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Purpose-Driven Resilience: Vince Hafeli on Psychological Safety, Suicide Prevention, and Leading with Heart

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Vince Hafeli, a seasoned construction executive with over 40 years of industry experience, President of Ajax Paving Industries in Florida, and advocate for mental health, brings humanity to an industry often typified by grit, silence, and masculine bravado. In this candid interview, Hafeli shares how personal trauma, including the loss of colleagues and suicidal ideation, led him to champion psychological safety in the workplace. The interview is thematically coded into five core categories: Psychological Safety, Suicide Awareness and Prevention, Personal and Professional Transformation, Emotional Vulnerability, and Leading Through Purpose. Hafeli's insights align with dimensions of sustainable career theory, particularly personal agency, time, and meaning. His journey affirms that purpose-led leadership is not only possible in high-pressure industries but essential for systemic change. Through lived experience and deliberate action, Hafeli demonstrates how inclusive, vulnerable leadership creates environments where people can survive, grow, and thrive.

A conversation with construction executive Vince Hafeli reveals how personal trauma, authentic leadership, and psychological safety can transform careers and save lives.

Keywords: Vince Hafeli, psychological safety, suicide prevention, sustainable leadership, trauma-informed leadership, emotional resilience, masculinity, vulnerability, stigma, personal agency, construction industry, mental health, inclusive leadership, mental health in construction

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This article presents an in-depth exploration of Vince Hafeli's lived experience as a construction industry executive who has not only achieved professional success but also led a profound cultural transformation centered on empathy, psychological safety, and mental health advocacy. Unlike many in the commercial construction and roofing sectors, fields often defined by physical toughness, time pressures, and emotional stoicism, Hafeli's journey reflects a deeply humanistic and trauma-informed approach to leadership.

Drawing from a qualitative, narrative-inquiry interview method, this article captures Hafeli's voice with minimal filtering, allowing his experiences, insights, and values to emerge organically. These personal narratives are then analyzed using thematic coding and contextualized within the sustainable careers framework developed by Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015). In this way, the article bridges the gap between theoretical models and real-world practice, offering both scholarly insight and practical inspiration.

The significance of Hafeli's leadership story lies in its complex and layered nature. He is not merely a leader implementing new policies; he is a survivor who has used his pain as the foundation for systemic change. His evolution from silence to advocacy and from conventional command-and-control leadership to emotionally intelligent and purpose-driven leadership serves as a case study for how careers can be sustained not despite adversity, but because of how individuals respond to it. Through this lens, the article positions Hafeli's experience as not only relevant to those in the construction industry but also broadly applicable to anyone interested in inclusive, values-based leadership across various industries.

The construction industry itself provides a particularly important context for examining leadership. Executives in this field navigate challenges that differ from those found in traditional corporate environments, including managing project-based workflows, coordinating diverse subcontractors, mitigating safety risks, and responding to economic fluctuations that directly affect workforce stability. Leadership effectiveness in this sector is therefore intertwined with high-pressure decision-making, dispersed teams, and environments where both physical and psychological hazards are present. Understanding how leaders operate under these conditions offers insight not only for construction professionals but for managers across industries who face similarly complex human and operational dynamics. By situating executive perspectives within this broader context, the significance of their insights becomes clearer, and their relevance to the wider field of leadership studies is strengthened.

Interviewee: Vince Hafeli

Vince Hafeli is a seasoned executive in the commercial roofing and construction industry with more than 40 years of operational and leadership experience. Throughout his career, he has held roles ranging from field supervisor to senior executive and President, giving him a comprehensive understanding of both frontline challenges and strategic decision-making. He is widely regarded for his technical expertise, project delivery, and team leadership, but what truly sets him apart is his unwavering commitment to reshaping the industry's culture around mental health and emotional well-being.

Beyond his personal leadership style, Hafeli's professional influence is also shaped by the scale and history of the company he leads. The organization is a long-established commercial roofing firm with a sizable workforce that includes hundreds of employees across the United States and multimillion-dollar annual revenues, giving him daily responsibility for guiding both complex operations and large teams. Hafeli did not step into this position from the outside. He built his career within the industry, beginning in frontline roles and gradually moving into executive leadership, where he helped strengthen and expand an already established company. This trajectory provides important context for understanding why his insights resonate. They come not only from personal conviction but from decades of operational decision-making in a high-pressure, people-intensive environment.

