person formats, the percentage of remote workers will likely continue to rise (Clancy, 2020). Clancy (2020) noted some of the benefits of remote work, such as lower transport costs and an ample labor supply within an area. Remote work may also provide benefits through the virtual agglomeration of workers without needing to pay the support of housing, commuting, and relocation (Clancy, 2020). Clancy also asserted remote work can reduce “geographic inequality,” which, in the past, has led to decreased economic success in rural areas and increased success in cities. Furthermore, virtual work may significantly decrease carbon emissions from commuting (Clancy, 2020).

### ***Labor Shortages***

During the start of the pandemic, the announcement of shutdowns and shelter-in-place mandates amidst the spread of the virus subsequently led to a great economic recession through a spike in unemployment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). In February 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the unemployment rate was 3.5% (Fairlie, 2020). With the onset of COVID-19, America’s small businesses were impacted

as well. The unemployment rate in the United States in April 2020 rose to 14.7%, making it the highest ever recorded rate since data started being recorded in 1948 in a post-World War II economy (Fairlie, 2020). By August 2021, the unemployment rate in the United States dropped to 5.2%, indicating an improvement (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). The U.S. unemployment rate declined again in 2022; as of March 2022, the unemployment rate was 3.6%, nearing a half-century historic low (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).

During the pandemic, two-thirds of unemployed Americans stated since becoming unemployed, they have considered changing their field of work and had no intention of finding a job in the same field soon (Parker et al., 2021). This sentiment was shared across all income levels, from low-income to high-income unemployed Americans (Parker et al., 2021). Additionally, 55% of survey respondents have noted they “enjoyed” not working during the pandemic since being laid off from their job and having more time for hobbies and other interests (Parker et al., 2021).

Moreover, the increased extension of unemployment benefits impacted the shortage of labor with the availability of jobs (Greszler, 2021). Pre-pandemic, only about 40% of unemployed workers utilized unemployment benefits; however, this considerably changed when Congress granted increased benefits to stimulate the economy (Greszler, 2021). As such, unemployment benefits equated to 176% of unemployed workers (Greszler, 2021), leading to an estimated 357 billion of tax dollars being used for unemployment. The unemployment benefits deployed during the COVID-19 pandemic were unlike any other benefits in history as they included expanded coverage (including those who were employed by companies who did not pay to the federal unemployment



insurance fund), increased benefit fund (briefly added an additional \$300 to the already unprecedented \$600, per week), extended benefits (allowing the usage of these benefits for up to 18 months, rather than the typical 6 months), and loosened eligibility (including those who lost partial income, rather than fully unemployed) (Greszler, 2021). According to Greszler (2021), this ongoing expansion contributed significantly to a labor shortage, subsequently holding back the full recovery of the U.S. economy.

### ***COVID-19 Vaccine and Social Distancing***

The availability of the COVID-19 vaccine has also directly affected businesses and the economy. Arnon and Ricco (2021) noted that social and economic behavior fluctuated directly in response to the perceived severity of the pandemic and the risk of contracting the virus, which correlated mainly with the number of reported cases in a community. They also noted an increase in cases leads to increased social distancing practices, arguing that it was rather costly for the economy (Arnon & Ricco, 2021). Moreover, they also noted the opposite, where fewer cases, as occurred in mid-2021, led to a boost in economic activity and infection rates. They asserted the release of the COVID-19 vaccines, presumed immunity, and significantly decreased risk for much of the population would lead to relaxed social distancing measures and a boost in the economy in a safe manner (Arnon & Ricco, 2021).

Some researchers have studied the correlation between vaccination percentages in a state and the number of eligible adults employed. In a study conducted by the Chris Weller of the American Progress Organization (2021), polls results indicated in states where 10-30% of the adult population were vaccinated, 52.4% of the eligible adult population was working; whereas in states with 30-50% of the population vaccinated,

58.1% of eligible adults were working. This highlights a direct increase in the number of working adults and the number of vaccinated individuals (Weller, 2021). Weller (2021) also noted through higher vaccination rates, the overall physical and health-related safety of individuals who were originally in a higher-risk category improved, thus contributing to the continued rise of the labor market and overall economy.

At the time of this study, no studies have been conducted on the impact of industries in which vaccines became mandated, and therefore cannot be included in this literature review. Additionally, the emergence of new variants of the COVID-19 virus is ongoing at the time of the study. In the future, there may be existing literature indicating the trends of economic recovery and plummeting and their relation to case numbers nationwide (U.S. Bank Wealth Management, 2021).

### **Future Expectations Regardless of COVID-19**

Although pandemics have occurred in the past, it is difficult to predict long-term economic, behavioral, and societal consequences, as these responses have not been studied in the context of today's global economy. In general, little research has been done in this area (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). As the pandemic itself fluctuates in intensity both nationally and globally, the economy continues to shift with it. According to Donthu and Gustafsson (2020) such changes can have both a direct and indirect impact on small business success.

Some researchers have considered whether shutdowns are temporary, periodic, or permanent (Fairlie, 2020). In a survey of business owners, around half of those surveyed stated they expected normalcy to return by August 2020, and half estimated March 2021 (Meyer et al., 2022). The researchers repeated the study in July 2020, and at that point,

half hypothesized the return to normalcy to return by April 2021 and half predicted early 2022. At the time of the survey, the market's supply and demand had slowed down, leading to a further effect on the overall economy and labor market (Meyer et al., 2022).

As the pandemic progressed, more updated statistics have demonstrated the health-related impact over time and the corresponding fluctuations in the economy. The percentage of small businesses negatively impacted by COVID-19 shifted from 51.4% in April 2020 to 25.2% in July 2021, showing a more than 50% reduction in negative impact (USSBA, 2021b). However, the negative impact varied significantly across industries, with accommodation and food small businesses still being impacted negatively at a proportion of 54.7% as of July 2021 (USSBA, 2021a). In this study, analysis across industries may provide deeper insight into the variation of impact on small businesses and the overlap and differences in factors to succeed before, during, and after the pandemic.

The current effect has already been significant with one research team noting economic activity, as measured by GDP, fell by 5% in the first quarter since COVID-19, and 32% in the second quarter, making it the “most severe economic shock the U.S. has experienced in modern times” (Meyer et al., 2022, p. 2). Findings indicated a marked reduction in wages, inflation expectations, and overall business productivity. The researchers predicted that continued and ongoing changes and restrictions will lead to lower labor and less production (Meyer et al., 2022). Furthermore, Meyer et al. (2022) asserted that when the pandemic concludes, the economy itself will be completely different. Donthu and Gustafsson (2020) noted businesses in many markets, such as

hospitality and tourism, have ceased to exist and may operate quite differently following the onset of the pandemic and its restrictions on travel.

In many cases, small businesses are trying to hire more workers and cannot get enough people to work (even with incentives), leading to understaffing (Meyer et al., 2022). Supply chain issues have also been a major issue for many small businesses as well (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). Conversely, online business, and communication platforms, such as Zoom, Amazon, or other online shopping and entertainment platforms, have skyrocketed in production and business due to the nature of the pandemic (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020).

### **Chapter Summary**

This literature review contains research regarding the origination, concepts, effects, and impacts of small business and entrepreneurship as related to this study. The basis of this study stems from the statistic that small businesses make up 99.9% of employer firms and fail at a rate of more than 50% within the first 5 years of operation (Turner & Endres, 2017). In addition, in the review, the researcher provided literature regarding the definition of a small business and its importance at both the national and community levels.

In the review, grit theory and resilience theory were both defined and explained. Moreover, the importance of self-efficacy and growth mindset was covered in detail related to success and being an entrepreneur. A review of various leadership theories and studies was used to examine ways in which business owners and overall organizations can succeed. This review included studies on transformational, transactional leadership, and trait theory. Additionally, both servant leadership and situational leadership were

reviewed, as were other theories connected with small business ownership and entrepreneurship.

During the past few years of the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses and the economy have been impacted by the pandemic, making small business success more complex than ever. This review encompasses research on possible modulating success factors in businesses nationwide. During this unprecedented pandemic, many SBOs operated in a constant state of change, making both short-term and long-term planning and decision-making difficult. Moreover, many SBOs became reactionary, adapting to ever-changing laws, mandates, and restrictions. Small business owners were tasked with keeping their businesses afloat amidst nationwide shutdowns, changes, social distancing, inflation, supply chain delays, and lack of employee availability.

In the next chapter, the researcher explains the methodology used in this research study. The three primary research questions and an explanation of the narrative inquiry process are addressed. Moreover, the use of purposeful sampling to select the participants and the role of the researcher and interview setting are discussed. Finally, the sampling technique and data collection methods are covered in the next chapter.

### **Chapter III:**

#### **Methodology**

In this chapter, the researcher provided an overview of the research methodology used for this qualitative study on small businesses in the Southeastern United States. Small businesses are defined as 500 or fewer people and compose most businesses in the United States (USSBA, 2020a). Nearly half of all jobs in America come from small businesses, with 64% of the nation's annual new job creation occurring in this sector (Mohsin, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging for many SBOs due to new or existing competition, loss of talent, rising costs, changes in technology, weather, supply chain issues, and market entry (Saebi et al., 2017).

The problem under study was that 50% of small businesses in the United States failed by the end of their fifth year in operation (USSBA, 2018). Each business failure can cause a loss of jobs, loss of money, emotional pain for the owner and stakeholders. In this study, the researcher explored the reasons behind the 50% *success* rate with the aim of determining characteristics of small business owners that led to success.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the life and career experiences of a select number of SBOs in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States. The small business leaders were recruited from the population of those who have successfully started and run a profitable small business for 5 or more years up to and through the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher presented the findings of the most and least critical personal characteristics, as perceived by the participants, to examine the

extent to which those characteristics played a role in their business success. Furthermore, the researcher explored the perceptions of participants regarding the most significant challenges of getting a new business started and the challenges of keeping the business viable before, during, and through the COVID-19 pandemic. I used three central research questions instead of listing specific goals or objectives in this qualitative study (Creswell, 2014). The three central research questions are designed to gain a deeper insight into the personal characteristics of small business owners.

### **Research Questions**

***Research Question 1.*** What are the life and career experiences of a select number of small business owners in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States who successfully owned and operated a small business for 5 or more years up to and through the COVID-19 pandemic?

***Research Question 2.*** What are the most and least important personal characteristics needed to successfully own and operate a small business for 5 or more years in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States up to and through the COVID-19 pandemic as perceived by a select number of small business owners?

***Research Question 3.*** What are the most significant challenges to getting a new business started and keeping it open for over 5 years up to and including the COVID-19 pandemic as perceived by a select number of small business owners?

The following sections of this chapter contain a thorough description of the methodology and the specific research aspects of this study. In the design and rationale section, I identify the foundation for the methods used in this study. The following section details a comprehensive overview of the research setting and how and where the

research occurred. Following the setting overview, I described my role as the researcher, explaining my personal biases and how they were addressed.

The criteria used to select participants for this study and the sampling procedures are found in the next section, the proposed sampling technique. The following data analysis section highlights the proposed strategies to systematically deduce and organize the information that was collected. In the data collection procedures section, I identify how various sources of information were collected and why their contents are valuable to this study. The final two sections of the chapter focus on the critical issues of trustworthiness and ethical measures to ensure the study's validity and reliability and the safety of all participants.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

There are various ways to design a research study, including quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods approaches. The design depends on what the researcher seeks to learn (Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) suggested reflecting on the purpose of the inquiry, arguing that the types of answers one seeks are vital in determining the research design. He asserted the qualitative process is about making meaning out of the experiences of individuals or groups of people. Thus, after careful consideration, I chose a qualitative research approach for this study. This approach allowed me to delve deeper into better understanding each participant and making meaning of what they share. In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis to make sense of and interpret each participant's lived stories and experiences (Merriam, 2002).



Qualitative research is personal and “inquires into, documents, and interprets the meaning-making process” (Patton, 2015, p. 3). According to Merriam (2002), qualitative research is inductive in understanding the phenomenon under study and assists researchers in building a theory from observations and interviews. Merriam argued that such research is richly descriptive and uses words and pictures to demonstrate what the researcher has learned. This study examined the lived experiences and perceptions of successful SBOs and characteristics that may have influenced long-term business success.

Narrative inquiry is the approach that was used in this study. It is a form of qualitative research in which the stories become the raw data (Bleakley, 2005). Narrative inquiry, which evolved from the social sciences, involves inquiry directed at narratives of human experience or inquiry that produces data in narrative form (Hoshmand, 2005). Narrative inquiry examines human lives through the lens of a narrative. This approach focuses on the importance of lived experiences and studying human lives. According to Clandinin (2013) studying a person’s lived experiences is integral to gathering knowledge and understanding. I interviewed six successful SBOs who have owned and operated a small business for 5 or more years up to and through the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study allowed the voices of the SBOs to be heard in the narrative. Originally the plan was for the data to come from a three-part series of interviews (Seidman, 2013). This was reduced to two interviews due to numerous hurdles, including both an increase in COVID-19 and lack of available time by the SBOs. Additional data was derived from documents provided to the researcher by participants and the researcher’s memos,

transcripts, field notes, and observations. The findings from this study may contribute to a deeper understanding of successful small business owners. My goal in conducting this qualitative research was to understand small business owners' perceptions better. I sought to learn the least and most important personal characteristics, as related to successful business ownership, they perceive they possess. Moreover, I desired to understand their life and career experiences. Finally, I wanted to learn about their perceptions of the most significant challenges to opening a business and keeping it open.

### **Setting**

The setting for this qualitative research was in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States, at each participant's office or in a private room in their building, to capture the most comprehensive understanding of the leader in their working environment (Maxwell, 2013). According to Creswell (2014), this allowed me, as the researcher, to observe the participant in the most authentic way possible in their natural setting. As well, according to Seidman (2013), it is critical each participant feels as comfortable as possible as they reflect on and share their stories and experiences. I conducted interviews and observed data from six different SBOs at their business location, which are described in detail. Six small business owners were the participants in this study. The participants are of different ages, genders, races, backgrounds, years of experience, and industry sectors.

The proposed plan was for the data to come from a three-part series of interviews (Seidman, 2013). This was reduced to two lengthy interviews due to numerous hurdles, previously discussed. Such obstacles included an uptick in COVID-19 illnesses at the time of the interviews and the small business owners' lack of available time. They were all

understaffed. The participants gave me more time than planned for each interview. I was able to collect an enormous amount of information-rich data from these two interviews (Patton, 2015).

I requested memos, operating procedures, company goals, handbooks, meeting minutes, company guidelines, and other relevant documents. This information, along with the interviews, allowed me to compile and compare, triangulating the rich data as I made meaning of the participant's stories and experiences, exercising double hermeneutics (Smith et al., 2012).

### **Role of the Researcher**

In any research study, one must consider their role as a researcher, what will be studied, and the level or type of involvement the research will require. This study used the narrative approach to qualitative inquiry. Patton (2015) asserted that the researcher is the instrument in qualitative research in data collection and interpretation. The participants' stories were captured through interviews and transcribed from audio to words on paper to best identify patterns and themes. Patton posited that a researcher should treat the story as data and the narrative as analysis. This process involves interpreting and making sense of the story and putting it into context with other shared stories. In this study, the researcher triangulated the data using various data collection methods: interviews, member checking, field notes, memos, observations, and documents (Patton, 2002).

As the researcher, I communicated to each participant regarding how the interview process would work to ensure there was no ambiguity. Once the participants agreed to two lengthy interviews, I clearly defined what we would do in the interviews

and the required time needed for each of 60-90 minutes. In writing, I also informed the participants that the interviews would be recorded, and that I would take field notes. The goal was to ensure they felt comfortable during the interview and had no surprises. Each interview had a list of questions from a semi-structured interview guide for each participant in the two-part interview series. Patton (2015) argued that asking open-ended questions is the essence of qualitative research, as such questions allow the researcher a deeper understanding of the participant.

Patton (2015) stated a researcher should strive for empathetic neutrality, which means “understanding a person’s situation and perspective without judging the person ... and communicating that understanding with authenticity to build rapport, trust, and openness” (p. 57). In addition, Peshkin (1993) recommended the researcher be aware of “subjective I’s.” The “subjective I’s” allow a researcher to understand who they are; what factors influence their beliefs and values; and how these beliefs and values play a role in the research process.

As the researcher, I diligently acknowledged my mental models and biases so they did not impact the data collection or interpretation process. Researchers must be purposefully attentive to their subjectivity and biases as they conduct and reflect on research activities (Peshkin, 1993).

### **Sampling Technique**

Qualitative inquiry generally focuses on small sample sizes (Patton, 2015). Purposeful sampling is often used when choosing participants, allowing for in-depth analysis and a deeper understanding of information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). According to Patton (2015), “information rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal

about the issues of central importance to the research: thus, the term purposeful sampling” (p. 53). The participants for this study met the requirements needed to provide in-depth and rich information to help answer the research questions designed for this study.

The criteria for selecting interview participants were established based on the following specifications:

1. Each participant is a small business owner located in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States
2. Each participant must have started and operated their own successful small business for 5 or more years up to and through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Seidman (2013) recommended two guidelines for selecting the number of participants for a study. First, the researcher must ensure enough participants to sufficiently represent the population being studied. The second is that the research achieves saturation. Saturation is when the researcher has collected enough data for data analysis, and no additional new information is necessary (Seidman, 2013). This researcher used purposeful sampling to recruit a diverse group of six SBOs who run companies with less than 500 employees per the definition of a small business (USSBA, 2020a). Each participant had a great deal of lived experiences and stories to share.

Before contacting potential participants, I worked with Valdosta State University (VSU) to gain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct my research. Upon receiving IRB (see Appendix C) approval to proceed, I contacted potential participants via email, using my VSU email address, to individuals who met the study's criteria and inquired if they would participate. This initial email included a formal letter and listed my

name and contact information (See Appendix B). In addition, it stated that this was an entirely confidential and volunteer process, and they could withdraw at any time and for any reason. Furthermore, I let them know they would never be identified or recognized in their responses. This was critical, as business owners might be cautious about how much they wish to share (Petrova et al., 2016).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Once all participants agreed to participate in the study, I emailed them the informed consent form, which they agreed to via email. Moreover, I verbally read the consent form to each participant before the interviews and asked for their verbal consent to proceed. The consent form summarized the study, procedures, and confidentiality guidelines (Patton, 2015). In qualitative studies, participants' words are of utmost importance (Patton, 2015). I had a standard list of questions that were asked of all participants for each of the interviews (See Appendix A), and to ensure participants' words were accurate, I recorded each interview and transcribed it verbatim using a professional transcription service.

As the researcher, I am the instrument for collecting data; however, I was not an active participant but instead an active listener in the interview (Ary et al., 2019). According to Creswell (2014), collecting data from several sources is common in qualitative research. As Merriam (2002) noted, three primary qualitative data sources are interviews, observations, and documents. I made observations and field notes on-site, which were turned into memos. I also collected other related documents or artifacts the SBOs gave me to review to help ensure triangulation. This method increases the credibility and validity of research findings (Cohen et al., 2000).

According to Patton (2015), researchers can learn a great deal about the inner perspectives of others through interviews that cannot be gained from other forms of data collection. Seidman (2013) argued “in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). The focus is on making sense of the beginning, middle, and end of the story. (Patton, 2015). However, narrative inquiry is more than just telling stories. Patton explained narrative inquiry as an approach that treats “the story as data and the narrative as analysis ... which involves interpreting the story, placing it in context, and comparing it with other stories” (p. 128). Before starting each interview, I asked participants if they had any questions and to let me know they were okay to proceed.

