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Succession Planning Strategies for Inclusive Leadership and Market Competitiveness

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Abstract

Ineffective leadership development and succession planning pose significant risks to an organization's stability by weakening daily operations, limiting long-term growth, and increasing financial instability. Business leaders who endeavor and fail to improve leadership development and succession planning may find their businesses facing instability as a result. Grounded in succession planning theory, this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project sought to identify and explore effective succession-planning strategies used by business leaders to ensure a diverse leadership team and maintain market competitiveness. The participants were 10 business leaders who implemented effective succession planning strategies. Data was collected through semistructured interviews and secondary data from publicly available sources. Using thematic analysis, four themes were identified: 1) strategic leadership development and mentorship, 2) intentional diversity and inclusion in leadership pipelines, 3) organizational alignment and governance support, and 4) measurement and continuous improvement of succession planning. A key recommendation is for business leaders to include leadership development in succession planning to sustain the leadership pipeline, and diversity and inclusivity to strengthen organizational decision-making, enhance innovation, and improve the organization's ability to respond to changing market conditions. The implications for positive social change include the potential for business leaders to develop leadership talent from underrepresented groups and contribute to economic stability within communities by maintaining organizational sustainability and reducing disruptions.

Keywords

Succession Planning, Leadership Development, Diversity and Inclusion, Leadership Pipelines, Organizational Competitiveness

1. Introduction

Ineffective leadership development and succession planning pose significant risks to an organization's stability by undermining daily operations, constraining long-term growth, and increasing financial instability through reduced innovation, diminished market competitiveness, and higher executive turnover. Although men and women are both part of the U.S. workforce, ongoing gaps in leadership representation highlight persistent challenges in developing strong leadership pipelines. Prior research indicated that women and underrepresented groups remain significantly underrepresented in executive leadership roles, limiting organizations' access to diverse perspectives that are critical for innovation and competitiveness.

The specific business problem is that some business leaders lack effective succession planning strategies to ensure a diverse leadership team and maintain market competitiveness. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative, pragmatic inquiry research project was to identify and explore effective succession planning strategies used by business leaders to ensure a diverse leadership team and maintain market competitiveness. This study contributes to the literature by addressing the gap between succession planning theory and practice and by providing actionable strategies grounded in real-world organizational experiences.

2. Literature Review

Succession planning is a strategic process used by organizational leaders to identify, develop, and prepare individuals to assume key leadership roles. It supports business continuity, mitigates operational risk, and ensures long-term organizational resilience. Despite its recognized importance, many organizations lack formalized succession frameworks, leaving them vulnerable to leadership disruptions and strategic instability (Groves, 2007).

Scholarly literature highlights three key dimensions of succession planning. First, leadership continuity and risk mitigation emphasize the importance of preparing qualified leaders to reduce disruptions and maintain organizational performance. Second, talent pipeline development and employee engagement demonstrate that structured leadership development enhances employee motivation, retention, and organizational commitment (Maroga et al., 2024). Third, governance integration and strategic alignment highlight the need to embed succession planning within organizational strategy and board-level oversight to ensure long-term sustainability.

Research also indicates that organizations with formal succession planning programs are more likely to retain high-potential employees and maintain competitive advantage (Society for Human Resource Management, 2024). Conversely, organizations that rely on informal succession processes are more susceptible to leadership gaps and performance challenges.

2.1. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual foundation for this research project is grounded in Groves' (2007) succession planning theory, which emphasizes the integration of leadership development and succession planning as a strategic process for identifying, developing, and retaining leadership talent within organizations. This perspective highlights the importance of structured leadership pipelines, mentorship, and talent identification in ensuring leadership continuity and organizational sustainability.

Complementing this framework, the theory of buyer behavior developed by Howard and Sheth (1969) provides a behavioral lens for understanding how employees interpret and respond to leadership development initiatives, suggesting that individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and decision-making behaviors are shaped by environmental inputs and organizational signals. Within this study, this theoretical lens supports the examination of how employees perceive leadership opportunities, access to mentorship, and fairness in succession planning processes.

2.1.1. Succession Planning Theory

Groves (2007) reconceptualized succession planning as a strategic and developmental process rather than a reactive replacement mechanism. Earlier models of succession planning often focused narrowly on identifying successors for key leadership roles, treating the process as a contingency plan. Groves advanced the field by embedding succession planning into the broader context of leadership development and organizational culture, thereby shifting the emphasis from replacement to pipeline cultivation.

Groves' (2007) succession planning theory incorporates the concept of pipeline cultivation with a focus on development. The model emphasizes aligning leadership development strategies, including mentoring, coaching, and action learning, with succession planning processes. Groves also emphasized performance-based identification of talent, ensuring that potential leaders are selected through systematic evaluation of competencies. Another critical construct is strategic alignment, which requires succession planning to be directly tied to the organization's mission and vision. Finally, Groves highlighted environmental responsiveness, recognizing that demographic shifts, globalization, and competitive pressures shape the urgency and design of succession strategies.

In my research project, the succession planning theory serves as the primary conceptual anchor. The research problem—to identify and explore effective succession planning strategies used by business leaders to ensure a diverse leadership team and maintain market competitiveness—aligns directly with its emphasis on embedding leadership development into organizational strategy. Groves (2007) succession planning theory guided coding and analysis of interview data to understand how leaders build internal pipelines, mentor talent, and align succession planning with long-term goals.

Contemporary literature affirms the enduring relevance of Groves' succession planning theory. Research on succession planning has consistently demonstrated its importance in supporting leadership continuity, organizational effectiveness, and long-term business performance. Scholars have emphasized that organizations implementing structured succession-planning strategies are better positioned to sustain service delivery, strengthen firm performance, and address leadership demands within increasingly competitive global environments (Bano et al., 2022; Obianuju et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023). Collectively, these studies extend Groves work by connecting succession planning to organizational resilience, diversity initiatives, and long-term competitiveness.

2.1.2. Theory of Buyer Behavior

While Groves' (2007) succession planning theory provides a structural framework, Howard and Sheth's (1969) theory of buyer behavior offers a complementary behavioral perspective. Originally developed to explain consumer decision-making, the model describes how individuals process stimuli, interpret information, and make choices based on perceptual, learning, and social constructs. Although designed for consumer markets, the theory has been adapted to organizational contexts, including employee and stakeholder decision-making (Howard & Sheth, 1969).

The evolution of buyer behavior models reflects a shift from rational, economic decision-making models to more nuanced frameworks that incorporate psychological, emotional, and social influences; later adaptations emphasize the roles of symbolic cues, trust, and cultural context in shaping adoption behaviors (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Emotional marketing research, for instance, underscores how affective appeals and brand sentimentality can override rational evaluation, reinforcing the importance of emotional resonance in shaping consumer and employee behavior. This evolution makes the model particularly relevant for organizational studies, where employee perceptions, emotional investment, and cultural dynamics often determine the success or failure of change initiatives.

The constructs of the theory of buyer behavior model include input variables, such as leadership communication and organizational policies; perceptual constructs, including bias, interpretation, and selective attention; learning constructs, which reflect past experiences and reinforcement mechanisms; output variables, such as behavioral responses including adoption or resistance; and exogenous variables, encompassing social, cultural, and situational influences (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). These constructions provide a basis for analyzing employees' perceptions and responses to succession planning initiatives.

In this study, the buyer behavior model conceptualizes employees and stakeholders as buyers of succession planning strategies. Even the most robust succession plan will fail if stakeholders perceive it as unfair, exclusionary, or disconnected from organizational culture. Constructs associated with the Howard-Sheth theory of buyer behavior, such as perceptual filters and learning mechanisms, are particularly relevant for understanding how employees interpret succession-planning initiatives, develop trust in leadership processes, and respond to organizational culture during leadership transitions (Howard & Sheth, 1969). The behavioral perspective proposed by Howard and Sheth complements Groves' (2007) succession-planning framework by explaining not only how succession-planning systems are structured, but also how employees perceive, interpret, and engage with those practices within organizational settings.

The theory of buyer behavior continues to be widely applied in contemporary consumer and organizational research. Studies examining digital and emotionally driven decision-making contexts have emphasized the influence of symbolic cues, affective appeals, and emotional engagement on consumer purchasing behavior (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Meanwhile, Meng et al. (2023) employed behavioral frameworks to explore leadership and team adaptation, demonstrating the model's relevance in organizational settings. Collectively, these applications underscore the model's adaptability in environments where a dynamic interplay of rational evaluation, emotional investment, and cultural symbolism influences decision-making.

Taken together, Groves' (2007) succession planning theory and Howard and Sheth's (1969) theory of buyer behavior provide a dual-lens conceptual framework for my research project. Groves' theory explains the structural and strategic imperatives of succession planning, while Howard and Sheth's model captures the behavioral dynamics of stakeholder adoption. Integrating the two theories enabled me to address both the supply side of succession planning (the development of leadership pipelines) and the demand side (stakeholder perceptions and engagement). This dual perspective is essential for understanding not only how organizations prepare for leadership continuity but also how employees and stakeholders perceive and legitimize those efforts.