What makes Hafeli particularly compelling is the personal dimension that informs his leadership. Having experienced suicidal ideation himself and having lost colleagues to suicide, he decided to become a vocal advocate for change. He has since spearheaded suicide prevention programs, developed psychologically safe team cultures, and become a sought-after public speaker on trauma-informed leadership. His influence extends beyond his company through national conferences, consulting work, and thought leadership within construction associations.

Hafeli does not present himself as a hero or expert, but rather as someone still on the journey. His candor and vulnerability have become cornerstones of his leadership brand. Colleagues often describe him as both disarmingly honest and fiercely committed, someone who creates space for difficult conversations while also holding a clear vision for performance, safety, and purpose. His approach has earned him recognition not only within the construction field but also among researchers and organizational psychologists studying emotional resilience and leadership transformation.

Hafeli's story challenges traditional assumptions about what leadership should look like, especially in male-dominated, high-pressure environments.

He demonstrates that it is possible, and indeed essential, for leaders to show up with authenticity, to model emotional openness, and to embed purpose into every layer of organizational life. Through his voice, this article captures not only the trajectory of a single career but a potential blueprint for transforming entire industries.

Coding Overview and Emergent Themes

The interview data was analyzed using a qualitative thematic approach. The coding process included generating initial descriptive codes, grouping related concepts, and synthesizing them into overarching themes. The detailed coding steps, open code lists, and exhibits appear in the appendix so that the main text can focus on the key findings. What follows is a concise summary of the five themes that emerged from the analysis.

Conceptual Definitions

Because several key concepts used throughout the findings have multiple interpretations in the literature, this section provides clear definitions to ensure consistency. For each concept, a single scholarly definition is adopted while acknowledging that alternative definitions exist. These definitions establish the conceptual frame for the five themes derived from the interview data.

Psychological safety is defined using Edmondson's (1999) description of a shared belief that team members can speak up with questions, concerns, or mistakes without fear of embarrassment, social punishment, or negative consequences. Although psychological safety has been broadened by later scholars, Edmondson's definition remains foundational and aligns with how the interviewee describes creating space for emotional honesty in the workplace.

Vulnerability is understood using Brown's (2012) framing of vulnerability as the willingness to face uncertainty, emotional exposure, and personal risk in interpersonal settings. While vulnerability can take many forms, this definition captures the emotional candor and openness that the interviewee models and encourages in others.

Emotional vulnerability refers specifically to the willingness to identify, express, and engage with one's emotions even when doing so involves discomfort or ambiguity (Brown, 2012). This definition is used because it reflects both the internal and relational aspects of emotional expression that appear prominently in the interview.

Leadership is a concept with no universally accepted definition, and scholars emphasize different elements such as influence, relationships, ethics, or strategic vision. For clarity, this article adopts Yukl et al.'s (2013) definition of leadership as a process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to accomplish it. This definition is sufficiently broad to encompass both directive and relational leadership behaviors.

Masculinity norms refer to socially constructed expectations regarding how men should think, behave, and express emotion. Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) describe these norms as emphasizing toughness, self-reliance, control, and emotional restraint. This definition is used because it reflects the cultural pressures described by the interviewee and provides context for the theme of emotional vulnerability.

Trauma-informed leadership is defined using the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration framework, which describes trauma-informed practice as an approach grounded in safety, trust, empowerment, choice, and collaboration (SAMHSA, 2014). Although originally developed for clinical and community settings, this definition is increasingly applied to organizational contexts and aligns with the interviewee's emphasis on empathy, safety, and an understanding of the effects of past adversity.

Resilience refers to the capacity to adapt, recover, or grow following stress, challenge, or adversity (Luthans, 2002). This definition is used because it aligns leadership and organizational psychology literature and reflects the interviewee's description of learning, adapting, and reorienting his career after a personal crisis.

Purpose is defined using Damon, Menon, and Bronk's (2003) description of purpose as a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something meaningful that is both personally significant and contributes to the world beyond oneself. This definition aligns with the interviewee's emphasis on meaning, mission, and service to others.

Suicide prevention is framed using the public health perspective of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), which defines prevention as a coordinated set of strategies that reduce risk factors, strengthen protective factors, and create environments where individuals can access support before a crisis escalates. This definition captures both the cultural and systemic elements emphasized by the interviewee.

A sustainable career is understood using Van der Heijden and De Vos's (2015) definition of a career that supports health, motivation, and productivity over time while allowing individuals to maintain meaning, learning, and adaptability across changing circumstances. This definition provides the theoretical foundation for linking the interviewee's experience to the sustainable careers framework.