Each interview allowed for a natural conversational flow during which several topics were discussed simultaneously. This allowed for deep, open-ended questions to maximize the learning from the participant’s lived stories and experiences. Asking such in-depth questions helped me gain deeper insights about the participants’ background. Moreover, it helped me make greater meaning of what the story reveals about the person and world from which it came (Patton, 2015).

An interview guide was prepared to ensure the “same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed” (Patton, 2015, p. 439). Patton noted a guide allows the interviewer freedom to explore and probe for more information around questions. Also, it allows the interviewer to remain conversational but semi-structured around the predetermined interview questions. Interview protocols were developed in Microsoft Word for each of the interviews. The protocol included “instructions for the interviewer to follow that a standard procedure is used from one interview to another”

(Creswell, 2014, p. 194). This protocol utilized different segments and included demographic information such as the date, time, location, setting, participant, and interviewer and was divided into main sections to reflect an introduction, body, and conclusion (Creswell, 2014). It also allowed for space between the questions to record responses, notes, and follow-up questions.

Each interview focused on different areas and was 60-90 minutes long.

Furthermore, subsequent interviews were spaced between 1 to 2 weeks apart to allow the interviewer and participants time to reflect on each interview. According to Seidman (2013):

The first interview establishes the context of the participant's experience. The second interview allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experiences within the context in which it occurred ... and the third encourages ... participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them. (p. 21)

Seidman suggested following these guidelines to help the interviews be as productive as possible.

In the first interview, I covered the participants' life history and experiences going back as far as possible and up to the present time. I also substituted the first half of the proposed initial second interview. In the final interview, I covered the second half of the proposed initial second interview to understand better the details of participants' present lived experiences related to the small business they own and operate. In this final interview, I also asked the participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. It connects the intellectual and emotional components of a participant's work and life and its impact on the business. The end of the each interview included a wrap-up, and I



thanked each participant for their time and commitment to the field of small business and leadership. After each interview was recorded and transcribed, participants were allowed to review the transcripts for the validity and accuracy of the content, as member checking helps give the participant peace of mind (Creswell, 2014).

### *Documents*

I asked participants to supply documents that may help supplement the study and the interviews. According to Merriam (2002), documents can be a significant data source for researchers and may be written, visual, oral, or artifacts. I requested documents that related to the small business owner's leadership style and the overall history of the small business. For example, I asked for documents such as goals, achievements, memorandums, letters, emails, standard operating procedures, meeting agendas and minutes, vision, and mission statements. Again, I reassured participants that any information collected in document form was confidential and that no personal and identifiable information would be captured.

I created a document protocol in Microsoft Word, divided a paper into key segments, and analyzed each document. The document protocol allowed for vital information to be available rapidly. At the top of the page, I summarized the document and listed contexts such as date, time, and participants involved in document creation. According to Ary et al. (2019) the document protocol contained sections for researcher reflections, participants' reflections, and a question area to analyze documents and artifacts. To help ensure accuracy, each participant was offered a copy of the document protocol to review and provide feedback if so desired. By offering participants this opportunity, the researcher could feel confident that the document was valid and

valuable. Another step involved the researcher identifying common patterns and themes in the documents.

All documents were backed up in multiple places. Handwritten notes were scanned and saved in several places securely online with passwords only known to the researcher. Electronic recordings, hard copies, verbatim transcripts, and all documents were also saved online in multiple secure places that are only accessible to me.

### ***Researcher Memos***

According to Maxwell (2013) “memos are one of the most important techniques you have for developing your ideas” (p. 20). During the research process, written documentation was defined as a researcher memo. Maxwell argued not writing memos when doing qualitative research is a bad practice that leads to poor results, as the researcher may not remember the most critical insights when the time calls for them. Maxwell suggested researchers write numerous memos that engage in serious reflection and analysis and organize all such memos in a systematic and easily retrievable form.

After each interview, I wrote memos on any insights, thoughts, connections, or ideas established. Throughout the process, I also used memos to identify concerns of researcher bias and notes for possible future research. It was vital to promptly capture the essence of such human interactions, so they do not escape memory. Also, it was essential to write memos in a simple manner that is not meant to be communicated to others but to aid the researcher.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Merriam (2002) argued data analysis should happen as close to the same time as data collection as possible, so the researcher does not get a backlog of data. This way, the

researcher can continually think, generate new ideas, and analyze the data so the overall research remains fresh. Maxwell (2013) suggested data should be analyzed as soon as the first interview is complete, and such data analysis should continue in this manner after each subsequent interview. According to Ary et al. (2019) qualitative data analysis is challenging, difficult, and time-consuming. Qualitative data analysis takes much time for even the most experienced researchers.

Ary et al. (2019) defined three basic components to analyze the data: become familiar with the data; organize, manage, and code the raw data; and group data into categories and themes. After completing these three components and creating additional memos as needed, I interpreted and made sense of what had been discovered to ensure an accurate description of the study's findings was ready to share with others (Ary et al., 2019).

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

A researcher must be aware of threats to validity and have strategies to diminish such threats (Maxwell, 2013). One threat is researcher bias, and another is reactivity. Researcher bias is when a researcher selects data or dismisses data that aligns with the researcher's preconceptions and beliefs. In the role of researcher, there was no way for me to prevent researcher bias based on personal and professional lived experiences. Such experiences have helped shape my mental model and worldview. However, I was intently aware of them and explained and acknowledged such biases in my research. According to Maxwell (2013), reactivity is the researcher's influence on the setting or individuals being studied. This actual influence could not be eliminated, but the goal was to understand it better and use it productively.

Ary et al. (2019) explained that validity helps ensure the truthfulness and accuracy of the information. Thus, as the researcher, I was the primary instrument of data collection. Therefore, establishing such trustworthiness was of utmost importance to the study. I used various methods to help diminish or eliminate threats to validity in this study. For example, I examined participant feedback, prolonged participant contact, and an in-depth data analysis. Moreover, I encouraged participants to reflect on the internal consistency of what they say between interviews to help ensure accuracy.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined the concept of trustworthiness. The scholars introduced the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria. The goal was to try to parallel quantitative research's validity and reliability. In the following section, these criteria are explained in more detail.

### ***Credibility***

Credibility is confidence in the research findings' truth (Anney, 2014). Maxwell (2013) defined validity as “correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation or other sort of account” (p. 122). The key to credibility is determining how similar the research findings are compared to the real world. Moreover, validity must be explained thoroughly, so others do not question the fieldwork done by a single researcher.

Credibility is often referred to as internal validity (Merriam, 2002). In qualitative research, Patton (2015) suggested that information is analyzed from different vantage points, frameworks, and data sources. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) researchers can increase credibility or validity with triangulation, the best-known strategy for gaining insight from multiple data sources to speak to an issue instead of only one

source. Such information can include documents, field notes, observations, transcriptions, memos, and participant interviews.

Member checking of the researcher's interpretations in interviewing participants also helps establish credibility. Participants reviewed the accuracy of the verbatim transcripts and other researcher reflection documents as collected over the two-part interview process to ensure internal validity and credibility. This study's credibility was bolstered by including such provisions. Moreover, continual comparisons of emerging patterns and data helps increase credibility as well (Nowell et al., 2017).

### ***Transferability***

Transferability refers to the generalizability of the inquiry. The researcher did not likely know the sites that may wish to transfer the findings. However, the researcher is responsible for providing thick, detailed descriptions so those who seek to transfer the findings to their site can judge transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Merriam (2002), one measure that helps with transferability is the selection of a representative sample of participants.

In this study, participants were selected based on their qualifications and ability to provide rich information directly related to the three research questions. However, this may not be enough to ensure transferability, as the sample size was small. Moreover, it is limited to one metropolitan region in the Southeastern United States, making generalization to other populations more difficult.

### ***Dependability***

Dependability relates to the consistency of the research process and findings. Shenton (2004) argued that to address dependability more directly, "the processes within

the study should be reported in detail ... enabling a future researcher to repeat the work, if not necessarily to gain the same results” (p. 63). Ary et al. (2019) suggested as the consistency of the research findings. Researchers must ensure the research process is logical, traceable, and documented to achieve dependability (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Audit trails are an essential part of dependability, as they contain information about how and why the researcher did what they did. An audit trail indicates the researcher’s decision on the data collection process, data analysis process, and research findings (Merriam, 2002).

### ***Confirmability***

Confirmability is the last criterion of research trustworthiness and can only be established once credibility, transferability, and dependability are achieved (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), confirmability is the degree to which other researchers can confirm the research study's findings. Moreover, confirmability establishes that interpretations of the findings are derived from the data, not from preconceived biases or opinions. Patton (2015) recognized the tough time qualitative researchers often have ensuring absolute objectivity and that intrusion of such researcher biases is inevitable. According to Ary et al. (2019) confirmability relates to the researcher's neutrality in qualitative research and ensures the research findings are the result of the experiences and stories of the participants rather than the preferences of the researcher.

### **Ethical Procedures**

The researcher focused on learning and making sense of the lived stories and experiences of the participants. According to Ary et al. (2019) when working with human

participants, the researcher must protect their rights, safety, identity, and dignity. All participants in this study always had the right to privacy and confidentiality. Further, the researcher adhered to the strict norms and standards of research compliance defined by the IRB. In addition, no research started until such approval was obtained. The IRB approval process ensured the research methodology and research questions were thoroughly reviewed, and there were minimal risks associated with this study. Each participant was notified of the possible benefits of this study. Furthermore, they were reminded they could opt out of this voluntary research at any time and for any reason. Considering confidentiality, the researcher stored the data during the research period on an external hard drive (Patton, 2002). The hard drive was protected under lock and key in a fireproof safe, along with the researcher memos and field notes written during the interviews. At the conclusion of the study and after the dissertation is submitted and accepted by the university, the data was destroyed to protect each participant and their business information.

### **Summary**

Small businesses make up most businesses in the United States, with nearly half of all jobs in the country coming from small businesses. Thus, their success is critical in our communities, schools, nonprofits, government, and many other sectors. This researcher aimed to amplify the voices of SBOs who have both started and run a viable and profitable business for 5 or more years up and through the COVID-19 pandemic.

The backgrounds of the six small business owners who were interviewed in this study are highlighted in Chapter IV. In Chapter V the themes, sub-themes, and findings of this study were analyzed based on participants' lived experiences of running and owning a small business. In Chapter VI, the researcher will discuss the conclusions and implications of research findings.

## **Chapter IV:**

### **Participants**

The interviewing process allows researchers to understand better participants' actions, motivations, thoughts, and ideas (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). For this study, the researcher sought six participants to provide detailed and information-rich descriptions of their lived experiences and perceptions of small business success. The criteria were established for selecting interview participants based on the following specifications:

Each participant is a small business owner located in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States.

Each participant must have started and operated their own successful small business for 5 or more years up to and through the COVID-19 pandemic.

The researcher learned about the participants' lives, careers, experiences, and thoughts through individual interviews. Participants' lived experiences served as the basis for understanding their perceptions and the meaning they make of starting and running a small business. Each participant's story led to a better understanding of the studied phenomena. The name of each participant was changed to a pseudonym to protect them and provide confidentiality for their personal and business identities.



## Participants

**Table 1**

*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

<b>Pseudo</b>	<b>Ethnic Group</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Years of Ownership Experience</b>
Blake	CA	45-50	Male	10+
Barbara	CA	65-70	Female	20+
Mandy	CA	40-45	Female	20+
Chad	CA	75-80	Male	40+
Trina	AA	50-55	Female	20+
Randy	CA	50-55	Male	25+

*Note.* AA=African American; CA =Caucasian

### Blake

Blake and I set our first interview in the early afternoon of a busy workday. He was punctual, focused, and prepared to get the process moving as the later afternoon would be full of meetings. I later learned he was an Eagle Scout, in ROTC, and in the military. Blake gave me a tour of the large building, design rooms, and office space of the outdoor patio and furniture design and manufacturing company he owns.

As I walked with Blake, I could sense the staff's innovation, excitement, and energy buzz. Blake smiled and offered an encouraging word to each person he passed. Blake showed me his office and then introduced me to a couple of employees who warmly welcomed me before escorting me to the conference room. The room was spacious, with a beautiful table, chairs, video conference set up, marker board, a company handbook on the table, and creative images on the walls. We sat across from each other at the conference room table.

Our conversation flowed easily as we settled down to begin the interview. I asked Blake to tell me about his childhood and home life. He grew up in the suburbs of a major city in the Southeast with his father, mother, and siblings. Blake was the oldest child and had a younger brother and sister. Nearly 50 at the time of our interview, Blake had

worked for various companies before starting his own. In discussing his family, Blake noted his middle brother is 5 years younger, and his sister is 8 years younger. Blake's father spent his career in sales with multiple companies and traveled often. Blake's father tried to start his own business and made it a few years, but it ultimately failed. Blake said after the business failure, his father returned to sales, "but really lost momentum in his career once that business folded." This business failure had a lasting impact on Blake.

Blake's mother was a former teacher who became a homemaker, as Blake's father was often on the road. He said he experienced the life of being in sales and had no desire for it. However, later in the interview, Blake conveyed he moved from marketing to sales early in his career and had been in global and national sales ever since. Blake learned the real world of sales was different than what was taught in school. He repeatedly mentioned the importance of hard work or a strong work ethic and that there were no shortcuts in business or life. Blake explained, "I started working at a fast-food restaurant at age fourteen and haven't stopped working since." Consistent work has been a part of Blake's life for as long as he can recall.

Blake shared the importance of integrity and strong relationships. He told me how much long-term relationships helped him throughout his life and played a crucial role in starting his own business. Based on his relationships and reputation, Blake had people in his corner willing to help.

Always looking forward to the next challenge in life, Blake, in his early years, played competitive sports, became an Eagle Scout, and was in the debate club. Blake noted his family did not have money to put him through college. Blake was told, "If you are going to go to college, you need to... earn a scholarship or find a way to pay for

college or take out a loan because we just can't afford to pay for it." He took this financial challenge and achieved it. This pattern of his accepting a challenge and completing it occurred numerous times. Explaining how he would be bored without a challenge in front of him, Blake said:

At the awards ceremony before my senior year graduation, they read off a list of all ... scholarships I had been awarded ... and it was embarrassing ... because I had to sit there and listen ... to sit there and listen to them read them ... also made me proud ... as I worked very hard ... as I knew I had two choices. I could either find a way to pay for college, or I would have to take out a loan and go into debt.

Blake described going to college on an ROTC scholarship and later serving in the military.

After dating through high school and college, Blake later married his high school sweetheart, who went to a different college. She later achieved her Ph.D. He supported her entirely and helped pay the bills while she was in school. I asked Blake if he had ever considered getting an MBA, and he said:

Because I believe that real-world experiences are as good or better than an MBA. What I learned in the classroom with marketing absolutely helped me, and I would not be able to do some of the things I do in the business world without ... having that knowledge. I think it's all about work ethic and how much hard work you want to put in. I was one that put the hours in, was willing to put the effort in, go above and beyond what others may be willing to do ... so I never thought about getting an MBA, but I thought about opening my own business.

Blake conveyed studying marketing and obtaining a degree was helpful in getting started. However, his real-world experience and work ethic made a difference in quickly achieving success early in his career. Blake's business has grown exponentially and is quite successful. He explained:

I really believe in the next ... few years, we could absolutely sell this business, and I could cash out and be done, and I would not have to worry about money anymore, but what am I going to do? I can't sit around; that's not who I am. I'm too driven so maybe my next goals in life are through volunteering ... through giving back to the community. I mean, there has to be something that I must wake up every day and have a challenge; I just can't see myself sitting around.

I jokingly commented, "I guess you are not the guy who will be golfing every day." Blake immediately replied "Well, if I were to do that ... I would make it a challenge ... I'd set a goal and say by the end of the year, I want to be shooting on average 75, not 85." Blake told me this type of passion is something he needs to feel in any part of his life or in any endeavor he undertakes.

Blake often mentioned the importance of taking on challenges, hard work, and lifelong learning. He explained he had risen to a national company's vice president of regional sales. Blake had achieved a substantial income, had many salespersons working for him, and was extraordinarily successful. However, the word challenge surfaced again as he discussed why he left a secure job to take on risks and start his own company.

Blake said:

I've always had the drive to do something challenging. I can't stand waking up in the morning and sitting around, not having a challenge. One thing I look for in life is that there's going to be some way to try ... to learn something new each day.

In more detail, he explained why learning something new each day was essential. Blake said, "Learning could be a very small thing ... I'm always challenging myself to learn one new thing every single day, and that's not an easy thing to do." He added, "If you set your mind to it and ... wake up with the mentality of what can you learn today ... you'll surprise yourself." Blake told me he has always been growth-focused and loves challenges that allow him to grow.

Although he was working with a well-known company, Blake noted he wanted to grow and achieve more. He said, "I could have had the easy street. I could have just continued to be that career person and been there for 20, 25 years. I was very successful with them."

I asked what finally made him decide to make this new business career choice and Blake said, "Why am I continuing to make other people rich, why do I not try this on my own?" He continued, "So, that's when the idea sparked [business ownership]. I've made enough money now to take some more risks, so I'm going to take that money, and I'm going to parlay it into starting my own business, and that's what I did." He argued the risk was considerable for him and lenders, investors, his wife, kids, and more. However, the challenge of starting his own business was worth the risk to Blake, and he took it.

Blake noted the COVID-19 pandemic demands and changes while running a business have been his greatest career challenge. Blake shared his mindset during the pandemic has been quite stressful, which continues to this day. Blake had a tough bout

with COVID, and explained how many of his employees, customers, and vendors have been sick and out with COVID. The pandemic and all the unpredictable aftereffects, such as inflation, supply chain delays, new strains of COVID, labor shortages, and more, are some of the ongoing challenges of the pandemic. Blake and his team have continually planned, pivoted, and creatively changed over the past few years. Blake remained confident, encouraging, positive, direct, and detailed in our time together.

### **Barbara**

Barbara and I set our first interview for an early weekday afternoon at her retail location. The business sells exotic animals, food, and related supplies. The animals were moving and jumping around as I walked in the front door. From my first step inside, I could tell Barbara was quite busy and a hard worker. She was on the phone with a vendor and had a customer in her office. Her husband, Pete, offered me a tour while I waited and guided me through the entire large facility. The employees were working in every part of the building. The warehouse was hot, and people were sweating, but they all wore big smiles and greeted me with a warm hello.

After the tour, Pete took me to Barbara's office, where we conducted the interview. As she shared later, Barbara likes to be close to the action and able to interact with her staff and customers. Thus, her office is near the front of the retail operation. I observed customers dropping in to say hello, phones ringing, employees opening the door to confirm pricing, animals making noises, and much more. Throughout our interviews, it was helpful to observe firsthand Barbara's multitasking. Moreover, Barbara was forced to stop and start things many times but never lost her composure.

Barbara appeared focused, detailed, honest, kind, intelligent, and full of energy. She presented as an independent thinker and genuine in both words and actions. I asked what instilled this confidence and independent thinking. Barbara explained her father was successful in the oil industry and had to move often as he was promoted. I asked if he left the family behind on such moves. Barbara replied, “No, he took us ... the family with him ... he drug us with him.” She was always the new student, Barbara conveyed, “I went to 22 schools before I finished high school.” Additionally, she noted, “They talk about bullies now and prejudice; nobody is, as prejudiced towards new kids as the kids that were there all their lives.” In recalling these experiences, it was clear they had a significant impact on Barbara.