3. Methodology

The researchers used a qualitative research approach to allow for an in-depth exploration of the complex experiences and perspectives of business leaders regarding succession planning strategies. Effective succession planning strategies are defined as organizational practices used to identify, develop, and prepare employees for future leadership roles while supporting leadership continuity, workforce diversity, and long-term organizational sustainability. These practices may include leadership development programs, mentoring relationships, talent identification processes, leadership readiness assessments, and succession initiatives aligned with organizational governance. During the interviews, effective succession planning strategies were identified through participants' descriptions of leadership development activities, mentoring experiences, internal promotion practices, diversity-related efforts, and succession planning processes used within their organizations. Secondary sources, including organizational reports, leadership development publications, and industry documents, were reviewed to provide additional context and corroborate participants' accounts of succession planning practices.

Market competitiveness is defined as an organization's ability to sustain performance, respond to changing business conditions, maintain stakeholder confidence, attract and retain talent, and achieve strategic objectives within its industry. Evidence of market competitiveness emerged through participants' discussions of organizational performance, leadership continuity, innovation, employee retention, stakeholder engagement, and responses to market challenges. Secondary data sources were also examined to identify evidence of leadership effectiveness, organizational sustainability, workforce development initiatives, and strategic performance outcomes that supported participants' descriptions of organizational competitiveness.

Qualitative inquiry is especially suitable when the goal is to understand human behavior, organizational practices, and contextual factors in detail, rather than to measure outcomes. Qualitative research offers a nuanced approach to examining lived realities and diverse perspectives, making it well-suited to studying leadership development and organizational resilience (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). A pragmatic inquiry design emphasizes practical problem-solving and the creation of actionable knowledge. Pragmatic inquiry focuses on usefulness and results, aligning research with the practical needs of organizations (Patton, 2014). The combination of qualitative methodology and pragmatic inquiry ensures that this project provides methodologically sound insights that are directly useful in addressing the current business issue of succession-planning gaps.

The population for this research included business leaders and organizational decision-makers from various industries who were directly responsible for succession planning or leadership development. The participant group consisted of 10 business leaders representing organizations from the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. Participants came from a variety of industries, including healthcare, education, nonprofit services, consulting, manufacturing, and professional services. The organizations ranged from small businesses to larger regional and national organizations with varying leadership structures and workforce sizes. Several participants managed geographically dispersed teams operating across multiple states or international locations. Participants were recruited through professional networking platforms, including LinkedIn, professional associations, organizational contacts, and the researcher's professional network. Prior to participation, each individual was screened to ensure they met the eligibility criteria, which required direct responsibility for succession planning, leadership development, talent management, or executive-level decision-making related to leadership continuity within their organizations. This screening process ensured that all participants possessed relevant experience and could provide meaningful insights into succession-planning strategies.

Eligibility criteria required that participants: 1) held leadership or executive roles overseeing succession efforts, 2) represented organizations that had implemented or attempted succession strategies, and 3) could provide detailed insights into the challenges and practices related to developing leadership pipelines.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify the research participants. Criterion sampling was applied to select the 10 business leaders for the research study based on specific eligibility criteria directly related to the research question. The inclusion of ten participants provided an appropriate balance between breadth and depth, supporting comprehensive exploration and ensuring data saturation.

The doctoral research project was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles and the requirements established by Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Before participating, each individual received an informed consent form that explained the purpose of the doctoral research project, participation requirements, confidentiality protections, potential risks and benefits, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the doctoral research project at any time without penalty.

To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms (Participant 1 through Participant 10) were assigned, and all identifying information was removed from interview transcripts, notes, and research records. Interview recordings, transcripts, and supporting documents were stored on password-protected and encrypted devices accessible only to the researcher. Consistent with Walden University guidelines, IRB approval was obtained before the research commenced, all research materials will be retained for 5 years following completion of the doctoral research project and then securely destroyed.

The researchers used semi-structured interviews for the data-collection process. An interview protocol was used to ensure consistency across interviews with each participant. Additionally, secondary data from publicly available sources was collected .

Secondary data were drawn from published industry reports, company websites, and organizational statements, including annual and quarterly reports and employee turnover data. These secondary sources provided additional context and served as supporting evidence, enhancing the credibility of the findings.

Braun and Clarke's six-step process was the thematic analysis process used: 1) familiarizing myself with the data by immersing myself in transcripts, 2) generating initial codes to capture important features, 3) searching for themes by grouping codes into broader categories, 4) reviewing themes to ensure they accurately reflected the dataset, 5) defining and naming themes to express their core ideas, and 6) producing the report with illustrative participant quotes. This step-by-step process provided a clear framework for moving from raw data to meaningful insights.

Microsoft Word and Excel was used to facilitate a systematic cataloging coding, mind-mapping of codes, and theme recognition and development. Reflexive memos were maintained to document analytic decisions and researchers' positionality, ensuring transparency and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Emerging themes were compared with the conceptual framework and correlated with current literature. For example, themes such as leadership continuity, organizational resilience, and inclusivity aligned with succession planning. Recent scholarship has emphasized employee development and engagement as critical strategies for strengthening succession-planning practices and supporting organizational continuity (Anos, 2025). Similarly, Paredes-Saavedra et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of leadership practices and structured work environments, which aligned with participant narratives highlighting leadership development and its influence on organizational performance.

To ensure reliability in this research, we followed the established interview protocols and continued data collection until saturation. This process ensured that the findings were thorough and represented the full range of perspectives on succession planning strategies. Credibility was enhanced through member checking. There were no discrepancies between the researchers' interpretations and the participants' responses.

Credibility was enhanced through member checks, which allowed participants to review transcripts and initial interpretations to verify accuracy and authenticity. This process ensured that the results stayed true to participants' intended meanings and minimized the chance of researcher bias.

Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of organizational settings, participant roles, and succession planning practices, enabling readers to assess whether the findings could be applied to similar organizational environments. A structured interview protocol documented analytic decisions, and an audit trail of coding and theme development was maintained to ensure dependability.

Confirmability was established through methodological triangulation which was achieved through the comparison of interview data with existing scholarly literature and industry reports, which helped corroborate findings across multiple sources. Reflexivity also supported confirmability, as the researchers maintained reflective notes to acknowledge positionality and minimize bias in interpretation.

The researchers employed Holsti's method of intercoder reliability assessment. This approach measures the consistency and trustworthiness of the coding process by comparing the degree to which multiple coders assign the same codes to the same data units, providing a quantitative measure of coding reliability within the qualitative research framework.

The intercoder reliability process involved two experienced researchers independently coding a subset of the interview transcripts using the established coding framework. Following Holsti's method, reliability was calculated (Holsti, 1969).

4. Findings

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to identify and explore effective succession planning strategies used by business leaders to ensure a diverse leadership team and maintain market competitiveness. Thematic analysis of data collected from 10 participants revealed four major themes: 1) strategic leadership development and mentorship, 2) intentional diversity and inclusion in leadership pipelines, 3) organizational alignment and governance support, and 4) measurement and continuous improvement of succession planning strategies. The overarching research question guiding this study was "What effective succession planning strategies do business leaders use to ensure a diverse leadership team and maintain market competitiveness?"

Sources of data included semistructured interviews with 10 participants and secondary corroborating evidence from publicly available documents, leadership development reports, and industry publications related to succession planning practices. Each participant held a leadership role within their organization and had direct experience implementing or overseeing succession planning initiatives. These secondary sources provided additional context for interpreting participant responses and strengthened the credibility of the findings by corroborating the strategies described by participants. Public organizational reports and industry leadership publications similarly highlighted leadership development, inclusive leadership practices, strategic alignment, and leadership evaluation as key mechanisms organizations use to strengthen leadership pipelines and maintain organizational competitiveness.

Interview data were transcribed using Microsoft Word, and pseudonyms were assigned to maintain participant anonymity and confidentiality. Participants are referred to throughout the research project as Participant 1 through Participant 10. ATLAS.ti was used to support manual coding and thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. During the first phase of analysis, each transcript was reviewed multiple times to identify meaningful statements related to succession planning strategies. Initial codes were assigned to recurring concepts within participant responses. These codes reflected frequently mentioned concepts such as leadership training, mentoring relationships, inclusive leadership development, governance alignment, and leadership performance evaluation.

Through an iterative process of reviewing and comparing coded data, these codes were grouped into broader categories representing patterns across participant experiences. **Table 1** illustrates the relationship between the codes and the themes that emerged during the analysis. Following the coding process, thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to qualitative data analysis. This process involved reviewing coded data segments, identifying patterns across participant responses, and organizing those patterns into overarching themes that addressed the research question.

Table 1. Codes and corresponding themes identified during data analysis.