Together, these definitions clarify the conceptual language used in the article and provide a consistent

reference point for interpreting the themes that follow.

1. Psychological Safety

Hafeli treats psychological safety as a core leadership responsibility. He encourages open conversations, routine emotional check-ins, and a culture where asking for help is normalized. His comment, "If people are afraid to be honest, then safety is an illusion," reflects how he expands the meaning of safety to include emotional well-being, not only physical protection.

2. Suicide Awareness and Prevention

Hafeli's lived experience with suicidal ideation shaped his personal mission to bring visibility to an issue often hidden in construction. He describes sitting in his truck with a loaded gun as a turning point that redirected his leadership toward advocacy. His insistence that "When we say, 'We do not talk about that here,' we kill people quietly" shows his belief that silence itself is a safety hazard.

3. Personal and Professional Transformation

Hafeli's leadership changed significantly over time. He explains that the moment he said he needed help was the strongest he had ever been. This shift from control-based leadership to service-focused leadership highlights how his own healing process informed a more compassionate and people-centered leadership identity. Journaling, therapy, and daily reflection played important roles in this transformation.

4. Emotional Vulnerability

Hafeli challenges long-standing norms in construction that equate masculinity with emotional suppression. By speaking openly about therapy, trauma, and doubt, he creates space for others to do the same. His comment, "I used to think success was a paycheck. Now I think it is the number of people I help go home safely," illustrates how vulnerability reshaped his definition of success and leadership.

5. Leading Through Purpose

Purpose is central to Hafeli's approach. He maintains a clear sense of why he does this work, often reflected in his journaling practice. He describes receiving messages from people who say his openness helped them feel less alone, which reinforces his motivation to continue advocating for mental health. Purpose serves as a stabilizing force that guides both personal resilience and organizational impact.

These five themes provide a framework for understanding how trauma, identity, and purpose interact in Hafeli's leadership. The full breakdown of the coding process, including open codes, axial groupings, and supporting data excerpts, is included in the appendix for transparency and reference.

Discussion

1. Psychological Safety: Culture as a Lifeline

"If people are afraid to be honest, then safety is an illusion. Psychological safety is everything." "We talk about hard hats and boots, but what about the head and heart? They need protection too."

"I start every meeting with the same two questions – 'How are you?' and 'How's your head?' It changes everything."

Hafeli's leadership framework is grounded in a belief that psychological safety is not a bonus or luxury but a non-negotiable foundation. He challenges the notion that safety stops at physical protection, arguing that real leadership requires protecting emotional well-being as fiercely as one would guard against a fall hazard or faulty wiring. In the high-risk, blue-collar world of construction, where vulnerability is often mistaken for weakness, Hafeli's call for open communication reorients how teams view trust and accountability.

This approach aligns closely with psychological safety as defined by Edmondson (1999), where employees feel free to speak up, share mistakes, and express needs without fear of retribution or embarrassment. Hafeli operationalizes this by embedding daily rituals that signal care-questions like "How's your head?" and creates a norm of emotional check-ins that open the door to more meaningful conversations. This is not simply managerial friendliness; it's the consistent reinforcement of a norm that emotional reality is welcome and valid.

Such actions reinforce the "social space" dimension of sustainable careers (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015), which centers on how external work environments shape individual well-being and development. In a sector often driven by short timelines and high-stakes deliverables, Hafeli resists the pressure to prioritize output over openness. He maintains that productive teams are not just technically competent but emotionally secure, and that teams built on trust outperform those led by fear.

Hafeli's perspective is also reshaping industry norms. By likening mental health conversations to "emotional PPE," he introduces a scalable metaphor that others can easily adopt. Emotional PPE like helmets or steel-toed boots become a required layer of protection, not an optional accessory. When psychological safety is reframed in this way, it is easier for organizations to institutionalize it. Safety becomes a matter of culture, not compliance.

2. Suicide Awareness and Prevention: Making the Invisible Visible

"I sat in my truck with a loaded gun once. That moment is why I do this work."

"This isn't about statistics. It's about people I knew. Their faces. Their families."

"When we say, 'We don't talk about that here,' we kill people quietly."

Few leaders in construction-or any industry-are as candid about suicide as Vince Hafeli. His advocacy is not theoretical; it's visceral. He speaks from a moment of crisis, when he nearly became part of the very statistic he now fights. His trauma was not only a turning point, it was the ignition point for his leadership transformation. His vulnerability breaks through the walls of silence that have long defined the trades.