Barbara shared such isolation resulted in learning to count on herself. She offered, “I was always my own best friend ... and never depended on anyone to like me or dislike me.” She described her childhood family as her father, mother, and two siblings. Barbara’s mother stayed home with the children, and Barbara was the middle child. Barbara defined her role as the middle child as “the silent sufferer.” She relayed the work ethic in her family as strong, expected, and instilled at an early age.

Barbara recalled her mother’s considerable influence and how she often told Barbara, “can’t never could do nothing.” This expression was used many times during our time together. Her mother also told Barbara to “get off of it and try” if an excuse arose. Barbara said sitting around or complaining was not allowed in their household, as she was expected to try her best and work hard.

From the time she was able to work, Barbara had a job, starting with babysitting and then moving on to a fast-food restaurant. She had worked consistently ever since and

was promoted to nighttime manager at the restaurant because others saw her going above and beyond the norm for an entry-level worker. Barbara explained it as simply seeing things that needed to be done and doing them.

Explaining how she had always had a strong work ethic, Barbara shared, “There’s nothing a person can say that’s going to detour me from succeeding with whatever it is I’m doing.” Whether she worked for someone else or later owned her own company, Barbara worked hard and treated it as her own. Barbara offered:

To succeed at anything ... whether it’s a factory job ... fast-food restaurant ... waiting tables ... whatever you’re doing if you are not passionate about it ... and ... don’t bring energy to the job no one’s going to give you the time of day.

When she became a manager at the restaurant, Barbara learned a lot about success.

Her leadership style was never to ask someone to do work she was not willing to do herself. She said, “If I wouldn’t do it myself, I wouldn’t ask you to do it.”

Additionally, Barbara shared, “You have to have a strong work ethic to lead by example.” During this time as the manager, Barbara learned more about perseverance and success.

Barbara explained, “It’s really important that you have an open mind, and you don’t think you know it all, and you’re able to gather information wherever you can find it ... and be a continual learner.” Barbara believed achieving success is an option available to any person. She shared, “A person can succeed whatever color you are, whatever gender you are, and however old you are ... that you can succeed no matter what if you put your mind to it.” Expanding further, Barbara explained, “When you become passionate about what you’re doing ... if you can find something you like about



it ... you don't mind going to work. It's no longer drudgery ... because it's not a job."

So, making your work more enjoyable is the key to not seeing it as a job.

After the manager job, Barbara left for college and became a pre-med major in zoology. However, after 2 years, she decided college was a poor choice, and she married. Barbara explained how difficult life can be and how her commitment and determination were vital to navigating such times. For example, she had several marriages, was widowed, and faced health issues as well as other tough challenges. Moreover, she fervently conveyed how her strong faith in God has been the anchor in every part of her life. Barbara said the jobs she had before starting her own business taught her much more than any formal classes or training.

A critical full-time job she held, while caring for an ailing mother, was on an assembly line in a manufacturing plant, where Barbara stood on her feet for the entirety of her 12-hour shift. Upon applying for the job, she was reminded of her gender and was told she was too old to do the job. Later hired at the company, Barbara quickly became one of the floor's most successful assembly line packers. She ultimately moved up to become a crew leader and was later tasked by the CEO, based on her success, to develop written safety procedures for the company. Barbara explained her interactions with co-workers on the factory floor assembly line:

I was the oldest person on the floor, and I got this all the time. They said, 'Don't disrespect me and talk down to me.' I said, 'Look, I'm just telling you, this is how I do it. You can do it however you want to, but you got to do it in 30 minutes.'

You can sweat bullets and bust your back ... as I told those big ole linebackers ...

but I said this is how I do it. I let gravity work and would show them how grandma does it.

Such interaction was another example of Barbara's leadership.

Barbara told me, "I had a proven system ... and with it ... I could work next to a six-foot-five-inch linebacker and outwork him." The goal was to share the system with her team. Barbara said, "My goal was always to work smarter, not harder." Barbara was asked to help with company-wide safety and she accepted this assignment and focused more on all parts of corporate safety.

Barbara considered the crew and safety leader's responsibility as if it was her own business and thus put a great deal of time into this. She conveyed, "I made it my own, and I concentrated so much on the safety. I would write up a near miss on something I saw that we could do better." Barbara stated all her safety data was based on math as she said:

From the line calculations ... they put that in a frame on the computer ... and hung a calculator up ... so ... everybody would use the same rate, the same math, and ... it went from [numbers don't lie] that to numbers don't lie about recordables.

Barbara further explained, "Numbers don't lie about near misses. If we have near misses, we have no recordables." She was pleased this became a company-wide procedure.

Barbara recalled how far she had come, considering she was not even offered the job in the first place. Barbara emphasized hard work, mental toughness, and determination helped her grow to this company-wide role. She explained she took this job to supplement her income as she had started her exotic pet business on the weekends and

vacation days. Once she began focusing on this new business full-time, she said she “jumped in with two feet” rather than gradually.

Barbara had a passion for these animals and began going to trade shows, and said, when a person approached her booth here, she understood the great importance of solid sales. She offered:

I saw people at the trade show that didn’t have the success that I had, and I could look at them and say, ‘Well, these people left your booth and came to me and spent four thousand dollars because you didn’t turn around when you were talking to them.’ We used to call it gaffing them off.

During both interviews and after seeing her work with customers firsthand, the importance of the customer to Barbara was evident.

Barbara shared she put strict protocols in place when the pandemic began, planning and making changes from the start. Barbara has been infected with COVID several times. Most of her staff has also contracted COVID, dramatically impacting who was in the office or out. Moreover, the virus has affected her customers, vendors, and other stakeholders.

Additionally, Barbara shared if she had not saved a large amount of capital, she could have gone out of business as many small businesses did during the pandemic. She said too many small business owners she knows spend all their profits and do not hold them back for a “rainy day” fund. She described continued sickness from COVID, inflation, supply chain issues, and finding people to work as some of her ongoing challenges related to the pandemic. Barbara explained the past few years of the pandemic have been the most difficult to navigate as a business owner.

## **Mandy**

I arrived to meet Mandy at her high-end hair salon. The place was bustling with energy, and the front desk employees gave me a warm welcome offering me a soda or water. Soon, I was taken back to the owner's office, where Mandy and I were set to meet. I immediately noticed Mandy's confidence and positive and encouraging communication with employees and clients on the salon floor. Mandy stopped to clean up something on the floor so one of her stylists could continue working and then sat down in her office chair.

Mandy explained she was the owner but also a stylist. One of her employees had broken their hand, and Mandy was covering the full schedule for this stylist in addition to working with her own clients and running the business. She was very busy, and we got right to work.

We started with Mandy's childhood and she explained, "I was raised by my mom and dad ... who are still married ... for almost 50 years ... and I have two younger brothers." I asked about the birth order of the siblings. Mandy said, "I'm the oldest ... by 18 months ... and by 3 years." We discussed her childhood in more detail.

Mandy conveyed, "My mom ... owned a daycare center when we were ... little and then decided to become a stay-at-home mom." She explained, "My dad traveled a lot for work ... and was a top executive at a large company ... he traveled a lot for work, but ... made it to every softball game and every football game." She shared her father "managed to coach ... I don't even know how he did it, to be honest" and further explained both her parents had always been in leadership roles.

Regarding childhood lessons learned, Mandy recalled, “They taught us to not depend on anybody else to make money but for us ... to have our own way to make money.” She added, “My dad always told me that even if I had become a stay-at-home mom to at least have something to fall back on because you never know if your husband was going to die or get divorced or become disabled.” He often reminded Mandy of the mantra: “Always have something to fall back on.” She told me this is something she has always remembered and done.

Mandy laughingly recalled her parents as:

borderline workaholic ... always doing ... even as a stay-at-home mom ... my mom was PTA President ... and on all the committees for all of our sports events in high school ... she was always at the school doing stuff.

She said her parents instilled this type of work ethic in her at an early age. It was just something that was expected and the norm in her family.

Mandy shared, “I was expected at 15 to have a job if I wasn’t doing at least high school sports, but I did both; I had a job and played two sports ... and in drama ... and was the wrestling manager.” She began working at 15 years old and never stopped. She shared, “Once that paycheck started coming in, I enjoyed having my own money.” As she recalled her high school years, it became clear to Mandy that she had developed the same strong work ethic and multitasking her parents had modeled.

Her first job was at a fast-food restaurant. She worked there for a year and explained:

I was kind of an introvert, so ... it helped me ... come out of my shell a little bit when you're having to talk to customers ... at the cash register and having to ask people what they want.

Mandy recalled the owner "was involved ... but he also had people in place ... so that he wasn't doing everything." She told me this work experience helped her understand the importance of good sales and customer service.

Next, Mandy moved on to a job working at a gift basket store. Mandy disclosed, "I didn't stay there very long because my boss there was actually not great ... but I knew at least what I didn't and who I didn't want to work for." I asked more about the behavior of this business owner. Mandy offered, "It was very stressful. She didn't ever talk to us ... like we were even appreciated ... it was like an expectation ... so I never felt appreciated." Mandy conveyed, "And the final day she ... grabbed my shoulders and ... kind of shook me because I did something wrong." Mandy told me she learned from this experience, and it was something she never wanted to emulate as a leader.

While in college, Mandy began working in retail, where she enjoyed interacting with customers. Mandy also mentioned that she worked for her father's large company during this time. She laughed as she recalled, "I assisted his assistant ... so did the not-so-fun stuff that she didn't want to do." We moved deeper into her college experiences. She told me she went to college eight hours from home and only went for one semester.

In talking about her father, Mandy explained, "The expectation was always there that I had to go to college." She quickly offered:

I really didn't research it ... I kind of lived in a bubble ... I just didn't know you know what to expect ... went eight hours away from home, hated it, had a boyfriend back at home that I missed.

She said she also missed her close-knit family and conveyed:

I was probably more privileged than I should have been, but ... I had to share a bathroom; I had to share a room ... I got sick, and so, I was like, I'm going home. I don't like this.

Mandy shared college was not for her, but her father had set the expectation that a college degree was necessary for success.

In becoming a hairstylist and later a hair salon business owner, Mandy told me there was no need for a college degree. Regarding running a business, Mandy shared, "College can't teach you customer service ... and ... can't teach you certain things ... that you really need." She said maybe it would help "with the books ... or taxes and ... that kind of stuff, but even so ... you don't really know until you kind of dig in and just start doing it." Mandy said, "You do not have to go to college to be successful, no." This is now something she is pondering with her own children.

We discussed how Mandy navigated leaving college and confronting her father's expectations. Mandy shared, "I felt like I was failing him ... by getting out ... or not going to college ... so I started doing hair." She told me she had developed a plan for her future. Mandy said, "I felt like I had to give him ... a 5-year game plan. My 5-year game plan was to try hair ... then own ... a hair salon business." She said, "If that didn't work ... I was going to do photography, and again, own my own business because that's ...

what they instilled in me is that independence.” She told her father that if neither worked out, she would return to college and get a degree in psychology.

Mandy’s goal was to become independent by owning her own business, and she explained she would do whatever it took to accomplish this goal. Determined to become a business owner, and not to go back to college, Mandy achieved these goals. She had been a stylist for a year when the opportunity to open a business presented itself. Mandy told me it was partly due to her parents’ solid connections and relationships. Also, she shared her strong Christian faith, belief in herself, strong work ethic, mental toughness, and willingness to take a risk contributed to making this happen. Mandy became a stylist and owner of a salon over 20 years ago. The business now has multiple locations and has expanded its services and offerings.

In discussing the pandemic, Mandy said she was forced to close the hair salons due to government guidelines. She has personally had COVID, and most of her staff has contracted the virus as well. Some people have gotten quite sick and been out for a long time, creating various challenges to keep everyone safe. The pandemic has also been difficult for clients, vendors, and stakeholders battling COVID. She conveyed there is no precedent to follow as a business owner trying to navigate a pandemic.

Mandy and her leadership team began planning for reopening on the first day of the shutdown. Many salons, Mandy stated, did not open back up and went out of business during this time. She explained the continued pandemic-related problems related to COVID sickness, inflation, supply chain shortages, and delays require constant pivoting and changing. The pandemic has been the most difficult challenge of her career.



Mandy said she has always worked extremely hard as a stylist and business owner but nothing like the past few years of the pandemic.

## **Chad**

Chad and I set our first interview for a late weekday morning. As I walked into the lobby, I saw several smiling faces. Chad greeted me promptly with an enthusiastic handshake and warm hello. He then took me back to their main conference room for our meeting.

Chad was eager to get started and looked at his watch several times during the initial small talk; therefore, I asked Chad about his childhood. He said his father was a serviceman for a bottling company. Chad stated, “When I was small, I’d go with him ... he left home early in the morning, and if I wasn’t ready, he’d leave me. So, that didn’t happen but about one or two times.” Chad said his father “was a hard worker and that taught me the value of working hard ... had a third-grade education ... was one of 13 kids so, that always ... motivated me ... to work hard.” Chad offered, “My mother was a stay-at-home mom ... and ... was a hard worker and looked after the home.” He explained the different roles his parents played in his childhood had a lasting impact on him.

Chad explained his father had a significant impact on his work ethic. After leaving the bottling company, Chad shared his father “got into refrigeration ... mechanical work ... for like 28 years ... and then went to work ... as a housing inspector ... then went to work driving cars ... at a local dealer. He quit there the year he died ... when he was 84.” Chad stated he was like his father, as Chad started working at age 8

and has never stopped. He said his two sons joined the business and helped it grow and also shared he never misses a day of work and always remains busy.

Chad recalled working full-time and attending night school at a university where he majored in marketing. He had started as an accounting major but struggled and did not enjoy it. He recalled a professor telling him in his third accounting class:

Chad ... you are never going make it at accounting ... I was dating this girl in there, and she was real smart ... best thing you could do is marry Miss Laura ... and go sell insurance ... and let her make a living for you.

Chad told me that moment was when he realized a career in sales would be his path. He also paid his way through school without borrowing any money.

I asked Chad what he saw as being important in sales. He reminded me he had been working in sales while in school and said, "It took me like five trips to even get in the door of a hardware store." He argued determination and perseverance are so crucial to success in sales. He also said, "Relationships are the key to sales." Chad conveyed, "The people who were willing to get up and go to work ... and worked on relationships because ... to me that's everything ... and I think ... you got to know what you're selling." Chad proffered, "There is only ... so much bull you can spread around ... you got to know what you're doing, and ... be dependable, and ... back up what you are doing." Chad's strong sales skills were vital, he said, to later being able to start his own business.

While working and going to night school, Chad joined through ROTC and was in the infantry for several years. "We met at five o'clock in the morning ... which I would

hate to be doing ... today.” He said he learned much about multitasking, perseverance, work ethic, and focus during this time.

Chad got married after he graduated from college, nearly 58 years ago. He mentioned the importance of commitment in life and business success. Chad received his commission from the Army and was stationed as a second lieutenant in the midwestern United States. The unit he served with while on active duty ultimately went to Vietnam, and he lost many friends, which he said was very difficult. Chad had left before that time, moved to inactive duty, and then went back to work in the private sector.

His career began as he was working as a salesperson in the HVAC air filter parts and service industry. He worked for a decade with this national company in several positions. Chad received formal training and built relationships with people throughout the company. These relationships proved crucial in the future. After being transferred to different cities to work in sales and exceeding expectations at each location, his thinking began to change. Chad told me he did a super job in each city and always surpassed his sales quotas. He explained, “I learned a lot working for those people ... I also learned ... every year; the better I did, the more ... I made ... they figured out a different way to cut down my commission.” Chad quickly asserted, “That made me decide that if I could do it for them, I could do it for myself.” He expressed how vital it was to have so many quality friendships, relationships, and connections, especially in this next step of starting a business.

He had stayed connected with customers, past co-workers, vendors, etc., and all were eager to help Chad get started. He said these people helped send business his way, enough to open the doors. Chad had a friendship with a sales manager of one of the

company's divisions, bringing this person, Frank, with him to help start the company. Frank's uncle was an executive of a big air conditioning company and promised to send business to the new company. So, those connections helped set things in motion, and they opened an office.

Chad's children were young when he started the company, and he considered the business a considerable risk. His wife asked when he thought he would be bringing money home and Chad told her, most likely, 90 days. Chad shared, "She said ... well, that won't be too bad; we can make it ... and you know it was 13 months before I ever brought home a dime." He said he worked "around the clock and all the time." He told me there was no other choice than to go all in. He said he believes a person "does their best when their back is up against the wall, and he knew he had to do it." Chad thought the only option was to do whatever it took to succeed, and there were no shortcuts in this process.

Chad gave me an example of a customer friend who helped him. Before leaving his old company, Chad told the customer, "I'm going to leave, and I'm going into business, and you are going to have to help me, and he [agreed]." I asked Chad how much these relationships meant to him. He shared, "Those 9 years, looking back, the relationships made were tremendous ... and helped me start a business ... taught me a lot about business." He told me more about his family.

Chad became emotional and stated:

It was just amazing how all that played out ... I mean ... it was just like somebody was watching over me and my wife; I mean, she was balancing a lot

with the new business. She looked after the house and the boys, and that was ... particularly when you don't have a lot and have to make do ... a tough job.

Chad started his business in 1975; he told me it was essential to take care of customers so they would stay with you. Chad shared, "Some of my customers have been with us for 50 years ... a long time." He expressed how quality relationships built on mutual respect are the reason the customers have stayed. Chad told me excellent customer service made those customers feel appreciated.

During the pandemic, Chad's company had a particularly challenging time. His customers are in office complexes, and they all need air filters. The onset of COVID created a challenge because all the customers began calling and wanting new or upgraded air filters to improve air quality. The quantity, sizes, and deadlines associated with the demands made it difficult. These orders began at the beginning of the pandemic and continue to the present but are negatively affected by the supply chain backlog and worker shortages. Chad's company receives many of its supplies and filters from manufacturers in China.

In addition, the new waves of COVID have led to most people at his company, vendors, and customers contracting COVID. So many cases of COVID have made planning unpredictable over the past few years. Chad stated both inflation and an increase in freight have driven his costs up a great deal. He noted this "pandemic has been unlike anything he has ever seen." Chad's clients, vendors, and more have had ever-changing rules concerning COVID, so the continual change over the past few years has been challenging to navigate. He told me there have been many challenges he has faced while

owning a small business for many decades and reiterated the pandemic has been something he could never have prepared for or anticipated.

### **Trina**

From the first time I talked to Trina at length, she appeared intelligent, humorous, honest, creative, and determined. She owns and operates an early childhood education center she opened over 20 years ago. During the interviews, Trina was dealing with lingering effects from a physical injury, causing her much pain. She was determined to participate in this study and did not miss a date. An interview was moved online and conducted via Zoom as her education center had a significant outbreak of COVID. In her early 20s, Trina earned a graduate degree in education and explained how much she believes in continual learning at all ages.

Trina grew up in the Northeastern United States with her father, mother, and younger brother of four years. In describing her childhood, she stated, “We grew up in private school ... went on vacations every summer with our family ... our family is close-knit.” She shared she had “a good, happy homelife and all that ... and my parents were always supportive of things we were doing.” She said, “My dad was in the military service. Then he ... ultimately ended up being in sales for a long time ... and retired as a salesman.” Trina recalled his work ethic as the thing she remembered most about her father’s career in sales.

Trina continued, “He works really, really hard ... and always looked towards ... connecting with people.” She explained how people simply trusted her father in sales. Trina offered, “People trusted him as he sold things with integrity and ... would build relationships with people.” Trina said this led to other people approaching him via

referrals and connections as they knew he was a man they could trust to do business the right way.