Theme	Representative Codes
Strategic leadership development and mentorship	leadership training programs, mentoring relationships, leadership pipeline development, coaching future leaders, talent identification
Intentional diversity and inclusion in leadership pipelines	inclusive leadership initiatives, equitable advancement opportunities, diverse candidate identification, and representation in leadership roles
Organizational alignment and governance support	executive leadership commitment, strategic planning alignment, governance oversight, cross-department collaboration
Measurement and continuous improvement of succession planning	leadership readiness assessment, internal promotion tracking, employee engagement feedback, program evaluation

Note. Codes were derived from recurring concepts identified during thematic analysis of semi structured interview transcripts from 10 participants. Codes were grouped into categories and refined into themes using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process.

The analysis revealed four major themes representing the strategies business leaders use to develop leadership pipelines, promote inclusive leadership practices, align succession planning with organizational strategy, and evaluate leadership development initiatives. Table 2 highlights the major themes, the number of participants who referenced each theme, and the number of references associated with each theme. Collectively, these findings indicate that effective succession planning strategies involve a multifaceted organizational approach that integrates leadership development initiatives, inclusive leadership practices, governance alignment, and ongoing evaluation of leadership readiness.

Table 2. Major themes identified from participant interviews.

Theme	Participants Referencing Theme	Number of References
Strategic leadership development and mentorship	10	28
Intentional diversity and inclusion in leadership pipelines	9	24
Organizational alignment and governance support	8	19
Measurement and continuous improvement of succession planning	7	16

Note. Participants are referenced as Participant 1 through Participant 10. The number of references reflects the frequency with which participants discussed concepts associated with each theme during semistructured interviews.

The findings align with the conceptual frameworks guiding this research project. Groves' (2007) succession planning theory emphasized the intentional development of internal leadership pipelines through structured leadership development initiatives, mentoring relationships, and systematic talent identification processes that prepare employees for future leadership roles. Participants' descriptions of mentorship programs, leadership training initiatives, collaborative leadership structures, and leadership readiness assessments illustrate how organizations operationalize these theoretical principles.

The findings also aligned with the Howard & Sheth (1969) theory of buyer behavior, which provided a framework for understanding how individuals process organizational stimuli to develop specific attitudes and behavioral responses. When applied to succession planning, the Howard-Sheth theory suggests that employees act as internal stakeholders who process leadership initiatives through perceptual filters—specifically, those of fairness, transparency, and opportunity.

Data from this study regarding mentorship programs and inclusive practices illustrate how specific organizational inputs, such as leadership support and structured training, directly shape these internal learning processes. Ultimately, as Howard and Sheth (1969) posited in their work on consumer behavior, these cognitive evaluations determine the degree to which employees are willing to commit to leadership development and engage in long-term succession planning initiatives.

The results of this study aligned with established scholarship regarding succession planning and leadership development. Rothwell (2016) originally established that integrating leadership development and evaluation into succession systems is vital for organizational resilience. This perspective is further supported by Jackson and Dunn-Jensen (2021), who highlighted the need for governance alignment, and by Kamali et al. (2024), who emphasized the role of diversity initiatives in sustaining leadership continuity. While the current findings confirm these foundational conclusions, they extend the literature by illustrating how business leaders practically operationalize these strategies through mentorship, inclusive practices, and the continuous evaluation of leadership readiness.

Taken together, these findings illustrate how succession planning functions as both a strategic and behavioral organizational process. From a strategic perspective, the themes demonstrate how organizations build leadership pipelines through structured leadership development initiatives, inclusive talent identification practices, and aligned governance. From a behavioral perspective, the findings highlight how employees interpret and respond to leadership development opportunities, influenced by organizational communication, access to mentorship, and perceptions of fairness. This dual perspective underscores the value of integrating succession planning theory with the Howard-Sheth theory of buyer behavior to understand how leadership pipelines are both designed and experienced within organizations. By combining these perspectives, the findings provide a more comprehensive explanation of how succession planning strategies are implemented and adopted in practice. For business practitioners, this integration suggests that effective succession planning requires not only structural systems for leadership development but also organizational cultures that promote transparency, inclusiveness, and stakeholder engagement.

Table 3 presents the data saturation summary for this qualitative pragmatic inquiry and illustrates the progression of coding across the ten participant interviews. Data saturation was achieved when additional data collection no longer yielded new codes or meaningful insights, indicating that the phenomenon had been sufficiently explored (Saldaña, 2021; Yin, 2018). As shown in **Table 3**, the number of new codes decreased progressively with each interview, reflecting increasing convergence in participant responses.

Table 3. Data saturation summary.

Interview Number	New Codes Identified	Cumulative Codes	Saturation Status
Interview 1	8	8	No saturation
Interview 2	5	13	No saturation
Interview 3	4	17	No saturation
Interview 4	3	20	No saturation

Continued

Interview 5	2	22	Approaching saturation
Interview 6	1	23	Saturation reached
Interview 7	0	23	No new codes
Interview 8	0	23	No new codes
Interview 9	0	23	No new codes
Interview 10	0	23	No new codes

Note. Data saturation was reached after Interview 6, when no new codes emerged. Interviews 7 through 10 confirmed thematic consistency across participants.

During the initial interviews, a higher number of new codes emerged, capturing a broad range of participant perspectives. Eight new codes were identified in Interview 1, followed by five and four new codes in Interviews 2 and 3, respectively. As data collection continued, the number of new codes declined, with three codes identified in Interview 4, two in Interview 5, and one in Interview 6. This pattern indicates that key concepts were identified and that subsequent interviews reinforced existing findings rather than generating new insights.

Data saturation was reached at Interview 6, after which no additional codes were identified. Interviews 7 through 10 confirmed thematic consistency, as no new concepts emerged and participant responses aligned with previously identified patterns. This outcome is consistent with qualitative research standards, which suggest that saturation occurs when further data collection produces redundancy rather than novel insights (Saldaña, 2021). The absence of new codes in the final interviews strengthens the credibility and dependability of the findings.

In total, 23 cumulative codes were identified and consistently observed across the dataset. The systematic decline in new codes and the stabilization of coding after Interview 6 provide evidence that the sample size was sufficient to fully explore the research question. **Table 3**, therefore, serves as a transparent audit trail of the data saturation process and supports the study's trustworthiness by demonstrating that the identified themes are grounded in repeated, consistent participant responses.

4.1. Theme 1: Strategic Leadership Development and Mentorship

The first theme that emerged from the thematic analysis was strategic leadership development and mentorship. Analysis of the interview data revealed that leadership development strategies, including mentorship, leadership training, collaborative decision-making, and talent identification, were consistently described by participants as essential practices for preparing future leaders and sustaining organizational competitiveness. One hundred percent of participants cited leadership development initiatives as a critical component of effective succession planning strategies. These strategies included mentoring emerging leaders, providing experiential leadership opportunities, identifying leadership talent within organizations, and fostering collaborative leadership structures that support organizational learning and knowledge transfer.

Participants described leadership development as an intentional organizational process through which leaders cultivate leadership competencies, transfer institutional knowledge, and prepare employees to assume future leadership roles. Seventy percent of participants emphasized mentorship as an important mechanism for developing leadership talent. Public leadership development reports highlighted the importance of internal growth structures. For instance, Deloitte (2023) noted that organizations implementing mentoring programs and leadership training initiatives are more likely to maintain leadership continuity. The Society for Human Resource Management (2023) emphasized that structured talent development and career advancement systems play a critical role in retaining high-potential employees and supporting long-term organizational sustainability. These reports emphasized that leadership development programs strengthen internal leadership pipelines and improve organizational resilience during leadership transitions.

Participant 1 emphasized the importance of knowledge sharing and transparency when preparing employees for leadership roles. Participant 1 explained that leaders should ensure employees understand the broader organizational context and strategic objectives. According to Participant 1.

Within my teams, I usually make sure that we have the type of knowledge that I have… I'm usually very open and transparent with what's going on with the company… making sure that the team is not just focused on getting tasks done but understanding the bigger picture.

This response illustrates how leaders facilitate leadership development by sharing institutional knowledge and helping employees understand how their responsibilities contribute to broader strategic goals.

Participant 2 emphasized the importance of relationship-building and understanding the needs of diverse stakeholders in leadership development. Participant 2 stated, "I focus on building relationships and understanding the diverse, unique needs of the people I serve—that's what makes this effective." This perspective highlights how relational leadership and stakeholder awareness contribute to effective leadership development strategies.

Participant 3 described leadership development as a process of identifying employees' strengths and aligning their competencies with organizational initiatives. Participant 3 explained, "The first step was to identify, first, the talent within my team… I try to make sure that I get to know everybody individually, understand their competencies, and know what they are good at." This response demonstrates how leaders cultivate leadership potential by recognizing individual strengths and providing opportunities for employees to contribute meaningfully to organizational initiatives.