Suicide in the construction sector is alarmingly common. Factors such as job insecurity, chronic pain, isolation, and stigma around mental health all contribute. Hafeli doesn't just acknowledge this reality, he acts. From implementing suicide awareness training and distributing crisis resources to embedding mental health protocols into safety briefings, he approaches prevention as both a systems issue and a cultural imperative.

These efforts represent a response to what Akkermans et al. (2018) call a career shock, a deeply disruptive event that compels reevaluation of values and trajectory. Hafeli's story also illustrates Newman's (2011) concept of career renewability, where purpose is reawakened through suffering. In the time dimension of sustainable careers, Hafeli doesn't just survive trauma, he channels it into long-term, value-driven leadership.

Importantly, Hafeli emphasizes visibility not just of the issue, but of those impacted. He often says the names of colleagues lost to suicide, reminding others that these aren't numbers on a chart, but friends, mentors, fathers. His storytelling humanizes the issue and compels organizations to act not from obligation but from empathy.

By reframing suicide prevention as a core responsibility of leadership, Hafeli shifts the discussion from reactive to proactive. Instead of waiting until tragedy strikes, he asks, "What systems, conversations, and norms can we build now to protect lives?" His answer lies in honest talk, shared vulnerability, and a commitment to never looking away.

3. Personal and Professional Transformation: From Stoicism to Servant Leadership

"The strongest I've ever been was the moment I said, 'I need help.' That's what changed everything."

Vince Hafeli's journey is marked by a radical shift in leadership identity from a hard-nosed operator to a servant-leader grounded in purpose and empathy. Early in his career, leadership meant control, direction, and discipline. Emotions were liabilities. Asking for help was a sign of failure. But crisis cracked that mold, and what emerged was a leadership philosophy rooted in service, transparency, and humility.

This transformation mirrors the personal agency dimension of career sustainability, which emphasizes self-directed change and identity alignment. Hafeli didn't inherit a new leadership model, he built one from the ground up, using pain as a blueprint. He permitted himself to unlearn what wasn't working and to redefine success not by metrics but by impact.

His reinvention involved intentional practice: journaling, therapy, storytelling, and mentoring others through their pain. These weren't temporary coping mechanisms, they became foundational behaviors that shaped how he shows up as a leader. He began listening more than talking, prioritizing people over processes, and leading meetings with emotional check-ins rather than status updates.

Hafeli's approach also reflects a broader shift in what effective leadership means in today's workplace. As industries grapple with burnout, disconnection, and mental health crises, leaders like Hafeli represent a new archetype: the emotionally literate change agent. He embraces vulnerability as a leadership strength, modeling what it means to be whole at work.

His example offers a roadmap for others in high-intensity fields. Instead of waiting for breakdowns, leaders can proactively cultivate resilience through reflective practice, community support, and values alignment. Hafeli's evolution illustrates that personal transformation is not a detour from leadership, it is the path itself.

4. Emotional Vulnerability: Redefining Masculinity and Success

"I used to think success was a paycheck. Now I think it's the number of people I help go home safely- mentally and physically."

In a field historically dominated by rugged individualism and emotional suppression, Hafeli's embrace of emotional vulnerability is quietly revolutionary. His leadership challenges longstanding narratives about masculinity in construction, where expressions of sadness, fear, or uncertainty are often dismissed as unprofessional. Instead, he argues that emotional honesty is not only compatible with strength, it *is* strength.

This orientation aligns with the meaning dimension of sustainable careers, which values inner fulfillment and congruence over external markers. Hafeli's shift in defining success – from monetary gain to human impact – signals a deeper recalibration of his inter-

nal compass. He is no longer driven by status but by service.

His vulnerability isn't performative. It is a daily practice. He shares openly about his past struggles, his therapy, and his fears. And in doing so, he permits others to be real. This authenticity cultivates trust and safety across his teams. Employees begin to see themselves as more than workers. They are human beings with inner lives that matter.

Saldana (2013) describes this emergence as "authentic leadership," where congruence between values and behavior becomes the cornerstone of influence. Hafeli models this by aligning personal healing with professional practice. He is the same person in the boardroom as he is on a job site, something increasingly rare and deeply impactful.

By reframing vulnerability as a leadership tool, Hafeli broadens what success means in construction. He calls others in the industry to move beyond stoicism and toward a leadership model that recognizes humanity as an asset, not a risk.

5. Leading Through Purpose: Aligning Career and Calling

"Every time I speak out, someone emails me. They say, 'You helped me see I'm not alone.' That's the fuel."