She reflected on her father's influential sales and business philosophy. She noted, "I always had some level of an entrepreneurial spirit ... so, I was the kid that had the lemonade stand ... or we'd make paper airplanes for the neighborhood and sell them we'd sell them for twenty-five cents." Trina explained she was a distributor "for a magazine that sold just about anything." She remembered selling "for a skincare line ... and working retail in sales to get a discount on clothes." She mentioned her father's sales experience and the jobs she had in sales, "When I look back on it ... [these things] sparked the thirst for me to have my own company." Trina's first job was in her early teenage years, and she said she has worked ever since.

We quickly changed subjects as Trina wanted to talk about her mother. Trina said her mother had had a considerable influence on her as well. Trina shared, "She [her mother] worked, and she always made sure she did ... probably my dad too, above and beyond was always their norm for whatever they did." Trina quickly recalled, "You remember when you were in school ... and ... you did the math or the reading questions, and then they'd have the bonus questions that were optional? Yeah, they weren't optional in our house." Trina offered, "We always had to do them ... so ... my kids always had to do them." Trina conveyed her arduous work ethic and going above and beyond the norm are ingrained in her. She told me she just does not understand a lack of work ethic or people who do not care or try their best.

Trina expressed how meaningful building and maintaining relationships has been for her in life and business. She said, "I have my mom to thank for that because one of

the things ... she was very adamant about ... when I started working or doing anything was the concept ... don't burn a bridge." She further explained that it was crucial to take great personal pride in any job or community work. Trina said she values relationships built on honesty and being around people who demonstrate high integrity.

I asked Trina what she noticed most about other successful SBOs. She quickly stated, "Passionate ... most successful business owners I know are passionate about what they do ... they roll up their sleeves ... and are hardworking ... and dedicated." She added, "I think they like people ... really ... have a love for people ... and a love for the community." She shared with me how she views these types of people as leaders.

Trina offered, "I think that leadership is or can be a very fluid position where you have to lead differently at different times." She added her son had shared a statement he had learned in a college leadership class. Trina said her son had quoted, "In order to lead the crowd, you have to read the crowd." Trina mentioned she had done this throughout her life and also said this mantra hit home with her as to how she thinks about leadership and communicates with others.

Since third grade, Trina shared, she had wanted to teach. Her family said she was a strong math and science student and, therefore should become a doctor, so she thought about becoming a pediatrician. However, Trina always came back to education and teaching. She achieved undergraduate degrees in education and sociology and a graduate degree in educational leadership. She shared, "Education is where I wanted to be ... and I needed more than a bachelor's degree to effectively influence more children." Thus, she earned a master's degree while working and later attained her dream [first job] job at the school where she had completed her student teaching. Trina told me it was all about the



work ethic, trust, and relationships she had established, and these people supported her in getting this job.

I asked Trina about educational role models, and she said, “There was an assistant principal there ... I was just in love with her professionally. She was like whom I wanted to become, everything about her.” Trina quickly explained, “I’d just watch, and I student taught under her ... we got very close. I ... was enamored with everything she did and how she led ... how people responded to her.” Trina recalled, “I could come in her office, and I could sit and talk with her ... so she was definitely my first [educational] role model.” She recalled this role model and her parents as most influential to her. She explained when she left the job years later to move to the southeastern United States, the superintendent who had hired her said, “You will always have a job here ... all you have to do is call me.” Trina told me how much this meant to her and how these caring words impacted her significantly.

Trina took her first job teaching in an inner-city public school, where she saw many things she did not like. She always took students' side and built relationships with the administration and fellow teachers to bring about change. She went on to teach at several other public schools. From there, Trina recalled wanting to move into leadership and become a principal or open her educational center. She told me that owning her own business felt like the best choice, which is what Trina did.

Trina said, “I believe you do what you love, and the money will come.” She told me, “I figured if I go into education ... I may not make a lot of money now ... but I’m not really driven by money.” Trina explained if she followed her love for teaching and building relationships, she believed money and success would fall into place. She

expressed this mindset “is how I got into business ownership in education.” She brought up some ideas on education and experience.

Trina reflected on this education and experience and said, “The hands-on stuff helped more than the college book stuff. The degrees help you get in the door ... because people see you on paper, and they think, okay, she’s educated.” Trina continued:

I learned more subbing as a teacher ... I could write on practice theories in the classroom. I could learn it today ... and try that in this classroom that I’m subbing tomorrow. So ... the hands-on experience [was more important] for sure.

Trina told me she strongly values education, as she has a graduate degree, but it could not compare with the hands-on experience she has gained.

Trina explained her current family was a blended family of her husband and three sons. She laughed and said, “Yes, all boys.” To Trina, her family is vital. We went on to discuss the past few years of the pandemic and how she was deemed an essential business during the lockdown as her childcare center is located between two hospitals and took care of many health care professionals’ children. Trina shared she got sick from COVID as has most of her staff. This has been very difficult to navigate with so many people in and out.

Trina explained beyond COVID itself, there have been constant changes and a ripple effect. Trina referenced new COVID breakouts, inflation, supply chain issues, difficulty finding employees, and more. She said the mammoth changes during the past few years have required her to be in constant creativity and flexibility mode. Summing up the past few years as a business owner, Trina said, “It’s just mind-blowing; it has been

absolutely mind-blowing.” The past few years, Trina shared, have been exhausting and the most challenging of her career.

## **Randy**

Immediately upon meeting Randy, I sensed his focus on the details of his business. He was sharp, punctual, focused, and busy multitasking. I soon learned he had much experience in small business. Randy started and has owned his recruiting and staffing business for nearly 30 years. Additionally, he has been involved with other business start-ups as an investor, smaller stake business owner, owner of commercial real estate, and more. It became clear that Randy was a busy person who worked in many capacities, as he constantly received calls and texts from employees and customers before we began the interview. I asked Randy about his childhood family. He shared:

I grew up in an athletic driven as well as a strong Christian background family.

My dad was in full-time Christian ministry work related when I was growing up ... he traveled a lot, so I was home without him some, but my mom and brothers were there.

Randy shared his family has always been very close. His brothers are 8 and 5 years older, and all three of them played competitive sports, which had a significant impact on Randy’s life.

He described his mother as “a stay-at-home mother; she worked a little bit, helped out at the hospital, and volunteered, but nothing that she would be getting a check for.” He told me his family had a strong work ethic. Randy shared, “Anytime you worked with my dad; you saw he was a strong, hard worker. You could see it in anything he did, he

was competitive, and he was driven.” He expressed his father had played a significant role in his life.

I asked Randy to share more about competitive athletics growing up. He offered: I played football. So, we trained for football in the summer and had a few months off in the summer, and then we did, started two-a-days, played football until... wrestling season... and then went right into the track; they all overlapped a little bit... and it was pretty much year-round.

He told me his brothers all played the same sports as did his father, and they all played a sport in college.

Sports are competitive, and business is as well. Randy told me he liked using his sports experiences as examples of real-life competition. I asked him what he had learned from the sports. Randy shared:

I got something from each sport ... the team atmosphere from football more than anything. The learning how not to quit with wrestling and ... I mean you must put your body through a lot of pain. Whenever you're tired and exhausted ... having the ability to push through that, really gives you a gut check. It kind of sets you up to accomplish things and not quit in the future.

Randy was quite driven and mentally tough in playing high-level sports. He said he used these examples so I could best understand his competitiveness and willingness to do whatever it takes to achieve success.

Randy explained, “Track was kind of a weird sport; it was kind of an individual sport, but we still had a team, but it wasn't a team atmosphere because everybody had their focus areas.” He added, “With track, you push yourself ... and body as far as you

can because you want to get the fastest time or highest height or whatever you're trying to do." He contrasted that to football and said, "A lot of that's mental for preparation for understanding what the play's going to be ahead of time, so you can overcome speed and size with knowing what's going to happen before it's happened." He shared he went to college and was a student-athlete in track; Randy believed the time management, determination, and hard work he developed by playing sports has helped him succeed in business.

Randy stated he has done whatever it has taken over his many years in business to make things work. He said, "When times were tough on the mat wrestling, and when the times are tough in life or business, you have to dig deep." He explained he was a "fixer" and looked at solving problems in creative ways. Randy added, "There are times when I've not paid myself or paid myself a lot less." This comment was to explain his focus on business success first.

I asked him about his current family. Randy asserted, "I have a daughter in early college ... a son in the middle of high school, and my wife ... is a school principal." He shared that private small business and public education are different, so he and his wife decided early on in their marriage not to intertwine the two beyond supporting each other.

From there, we discussed his childhood working experiences and adult life. Randy said, "Well, we always worked, we did paper routes, and there's not a lot of money whenever your father is in full-time Christian work. It wasn't very glamorous, wasn't a very well-paid position." He recalled, "Shoot, I can remember siphoning gas out of the truck and putting it in the lawnmower." He reflected on this instance as an example

of problem-solving. He had to find a creative way to mow the yard and meet his commitment date to the customer.

Randy said he began working as a young teenager and has continued to work ever since. His first job was working as a car washer at a car dealership. Randy told me he was not paid well, and the work was laborious. However, he had no choice as he either had to work hard or he would not have a job, and quitting was not an option. He shared, “After the car dealership ... I worked at fast food restaurant ... then at a sporting goods store, and then went washing dishes at a restaurant.” Randy said he learned the importance of hard work as well as people and sales skills in these jobs.

After graduating from college, Randy worked at a business in the recruiting and staffing industry. His role was in sales development, and he excelled in sales and building relationships. I asked why he ended up going into sales and he revealed he had majored in communication to get better at public speaking. He explained that, before this major:

“If I did a speech about pole vaulting, I did well, but if it was something I knew nothing about it ... I had to research it ... so I knew what I was talking about.

That’s why once I was in sales and knew my product, I was fine.

Randy said his communications degree helped him become a better presenter as they had many debates, which resembled sales presentation interactions. However, he told me the formal education and training were less important to his growth than the real-world experiences.

In responding to how he ended up in sales, Randy explained, “Well, my dad was in sales. He started and worked for a big insurance company, and he kicked butt. He was

their top producer ... but got fired for holding a Bible study, so he went into the ministry.” This sales job was Randy’s last job before starting his own business.

Randy told me, because he was “the new guy,” he was given a challenging territory to sell. He said that did not deter him and told me he has always believed in his determination to succeed. Randy’s father given him a sales tip: hard work. Randy shared, “My dad told me one time, you make a hundred door-to-door calls, and you’ll get one or two sales, so I called, and I called, and I called.” He quickly added, “I don’t know anybody that’s ever done that in this industry.” He said, “I’d start in the morning, and I would follow-up later on, and I just didn’t know any better ... and my dad’s formula worked.” Randy said he believed that he could accomplish the goals and then he went out and achieved them.

When the company he worked for had an ownership change, and many key people left, Randy realized he needed a new job. He talked to his father and decided he could start his own business in the same industry, and he did, after honoring a non-compete agreement. Randy explained the success was partially due to timing, relationships, faith, connections, hard work, and risk-taking. He has run a viable business for nearly 30 years.

He told me the pandemic has been the most challenging thing he has ever dealt with as a business owner. Randy has faced a tough bout with COVID, as have some of his employees. The rules were different for each company he supplied workers to, requiring constant change. He mentioned more COVID sickness, gas prices, people not wanting to work, and having to pay employees higher wages, among many ongoing challenges amid the pandemic. Randy stated, “I’m having to think outside the box, in

new ways ... so it will be good to see ... how we end up ... as we will find a way.” He reiterated the past few years have been draining as a business owner due to constant changes but remains as optimistic as ever that he will pivot his business creatively and continue to develop new opportunities in the future.

### **Chapter Summary**

Narrative inquiry provides a collaborative process between the researcher and participant in which the participants’ lived experiences are at the core of the study. This chapter provided narratives to share information about the six research participants as revealed in the two-part interview series. These participants shared their life and career experiences during the interviews. All six participants in this study are small business owners. Each business owner shared information about their childhood, family, education, career, and business. Moreover, each participant summarized the impact the COVID pandemic has had on their business.

Merriam (2002) argued that an essential feature of narrative inquiry is stories as data. It is the researcher's job to make meaning of the participants’ experiences. The rich, detailed, and meaningful interview responses from participants and my observations contributed to an overview of six participants lived experiences and perceptions of small business success. In Chapter V, the researcher will provide the themes, subthemes, and descriptions of the findings uncovered through data analysis of the interviews.



## **Chapter V:**

### **Results**

Small business success is the backbone of communities across the United States. A business failure can cause a loss of jobs, money, and emotional pain for the owner and stakeholders. Furthermore, over 30 million small businesses in the United States comprise over 99% of all businesses (Uzialko, 2019). The U.S. Small Business Administration's Office of Advocacy (2018) reported that less than 50% of new small businesses in the United States survive for more than 5 years. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the life and career experiences of successful small business owners in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States and gain insights into the personal characteristics of such leaders.

The researcher utilized purposeful sampling to identify six successful small business owners in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States who have been successful for over 5 years up to and including the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings from this research addressed the following research questions:

***Research Question 1.*** What are the life and career experiences of a select number of small business owners in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States who successfully owned and operated a small business for 5 or more years up to and through the COVID-19 pandemic?

***Research Question 2.*** What are the most and least important personal characteristics needed to successfully own and operate a small business for 5 or more

years in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States up to and through the COVID-19 pandemic, as perceived by a select number of small business owners?

**Research Question 3.** What were the most significant challenges to getting a new business started and keeping it open for over 5 years up to and including the COVID-19 pandemic, as perceived by a select number of small business owners?

Six participants were selected from small businesses in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States. Maxwell (2013) conveyed that such sampling led to obtaining information relevant to the research questions and goals of the study. Patton (2002) explained the power of purposefully selecting participants lies in retrieving information-rich data. Thus, the researcher can learn much about questions of central importance.

The six participants volunteered freely and received no benefit. Participants received an informed consent form when they agreed to participate in the study. Additionally, the researcher reminded the participants of the form before each interview. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities and businesses.

In this chapter, the researcher summarizes the data processes and interpretations that informed the themes and subthemes gathered from this study. The researcher includes a detailed description of each theme and subtheme with participant quotes and relevant supporting literature. Through a two-part interview series, the researcher collected data from each participant. Data sources in this study included interview transcripts, observation notes, field notes, researcher memos, and applicable documents from the research participants. The researcher created interview protocols and utilized a semi-structured approach to obtain participants' perspectives in each interview (Merriam,

2002). The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were audio recorded to ensure the accuracy of each participant's views. The researcher recorded the interviews with his mobile phone recorder and used a backup audio recording device to provide insurance in the event of a malfunction. Both recording devices were placed close to the participant. After each interview, the researcher listened to the audio recording as soon as possible and simultaneously wrote down words, expressions, and phrases that could be helpful during the data analysis process. While listening to these recordings, the researcher sent the audio file to a professional transcriptionist for conversion to text on paper. Once the researcher received the completed transcriptions, he listened to them for accuracy while the interview was fresh in his mind. Next, member checking was performed, meaning the researcher shared the transcriptions with the appropriate participants to ensure accuracy (Seidman, 2013).

Patton (2002) argued qualitative researchers use coding to make sense of the raw data and arrange it into categories. Such coding can then be broken down into main themes and subthemes. As the researcher, I analyzed the raw data in several steps. First, I read the transcripts, each of which averaged 27 single-spaced pages, and wrote short notes in the margins. The second time I examined each transcript, I highlighted relevant quotes while underlining keywords and phrases that stood out in the highlighted areas. Upon the third examination of the transcripts, I completed the coding in the right-hand margins. Table 2 includes the initial codes used to analyze participant data and the preliminary description and categories assigned.

**Table 2***Initial Coding*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>
Work Ethic and Relationships	WE	Work Ethic
	CFI	Childhood Family Influence
	LW	Long-term Work Relationships
	CR	Consistency in Relationships
	LLR	Lifelong Lessons from all Relationships
Growth Focused	DP	Determined & Persistent
	AG	Achievement & Goal Oriented
	M	Motivated
	CCL	Continual & Constant Learning
	CI	Creative & Innovative
Response to Adversity and Success	SCK	Strong Sales & Communication Skills
	TRG	Toughness, Resilience & Grit
	PP	Proactive & Planning
	PE	Passionate & Energetic
	SBO	Self-Belief & Optimistic
Values and Beliefs to Lead Relationships	HI	Honesty & Integrity
	CL	Commitment & Loyalty
	AD	Authentic & Dedicated
	CR	Character & Reputation
	WE	Importance of Work Ethic

From there, I organized the interview notes and corresponding codes on a legal pad and then entered the handwritten information into an Excel spreadsheet. Next, I color-coded and categorized similar things and created tabs with quotes and participant names related to categories and themes. This allowed me to review and search the data to determine each interview's frequency and similarity of ideas, words, or expressions. If more clarity were needed, I would repeatedly refer to the transcripts. From the interview data, four main themes and four subthemes emerged. The themes, subthemes, and names of participants who responded are listed in Table 3.

**Table 3***Themes, Subcategories, and Participant who responded*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Respondent</b>
Strong Work Ethic in all Experiences	Lifelong Guiding Mantras and Expressions	Barbara, Trina, Mandy
	Real-World Employee Experiences	Randy, Barbara, Trina, Blake
	Childhood Family Ingrained Expectations	Blake, Mandy, Chad, Trina, Randy
	Real-World Employer Experiences	Trina, Randy, Barbara, Chad
Growth Mindset Approach to Life Success	Strategist	Blake, Chad, Trina
	Continuous Learning	Chad, Barbara, Mandy
	Achievement Orientation	Blake, Chad, Trina
	Creativity	Randy, Mandy, Barbara
Resilience in Response to Adversity	Passion	Trina, Barbara, Blake, Mandy, Randy
	Tenacity	Randy, Blake, Barbara, Mandy, Chad
	Self-Confidence	Barbara, Chad, Randy, Blake
	Optimism	Blake, Randy, Trina
Leadership Style Built on Trust and Relationships	Integrity	Chad, Randy, Barbara
	Excellent Communicator	Blake, Barbara, Mandy
	Honest Reputation	Mandy, Trina, Randy, Blake
	Consistency	Trina, Barbara, Blake

**Description of Themes**

My experiential knowledge, the purpose of this study, and participants' interview responses generated this study's central themes and subthemes. I conducted a thorough data analysis and identified the overarching themes. The first central theme is a *strong work ethic in all experiences*. It includes the subthemes: *lifelong guiding mantras and expressions*, *real-world employee experiences*, *childhood family ingrained expectations*, and *real-world employer experiences*. The second central theme is the *growth mindset approach to life success* and includes the subthemes: *strategist*, *continuous learning*, *achievement orientation*, and *creativity*. The third primary theme is *resilience in response to adversity* and consists of the subthemes: *passion*, *tenacity*, *self-confidence*, and

*optimism*. The fourth overarching theme is *leadership style built on trust and relationships* and includes the subthemes: *integrity, excellent communicator, honest reputation, and consistency*. Finally, I created a tally sheet to indicate participants' input on the themes and subthemes. The quotes used are merely representative of the themes and all the participants.

### ***Strong Work Ethic in all Experiences***

The literature explains work ethic in different ways. Meriac et al. (2010) defined work ethic as “a set of beliefs and attitudes reflecting the fundamental value of work” (p. 316). Parkhurst et al. (2011) studied work ethic and found that individuals with higher levels of work ethic are more likely to choose a more challenging task or direction when facing adversity. This type of work ethic means individuals with higher levels of morality and ethics are more likely to work at higher levels of intensity, particularly in settings where they are unsupervised (Meriac et al., 2015).

