

“You Come for the Cause and Stay for the People”: A Grounded Theory Case Study of Mission Internalization Through a Ducks Unlimited Event

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Retaining professional and skilled employees in the non-profit sector is often dependent on facilitating the internalization of an organization’s mission. This case study of a mission-based event for a conservation organization examines how participants expressed dimensions of mission internalization described by Marimon, Mas-Machuca, and Rey (2016: Importance, Leadership, Knowledge, and Co-worker engagement). Through pre-event survey responses, a post-event focus group, and follow-up interviews, participants expressed how the experience created aspects of mission internalization. An informed grounded theory analysis helped to identify common concepts among participants. Further analysis suggested these concepts helped to build themes like Importance, Knowledge and Co-worker engagement and indicated a new dimension of Organizational Capital. However, participants noted a lack of leadership presence, and expressed some concerns about the overabundance of Knowledge they were presented with during the event. This lack of leadership presence and emphasis on Knowledge may affect the process of mission internalization. Suggestions for more work in this relatively unexplored field to further understand mission internalization in conservation-based non-profits are provided.

Keywords: conservation, employee engagement, employee retention, informed grounded theory, mission internalization, non-profit

INTRODUCTION

Mission statements are a crucial management tool for non-profit organizations (Oster, 1995). Even the for-profit industry has used mission statements to revitalize flagging companies (Cox, 1996; Stone, 1996). However, a key criticism in the literature is the lack of follow-up communication and implementation surrounding mission statements (Kopaneva, 2019; Kopaneva & Sias, 2015; Toh et al., 2022). This can create

challenges when companies try to use the mission for motivational purposes, which in non-profits especially, is one of the key desired functions of mission statements (Oster, 1995). While much focus is put on the rhetorical analysis of mission statements, their ultimate effectiveness is determined by how they are adopted throughout an organization (Alegre, Berbegal-Mirabent, Guerrero, & Mas-Machuca, 2018). Although best practices for implementing mission statements to motivate volunteers (Paxton, Velasco, & Ressler, 2022) and donors (Ressler, Paxton, & Velasco, 2021) have been explored in the non-profit literature, less is known about how mission statements can be used to motivate employees. This knowledge could be particularly important for when non-profits need to hire technical positions but cannot offer compensation that is competitive for the same types of positions in the for-profit sector. Attracting and retaining individuals in these situations then becomes more dependent on communication and internalization of organizational mission (Brown & Yoshioka, 2003; Kim & Lee, 2007).

While it could be argued that many individuals are attracted to non-profits because of pre-existing values and alignment with the organization's mission, others have suggested that this can only be considered a propensity for commitment to the organization (Brown, 1996; Cohen, 2007). Both mission internalization and organizational commitment are important to the performance of an organization (Macedo, Pinho, & Silva, 2016). Mission internalization is the process by which external ideas or practices become intrinsic and congruent with an individual's personal value system (Kelman, 2017; Marimon et al., 2016), and it can be mediated by organizational commitment, which consists of a number of different factors including how employees feel that their future is linked to that of the organization, if they would be happy to make personal sacrifices for that of the organization, are proud to work for the organization, have strong bonds with the organization, go above and beyond the call of duty for its well-being, and if they are committed and fond of the organization (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993; Macedo, Pinho, & Silva, 2016). Actual mission internalization and the development of organizational commitment arguably occur after an individual is hired and organizational processes like socialization and leadership exchanges take place (Cohen, 2007). However, very few studies have examined the processes by which employees internalize company mission statements. Previous studies of employee socialization events suggest that these can act as opportunities to foster connections and positive feelings of obligation toward the company that might help with mission internalization (Sindelar, 2001). Through the method of informed grounded theory (Thornberg, 2012), we examine the concept of mission internalization and organizational commitment using educational employee experiences at an event, Ducks University, arranged by a non-profit conservation organization: Ducks Unlimited.

Despite having run for over 20 years, no formal assessment has been completed to evaluate the effectiveness of Ducks University for communicating the Ducks Unlimited mission with employees. We sought to (1) determine if Ducks University was effective at improving employee ability to internalize and deliver the organization's mission, (2) offer suggestions for improving the event in the future, and (3) critically assess how pre-existing theories on mission internalization can be observed, modified, and expanded (Charmaz, 2014) through insights emerging from participant experiences.

METHOD

Case Study Organization and Event

Ducks Unlimited was founded in 1937 in response to plunging waterfowl populations. With the stated goal of not letting waterfowl disappear as a continental public resource, a small group of sportsmen banded together to form the organization. The organization's mission is that "Ducks Unlimited conserves, restores, and manages wetlands and associated habitats for North America's waterfowl. These habitats also benefit other wildlife and people" (Ducks Unlimited n.d.). Ducks Unlimited is an international organization spanning all of North America but Canada (DUC), the United States (DU, Inc; DUI), and Mexico (DUMAC) operate separately. Ducks Unlimited, Inc is currently governed by a 68-member volunteer board of directors. Asset management and acquisition are overseen by a separate board known as Wetlands America Trust. Conservation delivery and fundraising are carried out by a staff of around 700, who operate from five central offices in the United States. Ducks Unlimited hires staff with comparable expertise to

those hired in the for-profit industry, and the hiring process itself is also comparable. These roughly 700 staff members represent the operations arm of an organization of almost 1 million members across the U.S., Canada, and Mexico combined, which conserves more than 16 million acres of habitat across the North American continent with an annual budget of roughly \$315 million (DU, Inc., personal communication, Oct. 25, 2023).

We use this organization to examine the impact of an employee-focused immersive experience on mission internalization and employee satisfaction about the experience. Specifically, we examine the impact of Ducks University, an event put on by DU employees for DU employees. The goal of the event is to provide all participants with information about the science that drives DU's conservation decision-making, and an understanding of the organizational structure of DU. It is also intended to help employees (both old and new) network and make connections so they are more knowledgeable and comfortable when reaching out for assistance with large tasks or projects that further DU's conservation mission.

