

# LEADERSHIP LIVED

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**HARDSHIP AND  
LEADERSHIP:  
IS THERE A  
CONNECTION?**

## **Abstract**

Hardship or adverse circumstances in life occur to every human being. The question that the researcher of this study attempts to answer is: How do human beings face hardship and how do they turn an adverse circumstance into a developmental experience? Written life narratives and interviews with four leaders, one female and three males, shed light on this topic. A model of the relationship between hardship and resilience is presented as a means of understanding the results of this exploratory study.

## **Key words**

*Church leaders, leadership, hardship, resilience, life experiences, leadership development, faith.*

“Lorene Shinsky delivered her son, John, to an orphanage when he was 8 years old” (Rexrode, 2009). John’s

father had just died of a heart attack, and his mother felt unable to cope with a small child who was already getting into trouble. The only way open for this mother was to place the son she loved into a more safe and structured environment. It was rough at the orphanage, but John learned to survive and even thrive. By 12, he was placed in a foster home. At 16 (6-foot-4, 220 lbs) he became a highly sought-after football prospect. He finally chose Michigan State University, where problems with one of his knees ended his professional career.

“Education would be Shinsky’s ticket,” says Rexrode (2009). In 1983 John received a doctorate in education from MSU and reconnected with his real mother, Lorene. He bought her a new outfit and invited her to his graduation. The next day, Lorene was dead at 53 of a brain aneurysm. “I had to bury her in the same outfit,” said John in recounting this experience.

John went on to have a 20-year career as director of special education for a Michigan school district in charge of thousands of children with different disabilities. And in a life-changing encounter on a plane he began what he calls the fulfillment of his 40-year career—opening his own orphanage in Matamoros, Mexico.

In the midst of building the orphanage, John learned in 2007 that he had cancer in his neck. Thirty-three radiation treatments left him unable to talk for weeks or taste for months. But as soon as he regained his strength he continued with what is now his life commitment. John is convinced that he would not have accomplished everything he has done in life if it were not for the difficult circumstances that time and again shaped and molded who he is now and what he is able to do for other

children that, like him, face life without a parent.

## **Hardship—the Great Life Equalizer**

Hardship affects the wealthy and the poor; the young and the old; the corporate CEO and the teacher in a one-room school. “The human condition guarantees that each life will encounter natural and largely unpredictable trauma. . . .

Leadership, by its very nature, is entwined with adversity” (Stoner & Gilligan, 2002, p.17).

Given this sober dose of reality, the question that begs to be answered is this: How do human beings face hardship and how do they turn an adverse circumstance into a developmental experience? Since leadership is my professional interest, the above question even goes a bit deeper: Does hardship play a role in leadership development? Can people learn important leadership skills and competencies from their own experiences with hardship?

These and other related questions led me to start researching this topic two years ago. However, it was not until I faced my own set of hard circumstances that I began to understand the life-changing impact that hardship has on an individual. Kolb’s (1983) cycle of the experiential learning process has been validated in my own experience; I was better able to understand the role of hardship in shaping and molding leadership by the concrete experience of my own and others’ difficulties, as well as by the theoretical research I undertook.

Different researchers have been toying with the idea that there are formative leadership experiences that deeply impact leaders and the way they practice their leadership (Janson, 2008; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Kotter, 1988; Clinton, 1988). Some

researchers call these formative experiences with hardship “coping with struggle” (Janson, 2008), “triggers” or “critical events” (Luthans & Avolio, 2003), even “crucibles” (Bennis & Thomas, 2002). The best definition I have found for these critical events was one provided by Bennis and Thomas (2002), who posit that these events are transformative experiences through which these individuals come to a new sense of identity, especially after deep self-reflection that forces leaders to question who they are and what really matters to them. Bennis and Thomas (2002) interviewed more than 40 top leaders in business and in the public sector, and found that all of them pointed to unplanned, intense, and traumatic experiences that transformed them and developed in them distinct leadership capabilities. When the Center for Creative Leadership studied how lessons of experience mold leadership capabilities (Moxley & Pulley, 2003, 2004), they were surprised that the men and women they interviewed mentioned “hardship” more than any other life experience as being crucial for their development as leaders.

