CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1   INTRODUCTION

I conclude this study by highlighting the most prominent insights and contributions of the study, and make recommendations based on them. I indicate the limitations of the study against which the results should be viewed. Finally, I suggest some directions for future research.

6.2   DISCOVERIES, CONTRIBUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of Folkman and Moskowitz's (2004:768) opinion that new methodologies and new ways of thinking about coping within a specific context will assist this field of study to mature, I believe that this study makes a contribution towards both the field of coping research and that of Organisational Behaviour. This was done by investigating coping in a specific context (the economic downturn from 2009 to early 2010) using alternative methodologies (grounded theory as opposed to coping scales) and exploring coping from multiple levels (the individual, the team and the organisational levels). I made some unexpected and interesting discoveries in the course of this study, which made my research journey quite exciting. These discoveries, as well as the related contributions and recommendations of the study are discussed below.

6.2.1   Discoveries

I made the following discoveries in the course of the study:
- Studying coping on multiple levels of organisational behaviour (individual, team and organisational level) provides valuable insight into the coping of individuals (leaders) in the context of an economic downturn (in this case, the economic downturn in the period from 2009 to early 2010).

- Positivity played an important role in how the leaders coped during the economic downturn. Not only was it evident that the leaders attempted to frame the impact of the downturn on the organisation as positive, despite its obvious negative impact, but they also highlighted that individual factors such as being optimistic and confident, thriving on the challenge of the economic downturn and focusing on the future assisted them in coping during the downturn.

- Some of the leaders revealed that their religion (faith, belief, spirituality) had assisted them in coping during the economic downturn, although there was some indication that they did not perceive religion to be an acceptable corporate coping strategy, as they appeared to be apologetic about it and seemed to think that religion was something that should not be mentioned within the organisation.

- The leaders' perception of their relative level in the organisation (in terms of organisational hierarchy) influenced their coping. Leaders on a relatively lower level of their organisation (such as the South African executive members of an international mining organisation) tended to focus more on individual stressors and less on derived stressors than their counterparts (the South African executive members of a South African mining organisation). This finding may be linked to their perceived control over their own situation within the organisation.

- Individuals as leaders do not merely have to cope with individual stressors, for example, doubting their own job security, but often they face more pressing issues: they have to cope with derived team and organisational stressors.

- How the organisation chooses to respond to the downturn, its goals, plans and actions, not only related to the stressors that had an impact on the leaders, but also influenced the coping strategies that the leaders used.

- Leaders defined organisational action in response to the downturn in terms of retrenchment[40]. It was almost as if the economic downturn was viewed synonymise to retrenchment, possibly due to widespread job losses in the mining industry during the economic downturn (refer to Table 1) and the fact that the mining industry typically revert to retrenchment in turbulent times. This happened both in the case where organisations did indeed retrench employees, and where organisations did

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[40] Downsizing, layoffs.

not retrench employees. In the latter case, organisational action in response to the downturn was defined *ex negativo* in terms of retrenchment.

- Leaders resorted to individual strategies to cope with the stressors during an economic downturn, but also to team strategies, where trust played a prominent role.

- Leaders attempted to rationalise their actions in an attempt to cope with stressors during the economic downturn; for example, they convinced themselves that they were 'doing the right thing' and that they were compelled to act in the interests of organisational survival.

6.2.2 Contributions

The main objective of this study was to develop a guiding framework that South African leaders can employ in order to cope with adverse conditions such as an economic downturn. It does not mean that other country's leaders might not benefit by it. In addition, I attempted to answer the following research questions:

- **How do South African mining leaders cope during an economic downturn?**
- **How can organisations assist South African leaders to cope better during an economic downturn?**
- **What does a strategic coping framework for South African leaders consist of?**

The main objective was reached by the development of a conceptual framework of coping strategies for leaders during an economic downturn, as illustrated in Chapter 5. The research questions can be answered through a study of this conceptual framework, not only to understand how South African mining leaders cope during an economic downturn, but through this understanding, also to apply the knowledge on a practical level to cope better with adverse conditions. In addition, through some recommendations as set out below, organisations can, based on the conceptual framework, assist leaders to cope during an economic downturn.

I believe that this study manages to contribute **methodologically** to the field of coping research by demonstrating that alternative methodologies (in this case grounded theory) using narrative approaches (interviews) can uncover ways of coping that are not included in traditional coping inventories. This methodology also allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied in the particular context of an economic downturn, in answer to Somerfield and McCrae (2000:624), who appeal to researchers to focus on coping responses to specific situations within a specific context instead of general coping strategies.

In addition, this allowed me to look at coping on multiple levels (the individual, team and organisational levels), moving beyond the dominant individualist perspective of coping which has recently received an increasing amount of criticism (Muhonen & Torkelson, 2008:451). This study therefore contributes to both the field of coping research and the field of Organisational Behaviour.

I believe that my conceptual framework also contributes to the **theory** of both the coping and Organisational Behaviour fields of study by defining and relating concepts in the form of a model to facilitate a better understanding of individual coping on multiple levels within the organisation.

Lastly, this study contributes on a practical level, providing leaders and organisations with a better understanding of how leaders cope in an organisational context during adverse conditions such as an economic downturn. This understanding facilitates several recommendations, as discussed in the following section.

6.2.3   Recommendations

This study's discoveries and contributions can lead to recommendations for both leaders and organisations.