Participants also emphasized evaluating leadership representation as part of leadership development and succession planning. Participant 4 noted the importance of assessing leadership equity within organizations, stating, "Looking at where we are currently right now… how equitable are we when it comes to our leadership… and if we don't have that diversity, then asking ourselves why." Similarly, Participant 5 emphasized the importance of reviewing leadership pipelines to ensure alignment with organizational values and diversity goals. These responses illustrate how leaders may evaluate leadership representation to identify barriers to advancement and strengthen leadership development initiatives.

Participant 6 described leadership development as beginning with recruitment practices that prioritize competencies and professional potential. Participant 6 explained that leaders must identify individuals who possess strong technical abilities and the potential to grow into leadership roles. Participant 7 described leadership development within a collaborative governance framework, noting that leadership teams may include both organizational staff and community members who contribute to decision-making. These collaborative leadership structures allow organizations to incorporate diverse perspectives into strategic decisions.

Participants also emphasized networking and outreach strategies for identifying emerging leadership talent. Participant 8 explained that organizations may collaborate with other institutions to identify potential leaders, stating, "We made sure to meet with similar organizations to find out really what 'talent' they had in their pipeline." Participant 9 emphasized the importance of communicating organizational vision and leadership expectations to ensure employees understand organizational goals and leadership opportunities. Lastly, Participant 10 described mentorship and sponsorship as key mechanisms for preparing future leaders, explaining, "I mentor people and sometimes sponsor them for opportunities." These responses highlight how mentorship relationships help employees develop leadership competencies and build professional networks that support leadership advancement.

These findings align with Groves' (2007) succession planning theory, which conceptualizes succession planning as a developmental process that integrates leadership development initiatives with strategic talent management. Groves emphasized that organizations should intentionally cultivate internal leadership pipelines through mentoring, leadership training, and performance-based talent identification rather than relying on reactive leadership replacement strategies. Participants' descriptions of mentorship programs, leadership training initiatives, and talent identification processes illustrate how organizations operationalize these theoretical constructs in practice.

The study's findings align with the Howard & Sheth (1969) theory of buyer behavior, which provides a robust framework for understanding how individuals process organizational stimuli to form specific attitudes and behavioral responses. In the human resources context, employees act as internal stakeholders who interpret succession planning initiatives through distinct perceptual filters, including fairness, transparency, and perceived opportunity. According to Howard and Sheth, environmental inputs—such as mentoring programs, leadership training, and transparent communication—serve as the primary stimuli shaping an individual's internal learning constructs. The current findings demonstrate that these experiences directly influence an employee's willingness to engage in leadership development or pursue high-level roles within the organization. Furthermore, participants' emphasis on mentorship and leadership exposure illustrates how these specific organizational inputs refine attitudes toward the leadership pipeline, ultimately driving active participation in formal succession planning.

The study's findings align with established research on integrating leadership development and succession planning. For instance, Rothwell (2016) and Jackson and Dunn-Jensen (2021) demonstrated that organizations integrating these two systems are significantly better positioned to sustain leadership continuity and organizational resilience. Further supporting this connection, Kamali et al. (2024) highlighted that talent identification, and development initiatives remain critical components of effective succession strategies across diverse industries. While these findings confirm that leadership development strengthens overall readiness and competitiveness, they also extend current scholarship. Specifically, this project illustrates how practitioners move beyond theoretical frameworks to operationalize succession planning through active mentorship relationships, collaborative leadership structures, and intentional knowledge-sharing practices.

Collectively, these findings indicate that leadership development initiatives, specifically mentorship, training, and transparent communication, establish the necessary foundation for effective succession planning. This process shapes employee perceptions of leadership opportunities and encourages active participation in the leadership pipeline. These results are consistent with the succession planning framework established by Groves (2007), which emphasizes the integration of leadership development and succession systems. Furthermore, the findings align with the Howard & Sheth (1969) theory of buyer behavior, which clarifies how organizational stimuli influence internal psychological constructs and subsequent behavioral engagement. Together, these theoretical lenses provide the groundwork for the following theme, which examines how organizations intentionally cultivate diversity and inclusion within their leadership pipelines.

4.2. Theme 2: Intentional Diversity and Inclusion in Leadership Pipelines

The second theme that emerged from the thematic analysis was intentional diversity and inclusion in leadership pipelines. Analysis of the interview data revealed that participants viewed diversity as a critical element of effective succession planning strategies. Participants emphasized that leadership teams incorporating diverse perspectives are better positioned to understand stakeholders, respond to organizational challenges, and improve decision-making. One hundred percent of the participants referenced diversity or inclusive leadership practices when describing strategies used to ensure effective succession planning and maintain market competitiveness. Participants described diversity not only in terms of demographic representation but also in relation to cultural awareness, community engagement, professional perspectives, and inclusive leadership practices. One hundred percent of participants emphasized that intentionally cultivating diverse leadership pipelines strengthens organizational decision-making and organizational performance.

From a behavioral perspective, these findings align with the Howard & Sheth (1969) theory of buyer behavior, which describes how individuals process organizational stimuli through perceptual filters shaped by social influences and prior experiences. Within the workplace, employees and stakeholders evaluate leadership initiatives—such as succession planning and diversity programs—based on whether these "inputs" are perceived as fair and inclusive. Recent empirical research has demonstrated that inclusive leadership practices foster psychological safety and strengthen organizational identification, reinforcing behavioral learning and engagement processes that align with the internal learning constructs described by Howard and Sheth (1969) (Lv et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2025). When employees perceive leadership opportunities as accessible and transparent, they are more likely to participate in development initiatives. This study's participants further illustrated this process, emphasizing that stakeholder engagement and inclusive communication are vital organizational inputs that shape employee attitudes and ultimately encourage participation in the leadership pipeline.

Participant 1 emphasized that diversity strengthens organizational decision-making, as individuals with diverse experiences provide valuable insights when addressing complex organizational issues. Participant 1 explained, "I'm usually very open and transparent with what's going on with the company… making sure that the team understands the bigger picture." This response suggests that inclusive leadership practices involve ensuring employees understand organizational goals and feel empowered to contribute diverse perspectives to decision-making. From the perspective of buyer behavior theory, transparent leadership communication functions as an organizational stimulus, influencing how employees interpret leadership opportunities and shaping their willingness to engage with leadership development initiatives.

Participant 2 emphasized that leaders must understand the diverse communities and stakeholders they serve when developing leadership strategies. Participant 2 stated, "Understanding the people that you're serving and their unique needs and the diversity of the people that you serve… that's what makes this effective." This response highlights how culturally informed leadership strategies strengthen organizational responsiveness to community needs. Within the buyer behavior framework, employees and stakeholders interpret leadership initiatives through social and cultural contexts; therefore, leaders who demonstrate cultural awareness and responsiveness are more likely to build trust and encourage engagement in organizational initiatives.

Participant 3 described diversity within leadership pipelines as resulting from intentionally identifying employees with diverse perspectives and experiences.

Participant 3 explained, "Fortunately, enough, my team is a diverse team… I have a team that is UK-based, and I also have a team that is offshore… teams scattered around the world." This response suggests that geographically and culturally diverse teams contribute multiple perspectives that enhance strategic decision-making. From the perspective of buyer behavior theory, exposure to diverse perspectives also influences how individuals interpret organizational initiatives, shaping collective learning processes and reinforcing inclusive organizational cultures.

Participants also emphasized the importance of evaluating leadership representation within organizations. Participant 4 explained, "Looking at where we are currently right now… how equitable are we when it comes to our leadership… and if we don't have that diversity, then asking ourselves why." Similarly, Participant 5 emphasized the importance of assessing leadership structures to ensure alignment with diversity goals, stating that leaders must evaluate leadership representation and determine how organizations can improve opportunities for advancement. These responses suggest that organizational leaders intentionally evaluate leadership pipelines to identify barriers that may influence employees' perceptions of fairness and opportunity. Within the buyer behavior framework, such evaluations influence perceptual constructions, shaping whether employees interpret succession planning initiatives as equitable and credible.

Participant 6 noted that although skills are essential in hiring decisions, organizations benefit from leadership teams with diverse viewpoints. Participant 6 explained, "What is your skill set? Are you trainable? Because everything is hands-on… I need the best person that has experience." This response illustrates how leadership recruitment may balance competency-based selection with broader organizational goals of cultivating diverse leadership teams. Participant 7 described diversity within leadership teams through governance structures that include community stakeholders.

Participant 7 explained, "My current leadership team consists of a board of 12 members… comprised of staff at the clinic as well as members of the community itself." Including community members in governance structures enables leadership decisions to reflect the needs of diverse populations and reinforces stakeholder engagement.