According to the authors mentioned above, hardship is different from other developmental experiences because it is not intentional, and the lessons are usually learned in retrospect, through reflection. The element that is usually present in any hardship circumstance is a sense of loss “of credibility, control, self-efficacy, or identity” (Moxley & Pulley, 2003, p. 185). This sense of loss provokes self-reflection: What is happening to me? Did I do anything wrong? Was there anything I could have done to prevent this? Where do I go from here? What is important for me? What are my core values? How do I face life after this? How do I face my work after this?

Van Velsor and McCauley, editors of the *Handbook for Leadership Development* (2004), make the following statement:

Dealing with losses, failures, and disappointments can also stretch people. Job loss, business mistakes, damaging relationships, and similar events can cause a great deal of confusion, often stimulating a search for new meaning and understanding . . . These kinds of experiences, which we call hardship, startle people into facing themselves and coming to terms with their own fallibilities. Hardships also teach people how to persevere and cope with difficult situations. (p. 9)

The Center for Creative Leadership's study of hardship concluded that there are many lessons that can be learned from adversity. The study describes four lessons that came out of their research: self-knowledge, sensitivity and compassion, limits of control, and flexibility. Because hardship experiences are not intentional, they act as a "wake-up call" to look inwards and decide what is important for one's life. This first lesson, self-knowledge, is essential for clarifying core values and beliefs (Moxley & Pulley, 2003). It is also essential to come face to face with one's limitations and weak spots, thus fostering the emergence of more balanced leadership practices.

Being sensitive and compassionate are not traits that come easily for leaders who may have had to fight their way up to the top. However, it is hardship experiences that make leaders more aware of what others are going through, of the fears and hopes of others, and the vulnerability that exists in everyone's lives. I cannot imagine Nelson Mandela's response to the difficulties of post-apartheid

South Africa if he had not been tested in the crucible of 27 years in prison (Stengel, 2009; Mandela, 2000). In Nouwen's (2004) words, "wounds... [are] a call for deeper understanding" (p. 56), not only of our own wounds but of other people's wounds.

Hardship events conspire against the idea that leaders can have unlimited control of circumstances. And yet many behave this way until they come face to face with the reality that some things are totally out of their control. Illness or the death of a loved one, even market crashes, or downsizing, are not within anyone's control. From hardship, leaders learn that they cannot control everything in their lives. The only thing that can be controlled is their response to situations of adversity (Moxley & Pulley, 2004). Stoner and Gilligan (2002) call this lesson a "control reframe" by which leaders learn the ability to "turn loose what they cannot control, then concentrate their energies where they can have an impact" (p. 21). Turning loose in this case involves making a conscious decision to let go of that which is beyond a person's control.

Today's world is changing constantly, so it is not surprising that research shows that flexibility is one of the lessons taught by hardship experiences. Moxley and Pulley (2003) explain that their research "suggests that a key lesson individuals can learn from hardship is to be both-and people. They must learn that they can be both tough, stand-on-their-own-two feet, forceful leaders and empowering, sensitive, and compassionate leaders" (p. 197). This takes an intentional effort on the part of leaders to strike a balance between tasks and people, and to understand that one practice needs to co-exist with the other.

## Hardship and Resilience

Hardships are different from other kinds of developmental experiences in that they are linked with resilience. There is no single definition for resilience, but from the large amount of research on the topic, I can say that in essence resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity or hardship (Moxley & Pulley, 2003; Masten, 2001). Stoner and Gilligan (2002) talk about “leader rebound” when they mention managers that “bounce back” from tests of adversity. According to the Center for Creative Leadership’s research, resilience, or this ability to “bounce back” from hard circumstances, consists of individual capabilities that can be learned and developed in a person’s life: purpose and meaning, cognitive strategies, improvisation, and social support.

The search for meaning, for reconnecting with one’s own core values and beliefs, lies at the heart of the transformational power of hardships. Cognitive strategies refer to the way people understand and process their hardship. “Resilient people see things as they are and deal with reality in a constructive way” (Moxley & Pulley, 2004) instead of falling prey to what Frank (1997) called a “chaos narrative,” in which individuals become trapped in a spiral of recounting endlessly their devastating wound, without the capacity to move forward. The ability to improvise with the resources at hand is also a well-researched characteristic of resilience, what Masten (2001) calls the “basic human adaptational system” (p. 227). Finally, social support, in the form of family, friends, colleagues and church members, plays a pivotal role in building the capacity of an individual to bounce back from hardship.