This event is meant to provide employees with a science-based understanding about why the conservation organization targets certain areas. The focus is usually on the Prairie Pothole Region, one of the most important areas for waterfowl in North America (Batt 1992). Instructors at the event are leading scientists, biologists, and engineers in the organization seeking to communicate how employees' work influences waterfowl, wetland, and grassland conservation success. The employees attending the event are encouraged to participate in afternoon field activities to solidify concepts presented in classroom-based morning sessions throughout the two-day event.

Participants

Participants for this study were selected from the 36 DUI (United States) and 26 DUC (Canadian) employees who traveled to Bismarck, North Dakota, USA at their organization's expense to take part in the May 2019 Ducks University event. Summary statistics on all event attendees were collected one week prior to the start of Ducks University, when participants were emailed a voluntary pre-survey in Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). This survey is available in the online material (Appendix 1) and descriptive statistics about participants can be found in Tables 1-2. During a final evening dinner at the conclusion of the two-day event, all attendees were asked to self-identify if they were interested in voluntarily participating in a focus group intended to evaluate their immediate impressions and effectiveness of the Ducks University event.

Data Collection

The elicitation process involved two stages: a focus group and one follow-up semi-structured interview with participants. Both stages of elicitation were conducted with the aid of audio recordings with participant consent. An interview protocol was followed during each stage (UND IRB 201906-324), but a flexible and adaptive collection process allowed for personalized responses by each participant, and also allowed for participants to respond to each other during the focus group, thus taking advantage of the "more complete and less inhibited" data collection environment that allows participants to pursue lines of thinking that may not have occurred to them outside a group setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The first stage of elicitation occurred at the end of the Ducks University event on May 18, 2019, and lasted approximately 2 hours. The template for the focus group can be found in the online supplementary material (Appendix 2). The resulting audio recording contained 54:32 of relevant discussion that was transcribed and analyzed. At the end of the focus group, individuals were asked if they would be willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview.

The second stage of elicitation occurred approximately 6 months after Ducks University was held. Individuals who had indicated a willingness to participate in the follow-up semi-structured interviews were contacted by email or phone using the information they provided and asked if they would still be willing to participate. Of the 12 individuals contacted, seven individuals agreed to a follow-up interview: four males and three females. Two of these participants were from DUC and the remaining five were DUI employees in the United States. Times for the interviews were scheduled and another copy of the semi-structured interview was provided by email. The interviews were conducted over a period of approximately 2 months

(December 2019 to January 2020). These interviews ranged from 14:35 to 24:25 minutes and averaged 19:40 minutes. Interview protocol can be found in the online supplementary material (Appendix 3).

Data Analysis

Analysis followed the framework of informed grounded theory (Thornberg, 2012), a variation of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Blumer, 1954; Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000), which allows for inductive theories to emerge from the data, but also allows for the use of pre-existing theories and findings to have a role in the analysis, and therefore contribute more fully to theory development in specific fields (Themelis, Sime, & Thornberg, 2022). In this analysis, we incorporated facets of mission internalization found in pre-existing work as sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954), which help to “lay the foundation for the analysis of research data” (Bowen, 2006, p. 14). We chose to interpret our data through the lens of a framework that has been used previously to examine mission internalization in employees (Cardona & Rey, 2008; Marimon et al., 2016; Mas-Machuca & Marimon, 2020). This framework underscores five key dimensions of mission internalization, including *Implication*, *Importance*, *Knowledge*, *Leadership*, and *Co-worker engagement*. Mas-Machuca and Marimon (2020) found the dimensions form a process of mission internalization through three routes: 1) a direct path from *Leadership* to *Implication*; 2) a path from *Leadership* to *Knowledge* then through *Importance* to *Implication*; and 3) a path from *Leadership* through *Co-worker engagement* to *Implication*.

The sensitizing concepts of *Importance* and *Knowledge* address individual characteristics of employees. The former accounts for employees’ feelings that they are making valuable contributions to society through the mission in a way that is also aligned with their personal values. The latter is a concept that describes employees’ ability to understand the mission and the extent they can communicate it to others in their own words (Wang, 2011). This concept may be particularly vital for workers who serve as knowledge brokers (Meyer, 2010), and workers who are involved in the facilitation, use, and creation of information (Sverrisson, 2001). The sensitizing concepts of *Leadership* and *Co-worker engagement* both describe how employees view some aspect of commitment by others to the mission. *Leadership* describes whether managers are perceived to be committed to the mission in actions and words while the latter refers to the importance of having visible evidence of co-workers’ commitment to the mission (*Co-worker engagement*). The final dimension, *Implication*, was not included as a sensitizing concept in our analysis. *Implication* refers to the extent to which an employee participates in conceptualizing and creating the mission and how he or she thinks about it as time goes on (Marimon et al., 2016). Because our case study data involved a short-term event, and *Implication* captures long-term reflection and process, we did not think it was likely to appear in our data. The result of our deductive literature review process (Themelis et al., 2022) were the sensitizing concepts *Leadership*, *Co-worker engagement*, *Importance*, and *Knowledge* (Cardona & Rey, 2008; Rey, 2012; Marimon et al., 2016). We used these concepts as an analytical frame and a point of reference to guide data analysis and theory production (Bowen, 2006).

We analyzed data from the focal groups and semi-structured interviews using initial line-by-line open coding, analytic memoing, and focused coding, to collate initial codes into sub-categories and themes (Themelis et al., 2022). Coauthors CF and SE led the analysis process. The first stage of the data analysis involved open coding. Audio recordings of the focus group and audio recordings of the semi-structured interviews were addressed by CF and SE as well. CF transcribed all files and removed or altered personally identifying information. CF conducted open coding of participant responses in consultation with SE. Codes refer to a single idea related to a segment of data (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005). Analytic memoing was used to keep track of emergent, ongoing, and progressing trends in the data (Saldaña, 2021). Constant and ongoing analytic memoing, as well as ongoing dialogue about the relationship and relevance of emergent codes and their possible relationships to broader ideas fosters triangulation, improving the validity of inferences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Triangulation refers to comparing different points of view from multiple researchers tending to the design, collection, and analysis of data (Patton, 2015). If disagreements over codes arose, the different viewpoints were discussed until a resolution was reached. In the two cases where CF and SE were unable to reach agreement, the items were removed from the analysis. In situations where disagreements occurred about which codes were applicable, a larger discussion with co-authors SC

and KK was held until a resolution was reached. Codes that all co-authors agreed did not fit with any of the pre-existing sensitizing concepts of mission internalization were given an ‘unassigned’ category. The unassigned category was explored as a possible new facet of mission internalization not included as a sensitizing concept from pre-existing theories.