Participants also emphasized the importance of intentional recruitment and outreach initiatives. Participant 8 explained, "We were very intentional during the interview process to ensure our resources reached diverse organizations… for example, the Urban League and other community organizations." Participant 9 similarly noted that leadership recruitment often occurs through diverse professional networks and community relationships, stating, "I look within my sphere of influence… which is diverse… and ask persons that have the appropriate skill sets." These responses illustrate how leaders intentionally leverage networks and outreach strategies to identify diverse leadership candidates. From the perspective of buyer behavior theory, these strategies function as organizational signals, reinforcing perceptions that leadership opportunities are inclusive and accessible.

Finally, Participant 10 highlighted mentorship and sponsorship as key strategies that help individuals from diverse backgrounds gain leadership opportunities. Participant 10 explained, "I mentor people and sometimes sponsor them for opportunities." Mentorship initiatives serve as learning mechanisms that influence how employees interpret leadership opportunities and develop confidence in pursuing leadership roles. Within the buyer behavior model, mentorship experiences reinforce learning constructs that shape employees' attitudes toward leadership advancement and strengthen engagement with succession planning initiatives.

One hundred percent of the participants agreed that deliberate diversity and inclusion are essential for effective succession planning. It was noted that organizations can enhance leadership development by recruiting from diverse backgrounds, assessing current leadership representation, instituting inclusive leadership initiatives, and expanding mentorship opportunities for aspiring leaders. These strategies not only strengthen leadership pipelines but also influence how employees and stakeholders perceive leadership opportunities. When employees perceive leadership development initiatives as equitable and inclusive, they are more likely to support organizational strategies and participate in leadership pathways.

These findings also align with Groves' (2007) succession planning theory, which emphasizes systematic talent identification and leadership development as mechanisms for building sustainable leadership pipelines. Integrating Groves' structural framework with the behavioral insights of buyer behavior theory provides a more comprehensive understanding of succession planning strategies. Groves' theory explains how organizations design leadership development systems, while buyer behavior theory explains how employees and stakeholders interpret and respond to those initiatives. Together, these perspectives suggest that effective succession planning requires both structural leadership development systems and organizational cultures that encourage employee engagement with leadership opportunities.

Participants consistently emphasized that intentionally developing inclusive leadership pipelines improve organizational decision-making, strengthen stakeholder engagement, and support long-term organizational competitiveness. This emphasis on diversity-focused leadership strategies highlights the importance of integrating inclusive recruitment, mentorship, and stakeholder engagement into succession planning systems. Building on these findings, the next theme explores organizational alignment and governance support, examining how leadership development initiatives are reinforced through strategic organizational structures and governance frameworks that sustain long-term commitment to leadership development and succession planning.

4.3. Theme 3: Organizational Alignment and Governance Support

The third theme identified through thematic analysis was organizational alignment and governance support. Participants underscored the need to align succession planning with established organizational goals, leadership structures, and governance frameworks. Specifically, 80% of participants explicitly emphasized that leadership development initiatives must align with overarching organizational priorities. The remaining participants addressed the functional drivers of this alignment, emphasizing the importance of transparent communication, leadership accountability, and collaborative decision-making.

Participants indicated that succession planning strategies achieve maximum efficacy when they are not treated as isolated but are instead integrated into broader organizational systems. They further noted that these strategies require the backing of leadership and governance structures to provide a clear guide for decision-making and strategic priorities. These findings are consistent with Rothwell's (2016) research, which suggested that succession planning is most successful when leadership development is strategically aligned with the organization's mission. Furthermore, Groves (2007) and Jackson and Dunn-Jensen (2021) noted that such initiatives must be reinforced by governance systems that maintain leadership accountability and focus on long-term institutional objectives.

Participants explained that organizational alignment ensures leadership development initiatives accurately reflect the organization's long-term mission, operational goals, and stakeholder expectations. Within this framework, participants emphasized that leaders must clearly communicate the organizational vision, evaluate employee competencies, and ensure that governance systems actively support leadership development practices. These leadership actions can be analyzed through the lens of Howard and Sheth's (1969) theory of buyer behavior, who posited that such actions function as organizational stimuli. These stimuli directly influence how employees interpret leadership opportunities and organizational priorities. According to Howard and Sheth (1969), individuals interpret organizational initiatives through perceptual filters shaped by prior experiences, communication, and social influences. When leaders communicate organizational priorities with clarity and align leadership development initiatives with strategic goals, employees are more likely to perceive those initiatives as credible and meaningful. Consequently, this alignment of organizational stimuli can positively influence an employee's willingness to engage in leadership development opportunities.

Participant 1 emphasized that leadership alignment begins with transparency and communication between leaders and employees. Participant 1 explained that leaders must ensure employees understand the broader organizational vision and how their responsibilities contribute to strategic goals. Participant 1 stated, within my teams, I usually make sure that we have the type of knowledge that I have. I'm usually very open and transparent with what's going on with the company… making sure that the team is not just focused on getting tasks done but understanding the bigger picture.

Participant 1's response suggests that organizational alignment may be strengthened when leaders openly communicate organizational priorities and provide employees with opportunities to understand how their work supports the organization's long-term direction. Within the buyer behavior framework, transparent communication influences employees' perceptual constructs, shaping how they interpret leadership initiatives and organizational expectations.

Participant 2 similarly emphasized the importance of aligning leadership strategies with the needs of the organization's stakeholders and the communities it serves. Participant 2 explained, "Understanding the people that you're serving and their unique needs and the diversity of the people that you serve… that's what makes this effective." Participant 2's response indicates that leadership alignment may require leaders to consider the diverse perspectives and needs of the communities they serve when developing organizational strategies. In the context of buyer behavior theory, leaders who demonstrate awareness of stakeholder needs may strengthen organizational credibility and trust, influencing how employees and stakeholders respond to leadership initiatives.

Participant 3 described organizational alignment as a process of understanding employees' competencies and aligning those strengths with organizational initiatives. Participant 3 explained, "The first thing was to identify, first, the talent within my team… I try to make sure that I get to know everybody individually, know what their competence is, and what they are good at." Participant 3's response illustrates how leaders may align employee strengths with organizational objectives when developing leadership pipelines. By recognizing employees' individual capabilities, leaders may assign responsibilities that support organizational goals and leadership development initiatives.

Participant 4 emphasized that organizational alignment requires leaders to intentionally evaluate leadership structures and advancement opportunities to ensure they reflect the organization's commitment to equity and leadership development. Participant 4 explained that leaders must examine whether leadership pipelines provide equitable opportunities for employees from diverse backgrounds. Participant 4 stated, "Looking at where we are currently right now… how equitable are we when it comes to our leadership… and if we don't have that diversity, then asking ourselves why." Participant 4 further explained that leadership accountability plays an important role in strengthening succession planning strategies. By evaluating leadership representation and advancement practices, leaders can identify barriers to leadership opportunities and develop strategies that support equitable leadership development. Participant 4's responses suggest that governance oversight and leadership evaluation processes may help organizations maintain alignment between leadership development initiatives and organizational values.

Participant 5 also emphasized the importance of evaluating leadership pipelines to ensure alignment with organizational goals and diversity objectives. Participant 5 explained that leaders must critically assess the organization's representation in leadership and determine whether leadership opportunities are equitably distributed. Participant 5 stated, "How equitable are we currently when it comes to our leadership… and if we don't have that diversity, then assess why we don't." Participant 5 further explained that leadership evaluation processes enable organizations to identify gaps in leadership pipelines and implement strategies to strengthen succession planning initiatives. Participant 5's responses highlight the role of governance systems and leadership accountability in ensuring that leadership development initiatives remain aligned with organizational priorities.

Participant 6 discussed organizational alignment through recruitment and workforce preparation practices. Participant 6 emphasized that leadership development begins by identifying individuals with the competencies needed to support organizational operations. Participant 6 explained, "When it comes down to interviewing, I really don't look at diversity. I'm more interested in your skill set. Are you trainable? Because everything is hands-on… I need the best person that has experience." Participant 6 further explained that aligning workforce competencies with organizational needs helps ensure employees are prepared to perform effectively within their roles. Participant 6's responses suggest that recruitment practices prioritizing skills and training potential may contribute to organizational alignment by ensuring employees possess the capabilities needed to support operational priorities.

Participant 7 described organizational alignment through governance structures that include both organizational staff and community stakeholders. Participant 7 explained that leadership boards may include both members of the organization and members of the surrounding community who contribute to decision-making. Participant 7 stated, "My current leadership team consists of a board of 12 members… comprised of staff at the clinic as well as members of the community itself… the majority of the board are women between the ages of 20 to 64." Participant 7 further explained that governance structures guide strategic decisions through data analysis and performance evaluation, stating, "I help guide decision-making in terms of how we'll improve or what changes we can make towards our services." Participant 7's responses indicate that collaborative governance structures and data-driven decision-making may strengthen organizational alignment by incorporating diverse perspectives into leadership decisions.