Meriac et al. (2015) explained that work ethic is related to motivation and is a solid predictor of task perseverance and intensity. The participants in this study work with a high degree of passion, and as small business owners, they supervise themselves. Each participant began working in their early teenage years and has worked ever since. Hence, a strong and lifelong work ethic has been essential in their lives.

### ***Lifelong Guiding Mantras and Expressions***

Participants shared expressions and mantras they have followed throughout their lives related to work ethic and relationships with others. Barbara conveyed, “Can’t never could do nothing ... that means ... get off of it and try.” Regarding relationships, she said how much she valued successful small business owners who shared the secrets that

caused them success. Trina offered her mantra “the concept [importance] of don’t burn a bridge.” Trina explained, “I really wish a lot of these young people would understand that ... because they really don’t.” She shared more about not burning a bridge and said, “You should always be able to call back a person ... that ... will remember you fondly because of the work you have done...your level of integrity and the person that you are.” Trina told me that doing the right thing was so important to her.

Mandy held a similar opinion. She shared, “I am completely okay with [employee leaving], you going your separate way... but don’t come in here and not give me a two-week notice.” Mandy said it is vital that a person does not “burn a bridge” as they may need her as a reference someday. Mandy offered, “The grass is not [always] greener on the other side.” In discussing her work ethic, Mandy stated, “I dig in and just start doing it.” She added, “I get my hands dirty ... don’t mind rolling up my sleeves ... and don’t mind taking one for the team.” These expressions, sayings, and mantras were vital to each participant and explained their feelings about work ethic and other people.

### ***Real-World Employee Experiences***

Most participants had learned essential life lessons from working for others as an employee. Randy said, “I washed cars ... parked cars and cleaned them on the lot. I detailed cars whenever they came in. Now that was hard work.” Randy explained, “If you didn’t work hard enough, then they would get rid of you.” Barbara shared a story about working as the assistant manager of a fast-food restaurant. When she asked an employee to complete a task, she told the person, “If I wouldn’t do it myself, I wouldn’t ask you to do it.” Barbara also said, “You have to have a strong work ethic to lead by example.” The

employees followed her leadership style, as she was never above doing any job, and that attitude earned her the employee's respect.

Trina described her work as a teacher, "Your work and your ethic have to be a lifestyle. It can't be to get what you want ... it has to be doing something you would ... do if you didn't need the money." She said, "I loved every minute of teaching." Trina explained one of her early teaching experiences involved working many hours at a school under poor leadership. Trina offered:

[This situation] was draining me to a point where ... I was too exhausted to care for my child and things like that ... I had to choose my family because it was going to be one or the other.

She loved the kids and wrote a long letter to the superintendent about the situation but never received a response. However, she explained she had to go elsewhere to teach due to the stress. Trina conveyed, "I couldn't teach in [that school system] and be a good mom and wife." From that experience, she has learned about work ethic and overall balance and reflects on those lessons to this day.

Blake conveyed he learned lifelong lessons in working as an employee. He said, "Treat this business even if it's not your business like it's your business, and ... that stuck with me ... in how I approached the job and ... the role." Blake further explained:

Treat it like it's your company [even if it is not] as that right there shows respect and ... dedication to getting up and being motivated to go to work every day ... because if you don't produce ... you don't get a check.

Blake revealed how his early relationships with store managers started with hard work.



Blake explained the key was “putting in hard work, busting your butt ... moving pallets, all that manual labor equated to them [customers] saying ... ‘I want to sit down’... I’m going to ... [buy] products from you because you put in all this extra work.” Barbara offered, “When you become passionate about what it is that you’re doing ... if you can find something you like about it ... you don’t mind going to work. It’s no longer drudgery ... because it’s not a job.” Blake discussed the importance of remaining focused, not getting distracted, and not “taking your eye off the ball.” He said, “Stay focused on being the best ... do not try to be everything to everybody ... as you spread yourself too thin.” Blake told me such focus allows him to grow his business without the distraction of what his competitors might be doing. Participants’ experiences working as employees helped them learn much about what they did or did not want to do once they opened their businesses.

### ***Childhood Family Ingrained Expectations***

The participants revealed that a strong work ethic was ingrained in them at a young age. Many effortlessly recalled what they were expected to do in their childhood years. Chad said, “I had a dad who believed in hard work, and ... I learned the way you got anywhere was by hard work.” Similarly, Trina spoke of her father. “He has a strong work ethic ... he works ... really hard.” Randy, likewise, stated about his father, “Anytime you worked with my dad, [you could see] he was a strong, hard worker ... anything he did was competitive, and he was driven.” Mandy’s parents had instilled similar values. She explained, “They taught us not really to depend on anybody else to make money but for us to have our own way ... [to make money and be independent] and have something to fall back on.” Mandy added, “Oh, gosh, they were borderline

workaholics.” She reflected that it was hard for her to fathom all they accomplished each week.

Blake explained, “It’s been ingrained in me since I was young; if you want something in life, you got to work hard to get it.” He added, “I’ve always woken up and recognized ... it’s not going to be given to you ... you have to earn it.” Barbara shared, “Mama always said ... make do with what you got.” Barbara added, “I think about my mom, and she was always pushing, pushing, pushing ... be better, do better.” She said this meant working hard and finding a way to make things happen in life. Trina told me she was expected to do the extra homework bonus questions when she was a child. She explained, “Yeah, [the bonus questions] they weren’t optional in our house.” She described the expectation to go above and beyond in all that she did.

Chad revealed that his father, one of 13 children, had a third-grade education and had worked hard until he was 84. Early in Chad’s life, his father worked as a technician for a bottling company. Chad explained:

When I was small, I’d go with him ... he left home early in the morning, and if I wasn’t ready, he’d leave me. So, that didn’t happen but about one or two times. I learned at an early age the importance of hard work.

Chad conveyed, “I’m a fanatic about being on time, being there, being ready, whatever ... and ... I don’t do late very well.” He shared he still gets up earlier than needed to be ready before he is due to be somewhere. A lifelong, engrained work ethic instilled during childhood was essential to the participants.

### ***Real-Word Employer Experiences***

The participants shared the importance of a solid work ethic in running a business successfully. Trina stated, “I’ve been doing some physical therapy ... and the young lady found out that I was in business ... she’s like well, ‘I want to be a business owner too ... [I can] do whatever I want.’” Trina explained there is a common misconception that small business owners can do whatever they want. Trina had seen a therapist at 10 a.m., which led this person to a false assumption about Trina’s time. Trina explained to the therapist, “Look, because I can come in [mid-a.m.] and have this thing ... you’re not seeing the full picture, you’re not seeing the twenty-hour days ... you’re not seeing the blood, sweat, and tears.” Trina said people often confuse the flexibility of a small business owner’s schedule with the number of hours a business owner works.

Randy expressed his work ethic as a small business owner who must “do whatever it takes.” He explained, “My wife was pregnant, about to have our kid ... and as we were going to the hospital ... [he told her] I can’t go right now ... because I got to deliver these checks to people, to pay the people.” Randy was referencing his employees, some of whom were living paycheck to paycheck. As a business owner, he had to balance this incredible demand during such an important part of his personal life. Randy offered:

She didn’t understand that very well, and that was kind of tough, but ... I mean, I had to pay [them]. If I don’t pay them, they don’t get paid, and word is out that my business doesn’t pay people.

Barbara spoke about work ethic by explaining the misconception that many people think business owners can do whatever they want. Barbara told me, as a business owner, “Your time is not your own ... you live, eat, and breathe your business.” She explained how she

was always on call for her customers; therefore, small business owners must love what they do.

Chad echoed, “Everybody says ... when you’re working for yourself you can do whatever you want to ... but that’s not [true], you got customers that you answer to.” Chad explained, “That’s the thing that you ... always remember ... you can’t just do what you want to do.” He added, “I’ve always worked whatever hours it took, and I worked more Saturdays and a lot of Sundays,” Chad conveyed, “There is no easy street without working ... you’ve got to put in the work.” It became clear that a strong work ethic as an employer was essential to all the participants.

### **Growth Mindset Approach to Life Success**

According to Dweck (2015) a growth mindset is a belief that the qualities of human beings can change. It is the mindset that we can develop our intelligence and abilities through dedication and hard work. Dweck explains that talent and ability are mere starting points in such development. A growth mindset can foster a love of and dedication to learning essential for great accomplishment (Dweck, 2015). Individuals who believe their talents can be developed through hard work or learning from others have a growth mindset (Dweck, 2016). Such individuals often achieve more than those with a fixed mindset. People with a fixed mindset believe their talents are natural born gifts, such as being flexible or having a positive outlook (Dweck, 2016). All participants in this study had a growth-oriented mindset in their approach to life.

### ***Strategist***

Blake shared how he strategized and focused on evaluating business in the present to best prepare for the future. He offered, “You got to constantly be aware of ... the

SWOT analysis that they teach you in business ... strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.” Blake added “If you’re not looking at that swot analysis every day ... you’re putting yourself at risk and your business at risk ... that’s something that you should be absolutely considering as you ... run a business.” Chad offered, “There’s no putting your feet up and just saying we’re the best ... no, no [never do that] because there’s always somebody shooting at you.” He spoke of the importance of communication with his team, employees, and other stakeholders so everyone is on the same page.

Trina said she was always planning. She learned by going to formal training or reading books. She mentioned a book called *The E-Myth* about why most small businesses do not work. She explained “The premise of the book is if you’re a teacher, don’t go start a school.” Trina offered that she “began hiring people and not being afraid to hire someone who knew more than she did.” It is vital to have a vision and do the proper planning needed to succeed.

### ***Continuous Learning***

Chad expressed the importance of continual learning in the growth of his business for so many years. He shared a story of a business expansion that did not go as planned and how he wanted his team to learn from it. Chad said, “We had already decided we were going to do what it took to either ... make it right or buy it back ... whatever it took ... but that fellow left, and the new fellow did away with it.” Chad added, “Our team learned a lot from all the planning that did not go as we thought it would and gained valuable real-world experience.” Chad told me his staff saw how we lived up to our values in always making things right.

Barbara expressed that she valued the importance of brainstorming as a part of learning. She said, “Brainstorming is really ... a good thing whenever you have a lot of people that you trust you can brainstorm and pick things out, but if you don’t ... share this failure then you may never learn from it.” She valued learning from other business owners who were willing to share how they handled successes and setbacks.

Barbara discussed her time working on the factory floor and first learning about OSHA and safety regulations. Barbara conveyed, “We don’t want a big fine and ... OSHA doesn't get funding, they fine you, and that’s their funding ... they have to find something wrong.” She explained how learning about safety helped her company. She offered, “We ended up winning world safety records, seven years without a recordable incident.” Barbara said this would not have been possible without focusing on new learning.

Mandy explained that her hair salon industry is quite competitive, and obtaining new knowledge was difficult. However, she described a great vendor named Redken, who helped them with learning. Mandy offered:

We would go to people at Redken and go to their salon summit [for training] ... eventually down the road ... we did kind of connect ourselves ... [with] this little group in the southeast of about 10 salon owners.

She said much learning occurred as nobody was a direct competitor. Mandy proffered, “We would share ideas of ... what worked for you and celebrate that ... versus it being so cutthroat ... nasty and ... competitive.” She said she learned a great deal during the quarterly networking with the regional business owners and from the training summit, where her vendor had trained them with a proven model for running all components of a

profitable hair salon. Mandy said, “It wasn’t like we had to follow the model, but if you followed it, it works, and ... meeting up with these different people ... would give other ideas like ... try this instead.” Mandy explained continual learning and growth are part of her everyday focus.

### ***Achievement Orientation***

All participants shared an achievement-oriented quality from the time they were young. Blake explained that he was always driven to achieve. “I think that the drive and hard work is ... engrained into to you ... I mean I’m an Eagle Scout.” He argued, “I wouldn’t [have] become an Eagle Scout if I didn’t have ... dedication and commitment to doing something and seeing it all the way through, I wouldn’t have achieved that.” He added that he also lettered on the high school debate team. Blake told me this experience helped him. He said, “A hundred percent, I mean, the public speaking side of it obviously was something that you, practice a lot, you know ... and ... we actually came in second in the state.” He told me that such achievement-driven experiences stoked his desire to achieve even more in the future.

Chad reminded me he achieved the Eagle Scout rank growing up, which required much drive. He paid for college himself as his family did not have the money for it. He worked and went to school full-time and was also in ROTC. He explained, “I went through ROTC while I was in college, and we met at five o’clock in the morning.” He then went on to get his commission and served in the military. He has been driven to succeed his entire life.

Blake spoke of his drive to get scholarships so he could attend college. He applied for many college scholarships and achieved 50 different scholarships. He recalled the

ceremony before graduation and feeling “proud to know that I worked very hard because ... I had two choices. I could either go find a way to pay for college, or I was going to have to take out a loan and go in debt for college.” Blake later achieved an ROTC scholarship, served in the military, and has continued to take on challenges. He has no immediate plans to sell his business and retire. Blake offered, “I can’t sit around, that’s not who I am, I’m too driven ... [so] maybe my next goals in life are ... volunteering ... or ... giving back to the community.” He added he would be bored with no goals to achieve. He expressed, “There’s got to be something [where I] wake up every day and have a challenge.”

Trina told me about her desire to achieve things in her career. She said, “I started ... deciding, okay, do I want to be a principal or do I want to own my own business?” She conveyed she wanted to be in a leadership role and was driven to get there. The achievement orientation subtheme was crucial to the participants.

### ***Creativity***

All participants showed creativity in their attitudes towards obstacles or opportunities in life. Randy’s strong work ethic in sales was coupled with an innovative approach. His father told him to succeed in sales, an individual should make many door-to-door calls. Randy conveyed, “You [need to] make a hundred calls, and you’ll get one or two sales, so I called, and I called, and I called.” Randy told me he was used to hard work, so he did not see this as overly challenging.

Randy said, “Such effort [as far as he knew] was never seen in that industry before or since.” He explained, “I’d start in the morning, and I would follow up later on ... I didn’t know any better.” He shared, “My dad’s formula worked.” Randy was



creative and recalled thinking more entrepreneurially around this time. He shared, “So, I was like well, I’ll just [do] two hundred, and then I’ll get four [sales] instead of two [and grow more] ... and it actually worked.” Randy mentioned his childhood job of mowing yards. One day he was due to mow a customer’s yard, and he ran into two problems. He had no money, and the lawn mower had no gas. Randy solved the problem innovatively. He recalled, “I [remember] siphoning gas out of the truck and putting it in the lawnmower.” Randy said he had to find a way to keep the commitment, and this was his solution. He mowed the yard, fulfilled his responsibility, and had a happy customer.

Mandy explained she created a unique program to incentivize her team. She explained, “They’ve [employees] got stock in the game like ... getting paid vacations and benefits with them too so, they’re feeling like it’s creating loyalty, almost like a corporate America for a salon.” Mandy offered perks and benefits for employees who typically were paid only an hourly wage, and this creative approach helped her satisfy long-term employees.

Barbara told me that what she learned by creatively solving the safety problem at her former company proved helpful in her own company. She explained:

To do these shows [on the road], you have to load the animals up, and you have to unload that ... the magic in getting a cart that these containers will fit in so that we’re not making eighteen trips.

Barbara realized she had to think more creatively to save time moving these animals around, so she figured out the math. She said, “It’s so many inches across in this wagon has to be this big, so before I even order a wagon, it has to fit the parameters ... if the wagon is 36 inches long and you have 37 inches of boxes.” She added, “To put in there

[as is] it's not going to work; numbers don't lie." Barbara always looked at ways to solve obstacles innovatively. Randy shared, "I can come up with ways of getting from A to Z or A to B or however you want to say it ... and connect the dots and find a solution." The participants consistently shared examples of such creativity.

### **Resilience in Response to Adversity**

Vella & Pai (2019) argued that all definitions of resilience are fundamentally related to setbacks and positive outcomes. Ginsburg (2006) explained resilience as a human understanding that they can rise above challenging circumstances and move forward with confidence and optimism in facing adversity. For an individual to be resilient, they must be resilient against some form of adversity or risk (Vella & Pai, 2019). The participants in this study shared life stories and experiences that embodied some form of resilience.

### ***Passion***

The subject of passion was a subtheme of the resilience theme. Trina told me, "Most ... successful business owners I know are passionate about what they do." She said such passionate business owners "roll up their sleeves ... [are] hardworking... are dedicated ... have a love for people and community." Barbara shared, "You need to be passionate about whatever it is you're doing, whether your selling gym equipment or floor tile, whatever it is your selling ... whatever it is your providing for someone else." She added, "You need to do it the right way so that you can build your ... trustworthiness and reputation." Blake detailed his passion for his job as a business owner. "I'm very passionate about my job. If I wasn't passionate, I wouldn't do it." Randy explained, "Having a drive and passion is key ... if you've done something a long time then you

[can] hire people to do it for you ... you [also] can change your passion if you're successful." He said this meant that once successful, individuals can create additional things they are passionate about. Mandy offered the key to success for a newly hired hair stylist. "I mean, it's a passion. If you have a passion and you want to put forth the effort, you're going to succeed. I have some girls here that are level jumping like every six months." The participants clearly explained the importance of having passion as a subtheme of resilience.

### ***Tenacity***

The participants shared the importance of determination. Randy was working for another staffing and recruiting company when he landed a large project. The project entailed stuffing 101 Dalmatians, one per box for a major fast-food restaurant. Randy explained, "Every person had to put one particular doll into the spot, and they would move it on and then put another one, and there's a 101 of them, so that's 101 people." Randy told me he had "101 people doing that, and then you have ... the shipping part, the receiving, the making the boxes ... I had 150 people out there ... so was busing people to work from a huge Vietnamese community." Randy told me his company was not helping him and was on his own to make this project work and find a way to communicate. Randy offered, "I paid a Vietnamese guy that spoke Vietnamese [and English], I bought him a car and hired him and paid him ... so I could make more money." Randy shared, "I'm not afraid to try stuff either ... or take a risk ... because you have to ... [be willing] try stuff you know it's kind of gambling." He explained that being willing to take a risk and win some and lose some is crucial.

Blake shared, “You look back, and one of the things I even tell my kids today is that it’s all about hard work ... it’s about dedication, it’s about commitment ... and responsibility.” Blake told me such qualities are critical to him and how he lives his life. Chad defined grit as “toughness ... sticking to it ... getting back up and figuring out what you are going to do.” Barbara told me “You could succeed no matter what you put your mind to ... whatever color you are, whatever sex you are ... and however old you are.” She explained that she has had this type of determination and grit for as long as she could remember. Barbara defined grit as “John Wayne, tough ... willing to go the distance, navigate the potholes ... and do the best you can with what you’ve got ... and find a way to make it work.” Randy told me a story of a long-term client, since retired, whom he called on for years. Randy said, “I just kept bugging the crap out of him and ... [he told me] when I went to his 60th birthday ... [I came on board] I just got tired of you freaking bugging me.” Due to Randy’s persistence, this person became a lifelong client.

Mandy spoke of the toughness required of her stylists.

You got two choices in life, period ... you can stay down there and cry it out and walk away and .... [waste] all the effort and all the money you put into your training ... or you can say this is one person that beat me up [and get back up] and that’s ok.