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS COLLECTED FROM PRE-EVENT SURVEY
PARTICIPANTS (N=44)

Category	Characteristic	Count
Gender	Female (Male)	18 (26)
Age	18-24 years	5
	25-44 years	27
	45-64 years	12
Race	Asian	1
	Hispanic	1
	White	41
	Prefer not to answer	1
Education	Some college	1
	Associate’s degree	1
	Bachelor’s degree	24
	Graduate school	18
Length of employment	< 6 months	12
	6-12 months	8
	1-5 years	17
	> 5 years	7
Considers work with DU a	Career	38
	Job	2
	Doesn’t distinguish	4
Sees conservation as a	Calling	28
	Science	11
	Business	5

Characteristics of Attendees and Interviewees

Forty-four participants completed the pre-event Ducks University Qualtrics survey (Table 1). Most individuals were 25 – 44 years old (61%), male (59%), employed by Ducks Unlimited in the United States (69%), and identified as White (98%). Over 75% had at least a Bachelor’s degree and slightly more than 25% also had a Master’s. On 1-6 Likert scales, participants were excited to attend the event ($M = 5.36, SD = 0.77$) and had high levels of excitement to be working for Ducks Unlimited ($M = 5.57, SD = 0.56$, Table 2). Most participants viewed their positions with the company as careers rather than jobs or short-term commitments (86%). Less than half of attendees were avid duck or goose hunters (41%, 28%) and roughly one-third reported donating time and/or money to conservation (Table 1). Twelve attendees (6 males; 6 females) volunteered and were followed through both the focal group and the semi-structured interviews. Seven were from Ducks Unlimited Inc., (4 male, 3 female) and five were from Ducks Unlimited Canada (2 male and 3 female).

**TABLE 2
ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS OF PARTICIPANTS (N=44)**

Characteristic	Mean (SD)
Attitude: Excitement to attend Ducks University	5.36 (0.77)
Attitude: Excitement to work for Ducks Unlimited	5.57 (0.56)
Experience: Hunting ducks	4.45 (1.54)
Experience: Hunting geese	4.23 (1.49)
Experience: Hunting big game	4.16 (1.58)
Experience: Hunting other game	4.41 (1.61)
Experience: Donating time to conservation	4.89 (1.03)
Experience; Donating money to conservation	5.14 (0.81)

Note: All items measured on a 1-6 scale, with low values expressing negative attitudes or little experience and high values expressing positive attitudes and ample experience.

RESULTS

During open coding for the focal group data and follow-up interviews we identified 17 and 27 different codes respectively. When evaluating these codes within the context of the mission internalization framework, we identified 20 codes that aligned with *Knowledge* dimension, 11 with *Co-worker engagement*, 4 with *Importance*, and 2 with *Leadership*. Seven of the codes identified in the first step of the grounded theory process remained unassigned (Tables 3-4).

TABLE 3
SENSITIZING CONCEPTS, ASSOCIATED CODES, AND OCCURRENCE COUNTS FOR
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS (ELICITATION STAGE 1)

Sensitizing concept: knowledge		
Code	Code description	# Occurrences
Information	Comments by participants about how the event presented information that was appropriate in both breadth and depth.	47
Back pocket stories	The event provided employees with stories they can share with outsiders that illustrate important points, effective resource use, emotive, pathos, and accomplishment of mission.	4
Talking points	There were ample times that participants felt that because of this experience, they were better equipped to address criticisms or questions they face in promoting the organization’s mission, “logos”.	43
Practice distilling and communicating	Participants expressed that the chance to assimilate information, boil it down, and then communicate it back as they would to a donor or the public would be beneficial.	21
Logistical practice	Things that participants felt would make them better resources to the organization	6
Hunting heritage	There is a strong hunting heritage in the organization, but this is only one facet, and often that facet is what triggered an appreciation for the plethora of other things the organization does.	11
Partnerships	There was one suggestion about bringing in some of the outside parties to speak to participants and give them the perspective of a partner.	1
Sensitizing concept: coworker engagement		
Code	Code description	# Occurrences
Networking	The social connections created through the event was critically important to participants.	19
Culture of connection	References to the reliance of people on each other within the organization.	30
Geographic challenges	Descriptions of feeling isolated or challenged due generally to location.	7
Sensitizing concept: importance		
Code	Code description	# Occurrences
Integration	Participants consistently expressed that they felt integrated to part of a broader community, like they were part of something bigger and “more than just themselves” because of this event.	26
Conservation mission	Participants consistently express that DU is involved in conservation of natural resources that go far beyond just a hunting heritage, and that really, their mission is trans-generational.	18
Sensitizing concept: leadership		
Code	Code description	# Occurrences
Organizational structure	There is still some confusion or ambiguity about the structure of DU, and how all the parts fit together.	13
Figurehead	It bothered several participants that the Board was absent from such an event as this.	8

Sensitizing concept: unassigned		
Code	Code description	# Occurrences
Assess and reward	Participants were strongly in favor of an assessment and a reward for good performance.	2
Info overload	Discussion about feeling overwhelmed with info	3
Misconceptions	Statements that might be interpreted as a misunderstanding or incorrect	1

TABLE 4
SENSITIZING CONCEPTS, ASSOCIATED CODES, AND OCCURRENCE COUNTS FOR FOLLOW-UP PHONE INTERVIEWS (ELICITATION STAGE 2)