Participant 8 emphasized collaborating with external organizations to strengthen leadership pipelines and align leadership development practices across institutions. Participant 8 explained, "We made sure to meet with similar organizations to find out what talent they had in their pipeline… and we were very intentional during the interview process to ensure our resources reached diverse organizations." Participant 8's response suggests that partnerships with external organizations may help leaders identify emerging leadership talent and align leadership development initiatives with broader industry practices.

Participant 9 emphasized the importance of communicating organizational vision to ensure alignment among leadership teams. Participant 9 stated, "I'm all about clarity… ensuring everybody knows the direction in which we're going… ensuring everyone understands their role and responsibilities as we move forward." Participant 9's response highlights how communication may strengthen organizational alignment by ensuring employees understand leadership expectations and organizational priorities. Within the buyer behavior framework, clarity of communication influences how employees interpret organizational initiatives and their role within those initiatives.

Finally, Participant 10 emphasized mentorship and sponsorship as strategies that support organizational alignment by preparing employees for leadership responsibilities. Participant 10 explained, "I mentor people and sometimes sponsor them for opportunities." Participant 10's response suggests that mentorship initiatives may help ensure that leadership development aligns with organizational objectives by preparing employees to assume leadership roles. In their analysis of leadership development, Groves (2007) and Rothwell (2016) similarly indicated that mentorship and sponsorship programs serve as foundational elements that bolster leadership readiness and ensure long-term organizational continuity. As highlighted by Janis (2022), the consistency of findings across the data set indicates a high level of thematic reliability. Throughout the interview process, the repetition of specific concepts signaled that data saturation had been achieved, as no new themes or unique insights emerged during the analysis of the final participant interviews.

Eighty percent of participants' responses indicated that organizational alignment and governance support are essential components of effective succession planning strategies. Participants emphasized that leadership development initiatives are most successful when they are embedded within governance systems, supported by leadership accountability, and aligned with organizational priorities. These findings suggest that organizations that integrate succession planning into broader organizational structures and governance frameworks may be better positioned to sustain leadership continuity and maintain long-term competitiveness.

In addition to aligning succession planning with organizational strategy, the participants also emphasized the importance of evaluating leadership development initiatives to ensure their effectiveness. This emphasis on assessment and evaluation led to the emergence of the fourth theme: measurement and continuous improvement of succession planning strategies.

4.4. Theme 4: Measurement and Continuous Improvement

The fourth theme that emerged from the thematic analysis was measurement and continuous improvement of succession planning strategies. Participants emphasized the importance of evaluating leadership development initiatives and monitoring succession-planning outcomes to ensure long-term effectiveness. Seventy percent of participants explicitly emphasized the need to measure leadership development outcomes and refine succession planning strategies over time, while the remaining participants referenced related practices such as performance monitoring, leadership feedback, and organizational learning.

Participants indicated that organizations must regularly assess leadership readiness, leadership performance, and program effectiveness to ensure that succession planning initiatives continue to meet organizational needs. As Groves (2007) and Rothwell (2016) explained, systematic evaluation processes strengthen leadership development programs and improve organizational readiness for leadership transitions. Lv et al. (2022) demonstrated that inclusive leadership practices strengthen psychological safety and organizational identification, reinforcing behavioral learning and engagement processes that align with the internal learning constructs described by Howard and Sheth (1969).

Participants stated that evaluation practices help organizations assess whether leadership development efforts effectively prepare employees for leadership roles. Several participants mentioned using performance indicators, employee feedback, leadership outcomes, and organizational performance metrics to gauge the success of succession planning strategies. From the perspective of Howard and Sheth's (1969) theory of buyer behavior, evaluation practices function as feedback mechanisms that influence how individuals interpret organizational initiatives. Howard and Sheth explained that learning occurs when individuals evaluate outcomes and adjust their future behavior based on those outcomes. Within organizations, employees and leaders interpret the outcomes of leadership development programs and use those evaluations to determine whether succession planning strategies are credible and effective. When employees observe successful leadership outcomes and structured evaluation practices, they may be more likely to engage in leadership development initiatives and to view them as valuable opportunities for professional advancement.

Participant 1 emphasized the importance of monitoring leadership outcomes to determine whether succession planning strategies are producing the desired results. Participant 1 explained that leaders must observe whether leadership development initiatives successfully prepare employees to perform effectively in leadership roles. Participant 1 stated, "You want to see whether the people that you're developing are actually ready to take on those responsibilities and move into those positions." Participant 1's response suggests that evaluating leadership readiness may help organizations determine whether succession planning strategies are effectively preparing future leaders. Similarly, Groves (2007) emphasized that organizations must assess leadership readiness to ensure leadership development initiatives produce individuals capable of assuming leadership responsibilities.

Participant 2 highlighted the importance of employee feedback in assessing leadership development programs. According to Participant 2, employee and team member input provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of leadership strategies. Participant 2 stated, "You have to listen to the people that are involved and understand whether the strategies you're using are actually helping them grow." This response suggests that employee feedback may help leaders identify strengths and weaknesses in leadership development initiatives. Northouse (2022) similarly noted that feedback and reflection are essential to leadership development and organizational learning.

Participant 3 described evaluation as a process of monitoring leadership performance following promotions. Participant 3 explained, "You look at how people perform once they move into those leadership roles… that tells you whether your leadership development strategies are working." Participant 3's response suggests that leadership performance outcomes may serve as important indicators of the effectiveness of succession planning strategies. Likewise, Kamali et al. (2024) emphasized that organizations often evaluate succession planning effectiveness by monitoring leadership performance outcomes following leadership transitions.

Participant 4 emphasized the importance of regularly reviewing leadership pipelines to ensure organizations remain prepared for leadership transitions. Participant 4 explained that leaders must periodically evaluate whether leadership pipelines contain qualified candidates ready to assume leadership roles. Participant 4 stated, "You have to continuously review where your leadership pipeline stands and determine whether you have people ready to step into leadership positions." Participant 4's response highlights the importance of proactive leadership pipeline assessments. In support of this perspective, Rothwell (2016) explained that organizations that regularly review leadership pipelines are better positioned to maintain leadership continuity and reduce risks associated with leadership transitions.

Participant 5 also emphasized the importance of reviewing leadership representation and development outcomes to strengthen succession planning initiatives. Participant 5 explained, "If we're trying to build leadership pipelines, we have to evaluate whether the strategies we're using are actually producing diverse leadership outcomes." Participant 5's response suggests that leadership evaluation processes may help organizations assess whether succession planning strategies effectively support diversity and leadership development goals. Research conducted by Jackson and Dunn-Jensen (2021) similarly demonstrated that evaluating leadership development outcomes enables organizations to strengthen leadership pipelines and ensure leadership strategies align with organizational diversity goals.

Participant 6 described evaluation practices as monitoring workforce readiness and ensuring employees possess the competencies required to perform effectively in leadership roles. Participant 6 stated, "You can see whether people are ready by how they perform in their roles… whether they're confident, whether they're able to handle the responsibilities." Participant 6's response indicates that observing employee performance can provide leaders with valuable insights into leadership readiness and professional development progress. According to Rothwell (2016), monitoring workforce performance and competency development is a key component of effective succession planning systems.

Participant 7 emphasized the role of performance data and operational metrics in evaluating organizational effectiveness. Participant 7 explained that leaders analyze performance data to determine whether organizational strategies are improving service outcomes. Participant 7 stated, "I help guide decision-making in terms of how we'll improve or what changes we can make towards our services."

Participant 7's response suggests that analyzing operational data may help leaders assess whether leadership strategies and organizational initiatives are achieving desired outcomes. As Northouse (2022) noted, data-driven leadership evaluation can strengthen decision-making processes and improve leadership accountability.

Participant 8 emphasized that organizations may evaluate leadership development initiatives by observing whether employees pursue leadership opportunities following training and development programs. Participant 8 explained, "One way we measure success is seeing whether participants move into higher roles or pursue leadership positions after participating in the program." Participant 8's response highlights that leadership advancement outcomes may serve as indicators of the effectiveness of leadership development programs. Similarly, Groves (2007) explained that leadership mobility and advancement outcomes are key indicators of successful succession planning initiatives.

Participant 9 described evaluation practices as monitoring employee performance and task completion. Participant 9 explained, "By the effectiveness of her work… the tasks were being done on time and on target." Participant 9's response suggests that leadership effectiveness may be evaluated by observing improvements in employee performance and organizational productivity. According to Northouse (2022), performance outcomes often serve as measurable indicators of leadership effectiveness.

Finally, Participant 10 emphasized the importance of evaluating leadership development initiatives based on measurable outcomes. Participant 10 explained that leaders must examine whether leadership strategies produce meaningful results for the organization. Participant 10 stated, "At the end of the day, you look at the outcomes… did we achieve the goals and did the strategies actually work." Participant 10's response indicates that outcome-based evaluation practices may help leaders determine whether succession planning initiatives are producing meaningful organizational results. Groves (2007) and Rothwell (2016) similarly emphasized that linking leadership development initiatives to measurable outcomes strengthens the effectiveness of succession planning. Across the interviews, repetition of evaluation practices and performance monitoring strategies indicated data saturation, as no new themes emerged during analysis of the final participant interviews, a phenomenon described by Fusch and Ness (2015) in qualitative research.