Leaders are provided with a guiding framework that they can employ in order to cope with adverse conditions such as an economic downturn. Likewise, organisations can use the guiding conceptual framework to assist South African leaders to cope better during an economic downturn.

The following recommendations are made:

- Organisations, specifically managers and leaders, should be vigilant to maintain a continuous proactive environmental analysis strategy where potential opportunities and threats in the environment are constantly identified and monitored (Lynch, 2000:105). This will allow individuals within the organisation to prepare and act timeously in the event of an economic downturn or other problem. More importantly, leaders should remain open to information gained from environmental analysis.

- Leaders should proactively attempt to develop positive attributes within the organisation, and specifically within themselves. Luthans *et al.* (2007:213) propose that what they call positive psychological capital, which includes hope, optimism, self-efficacy and resiliency, is open to development. These positive psychological capacities correspond with several individual influencing factors that create a predisposition in respect of how organisational leaders cope during an economic downturn, for example, being optimistic (optimism), being confident (efficacy) and focusing on the future (hope, resiliency). In the light of this, organisations can develop these capacities to assist them and their leaders in coping with adverse conditions. For example, hope is said to be developed through goal-setting, participation and contingency planning for alternative pathways to attain goals (Snyder, Irving & Anderson, 1991, cited in Snyder, Rand & Sigmon, 2005:258).

- Organisations should embrace the concept of workplace spirituality. According to Duchon and Plowman (2005:809), a workplace can be considered to be spiritual when it 'recognizes that employees have an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in the context of community'. Van der Walt (2008:22) lists various studies confirming significant relationships between spirituality and work-related phenomena, as indicated in Table 11 (overleaf).

Table 11: Relationship between workplace spirituality and work-related outcomes

Work-related phenomenon	Researcher	Period
Organisational performance	Neck & Milliman	1994
	Thompson	2002
Organisational commitment	Milliman, Czaplewski, Ferguson	2003
Job involvement	Milliman, Czaplewski, Ferguson	2003
Ethicality	Giacalone & Jurkiewicz	2003
Emotional intelligence	Hartsfield	2003
Self-efficacy	Hartsfield	2003
Intrinsic, extrinsic and total work reward	Kolondinsky, Giacalone & Jurkeiwicz	2004

Source: Van der Walt (2008:22)

In addition, the present study has shown that religion, an important element of workplace spirituality, according to Hicks (2002:384), can play an important role in coping during an economic downturn. Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003:85) found that the degree of individual spirituality influences whether an individual perceives a questionable business practice as ethical or unethical, possibly tying in with what I termed the "value dichotomy" (refer to Section 4.3.18) as a derived organisational stressor and the belief that one is "doing the right thing" (refer to Section 4.3.37) as an organisational rationalization coping strategy used by leaders.

- Organisations and organisational leaders should carefully consider the selection, composition and team development of their executive teams due to the important role that team coping strategies have been shown to play in coping during an economic downturn. In addition, the culture of the organisation and the team should support teamwork and trust. Hence, active efforts should be put into place to develop this.

6.3   LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Like all studies, this one also has limitations that should be taken into consideration when viewing the results:

- All respondents in this study were white males. However, women represented a mere 0.01% of top management in mining in 2001 and 9.3% in 2006, with the gender distribution remaining fairly constant between 2006 and 2008. In addition, mining lags behind the all-industry average, with black representation of 28.5% at top management level in mining in 2008 (Wait, 2010). In view of these statistics, this limitation should be noted, but should also be seen in the context of the lack of employment equity at top management level in the mining industry.

- Although I am confident that the timing of the study was such that potential bias due to recall was limited, and that the study was done during the downturn where respondents could clearly convey their thoughts, feelings and behaviour related to coping during the downturn, it should be stated that data collection for this study was done during November and December 2009, at the end of the downturn. However, I am convinced by the responses from the respondents that, at the time, they saw themselves as still being in the downturn.

- The relatively small sample may not be representative of all the leaders in the mining industry and may not be applicable to other individuals or individuals in other industries. However, the depth of information gained from the sample may make up for this limitation to form the basis for future research.

- The aim of this study was to provide a guiding framework in the form of a conceptual framework that South African leaders can employ in order to cope with adverse conditions such as an economic downturn. I used a conceptual framework in the form of a model, not formulating substantive or formal theory, although my conceptual framework does venture into the realm of a theory.

6.4 OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings and limitations of the study imply several opportunities for future research:

- The model in the form of a conceptual framework of coping strategies for leaders during an economic downturn can be tested in other industries for its relevance and comparative results may yield further insight into the model and may allow for its expansion.

- The model in the form of a conceptual framework of coping strategies for leaders during an economic downturn can be elevated to a theory, focusing more on explaining concepts and their relationship to each other.

- The effectiveness of coping strategies for leaders in the mining industry can be researched to gain a better understanding of the relative effectiveness of different strategies in different situations.

- The conceptual framework can be researched on various levels in the organisation, comparing the coping strategies of leaders with the coping strategies of employees on lower levels in the organisation.

6.5 FINAL CONCLUSION

My research journey has taken me to various destinations to finally reach this point, the final conclusion of my study. I hope that I have contributed to the body of knowledge in the fields of coping and Organisational Behaviour, and that the journey will not end here, but will continue to build on the foundation laid through this study.

Vision is the ability to see beyond the boundaries of your own confinement.

(A.L. Horn, 2009: pers.com.)