At the center of Vince Hafeli's leadership journey is a clear and unwavering sense of purpose. His work is not simply a job or even a career, it is a calling rooted in personal truth, lived experience, and a mission to prevent suffering. This alignment between internal motivation and external action fuels not only his sustainability but also inspires others to connect their work to deeper values.

Purpose, in Hafeli's life, is not abstract. It is the answer to a life-or-death question: Why keep going? In moments of despair, he returned to that core reason: In his words, "To save lives." That clarity became his compass, guiding decisions from boardroom policy to personal storytelling. It also imbued his work with a level of resilience that metrics alone could never provide.

This leadership stance aligns strongly with the meaning and time dimensions of sustainable careers. Purpose offers renewability, as described by Newman (2011), the ability to regenerate motivation even after burnout or trauma. Hafeli simply doesn't power through difficult periods; he reframes them as chapters in a longer story of service and growth.

His sense of purpose also enables transparency. By publicly naming his mission, he holds himself accountable not just to organizational goals but to human outcomes. This builds trust across every layer of his company. Employees know that their leader is not operating from ego but from care. That care shapes hiring, training, performance evaluation, and culture.

Importantly, Hafeli encourages others to find their own "why." Through journaling exercises, mentorship, and speaking engagements, he prompts reflection and alignment at scale. This collective sense of purpose makes teams more cohesive and resilient. When people understand how their work contributes to something bigger than themselves, they invest not just effort but heart.

Limitations

While the article offers a compelling and in-depth exploration of Vince Hafeli's leadership journey, it is not without its limitations. The study is based on a single case interview, which, while rich in narrative depth, limits generalizability across broader populations or industries. Although the coding process is rigorous and thematically grounded, the insights are tied to one individual's lived experience within a specific organizational and cultural context, namely, commercial construction. This narrows the scope of applicability for organizations with differing structures, demographics, or risk environments. Additionally, the interviewee's unique openness and articulate reflections may not be typical among leaders in similarly high-pressure fields, raising the possibility that the findings represent an aspirational rather than representative case. The reliance on self-reported data also introduces the potential for bias or selective recall. Finally, while the article aligns Hafeli's story with sustainable career theory, it stops short of triangulating the findings with perspectives from his colleagues, subordinates, or independent observers, which could strengthen the validity of the conclusions drawn.

Conclusions

Vince Hafeli's story is more than a case study in trauma-informed leadership, it's a testament to what's possible when personal pain becomes a collective purpose. His approach defies outdated paradigms in the construction industry, where emotional detachment and silent suffering have long been mistaken for professionalism. Instead, he shows that acknowledging mental health, expressing vulnerability, and cultivating psychological safety are not only moral imperatives, they are performance strategies.

His actions map directly onto the framework of sustainable careers, particularly in four critical areas: Social Space, Personal Agency, Time, and Meaning. By reshaping workplace culture from within, Hafeli demonstrates how individual transformation can lead to systemic change. He doesn't impose new models from outside; he builds them through consistent action, compassion, and courageous honesty.

Crucially, Hafeli's leadership affirms that sustainable careers require more than strategic planning. They demand emotional integration, the ability to

bring one's full self into the workplace without fear of judgment or loss. This is especially vital in industries where the cost of silence is measured in lives. His story illuminates the connection between inner healing and outer impact, demonstrating that when leaders are brave enough to be vulnerable, they create conditions for others to thrive.

Hafeli's mental health journey is ongoing, and this article reflects his journey in meaningful ways. In his response to question five, Hafeli discusses how he remains grounded through daily practices, such as journaling—an intentional habit that reflects the consistent effort he invests in his wellbeing. The draft effectively shows how his sense of purpose plays a central role in maintaining his mental health, yet it also subtly acknowledges that this alignment requires daily work. Emphasizing that healing is not a linear process adds valuable context. Even for someone as thoughtful and committed as Hafeli, there may be moments of struggle or regression.

Highlighting this truth reinforces the idea that mental health is a continuous journey, and, in doing so, makes his story all the more authentic and relatable to others navigating their paths.

In a world that increasingly demands empathy, transparency, and adaptability, Hafeli's leadership is both a roadmap and a mirror. It reflects what many feel but have been afraid to say: that the old models are no longer working, and that healing and high performance are not mutually exclusive. They are inseparable.

Contributions and Future Research

This article adds depth to the field of sustainable career studies by offering a grounded, real-world application of the theory in a high-risk, often-overlooked industry. Vince Hafeli's narrative challenges the assumption that emotionally intelligent leadership is confined to knowledge work or service sectors. His work proves that the construction of the most physically and emotionally demanding environments can be a site of psychological transformation, safety, and purpose.