She added, “I’m not gonna let that one person get you down, and you’re going to get back up, and you are gonna get out there ... and you’re gonna go to the 10 people that loved you.” Mandy quickly added, “So, you got a choice here, it’s either you’re gonna be strong enough to man through it or not and walk away and go find something because

this is not an easy job.” She explained that determination and mental toughness are vital to her success, and she teaches these concepts to her team.

### ***Self-Confidence***

The participants discussed the importance of believing in themselves in good and challenging times. Barbara had to believe in herself and have confidence in her team as she moved her retail store in 2021 in the middle of the pandemic. She moved from a smaller location with fewer amenities to a much-needed larger place with a much higher rent, so it was a risk. Barbara explained, “I was trying to sell an animal that cost \$6000 out of a place ... I was renting for \$2400 ... and you really ... have to instill trust ... [so] people now come from all over to buy animals from me.” She said this self-confidence has led to clients coming from all over the country to buy animals from her at a higher price. Barbara added that such self-belief is critical to achieving success. She said doing the right thing has led clients and vendors to trust her more than others, “It’s reputation ... I guess ... you have to instill some kind of trustworthiness for the people to come.” Barbara continued, “You can succeed no matter what you put your mind to ... There is nothing that’s going to detour me from succeeding with whatever it is I am doing.” Randy told me that self-confidence in business was vital. He said, “Sometimes you have to spend money to make money.” Barbara shared a similar mindset. She explained, “You must spend money to make money ... you have to ... come off your pocketbook and be able to do that without shortening your regular life.” Blake conveyed the importance of having access to capital, cash flow, meeting payroll, and other expenses. He said, “The first three years we were not paying ourselves and took money from our [personal]

savings ... to invest in the company and keep it going.” Blake told me that he was able to take calculated risks due to this self-belief.

Chad shared that before opening his business, self-confidence was invaluable. Chad offered, “I was working for the national company before I went into business ... they told me that that will be the worst mistake you ever made ... going into business.” “[Starting a business] is hard and tough ... so [I] took that as a little bit of an incentive to succeed.” He added “that always drove me ... I could not let them be right ... and since then, that company has been sold four times.” Self-confidence was essential to the participants as a subtheme of resilience.

### *Optimism*

The participants explained that being positive and/or having an optimistic outlook is essential. Blake conveyed, “That’s one of the things ... I talk to my employees about; they say, you have so much energy or you always ... have ... a really upbeat spirit about you.” He quickly added his employees said, “When things are going bad, you don’t let that bring you down; you always hide ... if it is bothering you, and you always seem very energetic and have positive energy around the office.” Blake continued, “People love working with individuals ... that have positive attitudes. If you’re ... negative or everything’s always ... a bad situation, people don’t want to work for [or in] that.” Randy’s response was similar. He said, “I’m very positive ... I give a lot of chances.” He explained, “I have a positive attitude; I try to ... [even though] I analyze a lot of things and think things through a lot ... but ... you can be a realist and still be positive.” Randy explained that optimism levels can rise and fall in owning a business for decades, they never entirely disappear.

Trina expressed she creates optimism through how she lives her life. Trina offered, “Leave something better than when you came ... it’s the whole concept ... of leaving [for others] a trail a good trail.” She again mentioned optimism, “Be a blessing when you’re going through [life] every person ... everything that you come in contact with should be better because of you.” Chad detailed his optimism as he started his own company.

He shared, “We’d [he and his wife] saved a little money, but ... we didn’t have enough to really start in business ... if you could say anything, we were undercapitalized.” He told his wife he would be making money in 90 days or so and shared it was hard, but he remained positive. “It was 13 months before I ever brought home a dime ... and I was working around the clock.” Chad explained, “I think I feel the same way today that I did when we started ... it was an adventure ... and I’ve always been optimistic.” He added, “I’ve always felt ... if you just kept plowing on ... you can do whatever, and I think that’s what you gotta do ... just keep working.” Randy conveyed having access to capital and a rainy-day fund was one key to weathering the fluctuations of a business. All participants believed an optimistic outlook and lifestyle were vital.

### **Leadership Style Built on Trust and Relationships**

Burns (1978) defined transformational leadership as an influence process that involves relationships with followers, peers, superiors, and other stakeholders. Bass and Riggio (2006) broke transformational leadership into four parts: *individualized consideration*, *idealized influence*, *inspirational motivation*, and *intellectual stimulation*. *Individualized consideration* allows leaders to better understand followers' needs, values, and abilities. Bass et al. (2003) explained *idealized influence* as transformational leaders

who are admired, respected, and trusted by followers who desire to follow the leader's reliable display of solid ethics and values. Bass and Riggio explained *inspirational motivation* as the ability of a leader to provide meaning to a follower's work. According to Bass and Riggio, *intellectual stimulation* occurs when leaders empower followers to use more of their abilities, challenge them to perform at higher levels, and believe they can do so. The participants in this study described leadership built on solid trust and relationships as crucial.

### ***Integrity***

The participants shared mutually beneficial relationships built on honesty and trust were vital to their success in leading a small business. Chad explained, "The people who were willing to get up and go to work and ... and work on relationships [were successful] because ... to me that's everything." He added, "You got to be dependable and ... back up what you are doing." Chad explained the importance of leading by example. "I've always felt that ... I'm not gonna ask somebody to do something that I wouldn't do. My employees have told me how much that means to them." He continued, "They've seen me take the trash out a lot of times ... so sort of say if that old guy will do it ... I can." Randy discussed his non-compete agreement with a former company. When asked if the former company enforced the 12-month non-compete agreement, Randy conveyed, "No, but I honored it. I went an entire year without touching any of my clients." He said he later got many of his clients back, but he had to "honor that non-compete" to do things the right way. He told me this is how he leads others to do the right thing. "Treating people, the right way ... is so important." He added, "I'm a Rotarian ... [where we ask] is it the truth ... is it fair to all concerned ... would it build goodwill and



better friendships, and will it be beneficial to all concerned?” He expressed such questions are a vital part of how he lives all aspects of his life as a leader. Barbara disclosed she did not apply for government money and assistance during the pandemic. She explained, “We did not take the money ... as I felt others were hurting more, and we were okay.” Being a person of honesty and integrity was crucial to the participants.

### ***Excellent Communicator***

Strong leadership and communication skills were critical to the participants.

Blake expressed this belief when he said:

Communication skills are the foundation of a successful business ... [reflecting on] the owner and their ability to demonstrate clear, direct communication.

Without clear communication, tasks and responsibilities have a greater chance of failing as the responsible party may be unclear on what is expected of them. Not only is clear oral and written communication important, [but] listening skills play an important [role] ... if a leader is unable to listen to feedback or clearly understand a response from [a stakeholder], this may create a [problem].

Barbara held similar beliefs regarding the importance of communication skills in leading a company. She argued, “Communication is essential in any business, especially a small business ... [that] can be mortally wounded if the lack of communication or a miscommunication causes the waste of material and labor and most essentially ... time.” She added, “Good employees can be offended and find other jobs when there is a lack of communication ... the wrong communication ... or ... lack of positive communication. This causes wasted time and effort in finding and training new employees.” Barbara again emphasized the importance of solid communication. She explained:

Communication is the key to keeping a small business afloat ... with customers ... listening to their wants and needs ... communication with employees ... listening to suggestions to improve and ... about what doesn't work ... [having all] on the same page is what success is about.

Mandy conveyed, "Communication is vital to a [leading] successful business; otherwise, no one has direction or knows their place or the reasons they are doing what they are doing." This has been a critical part of her strategy in leading her team. She explained, "There are many aspects of communication ... positive communication to inspire ... and inform is the best ... even if you are frustrated [find] a way to cool off ... then communicate in the most positive but firm way." She added, "It's all in your tone." The participants deemed effective communication skills essential to achieve overall leadership success.

### ***Honest Reputation***

Participants believed in the importance of an honest reputation. Mandy discussed her father, a highly respected [former] senior executive of a large and well-known company.

So many respect him ... I get emails ... all the time, and he's been retired for 10 years now and still gets stuff... [about] how many looked up to him ... [and most] ... never met him ... they just knew of him.

Mandy conveyed how her father led has impacted her and the legacy she is building for herself. She explained "I get people all the time ... outsiders that I've never even met will email me, 'I've heard about you' and 'you have a great reputation' and that to me is huge." Trina discussed a time she was hired as a teacher, and the assistant principal was

constantly unexpectedly barging into her classroom. Trina told me this was commonplace at that school, so she set a time to meet with the assistant principal, as leaders do. Trina explained to the assistant principal, “I just want you to know that I’m always going to do what you’ve hired me to do because I care about these kids ... and you know it’s my reputation.”

Trina added, “If I don’t do what I’m supposed to do ... then it’s on me.” Trina explained that this authentic conversation helped instigate change as she became friends with the assistant principal and learned to handle problems directly in her leadership style. Blake said he “leaned on existing relationships” with those who had trusted him in the past to continue to trust him in his new business. He said this preexisting trust was a significant advantage in the early years of the new business. Randy told me about the importance of honesty in relationships. He shared that a prospective client told him, “Randy, I don’t like you ... but I trust you.” Randy told me they later became close friends. Participants deemed an honest reputation of utmost importance related to their leadership effectiveness.

### ***Consistency***

Consistency, as it relates to leadership, is essential. Trina explained it is vital “to take a look at what’s happening in the building right now ... and [see] what ... my people need now and that can change from day to day and sometimes moment to moment.” She added, “Sometimes they need [more leadership] ... sometimes they need someone to kind of shake them ... I can’t just always be the cheerleader.” Trina shared she uses various approaches when leading but is consistent each day in how she does so. She offered, “I have to know ... the temperature [of the business] ... I always have to be the thermostat

... and set the temperature for the building.” She added, “You know [I do this] by either my example or... change the temperature in the building ... the thermometer changes as the weather changes ... the thermostat sets the temperature ... the leader has to set the temperature.”

Barbara discussed the importance of continually treating her clients correctly and finding more sales. She said, “You’re going to have to find your clients ... if you can’t find them, they have to be able to find you, and sometimes it’s a mix.” She explained that she leads her team with this approach and can never become complacent. Blake shared the importance of consistently teaching others to learn from mistakes. He said, “Teach and coach others, so they don’t make the same mistakes ... and can learn from them.” Consistency in behavior was deemed necessary by the participants to be influential leaders.

### **COVID-19 Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic was a significant part of this study. Though not a theme or subtheme, it is included as a unique section as participants shared information about the challenges of running a small business amid a pandemic. In this section, the researcher overviews the participants’ thoughts about the pandemic.

Randy explained, “My business is the staffing and recruiting, so I deal with many people. We were ... an essential business as our workers ... and many of my clients were part of ... distribution centers, and they must get a product out.” He shared:

You have the problem of people getting sick ... people not wanting to go to work, people getting paid by the government to stay home, people scared ... and people using fake COVID if they don’t want to work. We have to trust they are telling

the truth, but ... I know for a fact a lot of them were not. I am in the people business, so ... it's been a nightmare.

He described the constant changing, planning, pivoting, and learning characterized by this time. Randy explained the sacrifices business owners must make. He said, "I've gone without a salary ... had to lay people off ... make hard decisions." Randy disclosed he lost two employees during the pandemic who were not even looking for a new job, but larger companies approached them and offered the employees substantially more money. He shared, "One employee was offered 40% more than he was making." Randy conveyed this employee was already making a handsome income. He said hiring people, especially good people, is difficult during the pandemic as larger businesses continue to "throw money at employees" to get them to leave. As a small business owner, he said he could not compete with such offers and called it a "wage war." Randy explained:

I'm doing his job because we can't afford to hire someone else. It is easy to become complacent as a business owner when all is going well. But when that's not there anymore, you better be able to buckle up and get back to it. I laid off four long-term employees who never received the state unemployment insurance they were owed. I later brought back those four employees ... life as a business owner in the pandemic has been one of constant change. There's a lot of people that don't want to work ... the work ethic is horrible in some folks ... and it hard to find good people.

Randy said he has become more creative than ever in finding ways to generate money from diverse sources during the pandemic.

Mandy conveyed:

Covid impacted us [negatively] financially for sure. We had to shut down for about six weeks, and when we came back, it impacted us ... [per regulations] we could only [service] half, the number of clients we could actually do. Not only did we have government regulations but ... state board cosmetology regulations to follow. Some were similar [guidelines], and some were very different.

Thankfully, we are very organized, and we were very proactive from the time they shut us down. Our goal was to always get back up and running ... and not sit back and wait on the government's support to get us back on track.

Mandy recalled, "We knew we would need extra cleaning supplies ... we already have so many things that we have to follow from the state board with cleaning and sanitation anyway ... we knew that was going to be intensified." Mandy explained her team worked together through remote zoom calls. They went out and bought supplies such as Clorox and Lysol at locations all over the city. Mandy shared, "Everyone was out of everything, but we had a stock full of it because all our staff was grabbing it [early on] as they went out." She shared this team approach of creative planning and initiative-taking began on day one of the shutdowns. Thus, their salon reopened faster than most in the country. She said, "We were organized and had all our ducks in a row." Mandy explained the continued difficulty in obtaining products and supplies due to supply chain shortages and delays caused by the pandemic. She said it is challenging to find workers. Mandy added that inflation has negatively impacted her business as she cannot raise her prices much, and her employees now expect to be paid more. "Patience, loyalty, and perseverance" have been essential to Mandy during this time. She said grit has always been vital, but never more than during the pandemic. She defined grit as "people who have gumption ...

and don't mind getting their hands dirty." Finally, Mandy stated, "The pandemic was scary in the beginning ... but that thought soon went out of my head." She said, "Failure [not reopening] was not even an option." She told me her sole focus was on a successful reopening once it was allowed.

Trina discussed the challenges she has faced during the pandemic. She had a problem with the accuracy of the fuel gauge on her school bus and could not determine whether the bus was running out of gas. Thus, before school started, she made an appointment with a mechanic to get it fixed. She explained the pandemic's continual aftereffects. "We were heading to the mechanic ... they [shop] called and said they had only one mechanic show up for work today ... so they cannot take our bus, and they don't know when they can take our bus." Trina added, "Now, thank God it's not something more major with the bus, but I can't get this fixed on my bus because of the great resignation, and I have nothing to do with the mechanic." Trina conveyed:

Everything's so much more expensive, and every supplier charges a gas fee, and then I paid the gas fee for them to bring food, and then a quarter of what we ordered is not there. When you are in business for as long as I have been, you hit rock bottom more than once, and ... learn the people that are most successful are the ones that have grit and keep getting back up ... So, it's resilience ... perseverance ... and not just believing in yourself but a calling.

She explained "I now have to spend gas and salaries to go looking for the food or go looking for the supplies ... everything just costs so much more." Trina shared that supply chain delays and shortages have sometimes led to an inability to follow through on plans and promises. Trina conveyed, "We do this behind-the-scenes work to make sure ...

although the peaches are on the menu ... we have to resort to serving pineapples, and we risk being on the chopping block by parents.” Trina added how a parent expressed, “I don’t care about supply chains, that’s not my problem, you said you were gonna serve peaches, I trust you with my kid, and my kid needs to have peaches today.” Trina told me it has been more exhausting than ever to be a small business owner during a pandemic.

This special section is related to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this section, the researcher recounted the participants’ thoughts about running a small business during a pandemic. Additionally, the researcher explained the continued challenges participants face in running a viable small business during this time. The stories and experiences shared in this section are representative of all participants.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, the researcher presented findings from interviews with six successful small business owners in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States. The researcher collected and analyzed interview recordings, transcripts, memos, field notes, and observation data to find themes among the participants’ stories and experiences. The six participants were small business owners in different industries, which allowed the researcher to collect information-rich data (Patton, 2002).

After thorough data analysis, four themes emerged: (1) strong work ethic in all experiences, (2) growth mindset approach to life success, (3) resilience in response to adversity, and (4) leadership style built on trust and strong relationships. Theme 1 includes the subthemes: lifelong guiding mantras and expressions, real-world employee experiences, childhood family ingrained expectations, and real-world employer experiences. Theme 2 includes the subthemes: strategist, continuous learning,



achievement orientation, and creativity. Theme 3 consists of the subthemes: passion, tenacity, self-confidence, and optimism. Theme 4 includes the subthemes: integrity, excellent communicator, honest reputation, and consistency. These themes and subthemes from participants' experiences were supported by existing literature. After the themes and subthemes, the researcher included a unique section on the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher will discuss the conclusions and implications of this study in Chapter VI.

## **Chapter VI:**

### **Conclusion**

The overwhelming majority of businesses in the United States are small businesses (USSBA, 2020a). Uziako (2019) reported over 30 million small businesses in the United States comprise more than 99% of all companies. Therefore, predicting small business startup success is a crucial area of research, as small businesses that fail are costly and disruptive to stakeholders such as owners, families, investors, and communities (Van Auken et al., 2009). Each business failure can cause a loss of jobs and money and emotional distress for the owner and stakeholders. According to the United States Small Business Administration's Office of Advocacy (USSBA) (2018), 50% of small businesses fail by the end of their fifth year of existence. There is a need to learn from successful small business owners, as much of the existing literature pertains to small business failure.

In this qualitative study, the researcher explored the life and career experiences of a select number of small business owners in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States. The researcher used purposeful sampling to select six small business owners for the study, each of whom had successfully started and operated a profitable small business for 5 or more years up to and through the COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant worked in a different industry and varied in age, gender, and race. Each had run their small business for a minimum of 10 years up to and through the pandemic, well beyond the 5 or more years threshold for the 50% failure rate. In interviewing the six

participants, the researcher collected information about their lives and careers, producing data on operating a successful small business. The findings may provide valuable information to current or future small business owners regarding proven methods of achieving long-term success. In addition, the research findings contributed to the resolution of the following research questions:

*Research Question 1:* What are the life and career experiences of a select number of small business owners in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States who successfully owned and operated a small business for 5 or more years up to and through the COVID-19 pandemic?

*Research Question 2:* What are the most and least important personal characteristics needed to successfully own and operate a small business for 5 or more years in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States up to and through the COVID-19 pandemic, as perceived by a select number of small business owners?

*Research Question 3:* What were the most significant challenges to getting a new business started and keeping it open for over 5 years up to and including the COVID-19 pandemic, as perceived by a select number of small business owners?

Narrative researchers treat the story as the data (Patton, 2015). The narrative researcher analyzes how the story is interpreted, placed into context, and compared with other stories (Patton, 2015). In this study, I adapted Seidman's (2013) three-series interview model to create a semi-structured interview guide for a two-part interview with each participant. I prepared the interview guide to ensure the "same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed" (Patton, 2015, p. 439). Patton noted that a guide allows the interviewer freedom to explore and probe for more information around

questions. Additionally, the guide enables the interviewer to remain conversational but semi-structured around the predetermined interview questions (Patton, 2015).

The researcher safeguarded the validity of this study by using various data sources to triangulate findings. Data sources in this study included interview transcripts, observations, field notes, researcher memos, and applicable documents from the research participants (Maxwell, 2013). Data analysis began after the first interview and continued beyond the conclusion of the final interview. After transcribing the interviews as text on paper, the researcher read them, wrote notes, and created memos during the process. All data underwent numerous successions of coding and analysis until clear themes and subthemes emerged, as explained in Chapter V.