## Methodology

I am interested in stories of hardship, but much more, in stories of how leaders have been able to overcome hardship and turn it into a developmental experience in their leadership journey. My own life had a sudden wake-up call when I was ten years old and my father died of a sudden heart attack, at the age of 53. He was my soulmate, my friend, my companion, the one who walked with me to school every day and who waited for me at the end of school, carrying my bag the three or four city blocks to where we lived. His untimely death devastated my mother and me, and we were left bereft of the quiet presence of my father in our lives as provider, mentor, and protector. How heavy my schoolbag was as I walked alone those blocks, how much I missed him when I got out of school and did not see him waiting for me. Many years later, I found a Heavenly Father and I embraced Him, and it was easy, because I already knew what a father meant and how much a father could love me.

I have faced many hardships in my life, and with the help of my Heavenly Father, I was able to bounce back and forge ahead. This is why many of the stories of hardship resonate with me. I feel the hurt, the anger, the loneliness. Human beings experience many kinds of hard circumstances, but they all go back to essential deep-seated sentiments: anger, frustration, sadness, hurt, grief, anxiety, depression, loneliness.

While conducting a doctoral program in Leadership, I got a view into the role hardship plays in leaders’ lives. The students had been asked to write a narrative of how their lives as leaders were shaped by their life experiences, and how this impacted their leadership and their vision. This introspective reflection is con-

gruent with what Janson (2008) posits:

Understanding the stories leaders tell followers (and themselves) about their past experiences can provide valuable insight into which experiences leaders consider formative, and why. This is particularly relevant because the impact of a formative experience on a leader depends more on the meaning the leader can make of it rather than on the experience itself and because this knowledge can further help leaders develop new leaders. (p. 76)

As I read 30 life narratives, at that time with the only purpose of better acquainting myself with each one of the students in the program, it became evident that there was a common thread in all of them: the impact of hardship and adverse circumstances in molding their lives and shaping their leadership practices. One of them mentioned how when he was at the peak of his career, feeling arrogant and in control of his destiny, a near-fatal accident caused him to reframe his life. Another one mentioned that she was on a path of uninterrupted professional success until a long illness shattered her dreams. For another, a traumatic demotion and work re-location was the beginning of many years of confusion and loss until he bounced back.

Intrigued by what I was seeing as a possible connection between hardship and the way these leaders understood and practiced their leadership, I chose a purposeful sample of four of them, three males and one female. All of them hold top leadership positions and all of them mentioned in their life narratives situations of hardship that were key factors in their development as leaders. And all four of them are Christian leaders. I conducted two-

hour-long interviews with each of them and later carried out a member check, to grasp the significance participants ascribed to their experiences with a greater degree of accuracy (Janson, 2008).

The conceptual framework for the present study lies in two theoretical approaches. One of them comes from Luthans and Avolio (2003), who propose that leaders need to identify actual events that when reflected upon in retrospect contribute to their leadership development. The other approach is based on the concept that people can improve their capacity for leadership and that life experiences can be a “key driver in leader development” (Van Velsor & McCauley, 2004).

## Stories of Hardship

The interviews corroborated what is found in the literature on hardship and its relation to leadership. All of the leaders mentioned that hard circumstances in their lives contributed to a greater sense of their purpose and meaning and enabled them to empathize with others in a different way than before their adversity struck. Sally mentioned that when adversity strikes, you are left “naked, stripped of everything.” For her, faith in God and family support was what pulled her through. When Sally was seven and her brother was six years old, their mother got very sick due to a brain aneurysm. For a long time, the mother battled for life. When she started recuperating, she would stare at her children, unable to recognize them. Sally and her brother spent hours showing pictures to their mother and seeing how hard she fought and clung to life. Sally’s mother could not walk, and at night she would crawl into the children’s rooms to make sure they were warm and safe. “We would not look at her or say any-

thing, because we knew it would hurt her to know that her children would see her crawling.”

Sally says her mother taught her to fight in spite of hardship. “Sometimes when there are strong winds in my life, they shake me for a couple of days, then, I say, NO, I was not raised like this.” When Sally was 16 her mother had another stroke, this one not as bad as the first. Sally’s mother retained her memory, but could not move, could not button her clothes, and became once again totally dependent on others. Sally and her brother saw their teen years cut short. They had to cook, clean, and take care of their mother. Yet Sally credits this hardship that truncated her childhood and teen years with the stamina and the strength to fight through many events in her life and to be today a top leader in a country with few women leaders.