Collectively, 70% of participant responses indicated that measurement and continuous improvement are essential components of effective succession planning strategies. Participants emphasized that organizational leaders must regularly evaluate leadership readiness, leadership performance, and leadership development outcomes to ensure succession planning initiatives remain effective. These evaluation practices allow organizations to identify gaps in leadership pipelines, refine leadership development strategies, and adapt succession planning initiatives to changing organizational needs. The project participants suggested that organizations that implement systematic evaluation processes may be better positioned to strengthen leadership pipelines, improve leadership development initiatives, and sustain long-term organizational competitiveness.

5. Discussion

The thematic analysis of participant interviews revealed four interconnected strategies that business leaders use to ensure diverse leadership teams and maintain market competitiveness: strategic leadership development and mentorship; intentional diversity and inclusion in leadership pipelines; organizational alignment and governance support; and measurement and continuous improvement of succession-planning strategies.

When considered collectively, these themes illustrate that effective succession planning is not a single organizational practice but rather a comprehensive system that integrates leadership development, inclusive talent management, governance alignment, and systematic evaluation of leadership outcomes. As Rothwell (2016) explained, organizations that implement structured succession planning systems are better positioned to develop internal leadership talent and sustain leadership continuity during organizational transitions.

Participants consistently described strategic leadership development and mentorship as the foundation of effective succession planning strategies. Mentorship relationships, leadership training initiatives, and experiential leadership opportunities were identified as essential mechanisms for preparing employees for leadership roles. Participants emphasized that mentorship allows emerging leaders to develop leadership competencies while gaining organizational knowledge and experience.

Similarly, Groves (2007) argued that organizations strengthen leadership pipelines when leadership development initiatives are intentionally integrated with succession planning systems. Leadership development initiatives help organizations identify high-potential employees and prepare them for future leadership responsibilities, thereby strengthening leadership continuity and organizational sustainability.

The project findings also highlighted the importance of intentional diversity and inclusion within leadership pipelines. Participants emphasized that leadership teams incorporating diverse perspectives are better equipped to understand stakeholder needs, respond to organizational challenges, and enhance decision-making processes. Inclusive recruitment practices, mentorship opportunities, and leadership representation assessments were described as strategies that enable organizations to cultivate diverse leadership pipelines.

The findings of this study align with the work of Jackson and Dunn-Jensen (2021), who demonstrated that organizations that proactively cultivate diverse leadership teams are better positioned to respond to technological advancements and evolving market dynamics. This alignment confirms prior research suggesting that diversity within leadership pipelines enhances organizational adaptability, innovation, and long-term competitiveness. In the context of this study, participants emphasized intentional diversity in succession planning as a strategic approach to strengthening decision-making and improving organizational responsiveness, thereby reinforcing the practical relevance of these findings. Similarly, Kamali et al. (2024) found that inclusive leadership development strategies strengthen leadership pipelines by expanding access to opportunities for individuals with diverse professional and cultural backgrounds. This finding further confirms existing literature by highlighting the importance of equitable access to leadership development resources, including mentorship and advancement opportunities. Participants in this study echoed this perspective by identifying transparency, fairness, and intentional inclusion as critical components of effective succession planning. Additionally, these findings extend prior research by demonstrating that inclusive succession planning practices not only support leadership development but also function as a mechanism for enhancing organizational resilience and sustaining market competitiveness. Collectively, the integration of these findings underscores that diversity and inclusion are not peripheral considerations but are central to succession planning strategies that drive both organizational effectiveness and long-term strategic success.

Another important finding involved the role of organizational alignment and governance support in strengthening succession planning strategies. Participants emphasized that leadership development initiatives are most effective when they are aligned with organizational goals and supported by governance systems that reinforce leadership accountability. Transparent communication, leadership evaluation processes, and collaborative decision-making structures were described as mechanisms that help ensure leadership development initiatives remain aligned with organizational priorities.

According to Groves (2007), aligning succession planning initiatives with organizational strategy enables organizations to integrate leadership development with broader talent management systems. Similarly, Rothwell (2016) noted that governance oversight and accountability structures for leadership are essential for sustaining leadership development initiatives over time.

Participants also emphasized the importance of measuring and continuously improving succession planning strategies. Monitoring leadership readiness, evaluating leadership performance, and analyzing organizational outcomes were described as essential practices that enable organizations to refine leadership development initiatives and improve succession planning. Participants explained that organizations must regularly evaluate whether leadership development programs are producing qualified leaders capable of assuming leadership roles. These findings correspond with the research of Kamali et al. (2024), who noted that systematic evaluation processes allow organizations to identify gaps in leadership pipelines and adapt succession planning strategies to changing organizational needs. Similarly, Rothwell (2016) emphasized that organizations that continuously assess leadership development outcomes are more likely to maintain sustainable leadership pipelines.

When examined collectively, these four themes illustrate that effective succession planning requires integrating leadership development initiatives, inclusive leadership practices, governance alignment, and ongoing evaluation processes. This integrated approach aligns with succession planning theory, which emphasizes that organizations must intentionally cultivate internal leadership pipelines through structured talent development systems. As Groves (2007) explained, organizations that integrate leadership development programs with succession planning strategies are better positioned to ensure leadership continuity and organizational stability.

At the same time, Howard and Sheth's (1969) theory of buyer behavior provides a behavioral perspective for understanding how employees interpret and respond to succession planning initiatives. According to Howard and Sheth, individuals interpret organizational initiatives through perceptual and learning processes influenced by communication, social context, and prior experiences. Within the context of succession planning, employees evaluate leadership development opportunities based on whether they perceive those opportunities as accessible, equitable, and aligned with organizational values. Participants frequently emphasized transparency, mentorship, and feedback mechanisms as practices that influence how employees perceive leadership opportunities. These practices function as organizational stimuli that shape employee attitudes toward leadership development initiatives and influence their willingness to participate in leadership pipelines.

Overall, the findings of this project suggest that organizational leaders seeking to ensure diverse leadership teams and maintain market competitiveness should implement succession planning systems that integrate leadership development initiatives, inclusive leadership practices, governance alignment, and systematic evaluation processes. Organizations that adopt these integrated succession planning strategies may be better positioned to develop sustainable leadership pipelines, strengthen organizational resilience, and maintain long-term organizational competitiveness.

The four themes identified in this doctoral research project—strategic leadership development and mentorship, intentional diversity and inclusion in leadership pipelines, organizational alignment and governance support, and measurement and continuous improvement of succession planning strategies—collectively illustrate how organizations implement effective succession planning systems. These systems not only enhance leadership capacity but also foster greater employee engagement with leadership opportunities.

From the perspective of succession planning theory, Groves (2007) explained that effective succession planning requires organizations to intentionally cultivate leadership pipelines through leadership development initiatives, talent identification processes, and governance structures that align leadership development with organizational strategy. Participants' descriptions of mentorship programs, inclusive leadership practices, governance oversight, and leadership evaluation mechanisms illustrate how organizations operationalize these structural elements to strengthen leadership continuity.

Simultaneously, Howard and Sheth's (1969) theory of buyer behavior provided a behavioral perspective for analyzing how employees perceive and respond to succession planning initiatives. According to the theory of buyer behavior, individuals evaluate organizational initiatives through perceptual and learning processes shaped by communication, prior experiences, and social influences. Participants frequently emphasized transparency, stakeholder engagement, mentorship, and feedback mechanisms as strategies that shape employees' perceptions of leadership opportunities and organizational priorities. These practices function as organizational stimuli that shape employee perceptions of leadership accessibility, fairness, and professional development opportunities.

Integrating these theoretical perspectives suggests that effective succession planning strategies require both structural leadership development systems and organizational environments that encourage employee engagement with leadership opportunities. While succession planning theory explains how organizational leaders design leadership development structures, buyer behavior theory explains how employees interpret and respond to those structures. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of how organizations cultivate leadership pipelines while also influencing employee participation in leadership development initiatives.

6. Contributions to Theory and Practice

The findings of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry provide practical insights for business leaders seeking to implement effective succession planning strategies that support leadership continuity, diversity, and organizational competitiveness. Participants emphasized that organizations benefit from implementing structured leadership development initiatives that cultivate internal talent pipelines and prepare employees for leadership roles. Leadership development programs that include mentoring, coaching, and experiential learning can enhance leadership readiness and support organizational sustainability.

Leadership development is a central component of effective succession planning because it enables organizational leaders to proactively prepare future leaders rather than reactively responding to leadership vacancies. Groves (2007) emphasized that organizations that integrate leadership development within succession planning frameworks are more successful at sustaining leadership pipelines and ensuring long-term organizational stability. Similarly, Obianuju et al. (2021) found that leadership development programs strengthen organizational performance by preparing employees for leadership responsibilities and improving leadership continuity. Leadership development enables the organization to be intentional with diversity in its leadership ranks.