Sensitizing concept: knowledge		
Code	Code description	# Occurrences
Fear of compromise	Fear they might not uphold the highest standards that are clearly part of the DU brand and mentality: ranged from relationships with landowners to the execution of projects and easements.	7
Waterfowl and their ecology	Participants described the importance of information gained related to waterfowl and waterfowl ecology.	21
Wetlands	Participants described the importance of information gained related to waterfowl habitat.	16
Project diversity	Participants described learning about the variety of projects DU and DUC are involved with.	12
Hands on experiences	Participants described the importance of the hands on and engaging activities at Ducks University.	10
Conservation easements	Participants described learning about the importance of conservation easements and habitat protection.	5
Agronomy practices	Participants described learning about how DU integrates agronomy practices that benefit ducks and landowners at the same time.	3
Site visits	Participants described the impact of actually getting “boots on ground”.	14
Integrity	When representing DU, participants wanted others to know that DU and its employees can be trusted/	8
Area/region specific session	Participants described a desire for a session during Ducks University that would be specifically relevant to the area or region that they were from.	2
Donor examples	Participants described learning about specific examples of donor connections and appeal.	5
Understanding finances	Participants described learning about the underlying finances of DU.	16
Heritage	DU was founded by hunters but has moved far beyond just that subset of the population, and this code represented descriptive statements by participants of that heritage and evolution.	11

Sensitizing concept: coworker engagement		
Code	Code description	# Occurrences
Connections	Connections that this event facilitated and were reported as beneficial because DU is a large organization with continent-wide work that requires teamwork and interpersonal connections.	19
Contacts	Similar to the “Connections” code but referred more to know who to go to for assistance, and when.	16
People	Participants described understanding individual roles, and how those roles fit together when it came to things like reaching out for help or support, collaborations, and increased efficiency.	19
Science based	Examples of individuals explicitly referencing the science that had been presented to them in Ducks University, and how they use that information to guide their decisions and actions in their roles	14
Organizational mentality	There was a mindset about representing DU in a positive manner.	7
Infectious passion	Assigned to statements that illustrated or exemplified descriptions of a positive and motivating work environment spread by people, personalities, and efforts.	9
Pride	Assigned where participants were proud (often fiercely) of being part of this organization.	9
Isolation	Assigned where participants described feeling isolated once they returned to a home office.	2
Sensitizing concept: importance		
Code	Code description	# Occurrences
Habitat conservation	Participants described the importance of wetlands, habitat, and the conservation of those natural resources.	16
Not-for-profit	Statements that used this term and/or described the non-profit approach of DU.	17
Sensitizing concept: unassigned		
Window of timing	Participants described feeling that Ducks University would be optimal at a specific window (roughly 6 months) of time in their career.	1
Logistics of sustainability	Assigned when a participant described recalling how much waste was generated during the event and described a desire to see that reduced.	1
Resources	Used when participants expressed having shared resources with others in the organization. These resources varied, but were significant because they increase organizational efficiency.	9
Information overload	Assigned to text where participants described remembering feeling overloaded, overwhelmed, or “saturated” with information during the event	3

Leadership

In Mas-Machuca and Marimon’s (2020) model of the mission internalization, *Leadership* is the starting point for the overall process, contributing to all other dimensions either directly or indirectly. However, our coding and analysis did not show many aspects related to the *Leadership* dimension emerging from participants. Codes and themes related to *Leadership* were the least likely to emerge in the data, and only appeared in the focus group immediately following the event. In all, we observed two codes, appearing 21 times in the data. Also, in contrast to other dimensions discussed below, participants indicated that elements related to *Leadership* might be hindering their mission internalization. This is likely related to one of the

codes that emerged for this dimension connected to *Figurehead* (N=8), or references to official leadership in Ducks Unlimited, particularly members of the executive team and Board of Directors. No members of these leadership bodies were physically involved in the 2019 Ducks University, which was noted by participants, who connected this lack of physical presence to participants' not understanding the role of these leaders in the mission. As participant [R1] stated,

"I thought that the board was conspicuously absent I don't have a clue what they do. I wouldn't know a Board member if I fell over one."

The strongest code for leadership that emerged was *Organizational Structure* (N=13), relating to the different elements, departments, and areas that compose Ducks Unlimited, and how those elements fit together to accomplish the mission. Participants also expressed that they experienced a deficiency in this area that impacted their internalization of the mission. Confusion about DU's complex structure, spanning several countries, emerged as a concern. For some, including participant [R2], the absence of this information proved frustrating.

"(B)ecause to me (Ducks University) was more really the science in conservation. We got that! And we know what they are doing and — but how about those other pieces (of DU)?"

Knowledge

Participants indicated that in the context of Ducks University, their paths to mission internalization started with the dimensions of *Importance* and *Knowledge*. *Knowledge*, defined by codes associated with employees' ability to communicate and explain the mission of the company in their own words, was the dimension that emerged most strongly from participants. The *Knowledge* dimension encompassed 20 codes that related to the interaction and communication of employees with and about the company externally (Tables 3 - 4). Many of the codes indicate participants saw themselves as conduits of *Knowledge*, first in receiving *Information* (N = 47) through the Ducks University sessions and presenters, and then envisioning themselves as distributors of that *Knowledge* to others. For example, the code *Talking points* referenced how participants felt that because of Ducks University they were better equipped to promote and discuss DU's mission (N = 43). Participant [R3] expressed in the focus group that

"(t)here are always organizations out there trying to come back and (compete or criticize DU)... and ask if DU does what it says it does. And being able to see it for the first time (here at Ducks University), yeah... DU is doing what they say they are."

Aspects of *Knowledge* emerged in several themes that showed participants perceived a large amount of growth in their understanding of varied aspects of DU's mission, especially related to conservation and the science supporting conservation efforts, particularly in the six-month follow-up interviews. Participants referred to *Waterfowl and Their Ecology* (N=21), *Wetlands* (N=16), *Conservation Easements* (N=5), and *Agronomy Practices* (N=3). Participants also indicated in both the focus group and six-month follow-up that they acquired and internalized more esoteric aspects of *Knowledge* related to DU's history and structural organization, including *Logistical Practice* (N=6), *Heritage* (N=11), *Hunting Heritage* (N=11), *Partnerships* (N=1), *Project Diversity* (N=12) and *Understanding Finances* (N=16). Participant [R2] expressed in the follow-up interview how this *Knowledge* helped connect them to DU's mission:

"When I first started here, I started at Ducks Unlimited thinking it was just a bunch of hunters who sold cool stuff. I had no idea! ... But the sheer magnitude of everything that is happening (for conservation) — I still can't wrap my head around it, and I have the unique position of working with people from the tip-top of Canada to the very bottom of Mexico."