Sally’s experience with the hardship of facing her mother’s chronic health situation, which persists in a lesser degree even today, shows that it plays a role in the way leaders approach their leadership and in acquiring leadership maturity. With this idea in mind, Van Velsor and McCauley (2004) present a model of leadership development that has three key elements: challenge (hardship), assessment (self-reflection), and support. “When we look at any type of developmental experience. . . we find that they are most effective when all these three elements are present” (p. 5).

Experiencing hardship led Sally to assess and redefine her core values and the meaning of her life. “It is possible to live through many hardships when we believe that there still is someone or something worth living for” (Nouwen, 1995, p. 73). This quest for purpose and meaning Sally has also transferred to her workplace by

encouraging her subordinates to seek a clearer mission and vision for their tasks and the way they approach their work. Being individually resilient has helped her to see her organization as also able to be resilient in uncertain times. Stoltz (2004) maintains that “the resilience of organizations depends in great degree on the resilience of the individuals who comprise it” (p. 18). Resilient leaders can teach other to be salient, and their example provides a model for others to emulate.

Pedro was born in a very poor household, yet his parents were loving Christians that instilled in their children the core values and beliefs that have sustained him up to now. His life has been a series of peaks and valleys. “Sometimes it seems more valleys than peaks,” he says, and yet, every time he bounces back. “God takes me higher and higher than before.” He credits his faith in God and the support of family as crucial for being resilient, in spite of all “the beatings in life I have endured.” There is an analogy with an organization’s peaks and valleys. We live in turbulent times, where change and uncertainty are the common denominators, and sometimes, it seems “more valleys than peaks.”

Pedro lived in a valley very far from big cities. One day when he was 10 or 11 years old, his father took him by the hand and they climbed a high peak. Pedro had always been fascinated by planes and his father had told him that one day he would take him to a place where there would be an airport and he could see planes. On the way to the top of the mountain, Pedro was sure that he was going to see this city and the airport. But when they reached the peak, after hours of climbing, to his dismay he saw only more valleys and more peaks, all the way to the horizon.

Profoundly disappointed, he turned to his father and said: “Dad, I thought I was going to see the city and the planes.” “Well, son,” his father replied, “in life you will climb many peaks, and when you reach a peak there will be another peak, but in each peak you will be able to see farther and farther. And one day you will reach your last peak and then you will meet God.”

Pedro wanted to study. One day the opportunity came for him to go to a distant city to enroll in higher education. His parents, extremely poor, were barely able to give him money for the bus fare. Before hugging her son and saying goodbye, his mother put in his hands the only treasure she had and her only connection to the outside world: an old transistor radio. It would be many years before Pedro was able to see his parents again, but that old radio was a constant reminder of his home and his own desire to gain an education and to rise above poverty. “Who would have thought,” Pedro says, that out of that humble beginning, “today I would end up with a PhD in Leadership?” Pedro has climbed many peaks in his life, and he has had many valley encounters, but no matter what hardship he has faced he always knew that God would take him to a higher peak.

Cognitive strategies such as making sense of life’s formative experiences are crucial for resilience, but so is faith. Hamel and Valikangas (2003) appropriately mention that resilience in companies and organizations is “not about responding to a onetime crisis. It’s not about rebounding from one setback.” What is needed are leaders who have the capacity for resilience, for what they call “riding on resilience,” in Pedro’s words, “from peak to valley to peak.” And for Christian leaders, faith in the ultimate

design of God for every human life is the backbone for coping with hardship. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (Romans, 8:28, 35, 37, NIV).

A common theme in the lives of these four leaders is humility, the notion that without their faith and without the support of others, they cannot go forward in life. Sally mentions that she does not cry easily. “At home, when I go there, I can be fragile, I can cry, and they understand. At home I can be weak; I have also others I can be weak with.” This notion of need, of being “wounded” and vulnerable (Nouwen, 2004), is what leads them to be better leaders.