By mapping his story to the model proposed by Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015), this piece extends the framework into new terrain. It illustrates how personal agency, social support, time-based reflection, and value-driven meaning-making operate in dynamic interplay, not in isolation. Hafeli's story demonstrates that sustainable careers are built not through ideal conditions but through the navigation of adversity.

Future research could explore how trauma-informed leadership scales across organizations. For example, how might large construction firms institutionalize practices like mental health briefings, peer check-ins, or vulnerability training for supervisors? Can these interventions reduce turnover, accidents, or even suicide rates over time? Longitudinal data could provide insights into how emotional safety translates into measurable business outcomes.

Additionally, identity factors like gender and class remain underexplored in sustainable career literature. In traditionally masculine professions, how do norms around toughness and silence inhibit or enable emotional expression? Research could examine how leaders like Hafeli disrupt these norms and what the ripple effects are for employees of different backgrounds.

Finally, further qualitative work is needed to understand the lived experience of leadership transformation. What makes someone turn toward purpose rather than away from pain? What are the thresholds for change, and how do they vary across industries? These are not only academic questions, they are urgent societal ones. Hafeli's story offers a beginning, not a conclusion, to a much-needed conversation about what leadership, sustainability, and humanity look like in the modern workplace.

By situating Hafeli's narrative within the theoretical framework of sustainable careers (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015), we uncover how purpose, agency, and renewal can emerge from even the most difficult personal circumstances. Sustainable career theory suggests that meaningful work requires alignment between personal and professional identities across time, space, and psychological dimensions. Hafeli's leadership demonstrates this principle in action—his past trauma does not derail his career but deepens its purpose.

Furthermore, this study highlights the relevance of trauma-informed leadership in professions typically viewed as resistant to emotional discourse. Hafeli's leadership exemplifies how acknowledging emotional pain, not denying it, can be a catalyst for authentic, enduring success. His story invites us to reconsider assumptions about what leadership should look like in traditionally masculine, results-driven environments and challenges the academic community to integrate lived experience into the evolving understanding of career sustainability.

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Review

This article was accepted under the ***constructive peer review*** option. For futher details, see the descriptions at:

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Appendix A: The Interview

Interview 1

Early Life & Family Background

Q: Where were you born, and can you share any vivid childhood memories or foundational experiences?

A: I was born in 1962 in Marion, IL, and grew up in Du Quoin and later Johnston City. My family was small, and my childhood was filled with activities like water skiing and horseback riding. My father had a heart attack in 1972, and I took on household responsibilities at a young age.

Q: Did you have any specific daily chores or responsibilities growing up?

A: Yes, after my father's heart attack, I took care of the coal furnace, mowed the lawn, and helped with laundry. I wasn't told to do it—it was just understood that I had to.

Q: What was your relationship like with your brother, and how did it shape you?

A: We were close physically but very different. He made a lot of mistakes, and I saw how it hurt our parents. That made me strive for perfection and avoid failure.

Q: How did your father's comments about mental health affect you?

A: He used to joke that weak men ended up in a mental institution. That stuck with me and taught me to suppress emotion, something I carried into adulthood.

Adolescence & Personal Identity Formation

Q: Did you have a role in your community during your teenage years?

A: Not formally. I was very involved in school-sports, clubs, and a long-term relationship. My town was small and didn't offer many community involvement opportunities.

Q: What other obstacles or significant changes did you experience in high school? A: My biggest struggles were internal-trying not to disappoint my parents and avoiding my brother's path. Financially, we struggled, but I never felt poor because my parents shielded us.

Q: What were some of your proudest accomplishments in high school?

A: I enjoyed high school immensely. One big lesson was getting caught cheating on a reading test and losing an award. It taught me the importance of ethics, which shaped my professional life.

Career Entry & Professional Development

Q: How did you enter the construction and paving industry?

A: I was interested in architecture and took drafting for four years. After moving to Florida, I enrolled in civil technology classes and got a job breaking concrete cylinders, which started my engineering career.

Q: What happened after you left the engineering firm?

A: I joined the Florida DOT in 1992 for more stability, but found it wasn't a good fit. I returned to private engineering firms until 2002.

Q: How did you join Ajax Paving?

A: I was recruited in 2002. Initially, I declined, but their commitment to ethics convinced me. I joined as a quality control manager.