Codes relevant to *Knowledge* increased and became more specific in the follow up interviews but were topically related to codes mentioned in the first elicitation stage, including *Wetlands* (N=16), *Hands-on experiences* (N=10), and *Waterfowl and their ecology* (N=21). Like in the first stage, interviewees focused on how the information they obtained from the immersive experience at Ducks University helped them to communicate the company mission, including Participant [R4]’s remark:

“It *really* takes seeing it to say, ‘*Whoa, wow*, we actually do *a lot*— When we are talking about field studies and how they do it and all that kind of stuff — There is *a lot* that goes on and it’s impactful. And just seeing it ... seeing it in your own experience was incredibly valuable, and it just deepens that bond to the brand.”

Importance

While fewer codes appeared under this dimension, it appeared that participants’ *Knowledge* was supported by their feelings about the *Importance* of the mission, aligning with Mas-Mascucha and Marimon’s (2020) model that suggests these two play a mediating role in connecting *Leadership* to mission internalization. Like *Knowledge*, *Importance* relates to information about an organization. However, this dimension emerged as specific to codes that described how the mission was important to fulfilling an employee’s contribution to society. Of the four codes that aligned with this dimension during the focus groups, *Integration* was observed most frequently (N=26). This code covered occasions when participants expressed they felt part of something bigger than themselves. For example, participant [R5] stated,

“Ecosystem services, water quality, flood water attenuation, wildlife habitat is obviously a big one for us... I got into this with a hunting background and then went to college and realized I could make a career out of (doing so much more). That’s how I ended up here.”

While the codes identified in the follow-up interviews were slightly different, participants still seemed to identify their contributions with those of the company’s to society. These codes included *Habitat Conservation* (N=16) and *Not-for-profit* (N=17).

Importance was also identified by co-authors as being multi-dimensional, or capable of fitting into more than one of the Marimon et al. (2016) dimensions. For example, under the code *Integration*, participant [R6] stated, “I think it’s just this nice – to begin to put some of the pieces together and really feel like somewhat knowledgeable about what I’m – what we are doing as an organization.” Co-authors noted that some interpretations of the code could place it under the *Co-worker engagement* dimension.

Co-Worker Engagement

Co-worker engagement was also a crucial step toward mission internalization (Mas-Machuca & Marimon, 2020). The *Co-worker engagement* dimension of mission internalization was defined by codes associated with employees’ exposure to their colleagues’ degree of commitment to the company’s shared mission. The most frequently mentioned code that was categorized under this theme was the *Culture of connection* (N=30), where the experience strengthened participants’ feelings of connections to one another:

“Just meeting all the great people who have a lot of passion. And like — everyone has been saying it’s really about the connections so that we can get professional advice or whatever you want from anyone really. Just call them up!” [participant R7].

Co-authors identified more codes that aligned with the *Co-worker engagement* dimension in the second stage of elicitation than in the first stage (N=8). Similar concepts existed throughout, with the codes *Connections* (N = 19), *Contacts*, (N=16), and *People* (N=19) being observed the most frequently. *Connections* covered instances where interviewees mentioned an increased comfort in reaching out to others because of their experiences at Ducks University. *Contacts* addressed similar instances that were more focused on *whom* to reach out to rather than increased comfort levels in doing so. Finally, the *People*

code identified occasions when interviewees described their increased network and understanding of others' roles in the organization as a result of their participation in the event:

“Now I have connections with people who maybe have similar positions to me, whether they are in other regions or in the same office. If I have a question I can call them up and maybe they've dealt with it recently, or have an insight on how they handled it within the organization” [participant R5].

The co-authors also earmarked *Connections* and *Contacts* as multi-dimensional codes that could have aligned with the *Knowledge* dimension. Understanding the structure of the organization and the people who fulfill roles in the organization overlapped with understanding how the organizational mission could be accomplished. While having knowledge about the individuals fulfilling organizational roles and positions at any one time was deemed important by participants, their comments also reflected the idea that the people in those positions were not as permanent as the actual positions. In that case, understanding what position to look for to find resources for fulfilling the mission was as important to participants as knowing the individuals. Thus comments like the following were coded as *Connections* because of the stress placed on the individuals in roles:

“I probably use the knowledge I gained about once a week... Now I have connections with people who maybe have similar positions to me, whether they are in other regions or in the same office. If I have a question I can call them up and maybe they've dealt with it recently, or have an insight on how they handled it within the organization” [participant R5].

However, another comment was coded as *Contact* because of the stress placed on understanding the organization of the company beyond the individuals fulfilling roles at any one time:

“Ducks University set the tone for me in terms of where I need to be looking and what types of things I need to be working on to really build the organization” [participant R8].

Unassigned Codes

Coding of the participants' comments revealed that their mission internalization could largely fit into the model described by Marimon et al. (2016) and applied by Mas-Machuca and Marimon (2020). The remaining unassigned codes suggest a theme around the application of mission internalization procedures and events. Participants indicated incentives for mission internalization were appropriate through *Assess and Reward* (N=2). *Information Overload* (N=6) appeared in both elicitation stages, a rare occurrence in this data set. The concentrated effort to provide all the elements of mission internalization in a short amount of time left participants mentally fatigued. As participant [R9] noted during an unrelated focus group question,

“My brain is too overloaded with information to give you a simple answer to that question.”

Participants also questioned the optimal time to conduct a mission internalization event like Ducks University through *Window of Timing* (N=1). And one participant [R10], questioned whether the waste produced during the event matched the conservation values DU was attempting to instill in participants; *Logistics of Sustainability* (N=1).

While codes related to logistics and delivery of the event were relatively sparse and isolated, one code does indicate a possible missing area in the mission internalization model. *Resources* (N=9) was descriptions of participants sharing equipment and job duties with others in the organization that increased organizational efficiency. We did not theme this code with *Co-workers' engagement*, because it was centered on understanding where non-personnel related resources were found throughout the national branches of DU. As participant [R11] stated,

“We have shared resources with folks at Iowa... and the science group in Winnipeg. And then with the other policy groups in Canada.”