Rebecca Merrill (2010) calls leaders such as Sally “starfish” leaders, because in spite of experiencing “misfortune, pain, suffering and tragedy,” and venturing “into a valley of deep wounding and pain-based learning . . . ultimately, this journey results in a regenerated state of wholeness, an enlarged capacity for greater personal leadership for the world” (pp. 2, 3). Starfish leaders emerge from the process of hardship being able to lead with “integrity, wisdom, and resilience” (p. 6). Or, as Bolman and Deal (2001) express so eloquently, “wounds provide an eye to find new possibilities” (p. 59).

One of the leaders shared the story of a near-fatal accident in which he almost drowned. Robert had been blessed with a rapid ascent into power positions. There was nothing that was not reachable. The more self-confident he became, the less confi-

dent he was that God was leading the way. As Robert told me about the drowning incident, I could picture the river, overflowing and running rapidly, and him and his friend gasping for air. I could feel the utter helplessness of those seconds and minutes in which he tried frantically to hold on to life and not go under to never come back again. His mind, keenly alert in the moments of peril, flashed back all his life in front of him. He saw how arrogant he had been in his dealings with others. He saw the times in which he had not relied on God. In desperation Robert asked God to save him and give him the chance to become a better person, a better husband and father, and a better leader. And that's when he felt a strong arm pulling him up and taking him to safety. His friend drowned.

It took a long time for Robert to reel back from this event. He felt disoriented, lacking focus and understanding of what the future held. He was impacted by his friend's death and did not understand why he had lived while his friend had died. Youseff & Luthans (2007) explain that the affected individual needs time, energy and resource investment to recover, rebound and return to an equilibrium point. In time, Robert was able to recover and use this event for an opportunity to grow. Now, whenever Robert feels that he is in control of everything, or "arrogant and self-centered," he goes back again and again to this self-narrative and gains the right perspective, that without God and the support of others he would not have survived the drowning. As a leader, he now knows that some things are totally out of his control, and that he needs to work with whatever resources and capacities are at hand.

Leo faced serious setbacks in his professional life. When he was ready

for a promotion, after many years of hard and steady work, he was instead demoted and his former job was given to a friend of his boss. Leo is a quiet, reserved man; I cannot picture him angry or enraged for this and other injustices he went through in his professional life. And yet, they had a bearing on his life and how he acts based on principles. He was finally sent to a remote city, away from the capital, and there he had to work under very difficult circumstances. That location was in itself a hardship and he thought he was going to be "buried" there for many long years. On top of this, when he arrived at his new workplace he learned that the person he was going to replace had decided to remain in that position, and so Leo was further demoted to a placement that is usually given to new accountants and not to people with many years of management experience.

What struck me during this conversation was the fact that he was at peace with this injustice. He recognized the inappropriate action brought about by his boss, as well as the results of this last demotion, but he eventually was able to come to terms with it, surrendering this situation to God. Stories about hardship dwell abundantly on perceived organizational injustice, from a demeaning expression to situations of demotion, mobbing or even open aggression (Nuñez & Gonzalez, 2009). Why did Leo continue to work for a supervisor who was clearly a "toxic leader"? Lipman-Blumen (2005) mentions that when followers are confronted with the kind of supervisor that Leo had, there are several rationalizations for staying or leaving. In Leo's case, he mentioned time and again that there were two roads open to him: taking his case to human courts, or opting for the celestial

court. He chose the latter, finding courage in the word of God: “He will judge the world in fairness; he will decide what is fair for the nations. The Lord defends those who suffer; He defends them in times of trouble. Those who know the Lord trust him, because he will not leave those who come to him” (Psalm 9:8-10, NCV). It reminds me of Hannah, the mother of the Old Testament prophet Samuel. When confronted with an accusation from Eli, the priest, she responded with “calm self-restraint” (*Comentario Biblico Adventista*, p. 456). Leo found the kind of peace that comes from a complete surrender to God.

Bennis and Thomas (2002) write that not all leadership crucibles are life-threatening events. Leo was confronted with an experience of rejection and prejudice. “Being a victim of prejudice is traumatic because it forces an individual to confront a distorted picture of him or herself, and it often unleashes profound feelings of anger, bewilderment, and even withdrawal” (p. 40). For some, though, experiences of rejection or prejudice are clarifying events. After a disquieting time of inner chaos and disruption, Leo was able to find forgiveness in his heart and to work at reconciliation. With the passing of time, he was able to move forward in life, bouncing back from these two demotions with a new sense of purpose and meaning. A few years later, he was invited back to the capital for a top leadership position. Leo credits his faith in God as the catalyst that helped him bounce back from a hurtful situation, with no animosity towards the people who had so mistreated him.