Q: What qualities made Ajax interested in hiring you?

A: They valued my reputation for honesty, integrity, and strong DOT relationships. I had no violations and consistently had high-performance ratings.

Q: What was your work life like before becoming President?

A: I worked my way up from laborer to manager. I preferred blue-collar environments. I managed asphalt plant operations for 19 years and became President in 2019.

Personal Life & Adversity

Q: What was your personal and family life like after moving to Florida?

A: I worked various jobs and married in 1985. I quickly advanced in engineering. In 1989, personal tragedies began to pile up, influencing both family and career decisions.

Q: Can you walk us through the personal events of 1989?

A: It was a devastating year. We lost twins, my father and brother died, and my mother was later diagnosed with cancer. These losses significantly shaped my emotional health and career path.

Mental Health & Resilience

Q: Can you describe the events of 2007 from your perspective?

A: In 2007, despite professional success, I was suicidal. Years of grief and emotional suppression led to a breakdown. I believed everyone would be better off without me. That moment forced me to start confronting years of unresolved pain.

Interview 2

Advice & Wisdom

Q: Looking back, what would you tell your younger self about managing emotional struggles?

A: Be open. Don't bottle emotions. People are more supportive than you expect. Fear of stigma was unfounded—openness would not have cost him opportunities or respect.

Q: What advice would you give to leaders in industries where mental health is often overlooked?

A: Value employees as your most important asset. Addressing mental health enhances company performance and helps attract and retain top talent, especially among younger generations.

Family & Relationships

Q: If you knew your brother would pass at 39, would your relationship have been different? Any regrets or proud moments?

A: He and his brother grew close as adults, living together and raising families nearby. He has no regrets and values the relationship they built during the last decade of his brother's life.

Impact & Influence

Q: Has anyone ever shared that your story helped them open up about their own struggles? What was that experience like?

A: Yes, after every talk someone has shared a story or thanked him. The silent, attentive audiences show deep engagement. These responses motivate him to continue, affirming that his message resonates widely.

Life Stages & Reflection

Q: Can you walk us through a typical day or week or month during the four major stages of your life (childhood, early career, mid-career, and current life)? For each stage, can you share a favorite moment and a moment you wouldn't want to relive?

A: Dr. Hafeli shared stories from each life stage. Childhood memories involved mischief with his brother. Early career was marked by mentorship and learning ethics. Mid-career included transformation work at Ajax and humility in leadership. In his current life, he reflected on being financially successful but emotionally unfulfilled, leading him to rediscover his purpose.

Q: Can you elaborate on the specific moments you would relive and those you would not in each of the four life stages?

A: Childhood: Would relive making his parents proud; would not relive a disciplinary incident. Early career: Would relive mentorship; would avoid disappointing his wife. Mid-career: Would relive declaring his desire to be president; would not relive oversharing about his divorce. Current life: Proud of personal notes to employees; regrets prematurely announcing retirement.

Mental Health & Crisis

Q: Can you walk us through the days, weeks, or months leading up to your 2007 suicide attempt? How did you feel right before the decision to take that drive?

A: He described a buildup of emotional trauma, isolation, and feelings of failure despite professional suc-

cess. A minor incident triggered the attempt. He had written farewell letters and left home intending not to return.

Q: While you were driving with the intention to end your life, what changed when your wife called? Why did you answer?

A: Her call reminded him someone still cared. Inspired by the story of Kevin Hines, he realized that small acts of compassion can interrupt dark decisions. He returned home and never spoke of the night again until years later.

Mental Health & Purpose

Q: Reflecting on your darkest moments, how do you view them now in light of your current work and role as a speaker and doctor?

A: He sees them as necessary experiences that shaped his mission. They gave him purpose, credibility, and opportunities to help others and influence industries through mental health advocacy and speaking engagements.

Interview 3

Personal Mental Health Journey

Q: How do you stay motivated in times of difficulty? Are there any tools or resources you've used to help you get through challenges both professionally and personally?

A: Dr. Hafeli shared that a narrative research class led him to seek therapy for the first time, initially as a courtesy to a professor's recommendation. Though skeptical, the experience proved transformative. Therapy helped him uncover personal insights and gave him tools to navigate difficult periods. He emphasized the importance of having an outlet—whether a therapist, coach, or mentor—particularly for those in leadership positions, where isolation is common.