We believe this connects to individual codes themed into other dimensions that may point to a missing area in the known dimensions of mission internalization, discussed below.

DISCUSSION

This study is one of the first explorations of mission internalization in the non-profit conservation sector. We set out to evaluate immediate impressions of an employee education event through a focus group interview, long-term impacts through follow-up semi-structured interviews six months after the event and sought to offer suggestions for improving the event in the future. An informed grounded theory approach with sensitizing concepts was used to analyze these data and to situate our findings within the literature surrounding mission internalization. We share those findings here to provide insight to other non-profits about participant perceptions related to the value of such an immersive event and its impact and persistence on organizational mission internalization.

Ducks University Mission Internalization Effectiveness and Potential Improvements

Dimensions of mission internalization identified by Marimon et al. (2016) were prominent in dialogues with attendees immediately after the three-day intensive educational event run by the non-profit conservation organization Ducks Unlimited. Specifically, our results suggested the *Knowledge*, *Co-worker engagement*, and *Importance* dimensions were well-addressed. A large portion of this event was focused on conveying information from scientists within the organization to attendees. This focus likely explains the preponderance of comments we connected to the *Knowledge* theme in both elicitation stages. In fact, unassigned themes around *Information overload* suggested that participants sometimes experienced the sensation of being given too much information and having difficulty processing it completely.

Participants also noted a greater connection to co-workers within the organization, even across the international borders this organization spans. As a result, we suggest the event more than adequately addressed the *Co-worker engagement* dimension. Other studies have shown the importance of interactions with co-workers who have a high degree of commitment to organization mission (Sindelar, 2001; Wang, 2011). Employee engagement overall is an increasingly prominent issue in the modern workplace (Harter, Schmidt, Agrawal, Plowman, & Blue, 2020) and low levels of engagement or commitment to the organization can impact company profits, job turnover, and employee emotional and intellectual commitment (Barik & Kochar, 2017; Choudhury, Dutta, & Dutta, 2019; Liu, 2022); the latter of which are often important in organizations that cannot afford to compete with salaries in the for-profit sector (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2002; Walden, Jung, & Westerman, 2017; Mani & Mishra, 2021).

Similarly, the *Importance* dimension of Marimon et al. (2016) provided context and insight about how and why participants perceived the impacts of the not-for-profit approach to habitat conservation as substantial or significant. Based on these findings grounded in the data from the voices of participants we find this event was successful at increasing the *Knowledge* reported to be possessed and used by participants, that participants left the event feeling more connected to their co-workers and more comfortable reaching out to them to accomplish the mission of Ducks Unlimited, and finally that participants reported seeing the status of DU as a not-for-profit habitat conservation organization as important and meaningful. While several participants reported it was possible to feel overwhelmed with the amount of information, such reports were generally qualified with an understanding that such short events were by necessity rather intense in nature.

The one dimension that was reported as needing improvement was *Leadership*. Our results suggest the absence of leadership presence at the board or executive level was noticed and questioned by participants. This is significant as Mas-Machuca and Marimon (2020) indicated that *Leadership's* impact on *Implication* was mediated by these other dimensions of *Knowledge* and *Importance* and by *Co-worker engagement*. Here by *Implication* we refer to the extent to which an employee participates in conceptualizing and creating

the mission and how he or she thinks about it as time goes on (Marimon et al., 2016). The themes surrounding *Leadership* had mostly negative connotations, suggesting the management structure of the organization was still not clearly understood after the event and the attendees were disappointed to have not met more major players in the organization. Instead, participants reported their mission internalizations started further into the mission internalization model, but still ended with *Implication*. Having leadership present at such events would be an opportunity for improvement moving forward, perhaps strengthening the entire process and the resulting mission internalization in participants. As a result, we recommend organizations hosting an employee education event like this include the presentations, hands-on activities, and social events as in Ducks University but also include involvement by senior leadership when feasible to better facilitate the *Leadership* dimension for internalization.

Implications for Mission Internalization Model

The *Knowledge*, *Importance*, and *Co-worker engagement* dimensions persisted in the second elicitation stage 6 months after the initial event. However, what emerged prominently from this data set was a shift in perceptions to focus on the importance of *Co-worker engagement*. *Knowledge* was the predominant focus immediately following the event and this dimension persisted in the 6-month follow up. However, codes aligned with *Co-worker engagement* increased substantially in this follow up as well. Additionally, some of the perceptions that were coded as aligning with the *Knowledge* dimension in this second elicitation were related to *Co-worker engagement*. Essentially, to carry out the mission of wetlands habitat conservation, DU employees reported relying on their connections and contacts, and the working relationships that many had fostered through the initial Ducks University event. But the greatest long-term benefit ended up being the networks that developed and persisted because of participation in the event. Our conclusion was this aspect, combined with the code of *Resources*, which did not align with the existing known mission internalization dimensions, suggests an unrecognized dimension. We call this missing dimension *Organizational Capital*, which captures the social aspects of mission internalization that strengthen through time. Although we considered the possibility, we felt *Organizational Capital* was not captured in the *Implication* dimension, nor is it the feeling that an individual is seeing others aligning with the mission, as in *Co-worker engagement*. Instead, *Organizational Capital* is about the feeling of understanding — and ability to activate — a network of people to fulfill the mission. This dimension appears in the longer-term process of mission internalization and may be more evident when data is collected longitudinally. This is promising for the practical understanding of mission internalization events, as it could be indicative of a lasting impact of the event that may strengthen beyond the 6 months we examined.

Limitations

It is worth noting these results are correlative in nature. The observed pattern could reflect the basic demographic and attitudinal characteristics of our participants. As the pre-event survey demonstrated, most individuals who attended the event already had high levels of excitement about the event, the organization, and conservation in general. Further, many had a pre-existing background in hunting or some form of wildlife, or natural resources education. Despite this background in conservation, many still did not arrive at the event with an understanding of how Ducks Unlimited delivered that conservation mission in practice. Thus, while *Importance* may have been confounded with previous demographic measures, we believe that most information about *Knowledge* and *Co-worker engagement* did not experience this bias.

