

Oral Defense Announcement

University of Missouri – St. Louis Graduate School

An oral examination in defense of the dissertation for the degree
Doctor of Business Administration with an emphasis in Leadership

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Master of Business Administration, Harding University, May 2004
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“It Can Be Lonely at the Top, But it Doesn’t Have to Be”: Workplace Loneliness as Experienced by Senior Leaders and Potential Coping Strategies

Date: August 23, 2024

Time: 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Place: ABH 001

Abstract

Workplace loneliness is a topic of growing interest among scholars and practitioners, in part because of the known impacts of loneliness on individuals' well-being and performance. Recent literature has suggested that senior leaders may be vulnerable to feelings of workplace loneliness but lacks a thorough depiction of how leaders experience and cope with the feelings. This qualitative study explores the lived experiences and perspectives of senior leaders through interviews with 26 leaders and seven close confidants who provide a nuanced understanding of how senior leaders experience workplace loneliness and offer insight on mitigating these feelings. The findings suggest that the structure of senior leaders' roles within their respective organizations can create systemic or structural isolation and that senior leaders do seem to experience workplace loneliness in response to both emotional and social isolation, two types of loneliness widely accepted in existing literature. Leaders attribute a feeling of “it’s lonely at the top” to the way the structure of the organization thwarts opportunities to build meaningful relationships, as well as describe feelings of exclusion and a lack of trusting relationships in the workplace. The research also highlights feelings of loneliness when senior leaders perceive that there is no one else like them among their peers whether because of race, ethnicity, gender, or background. Coping strategies identified in this sample include cultivating key relationships, intentional self-care practices, and the use of positive distractions to both mitigate and manage some feelings of loneliness that may be unavoidable in senior leadership roles. The findings also lead to a theoretical typology of coping strategies, based on two dimensions, social engagement and cognitive focus. We discuss actionable practical implications for both senior leaders and organizations, as well as limitations and future research opportunities.

Defense of Dissertation Committee

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