An additional consideration for professional practice is the deliberate incorporation of diversity and inclusion initiatives into succession planning frameworks.

Participants highlighted that cultivating inclusive leadership pipelines not only strengthens organizational decision-making but also drives innovation and enhances the organization's capacity to adapt to evolving market conditions. Prior research supports these findings by demonstrating that diverse leadership teams enhance strategic decision-making and organizational performance (Sunderman & Orsini, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). Intentionally developing diverse leadership pipelines may therefore improve organizational adaptability and competitive advantage.

The findings also highlighted the significance of aligning succession-planning strategies with organizational governance frameworks and strategic planning procedures. Organizations that embed succession planning within their governance structures demonstrate greater readiness for leadership transitions and are more likely to sustain organizational stability. According to Zhang and Rajagopalan (2004), effective governance oversight of succession planning enhances both leadership continuity and an organization's overall performance. Best business practices include assessing the alignment and effectiveness of organizational strategies.

The importance of measuring the effectiveness of succession planning initiatives and continuously improving leadership development strategies is also emphasized. Organizations can evaluate the effectiveness of succession planning by monitoring leadership readiness, internal promotion rates, and employee engagement. Evidence-based evaluation methods enable organizations to strengthen leadership development programs while ensuring alignment with evolving organizational goals (Barends et al., 2023; Society for Human Resource Management, 2023).

By adopting these strategies—such as leadership development, mentorship, deliberate diversity and inclusion efforts in leadership pipelines, organizational alignment, governance support, and ongoing assessment of succession planning-business leaders can reinforce leadership pipelines, minimize risks during leadership transitions, and boost long-term competitiveness. These practices create a framework for organizations to develop resilient leadership structures that can adjust to evolving organizational and market environments.

7. Implications for Social Change

The findings of this research project may contribute to positive social change by encouraging organizations to implement inclusive succession planning practices that expand leadership opportunities for individuals from diverse backgrounds. Participants emphasized that inclusive leadership development initiatives can help organizations identify and develop leadership talent from underrepresented groups, thereby promoting equitable access to leadership opportunities.

Organizations that prioritize diversity in leadership development programs may foster more inclusive workplace cultures and promote equitable representation in leadership roles. According to Zhang et al. (2023), organizations benefit from having diverse leadership teams, as these teams boost innovation and improve decision-making by bringing in a range of viewpoints. As a result, building inclusive leadership pathways can help make organizations more effective and promote social equity. Leadership development initiatives also contribute to workforce development by providing employees with opportunities to develop leadership competencies and pursue career advancement. Organizations that invest in leadership development programs empower employees to build professional capabilities while strengthening organizational capacity.

Moreover, by ensuring robust succession planning, organizations can support economic stability in their communities, sustain themselves, and minimize disruptions during leadership transitions. Robust leadership development enables organizations to respond effectively to economic shifts and maintain smooth operations. By promoting inclusive leadership development practices, organizations can help create more equitable workplace environments and contribute to broader societal efforts to increase diversity in leadership roles.

8. Recommendations

8.1. Recommendations for Action

The findings of this research project provide actionable recommendations for business leaders seeking to enhance succession planning and develop diverse, high-performing leadership teams. One hundred percent of participants emphasized that effective succession planning requires intentional leadership development, inclusive practices, strategic alignment, and continuous evaluation. Business leaders should implement structured leadership development and mentorship programs to cultivate internal leadership talent. Participants consistently identified mentorship, leadership training, and experiential learning opportunities as essential for preparing future leaders. Leaders should identify high-potential employees and provide targeted opportunities for coaching, professional development, and leadership experience. Integrating leadership development initiatives with succession planning systems enables organizations to proactively build leadership pipelines and ensure leadership continuity. Groves (2007) emphasized that embedding leadership development within succession planning strengthens leadership readiness and supports long-term organizational sustainability.

Additionally, business leaders should intentionally cultivate diverse leadership pipelines through inclusive recruitment and leadership development practices. Participants emphasized that diverse leadership teams enhance decision-making, innovation, and organizational responsiveness. Leaders should expand access to leadership opportunities by recruiting from diverse talent pools, establishing mentorship programs for underrepresented employees, and regularly evaluating leadership representation. These practices promote equitable access to leadership roles and strengthen organizational adaptability. Jackson and Dunn-Jensen (2021) supported this approach, noting that organizations that prioritize diversity in leadership development are better equipped to respond to evolving market conditions and technological change.

Organizations should also align succession planning strategies with governance structures and organizational priorities. Participants emphasized that leadership development initiatives are most effective when embedded within strategic planning processes and supported by accountability mechanisms. Leaders should integrate succession planning into organizational strategy, establish clear leadership expectations, and maintain transparent communication regarding advancement pathways. Aligning succession planning with governance frameworks strengthens organizational resilience and ensures consistency in leadership development efforts. Rothwell (2016) highlighted that organizations with governance-aligned succession planning systems are better positioned to sustain leadership continuity and achieve long-term strategic goals.

Furthermore, business leaders should implement systematic evaluation processes to monitor leadership development outcomes and continuously refine succession planning strategies. Participants emphasized the importance of assessing leadership readiness, tracking performance, and evaluating program effectiveness. Organizations should use performance metrics, leadership assessments, and employee feedback to identify gaps and improve leadership development initiatives. Continuous evaluation ensures that succession planning strategies remain aligned with evolving organizational needs and external market conditions. Kamali et al. (2024) emphasized that organizations that regularly assess leadership development programs are better positioned to strengthen leadership pipelines and enhance organizational effectiveness.

To maximize the practical value of these findings, business leaders should disseminate the results through professional networks, leadership development programs, and industry conferences focused on succession planning and leadership development. Organizations can also integrate these findings into human resource development initiatives and internal training programs. By implementing these recommendations, business leaders can strengthen leadership pipelines, promote inclusive leadership development, and enhance organizational competitiveness.

8.2. Recommendations for Further Research

While this study advanced understanding of the effective succession-planning strategies that business leaders employ to foster diverse leadership teams and uphold market competitiveness, further research is warranted to deepen insights in this domain. The findings of this research project were based on qualitative interviews with 10 participants who had experience implementing succession planning initiatives within their organizations. Future research involving a larger sample size or additional organizational contexts may provide further insight into how succession planning strategies are implemented across industries.

A suggestion for future researchers is to explore how succession planning strategies vary across industries and organizational sizes. The participants in this study represented organizations with leadership experience in succession planning;

however, leadership development practices may differ in large corporations, small businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies. Comparative studies may help researchers identify industry-specific practices that influence the effectiveness of succession planning initiatives.

A further avenue for future research is to assess the relationship between succession planning strategies and quantifiable organizational outcomes, including employee retention, leadership diversity, overall performance, and employee engagement. Quantitative or mixed-methods studies may help determine whether organizations that implement structured succession planning systems achieve stronger leadership continuity and improved organizational performance.

While this doctoral research project explored leaders' views on succession planning, future researchers could investigate how employees perceive leadership development and advancement. Understanding employee perspectives may reveal factors affecting engagement with these initiatives. According to Howard and Sheth's (1969) theory of buyer behavior, people make sense of organizational initiatives through perception and learning. As a result, researching how employees view these initiatives can provide organizations with insights into how leadership development efforts impact employee involvement in leadership pipelines.

Finally, additional research could explore the long-term impact of diversity-focused succession planning initiatives on leadership representation and organizational decision-making. Longitudinal studies may provide valuable insight into how inclusive leadership development strategies influence leadership diversity over time and whether these strategies contribute to improved organizational performance and stakeholder engagement.

9. Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to identify and explore effective succession planning strategies used by business leaders to ensure diverse leadership teams and maintain market competitiveness. Guided by the research question—what effective succession planning strategies do business leaders use to ensure a diverse leadership team and maintain market competitiveness—data from semistructured interviews with 10 business leaders revealed four key themes: strategic leadership development and mentorship, intentional diversity and inclusion in leadership pipelines, organizational alignment and governance support, and measurement and continuous improvement of succession planning strategies. The findings indicate that organizations seeking to strengthen leadership continuity and competitiveness should implement integrated succession planning systems that combine leadership development, inclusive talent management, governance alignment, and systematic evaluation of leadership outcomes.

The results align with Groves' (2007) succession planning theory, which emphasizes structured leadership development and internal pipeline cultivation, and Howard and Sheth's (1969) theory of buyer behavior, which explains how employees interpret and engage with leadership opportunities. Together, these frameworks suggest that effective succession planning requires both well-designed leadership systems and organizational environments that encourage employee engagement. Overall, this study contributes to the literature by identifying practical, evidence-based strategies that support diverse leadership pipelines, enhance organizational resilience, and position organizations for sustained long-term competitiveness.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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