CONCLUSION

We saw support for mission internalization through an immersive employee education event. Retaining and engaging employees in conservation organizations will help to leverage important skill sets needed to address the increasingly complex problems facing this field today. Despite the positive results demonstrated in our case study, we believe that additional research would help to identify the mechanisms and relative importance of the different dimensions of mission internalization for similar organizations. We further recommend that future studies incorporate multiple years of study with multiple cohorts of study groups

and that studies address the internalization question in a manner that will benefit implementation as well as the peer-reviewed literature.

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APPENDIX 1

Pre-event email and questionnaire sent out to participants of Ducks University event on May 15 2019.

Dear Ducks University Students,

Ducks University is an annual program that we would like to ensure is providing the best level of information and experience possible to 'students' like yourselves. In order to objectively examine the program's structure and delivery we have contracted with the University of North Dakota to develop a survey geared towards answering questions about the impact of Ducks University and how we might improve upon future years' programs.

We have two goals with this survey. First, we want to ensure that Ducks University offers you the best experience possible. With this in mind, we want to know a little bit about you, and what your expectations are prior to the experience. Following your Ducks University time, we will then ask you to participate in a small focus group that assesses how we did and looks at ways for us to improve. Second, we would like to gather some long-term data to see how Ducks University serves participants as they progress in their career with DU. To this end, we will ask if you would be willing to allow us to contact you after your time at Ducks University to see how the things you learned or were exposed to are serving you in your career. Our plan currently is to do this at 6, 12, and 24 months following your Ducks University experience. If you are willing to share your thoughts with us, you will be given the chance to provide us with contact information at the end of the survey. Participation is completely voluntary, but greatly appreciated as we strive to refine and improve Ducks University to make it the best experience possible for you, and future participants.

Thank you in advance for your time, insight, and help.

AGE

Please select the age category below that you fit in currently.

- I am 18–24 years of age
- I am 25–44 years of age
- I am 46–64 years of age
- I am 65 years of age or older
- I would like to not share this information

GENDER

Please share your gender with us.

- Male
- Female
- I would like to remain unidentified
- I do not identify as male or female

ETHNICITY

Please select the answer below that best describes your ethnicity.

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic
- Multiple races
- White
- Other
- I prefer to not answer

EDUCATION

Please select from the list below the item that best describes your highest level of education.

- I do not have a high school diploma or GED
- I have completed a high school diploma or GED
- I have some college experience but no degree
- I have an Associate's degree
- I have a Bachelor's degree
- I have some graduate level education
- I have a Master's degree
- I have a Professional degree
- I have a Doctoral degree

DU EMPLOYMENT

Please select the item below that best describes your CURRENT employment with Ducks Unlimited (DU).

- I have not yet started my position with DU
- I have worked for DU for less than 30 days
- I have worked for DU for between 1 and 3 months
- I have worked for DU for 3–6 months
- I have worked for DU for 6–9 months
- I have worked for DU for 9–12 months
- I have worked for DU for 1–2 years
- I have worked for DU for 2–5 years
- I have worked for DU for more than 5 years

PREVIOUSLY ATTENDED

Have you tried to attend Ducks University previously?

- Yes
- No
- I prefer not to answer

EXCITEMENT

How excited are you to be ATTENDING Ducks University?

Select the answer that best describes you.

- Extremely uninterested: I feel like this is a burden
- Moderately uninterested: I feel like this is an obligation
- Mildly disinterested
- Mildly interested
- Moderately excited: I think this is a cool opportunity
- Incredibly excited!

WORKING

How excited are you to be WORKING for Ducks Unlimited (DU)?

Select the answer that best describes you.

- Extremely uninterested: I feel like I just need a job
- Moderately uninterested; I need a paycheck, and they had a job opening
- Mildly unexcited
- Mildly excited
- Moderately excited: I like DU
- Working for DU or an Organization like them has been a life-long dream!

CURRENT ROLE

In the space below, please describe your current role with Ducks Unlimited. (What is your job title, and how do you describe what you do to friends and family?)

MOVE FOR DU

Did you have to move to take your current job with Ducks Unlimited?

- Yes
- No
- I prefer to not answer

HUNT DUCKS

Do you... Hunt ducks?

- Definitely no, I am strongly against this
- No, I have no interest
- No, I have never had the chance
- I used to, but I don't any longer
- Yes, when it is convenient
- Absolutely, this is a passion of mine

HUNT GEESE

Do you... Hunt geese?

- Definitely no, I am strongly against this
- No, I have no interest
- No, I have never had the chance
- I used to, but I don't any longer
- Yes, when it is convenient
- Absolutely, this is a passion of mine

HUNT BIG GAME

Do you... Hunt other big game (deer, elk etc.)

- Definitely no, I am strongly against this
- No, I have no interest
- No, I have never had the chance
- I used to, but I don't any longer
- Yes, when it is convenient
- Absolutely, this is a passion of mine

HUNT OTHER

Do you... Hunt other game (small game, turkey etc.)

Definitely no, I am strongly against this

No, I have no interest

No, I have never had the chance

I used to, but I don't any longer

Yes, when it is convenient

Absolutely, this is a passion of mine

DONATE TIME

Do you... Donate time to conservation

Definitely no, I am strongly against this

No, I have no interest

No, I have never had the chance

I used to, but I don't any longer

Yes, when it is convenient

Absolutely, this is a passion of mine

DONATE MONEY

Do you... Donate money to conservation

Definitely no, I am strongly against this

No, I have no interest

No, I have never had the chance

I used to, but I don't any longer

Yes, when it is convenient

Absolutely, this is a passion of mine

PREVIOUS BANQUETS

Please select the item below that best describes your previous experience with Ducks Unlimited Banquets

I have never been to a DU Banquet

I have attended DU banquets in the past, but not within the last 5 years

I attend at least 1 DU banquet a year

I attend multiple DU banquets a year

I help run/coordinate at least 1 DU banquet a year

ANYTHING ELSE BACKGROUND

Is there anything we haven't asked about your background that you think is relevant to us understanding you and how/why you work for Ducks Unlimited?