The four main themes of the study were: (1) strong work ethic in all experiences, (2) growth mindset approach to life success, (3) resilience in response to adversity, and (4) leadership style built on trust and relationships. Within each overarching theme exist four subthemes. Theme (1) consisted of the subthemes: lifelong guiding mantras and expressions, real-world employee experiences, childhood family ingrained expectations, and real-world employer experiences. Theme (2) included the subthemes: strategist, continuous learning, achievement orientation, and creativity. Theme (3) consisted of the subthemes: passion, tenacity, self-confidence, and optimism. Theme (4) included the subthemes: integrity, excellent communicator, honest reputation, and consistency. In this chapter, the researcher discusses the three research questions, the results in relation to previously discussed literature, and the themes and subthemes discovered in this study. Additionally, in this chapter, the researcher includes the study's limitations, implications, recommendations for future studies, and a conclusion.

## **Research Questions: Summary Discussion**

In this qualitative research study, I examined the lived experiences of six small business owners in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States. These participants were purposefully selected because of their vast knowledge and experience in starting and running a successful small business for more than 5 years up to and through a pandemic. I closely analyzed the data collected from a series of recorded interviews, transcripts, researcher memos, documents, field notes, and observations. In addition, I used each participant's firsthand accounts to understand the phenomenon better. In Chapter IV, I included a profile of each participant to provide context for the data analysis in Chapter V. In this section, I respond to the three central research questions of this study and discuss their alignment with the themes, subthemes, and existing literature.

### ***Research Question 1 Discussion***

During the two interviews and analysis, the researcher learned about each participant's life and career experiences as they shared stories from their childhood and adult lives. Participants' experiences were similar in many ways. A strong work ethic was a central theme in this study. This strong work ethic was shared by all participants in their life and career experiences. Each participant stated they believed in hard work and had held a job since their early teenage years. For example, Blake offered, "I started working at a fast-food restaurant at age fourteen and haven't stopped working since." Moreover, all participants explained it was an expectation in their childhood family that they were employed and worked hard consistently.

Meriac et al. (2010) explained work ethic as “a set of beliefs and attitudes reflecting the fundamental value of work” (p. 316). Mandy revealed, “I was expected at 15 to have a job if I wasn’t doing at least high school sports, but I did both; I had a job and played two sports.” Randy, Trina, and Chad each conveyed that their father’s work ethic had inspired them. Randy said, “Anytime you worked with my dad, you saw he was a strong, hard worker.” About her father, Trina echoed, “He has a strong work ethic ... he works really hard.” Chad said his father “was a hard worker, and that taught me the value of working hard.” Each participant explained their father’s impressive work ethic had impacted their lifelong belief in the importance of hard work.

Most participants’ fathers held jobs that required many hours of work each week, in addition to work-related travel. Additionally, most participants’ mothers were “stay-at-home moms” who were active in their lives and activities. Moreover, each participant grew up in a household comprised of a mother and father and one or more siblings. Blake, Mandy, and Trina were the oldest children in their families. Chad and Barbara were the middle children, and Randy was the youngest in his family. Each participant’s childhood family consisted of three children, except for Trina’s, which had two. Participants explained they benefited from solid roots and stability in their childhood years. Each participant had two parents and siblings and explained that this was not the case for some of their childhood friends.

All participants, except Barbara, who moved 22 times before high school, spent most of their adolescent years in the same location. All participants, except Barbara and Mandy, earned bachelor’s degrees in college. Neither Barbara nor Mandy enjoyed the college experience and chose not to finish. Trina was the only participant to pursue

further education, completing a master's degree soon after earning her undergraduate degree. However, each participant believed the real-world experiences gained in their jobs were more critical to their success than the knowledge acquired in a formal college classroom. Trina elaborated, "The hands-on stuff helped more than the college book stuff. The degrees help you get in the door ... because people see you on paper, and they think, okay, she's educated." Blake conveyed he had studied marketing and obtained a degree, which was helpful in getting started in the workforce. However, he said the real-world experience he gained in his first few jobs was more critical to his success than his college education. Most participants had solid family roots and grew up in the same area their entire childhood life. These circumstances provided stability from an early age. The participants had consistent childhood experiences and learned much about the real world in their homes. This consistency of location and learning may play some role as to why the participants preferred hands-on experience over traditional education

Participants described their personal lives as adults. Three of the six participants have been married to their spouse for 20 or more years, whereas the others have been married more than once. Most participants had two or more children. Each participant had worked multiple jobs before starting their business and had learned a great deal from these experiences. Real-world employee experiences are a subtheme in the findings of this study. Each participant explained how relationships, leadership styles, and organizational cultures experienced in previous jobs shaped how they eventually started and ran their own businesses.

Lifelong guiding mantras and expressions are a subtheme of this study. Barbara said, "Have an open mind, and don't think you know it all ... and be a continual learner."

Mandy said her mantra was “Always have something to fall back on.” Blake conveyed, “Wake up with the mentality of what can you learn today.” These lifelong mantras and expressions also connect with the continuous learning and strategist subthemes.

Continuous learning is crucial to the participants. Most participants shared how they have brought consultants onsite to provide further education for the entire organization or specific company divisions. The participants explained that they have also sent staff to attend offsite continuing education seminars, in which they also participated. The subtheme of continuous learning has been a constant in these small businesses, accounting for continued education and growth.

The participants identified strong leadership skills as vital to the success of a business. Each participant considered themselves to be a transformational leader. Kouzes and Posner (2017) defined transformational leadership as a five-part theory: *model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart*. The participants conveyed, as transformational leaders, how they provide guidance to others and encourage and inspire them. Chad said any growth mindset-focused business owner must lead by example and demonstrate a clear vision for the future. The participants shared that successful small business owners encourage and help others achieve success. Each participant in this study put their team and business first. A strategist, a subtheme in this study, is part of transformational leadership as such a person has a clear plan and vision and looks for ways to achieve success for all.

The participants were all transformational leaders, meaning their styles aligned with the definitions in the literature. For example, Trina shared that, as her company's leader, she serves as the thermostat and sets the room's temperature. She said, “The



thermostat sets the temperature ... the leader has to set the temperature.” Each participant explained that their leadership style fosters an organization characterized by a “family feel.” Barbara explained, “My employees are like my children ... Nancy [employee] ... will come over if I’m sick [to help me] ...I just really have ... adopted these people into my family.” She said this leadership style is built on trust and relationships, a central theme in this study, and has resulted in her employees operating as a cohesive unit. Trina said, “I have a core group of people that have been with me through thick and thin, so my relationship [our culture] is family oriented.” Mandy explained that a team culture exists in both of her salons, meaning they work together cohesively, resulting in a “family feel.” The participants told me the family feel of the business has continued to develop as employees do things because they want to and not because they must.

In discussing the importance of leadership, Blake shared his company is “very entrepreneurial, very ... hands off.” He said, “We like to treat our associates and employees as family ... I’m not going to babysit; everyone here is an adult; everyone here understands the expectation.” He added, “We explain our leadership and where this company is going ... and where we’ve been and where we’re expected to go ... so, we define very clearly our mission and our vision.” Burns (1978) defined transformational leadership as an influence process that involves followers, peers, superiors, and other stakeholders. Bass and Riggio (2006) noted *intellectual stimulation* as a component of transformational leadership that occurs when leaders empower followers to use more of their abilities and challenge them to perform at higher levels. In speaking about leadership, Blake added, “I think a clear definition of roles and responsibilities in their job description is very well communicated.” Trina stated, “I think that leadership is or

can be a very fluid position where you have to lead differently at different times.”

Another component of transformational leadership is *idealized influence* when leaders are admired, respected, and trusted by their followers. In turn, the followers seek to follow the leader's reliable display of solid ethics and values (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Blake conveyed the importance of being an excellent communicator, a subtheme of this study, as part of transformational leadership. He said, “Communication skills are the foundation to a successful business and reflect upon the owner and their ability to demonstrate clear direct communication.” He added, “Without clear communication, tasks and responsibilities have a greater chance of failing as the responsible party may be unclear on what is expected of them.” Mandy echoed the importance of communication skills, “Communication is vital to a [leading] successful business; otherwise, no one has direction or knows their place or the reasons they are doing what they are doing.” The participants agreed that being an excellent communicator was vital in their life and career experiences.

Transformational leadership is related to grit theory, based on the long-term passion and perseverance required to achieve lasting success. Duckworth (2016) defined grit as passion and sustained perseverance applied toward long-term achievement with consistency over time. The participants stated that grit was a crucial part of their success. As defined by Duckworth, grit connects to subthemes in this study, specifically passion, consistency, and tenacity. Lee (2018) explained that many scholars have shifted towards a non-cognitive approach in predicting the success of small business owners through ideas such as grit theory, resilience, self-efficacy, and growth mindset. Lee discussed ideas included in the conceptual framework of this study, specifically grit, growth

mindset, resilience, and self-efficacy. The participants shared that grit, growth mindset, resilience and self-efficacy were critical to their success.

Dweck (2015) explained a growth mindset as the belief that the qualities of human beings can change and further develop our intelligence and abilities through dedication and hard work. Such willingness to grow ties into a growth mindset approach to life, a central theme of this study. The participants shared that a growth mindset helped them to remain continuous learners. Such learning allows them to continue to evolve as people and learn new ways to grow their businesses. The findings of this study identified continuous learning as a subtheme under the growth mindset theme.

Ginsburg (2006) explained resilience as a human understanding that one can rise above challenging circumstances and move forward with confidence and optimism in facing adversity. One of the main themes of this study was resilience in response to adversity, and a subtheme from this study was achievement orientation. The participants named resilience as critical in their career experiences as small business owners.

Additionally, all participants shared they had to pull themselves back up repeatedly in the face of adversity. They said they “had to find a way” to succeed and “could never quit” or had to “dig deep” to achieve their goals and objectives. Billingsley et al. (2021) found a correlation between a growth mindset, resilience, and the need for achievement.

Akhtar (2008) defined self-efficacy as the belief in one’s abilities, specifically the ability to successfully address challenges and complete a task. Rather than avoid threats, individuals with high self-efficacy perceive challenging tasks as opportunities to be mastered and are committed to setting and achieving challenging goals. The participants shared the importance of self-confidence, optimism, and achievement orientation, all

subthemes in the study. The conceptual framework and literature aligned with the findings of this study, as self-efficacy has been an essential part of the career experiences of all participants.

The participants' life and career experiences have been shaped by their consistent actions. These topics include having a strong work ethic, being a transformational leader, having resilience and grit, possessing a growth mindset, and having self-efficacy.

### ***Research Question 2 Discussion***

**Most Important Personal Characteristics.** During the two interviews with each participant, I discovered the most and least critical personal characteristics needed to own and operate a successful small business, as perceived by the participants. One important characteristic is being passionate. Blake explained, "I'm excited and passionate about what I do ... and [if] you have passion for the work you do every day ... you're going to do a great job." Trina said "I can't teach people integrity ... or to love what they do." She told me she could train and mold people but cannot teach them to have passion. Trina explained the importance of passion in running a business. She said, "It's a 24-7 roll-up-your-sleeves ordeal." She told me you can't ask anyone to do anything you're not willing to do yourself. She explained the importance of her staff seeing her "in the trenches" with them. Trina said building a successful business can be emotional and full of "blood, sweat, and tears." Trina told me her staff can see, feel, and observe the company and her passion for it, and she believes her transparency in showing emotions has allowed her to build a cohesive team.

Barbara echoed the importance of passion, saying that a business owner must be passionate about its products or services. She said others could determine whether

passion is authentic. She stated, “You need to be passionate about what you are doing ... and do it the right way so that you can build your trustworthiness and reputation.”

Barbara’s words relate to several themes and subthemes of this study: passion, honest reputation, leadership style built on trust, and relationships.

Tenacity, another subtheme, is a crucial personal characteristic of successful small business owners. The participants discussed their determination, resilience, and grit during the interviews. Mandy explained she was running the business in addition to being a hairstylist with a full load of clients. When one of her hair stylists could not work due to a broken wrist, Mandy took on those clients, resulting in many extra work hours. She explained that she had to step in as the business owner for her employee or it wouldn’t get done. She said successful small business owners have no choice but to have grit and mental toughness if they want to succeed. Mandy further explained, “They must do whatever it takes and dig deep to find a way.”

Similarly, Mandy’s team worked diligently during the pandemic to find supplies throughout the city and began this process on day one of the lockdowns. The determination to “find a way” was necessary to succeed during this time. In discussing determination and grit, Blake shared, “Grit to me is like someone’s perseverance ... not afraid to get their hands dirty ... and work in tough situations.” He further explained that such people are not afraid to face challenging situations.

Creativity, a finding, and a subtheme of this study is another crucial characteristic of a successful small business owner. Barbara said the pandemic pushed her to be more creative. Her in-person business of exotic animal shows was shut down. She became innovative by starting a new venture, as people were still buying and selling exotic

animals across the United States. Barbara explained there was a significant jump in orders as people sought companionship during the lockdown. The airlines needed help moving animals between flights and caring for them as they reached their final destination. Her husband's tour guide business had been shut down in the early days of the pandemic, and Barbara saw an opportunity. With his background in transportation and her knowledge of animals, they created an entirely new source of income during the pandemic. She revealed that they are well-known at the local airport and are still called upon to help nearly three years later.

Blake explained that before the pandemic he had never been supportive of employees working from home. Then suddenly, there was no other option. He said his employees worked more hours than ever while remote and, to his surprise, performed better than ever. Blake became creative by consolidating two large commercial properties into one location. This saved significant money and allowed for a better overall primary business.

Additionally, the employees saved time by eliminating their commute. Their performance has remained at the highest level; thus, Blake has allowed the remote work to continue. Though initially against the idea of remote work, he saw the results and began thinking in new ways. Blake became creative, capitalized, and learned something new. A subtheme in the findings of this study is continuous learning, and Blake's actions during the pandemic exemplify this concept.

Another important personal characteristic of successful small business owners is self-confidence, a subtheme in the findings. Each of the participants believed in themselves. Chad shared he had been told he would fail but was confident he would make

it work, and he did, despite having to go 13 months without a paycheck. Barbara expanded to a better, though more expensive, location in the middle of the pandemic. She said she believed in herself and was willing to take an intelligent risk that she felt would pay off, and it has.

Blake explained that he invested in the company in its early days from his personal savings. In the early years, he did not pay himself to allow the business a chance to succeed. Randy said he has gone without a paycheck as needed while owning his business. Randy offered, “I am a fixer ... I can come up with ways of getting from A to Z, or A to B, or however you want to say it ... connect the dots and find a solution.” He explained he had confidence in himself to succeed and paid himself last to ensure the business's success.

Each participant was willing to take a risk to obtain a reward. In addition, the participants disclosed that money was not their focus in starting a business. Blake explained, “I’ve made enough money now to take some more risks, so I’m going to take that money, and I’m going to parlay it into starting my own business, and that’s what I did.” Trina said, “I believe you do what you love, and the money will come.” All participants possessed self-confidence.

**Least Important Personal Characteristics.** The participants explained the least important characteristics needed to own and operate a successful small business. The participants conveyed that a significantly overconfident person was one such characteristic. The participants shared that such overconfidence keeps one from foreseeing future developments. A lack of vision increases the risk of making the wrong decision, which can be detrimental to a small business.

Another least essential characteristic, as perceived by the participants, was a lack of humility by a small business owner. The participants explained that such business owners make it evident in their words and actions that they are no longer willing to do specific tasks they might have done in the early days. The participants conveyed that successful small business ownership requires a “24-7 commitment” no matter how long one has been in business. It also demands an owner to be willing to do whatever is needed and whenever it is needed. As I learned, a lack of humility by the business owner negatively impacts the organization. Once other team members see this lack of humility from the owner, they tend to follow this pattern and may no longer be willing to do what they once did.

The participants shared that operating with a fixed mindset is another least important characteristic of a small business owner. Small business owners with a fixed mindset do not view their traits or skills as areas that can improve. Instead, they consider the traits intrinsically stable and unchangeable over time. Individuals with a fixed mindset are content or even complacent in their day-to-day job. Dweck (2006) argued if such individuals don’t already possess the skills or intelligence to complete a task, there’s no chance of improvement. For example, a business owner lacking a solid financial background views this as an area they cannot learn more about. The participants explained that it is an area of weakness now and will continue to be so in the future due to a fixed mindset.

The participants told me that a business owner being inflexible is a least essential characteristic. Frequently, small business owners lose the willingness to change or do things in new ways. The world around the small business owner is in a constant state of



change. Thus, not developing new or modifying existing strategies or offerings can damage a small business. The participants told me that such business owners often said, “this is how we have always done it” or other similar phrases that focused on the past. This means being or remaining inflexible and not creating new solutions focused on the future is a negative quality of a business owner.

### ***Research Question 3 Discussion***

What were the most significant challenges to getting a new business started and keeping it open for over 5 years up to and including the COVID-19 pandemic, as perceived by a select number of small business owners?

The participants shared that a significant challenge to starting and keeping a new business open was having the necessary financial resources, funding, and capital. The participants explained that it is common to underestimate the money needed to start a business and keep it running over time. They conveyed that startup costs can far surpass estimates. In addition, unexpected delays, such as government inspections and licenses required, may take longer than anyone could have planned.

As explained by Randy and Barbara, a new business must be able to pay its staff and all vendors and have a “rainy day” fund. This fund can be accessed if there is a gap between money that must be paid out and money that has come in. The participants said this is often a cash flow situation, meaning the business owner has paid out a significant amount of money; however, the receivables and money due to the small business are delayed, causing a temporary deficit. In addition, all participants expressed they have experienced challenges with customers who are slow in paying their bills and even those who default altogether.

Many people may have skills or expertise but know little about running a business. For example, a great and talented chef is not automatically successful in starting and running a restaurant. Blake explained this concept in more detail. He offered, “I adopt more of a self-confidence model as far as leadership, but I know many businesses that have leaders that are ... very confident in themselves and [also] very egotistical and arrogant.” He added, “I think that becomes a challenge for those who work for those individuals because they feel that they can never do anything wrong and that if anything goes wrong, it’s not their fault, it’s your fault.” Blake said this “arrogant” style does not allow people to be honest and prevents continuous learning as some employees are scared to make a mistake. He said, “Understanding that we’re all human and humans make mistakes ... we’re not perfect, and even as a leader in this organization, I’m not perfect.” He added, “I know I’m gonna make a mistake and [try to] learn from those mistakes.” He said the goal is to lead by example and create an environment that welcomes feedback, so everyone continuously learns from mistakes. The central theme of a leadership style built on trust and relationships is vital.

By reviewing the findings in this study, one can surmise from the participants’ responses that the subthemes of an honest reputation, consistency, and integrity are essential. Everyone has a reputation, and a poor one will have adverse effects. Trina told a story of an angry parent during the pandemic who disapproved of the fact that her school was mandating all students and staff wear masks. This parent discredited Trina, including calling vendors and government agencies. Trina explained the issue was resolved expediently due to her consistent long-term relationships with such vendors and agencies. Everyone involved knew Trina firsthand as a person of integrity and an honest

reputation in her 20 years of running a business. Consistency, an honest reputation, and integrity were three subtheme findings in this study.

The participants discussed the idea that many people venture into small businesses underestimating the work and overestimating the freedoms. They desire to be their own boss and seek to work fewer hours but do not understand the difficulty and loneliness that can accompany an entrepreneur's life. The burnout rate can be high as a small business owner's work never ends. They are always on call and must be willing to sacrifice other things in their life, such as weekends or vacations, to deal with running a small business. Even with a solid organizational structure in place, a business owner is the one who must make the "tough judgment call."