## Conclusions

This exploratory study, conducted with four top Christian leaders, was an attempt to understand the role that

hardship played as a developmental experience in their leadership. I intend to continue to explore this theme in more depth in further studies.

Based on these first findings, I suggest a model of the relationship between hardship and resilience (see Figure 1). This is a modification of the model presented by Moxley and Pulley (2004). In the lessons learned from hardship, I have retained their four elements: self-knowledge, sensitivity and compassion, knowing one’s own limits, and being flexible. Because faith featured prominently in the life narratives and the oral interviews of the four Christian leaders I interviewed, I have added faith as the main component of the resilient characteristics of Christian leaders. I have retained the “purpose and meaning,” “cognitive strategies” and “improvisation” as presented by Moxley and Pulley.

Given the importance of processing life experiences in leadership doctoral programs or leadership development programs, it is evident that they constitute a pathway to building self-knowledge that in turn builds on characteristics of resilience. Telling stories of one’s own life is not only important for the leader, but also for followers (Sparrowe, 2005). The interviewees expressed that this repeated going back to their “stories of hardship” and how they were able to overcome provided the tools to face adversity the next time it came around. It reminds us of many Bible passages that admonish us to remember past hardships and how God was able to lift us up from them. “I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will meditate on all your works, and consider your mighty deeds . . . Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds” (Psalms

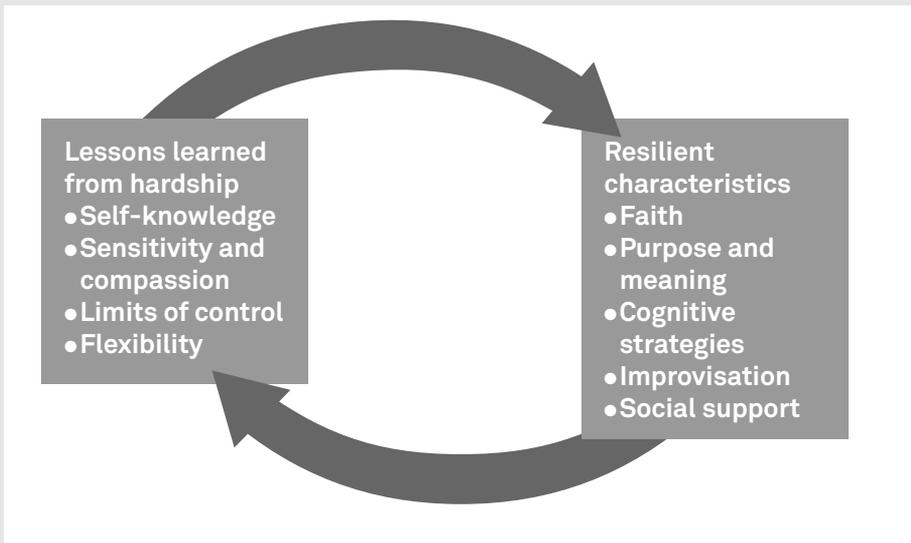


Figure 1: Relationship between hardship and resilience (modified from Moxley and Pulley, 2004).

77:11, 12; 78:7, NIV). “Blessed are those whose strength is in you, and whose hearts are in your paths. When they go through the valley of tears, you will turn it into a spring, as when the rains fill the pools of water. They will go from miracle to miracle and will see God in Zion” (author’s English translation of Psalm 84:5-7, RV 1960 Spanish). “I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them” (Isaiah 42:16, NIV).

The quest underlying the present exploratory research was a desire to understand if there is a connection between hardship and leadership. The Christian leaders I interviewed believe that their effectiveness and success as leaders is due to the way they have processed and faced the hardships in their lives. The experience of bouncing back from adversity and crisis imbues their lives with a heightened sense of purpose and meaning. They have learned to make realistic use of the resources they have at hand. But above all, they

consider their faith in God the indispensable component in their ability to bounce back when hardship hits them with full force.

\*The names of leaders mentioned in this article, with the exception of John Shinsky, are fictitious in order to protect confidentiality.

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