JOB CAREER

Which of the following best describes you?

I see my position with Ducks Unlimited as a job

I see my position with Ducks Unlimited as a career

I do not distinguish a difference between a job and a career

CALLING SCIENCE BUSINESS

Which of the following best describes you?

I see conservation, restoration, and management of habitat as a calling.

I see conservation, restoration, and management of habitat as a science.

I see conservation, restoration, and management of habitat as a business.

DU REGION

In what Region will you be working for Ducks Unlimited in?

The next series of questions is intended to help us understand where our participants are before attending Ducks University. We want to gather a sense of your emotions, motivations, and understandings before Ducks University.

DESCRIBING DU

When you describe Ducks Unlimited to others who are unfamiliar with the organization, what do you tell them?

DU MISSION

What is the mission of Ducks Unlimited, and how do you see your position contributing to this?

GAIN FROM UNIVERSITY

What do you hope to gain from your participation in Ducks University?

FEAR IN POSITION

What is your greatest fear, or the aspect of your position with Ducks Unlimited that you are most afraid of? (In other words, is there something about your position with DU that intimidates you the most)?

USE OF KNOWLEDGE

Do you anticipate using the knowledge and information you gain from Ducks University as part of your job, and if so, how?

ANYTHING ELSE UNIVERSITY

Is there anything we have not asked which you would like to tell us about why you are attending Ducks University?

NONE of the questions below need responded to at this point. The material that follows are the questions that we will use to guide the focus group discussion on the last evening of the event during the dinner. We will ask for 8–12 individuals to participate in this focus group. If you are interested, please provide your name and your preferred contact information below so that we may reach you prior to that time.

Your personal contact information will only be used to contact you for the focus groups. Once you complete this survey your name and contact information will be separated from your other answers and kept in a separate file to help ensure anonymity and to preserve confidentiality.

Questions we will be asking in a semi-structured focus group following the experience. Please feel free to look at these ahead of time so we can discuss this following your experience.

Ducks Unlimited is an organization that seeks to motivate people to action relative to the conservation, restoration, and management of wetlands. Having completed this event, please describe your motivation/engagement to contributing to this organization's mission.

Please explain what the most impactful aspect of Ducks University was for you.

If you could offer one suggestion for improving Ducks University, what would it be, and why?

Please describe how you see your attendance and participation in Ducks University affecting your ability to effectively carry out the duties you have with the organization.

Please think back to what you had hoped to gain from Ducks University before this began. Do you feel that this experience met your hope or expectations?

Please think back to your response about your greatest fear or intimidation about your position with Ducks Unlimited. Did Ducks University help address this? If so, how, and if not, how do think we could better prepare you?

Ducks University strives to strike a balance between some technically heavy material and some over-arching conceptual themes. How did we do with that? Please feel free to contextualize your response surrounding your background, position, prior knowledge, or anything else you feel is relevant.

ANYTHING ELSE EXPERIENCE

Is there anything about this experience that we haven't asked about, which you would like us to know?
FOLLOW UP

Finally, may we follow up with you after the Ducks University event to ask about how this experience has served you with Ducks Unlimited? Please respond "yes" or "no" in the space below, and if you answer yes, please provide us with your preferred method of contact, and the information we would need. (It is fine to give preferred times as well)

Thank you for your time, and for sharing your thoughts. As always, if you have any questions or concerns — please feel free to contact XXXX or by phone at XXX. I look forward to seeing you at Ducks University, and hopefully getting to talk with you about the experience.

APPENDIX 2

Questions asked during focus group session on May 18, 2019

These questions were included on the initial survey sent to participants.

1. Ducks Unlimited is an organization that seeks to motivate people to action relative to the conservation, restoration, and management of wetlands. Why do we need wetlands?
2. Ducks Unlimited is an organization that seeks to motivate people to action relative to the conservation, restoration, and management of wetlands. Having completed this event, please describe your motivation/engagement to contributing to this organization's mission.
3. Please explain what the most impactful aspect of Ducks University was for you.
4. If you could offer one suggestion for improving Ducks University, what would it be, and why?
5. Please describe how you see your attendance and participation in Ducks University affecting your ability to effectively carry out the duties you have with the organization.
6. Please think back to what you had hoped to gain from Ducks University before this began. Do you feel that this experience met your hope or expectations?
7. Please think back to your response about your greatest fear or intimidation about your position with Ducks Unlimited. Did Ducks University help address this? If so, how, and if not, how do you think we could better prepare you?
8. Ducks University strives to strike a balance between some technically heavy material and some over-arching conceptual themes. How did we do with that? Please feel free to contextualize your response surrounding your background, position, prior knowledge, or anything else you feel is relevant.

APPENDIX 3

Questionnaire outline for follow-up interviews that occurred between December 2019 and January 2020.

Below you will find a series of questions that I would like to use as a guide following the Ducks University experience in an effort to try and understand the perceived long-term impacts that this experience has.

1. What is your position with DU? And how long have you been doing this?
2. When you describe Ducks Unlimited to others who are unfamiliar with the organization, what do you tell them?
3. What was the most impactful aspect of Ducks university for you, and why?
4. Has attending Ducks University helped you in your position with DU, and if so, can you share how? If not, can you tell me why?
 - a. Can you share specific examples, and how often would you say you use this knowledge?
5. Can you tell me about any knowledge or information that you gained at Ducks University that has helped you in your job?
6. What did you gain from Ducks university that has been useful to you since attending?
7. What is the greatest fear or challenge you have related to your position with DU?
8. Is there anything Ducks University could have done to help with this?
9. Have you kept in touch with anyone you met through Ducks University? IF yes then how many and/or how often?
10. Is this professional or personal, or both?
11. Is there a difference in the response you get when you reach out to someone from Ducks University?
12. If you could talk to yourself 8 months ago, would you suggest to yourself to attend Ducks University? Why or why not?
13. So, I am trying to understand if Ducks University is a worth-while investment to DU. What are your thoughts on this topic?
14. Would you recommend to your colleagues that they attend Ducks University?
15. Is there anything I have not asked about the impacts of Ducks University on you that you would like to tell me, or that you think I should know?