Trina told a story of a physical therapist who assumed Trina was always free to do whatever she wanted. Trina explained to the therapist, "Because I can come in [mid-a.m.] and have this thing ... you're not seeing the full picture, you're not seeing the twenty-hour days ... you're not seeing the blood, sweat, and tears." Chad thought similarly about the misconceptions of small business ownership. He explained, "You can't just do what you want to do ... I've always worked whatever hours it took ... there is no easy street without working ... you've got to put in the work." Some people go into business for themselves, only focused on the money they will make. The participants believed that the money would follow if they did the right things and focused on honesty and integrity. For example, Trina offered "I believe you do what you love, and the money will come." This has proved to be the case for each participant.

Small business owners must have a long-term, calm, sensible, and leveled approach to starting and building a business. Earning money in a small business often

takes patience and sacrifice, thus increasing the importance of resilience and grit. The participants shared most people lack the mental toughness to deal with continual adversity. Instead, if they experience too many challenges, it is easier to close the doors and go to work for someone else. Some people prefer a steady paycheck, consistent hours, and true vacations from their work. Like everyone, small business owners are challenged by the unexpected. The way the business owner handles these challenges is critical. According to the participants, small business owners can prevail if they maintain passion, optimism, and self-confidence.

### **Study Limitations**

This study is limited to the narrative stories of six successful small business owners in a metropolitan area of the Southeastern United States. The limitations identified may influence the implications and recommendations explored in later sections of this chapter. One limitation is the small sample size of participants. The study is also limited to the experiences of small business owners who run businesses in the metropolitan area of the same state. It cannot be assumed that this study's six participants represent all small business owners' life and career experiences. The findings of this study related to the most and least important personal characteristics identified by these participants cannot be assumed representative of all small business owners. The same holds for what the participants deemed the most significant challenges of starting a new business and keeping it open.

The study is limited to the experiences of small business owners who have been in business for at least 5 years. An additional limitation is that all participants were required to meet the following criteria: they started the company, continued running it, and

successfully ran it through a pandemic. For example, I could not interview one possible participant I had considered as she unexpectedly sold her business and retired in early 2022. The study is also limited to the stories and experiences of the business owners who participated in this study. I did not talk to other stakeholders, such as managers or employees, to gain their insights. It is more challenging to determine if everything a single interviewee says is accurate as they are the only source of contact. I could see things from more than one vantage point if I also interviewed key company staff members.

I did not interview small business owners who took over an existing business, did not achieve the 5-year threshold, or closed and/or sold their business during the pandemic. This study may be limited by the variety of business sizes and industry sectors. The participants were of different genders, races, and ages. Based on the small sample size and the other factors noted, the generalizability of the study may be limited. Another limitation is my own bias. Qualitative researchers must carefully consider their background and prior experiences to eliminate potential biases. I am a male small business owner who started and has run a successful small business for over 5 years up and through a pandemic. It is not possible for the researcher to eliminate all biases. Thus, I limited my bias by collecting rich data, reviewing documents, writing memos, observations, field notes, and member checking. This study was based on the participants' recall of their life and career experiences from memory. Thus, another possible limitation is participant inaccuracies.

Another limitation might be that my proposed plan was for the data to come from a three-part series of interviews (Seidman, 2013). This was reduced to two lengthy

interviews due to numerous hurdles. Such obstacles included COVID-19 illnesses and small business owners' lack of available time as they were all understaffed. So, even though information-rich data was obtained, it is a possible limitation that only two interviews were conducted.

### **Implications**

This qualitative study was conducted to explore the life and career experiences of a select number of successful small business owners in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States. These leaders had both started and operated a profitable small business for 5 or more years up to and through the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this study focused on the experiences of six small business owners in the same state metropolitan area, it may also have broader implications for other people, groups, and organizations. The implications of COVID-19 will be addressed first.

### ***COVID-19***

The pandemic and its continuing after-effects have made running a small business more complex than ever. When asked about the pandemic, each participant shared that it has been the most challenging time they have had in running a business. The personal qualities found in the themes and subthemes were ingrained in the participants before the pandemic and helped the business owners succeed. The past things they had done to achieve success became even more critical amid the pandemic. Each participant was able to “double down” and survive.

The participants shared that the early days of COVID were challenging due to the unknown, pivots, and constant change. However, the participants explained they “found a way” and focused on “making things happen.” After-effects such as increased fuel and

freight prices, inflation, supply chain slowdowns, shortage of supplies, difficulty finding workers, higher interest rates, and people expecting higher wages caused continued challenges for all participants. The qualities described in the themes and subthemes proved to help participants stay viable and successful when so many similar businesses closed and never reopened due to the pandemic.

The theme of resilience in response to adversity, a central theme in this study, was vital to small business' survival. This central theme was critical for small business owners to stay viable in an ongoing pandemic. They have never faced such adversity while running a business; being resilient was crucial. This means that the business owner was able to withstand or recover from difficult conditions in a quick manner. The subthemes of being a strategist, having creativity, tenacity, self-confidence, and optimism were also crucial factors that helped the small business survive a pandemic.

### ***Aspiring Small Business Owners***

This study may prove helpful for those seeking to become an entrepreneur and start their own business. The findings of this study explain the necessary qualities participants possessed to be successful when others failed. In addition, the failure rate of 50% at the 5-year mark has proved consistent over time, but there is little data on success over 5 years and through a pandemic. For example, aspiring small business owners may want to consider the capital needed to start and remain in business, including the “rainy day” fund for tough times. The findings of this study show that the participants have understood the importance of hard work ingrained in them since childhood. They have spent their entire lives consistently working since their early teenage years.

The participants all had lifelong guiding mantras and expressions. Such expressions all focused on never quitting, digging deep, finding a way, making things happen, etc. Each participant was achievement-oriented and possessed a growth mindset toward life and career success. They never became complacent when they succeeded and wanted to learn and grow even more. They were continuous learners as well. The participants of this study were always trying to grow, learn, and improve. There was never a time to be complacent. These participants all demonstrated resilience in response to adversity. Considering that only 50% of all new businesses make it through the first five years, there is considerable adversity an aspiring small business owner will face. Thus, learning from this study may prove helpful to aspiring small business owners achieving success.

### ***Current Small Business Owners***

The results of this study may help current small business owners. Current businesses may be viable but could grow to new success levels by applying knowledge gained from this study. Existing business owners may strive to model the participants' actions, behaviors, and focus areas to achieve higher levels of success. Current small business owners may need to be more deliberate about the continuous learning process used in their company. For example, small business owners should ensure their team is getting the ongoing training required to grow and succeed in a rapidly changing world. Also, owners may want to create incentives for team members who produce creative ideas or solutions. Small business owners may also want to implement planning and goal-setting skills so employees work ahead and improve with a growth mindset approach.



### ***Executive Coaching and Consulting Firms***

The findings of this study may prove helpful for those who coach and consult with small business owners. Many firms offer leadership development, but their programs may need to be updated to incorporate new knowledge. Coaching and consulting firms should update leadership training to include new knowledge learned during the pandemic. The firms should review the themes and subthemes of this study and note that nothing replaces a strong work ethic.

They should incorporate the importance of having a growth mindset approach to success, meaning that successful small business owners are always focused on growth and getting better, even when times are good. The firms should also add resilience in response to adversity as part of their updated offerings. This resilient approach helped the participants succeed when many other business owners did not. So, a greater focus on a growth mindset and resilience could make the firm's offerings more applicable and helpful to its clients. The importance of self-efficacy and grit should be reviewed as well. Teaching small business owners to operate in a transformational leadership style is something to consider. In addition, focusing on growing intangibles such as self-efficacy, grit, a growth mindset, and resilience could make the firm's offerings more applicable and helpful to its clients.

### ***K-12 Education***

The results of this study may help K-12 schools and college and career academies add courses or opportunities to help students who desire to become entrepreneurs. An entrepreneurship offering that explains what it takes to start and run a successful business for an extended period could prove invaluable for non-college-bound students. As the

“technical schools” teach high school students a skill such as welding, K-12 schools may offer an entrepreneurship course to prepare students. This may help some students who believe being their own boss sounds appealing but lack the understanding of what business ownership entails.

### ***Higher Education***

The findings of this study may prove helpful for colleges and universities in creating their course offerings. Most businesses in the United States are small businesses, yet many programs and traditional coursework focus on large and Fortune 500-type companies. Degrees in leadership are now offered at many undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral schools in addition to conventional management or MBA-type degrees (Data USA, 2020). However, there is a need for entrepreneurship to be included as part of the leadership coursework.

### **Recommendations**

#### ***Conduct Mixed Methods or Quantitative Studies***

In this study, I utilized a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to learn about the life and career experiences of six successful small business owners. The business owners in this study were from different industry sectors in a metropolitan area of the Southeastern United States. I recommend a similar study in a separate area of the county. I also recommend research involving business owners from the same industry sector. Future researchers should also study small business success through mixed methods or quantitative research to validate the findings of this qualitative study. Quantitative and mixed methods research would allow for the exploration of cause and effect, data correlations to be examined, larger sample sizes, and better generalization of findings.

### ***Three-Part Interview Series***

The proposed and recommended plan was for the data to come from a three-part series of interviews (Seidman, 2013). This was reduced to two lengthy interviews due to numerous hurdles. Such obstacles included COVID-19 illnesses and small business owners' lack of available time as they were all understaffed. The participants gave me more time than planned for each interview. I collected an enormous amount of information-rich data (Patton, 2015) from these two interviews.

### ***Increase Sample Size and Parameters***

A larger sample size is recommended in future studies of successful small business owners. This sample size is correct for the methodology utilized in this study; however, generalization is limited by the small sample size. It is also recommended that parameters change in future studies. Participants in this study ran businesses in the metropolitan area of the same state. Expanding this further would allow for greater generalizability and better comparative analysis. I recommend that this study be conducted with participants in a rural area of the same state. In addition, I recommend doing this study and having all business owners from the same or closely related industries.

### ***Conduct a Longitudinal Study***

In future studies of successful small business owners, I recommend a longitudinal study in which data are collected from small business owners over an extended period. Such a study may provide deeper insights into participants' perceptions and lived experiences changing over time. It would be interesting to see what each participant said in year one versus year three versus year five.

## **Conclusion**

This study's themes, subthemes, and findings were developed and finalized through interviews with participants, data collection and analysis, deep contemplation, and connecting the dots. In Chapter I, I provided readers with an overview of small businesses in the United States. They account for most businesses, with 50% failing in the first five years of existence. I explored prior research and literature related to small businesses and leadership in Chapter II. I discussed different types of leadership, with transformational leadership as the focus. In addition, I explained theories such as growth mindset, resilience, self-efficacy, and grit as part of the conceptual framework of this study. In Chapter III, I established the methodology for this qualitative study. I addressed the sampling technique, data collection tools, data analysis procedures, trustworthiness, and validity, in addition to ethical issues. In Chapter IV, I introduced the six participants of the study through narratives with detail-rich representations. In Chapter V, I overviewed the procedures for data analysis and explained the themes and subthemes that emerged. In Chapter VI, I conveyed my overall explanations of the findings of this study and answered the three research questions. Finally, I explained the limitations and implications of the study and made recommendations for future research.

The inspiration for this study was my fervent desire to help small business owners become better leaders and achieve higher levels of success. This study was of personal and professional interest to me, as small business successes and failures have impacted myriad aspects of my life. During my adult life, I have observed some small businesses succeeding for many decades and witnessed countless others fail in their early years. However, I have never known why some achieved success and others faltered. Now I

have some of the answers. The themes and subthemes of this study provide powerful insights that any current or future small business owner should consider learning from and adopting.

I relate to the central theme of a strong work ethic in all experiences. I have shared with others that time is the great equalizer. We all have 24 hours a day and 7 days a week, which is 168 hours. Time never stops moving, nor can we get more of it. Time is a present, and time is the present. Thus, what one chooses to do with time is of utmost importance. Each participant has consistently worked hard since early childhood. In addition, they have put countless hours of their time into starting and running a successful small business. The participants explained the tremendous amount of time running a small business takes, so time is a crucial part of work ethic.

I also closely relate to the concept of a growth mindset. My entire life has focused on improving, shoring up weaker areas, and continuous learning. I love to talk to wise individuals or read a book written by a super leader and learn something new. The key is applying such knowledge and growing. Life is challenging and tough, and the theme of resilience in response to adversity is vital. One of my life mantras is that if you want something bad enough, you will find a way, and if you don't, you will find an excuse. This expression relates to the study's findings, as each participant never quit or saw failure as an option. In contrast, each participant "dug deep" and "found a way" to make things work and achieve their goals.

Throughout the last 30 years, I have seen a theme in my own life. I am split between two worlds. One "world" is characterized by hard work, real-world experience, and learning by example, with no significant focus on certifications, higher-level

education, or proven academic concepts. Often, people in this world did not finish or barely finished high school, yet some are highly successful. Many were bored in school. I, for example, did not enjoy formal school and education until I entered college.

On the contrary, many people live in the “academic world” with little real-world experience but tremendous research knowledge. I also readily relate to these people, having extensive certifications and advanced degrees. I sit in the middle with strong real-world experience and a solid academic background. My goal is to find ways to connect the members of these two worlds, as we have much to learn from each other. For example, I have found that people with limited formal education and solid real-world experience are not overly interested in my advanced educational background but quite interested in my real-world experiences.

Moreover, I have seen people with high levels of education have very little interest in my real-world work experiences but considerable interest in my degrees and certifications. The truth is both my academic background and real-world experience have played a considerable role in the success I have achieved in my life. Another example is that I see too many self-proclaimed “business coaches” with real-world experience but without the in-depth academic education or training to support their teachings. On the other hand, I see too many “academic or research-type” individuals trying to teach or coach others yet possessing little to no real-world experience.

In closing, my goal is to bring people from both “worlds” and help them experience what they can learn from the other. In working together, we can achieve more than working alone and simply doing things the same way we always have. Both the academic and real-world experience sides have a great deal of knowledge, and they can

learn from each other. Such a creative and hybrid approach to learning could be a way to best meet the learning needs of the current and next generation of learners, small business owners, and aspiring leaders.

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**Appendix A:**  
**Interview Questions**

## Appendix A:

### Interview Questions

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#### **Initial Interview and Early Business Experiences**

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##### *Interview Questions*

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1. To begin, please tell me about yourself as a child, including your home life.
  2. What did your parents do for work?
  3. What was the household attitude about work life, business, and/or entrepreneurship?
  4. Tell me about your first job experiences.
  5. What were your relationships like with your first employers?
  6. What post-secondary school(s) did you attend and what did you major/minor in?
  7. Please identify specific ways in which your college major has given you an advantage or disadvantage in your past jobs or current business ownerships.
  8. What motivated you to start your own business?
  9. Please describe your relationships with your past coworkers before you opened your first business.
  10. Describe your relationships with your past employers before you opened your first business
  11. In what ways did your former employer(s) support you as a new employee?
  12. When you experienced professional difficulties, who did you turn to for help?
  13. What year did you first start your own business?
  14. What made you decide to start your own business?
-

**Final Interview: Business Ownership Experiences, Characteristics;  
COVID-19**

*Interview Questions*

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1. Did you have outside influence when you decided to start your own business?

*Follow-up:* Can you identify a time you considered another person's success or failures to determine your own success in business?

2. Describe your current relationship with your employees if you have any.

3. What are the most difficult aspects of opening and running your own business (during non-pandemic times)?

4. What are the most joyful aspects of opening and running your own business (during non-pandemic times)?

5. When you first experienced success in the new business, how did this make you feel?

6. Did you have outside influence when you decided to start your own business?

*Follow-up:* Can you identify a time you considered another person's success or failures to determine your own success in business?

7. Describe your current relationship with your employees if you have any.

8. What are the most difficult aspects of opening and running your own business (during non-pandemic times)?

9. What are the most joyful aspects of opening and running your own business (during non-pandemic times)?

10. When you first experienced success in the new business, how did this make you feel?

*Follow up:* As you experienced success, how did this impact your attitude toward the business and entrepreneurship?

11. What role do you think growth mindset played in keeping your business successful, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic?

12. As you reflect on your journey to becoming a successful business owner, who or what made the greatest impact on your professional career?

13. As someone who has successfully run a business would you be open to opening another business?

14. What do you feel are the most important things for prospective business owners to understand?

*Follow-up:* What do you feel are the most common misconceptions about the business ownership?

15. What advice would you give to someone who is considering starting their own business?

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**Appendix B:**  
**Letter to Applicants**



**Appendix B:**  
**Letter to Applicants**

██████████  
From: Ryan Sauers

Date: June 23, 2022

Subject: Request to participate in a research study

My name is Ryan Sauers, and I am a Leadership doctoral student from the Department of Leadership, Technology, and Workforce Development at Valdosta State University. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study designed to learn from the experiences and stories of select small business owners in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States. These leaders have all successfully owned and operated a small business for 5 or more years up and through the COVID-19 pandemic. Learning from such successful small business owners may help future leaders and startup business owners achieve longer-term success and increase the overall success rate.

You seem like an ideal candidate for this qualitative study. You were selected as a possible participant because you are an owner of a successful small business and have started it and run it up and through the COVID-19 pandemic. If you agree to participate, two interviews that will last approximately an hour each will be scheduled at your convenience. My goal is to space the two interviews roughly a week apart. Interviews will be recorded, and any audio recordings will be destroyed upon completion of my dissertation. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life.

All data collected will be completely confidential. A pseudonym will be used for your name as well as the name of your business. In the data analysis portion of my dissertation, quotes from the interviews will be used to support themes in the study. No one will be able to associate your responses with your identity. You can expect data from the interviews to further add to the research on small business success.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate in the interview, to stop answering questions at any point in the interview, or to skip any questions you do not wish to answer. You must be a small business owner in the Southeastern United States. Your completion of the interview series will serve as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you meet the criteria outlined.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of this research study should be directed to Ryan Sauers at (phone) [REDACTED] or (email) [rtsauers@valdosta.edu](mailto:rtsauers@valdosta.edu). This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact IRB administration at 229-259-5045 or by email at [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu). I greatly appreciate you taking the time to consider being a part of this research study and I look forward to hearing from you very soon. Have a great day.

Sincerely,

Ryan Sauers

Doctoral Candidate, Leadership (contact info) [REDACTED] [rtsauers@valdosta.edu](mailto:rtsauers@valdosta.edu)

**Appendix C:**  
**Institutional Review Board Approval**

## Appendix C:

### Institutional Review Board Approval



#### *Institutional Review Board (IRB) For the Protection of Human Research Participants*

#### PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

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Protocol Number: 04318-2022

Responsible Researcher(s): Ryan Sauers

Supervising Faculty: William F. Truby and John D. Lairsey

Project Title: *A Qualitative Study of Small Business Owners' Lived Experiences and Perceptions of Long-term Business Success Amid a Pandemic*

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#### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations category 2. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator ([irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu)) before continuing your research study.

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#### ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *The researcher submitted an Expedited Application rather than the Exempt Application. OSPRA is approving the Expedited Application via a Protocol Exemption Report form.*
- *Pseudonym lists and corresponding name lists must be kept in separate, secure files.*
- *Exempt guidelines permit recording interviews for the purpose of creating an accurate transcript. Recordings must be deleted immediately upon creation of the transcript. Participant recorded testimonies, must be deleted upon creation of the transcript.*
- *Exempt guidelines prohibit the collection, storage, and/or sharing of recordings.*
- *The research consent statement must be read aloud to participants at the start of each interview session, and documented in the transcript.*

*If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu) to ensure an updated record of your exemption.*

DocuSigned by:  
*Elizabeth W. Olphie*  
AD344DA775501B45A

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Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator

*Thank you for submitting an IRB application.  
Please direct questions to [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu) or 229-253-2947.*

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Revised: 06.02.16