Q. Reflecting on your upbringing, what resources would have helped you better manage emotional challenges growing up?

A: Growing up in a small, blue-collar, coal mining community, mental health wasn't a topic of conversation. Institutions existed, but they were feared. His father's stoicism and trauma further discouraged emotional expression. While a counselor may have helped, such resources were nonexistent in his environment. He acknowledged the generational and geographical limitations of the time.

Q: How have you managed your own emotional challenges while helping others through theirs?

A: Dr. Hafeli admitted he often helps others more effectively than he helps himself. He feels pressure to remain strong and struggles with prioritizing his own needs. However, through his research and interactions with others, he's learned a lot. His wife plays a critical role in prompting him to seek help when needed.

Q: How do you know when it's time to speak to someone about your own struggles?

A: He described warning signs like insomnia, irritability, emotional withdrawal, and strong negativity at work. When he begins to feel like a different person, especially when he starts to hate what he used to enjoy, he knows it's time to speak with someone. His wife's encouragement often leads him to finally act.

Q: Do you still struggle with perfectionism?

A: Yes. While he's become better at delegating and accepting less-than-perfect outcomes, he still privately obsesses over how to improve things. His therapist has recently encouraged him to ease up on this tendency. He acknowledges that striving for perfection continues to affect him, even if he presents a more relaxed attitude externally.

Q: If you could change one thing about your past, what would it be?

A: He initially mentioned saving his first marriage but quickly reflected on how that hardship led to meeting his current wife, pursuing his DBA, and impacting others through his work. Rather than dwelling on regret, he expressed gratitude for the growth and opportunities that arose from difficult moments.

Workplace Mental Health Programs

Q: Have you implemented any policies or programs focused on mental health and therapy in your workplace?

A: In 2021, Dr. Hafeli announced a new mental health and suicide awareness initiative at Ajax, launching in early 2022. Initially designed as quarterly talks, it quickly evolved into a companywide program called "Ajax

Warriors." Employees wanted more than occasional conversations— they wanted sustained support. The Warriors receive formal training, have leadership roles, and provide peer support. The program has since inspired similar initiatives across the U.S.

Q: Do you believe the construction industry has a greater responsibility to address mental health than other sectors?

A: Yes. Construction has one of the highest suicide rates in the U.S.—nearly seven times the national average for laborers. He stressed the need to distinguish between mental health and mental illness and emphasized that mental health challenges can also contribute to job site accidents. He believes open conversations and preventive support are essential in addressing this crisis.

Q: What tools or activities are used in the Ajax Warriors program?

A: All Ajax Warriors are trained in Mental Health First Aid and VitalCog. The team also organizes walks with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, which have grown into a national initiative across 26 states. Warriors assist other companies in launching similar programs, creating a ripple effect far beyond Ajax.

Q: Have you had experiences where you or your team helped someone in crisis?

A: Yes. One example involved a worker who made concerning comments and disappeared. A Warrior intervened, and the employee received help. In another case, a bipolar employee was talked down from a silo and later stabilized with treatment. Both individuals remain employed and have shown significant progress, reinforcing the impact of Ajax's mental health initiatives.

Team Leadership & Support

Q: What is essential for gaining team buy-in for mental health initiatives?

A: Leadership involvement is crucial. Dr. Hafeli's research revealed that mental health initiatives only succeed when leaders publicly support them. He initially tried stepping back to empower others but learned from employee feedback that his visible presence remained vital. Leaders must set the tone and model engagement.

Q: How has your program worked in remote or hybrid work environments?

A: Most Ajax employees work in the field rather than remotely. As a result, mental health support is embedded directly at job sites. While he's not deeply familiar with fully remote organizations, he believes consistent visibility and communication are key, even if only part-time in-person contact is possible.

Q: How do you offer ongoing feedback and support to your team?

A: He shared that positive feedback comes more naturally than negative. He has worked to become more approachable—saying hello, smiling, and showing interest in employees' lives beyond work. While once seen as distant, he now emphasizes being a good human being as the 593 foundation of effective leadership.

The Five Final Themes

1. Psychological Safety
2. Suicide Awareness and Prevention
3. Personal and Professional Transformation
4. Emotional Vulnerability
5. Leading Through Purpose

Appendix B: Coding Procedures and Detailed Materials

The Coding Process: From Open Coding to Thematic Synthesis

This study employed a structured three-phase qualitative coding process using Quirkos, drawing on Saldana's (2013) model. The process involved open coding, axial coding, and thematic coding to examine Vince Hafeli's leadership journey through the lens of trauma, transformation, and sustainable leadership.

The coding process in the "Hafeli Interview Three Part Coding Assignment" followed a structured three-phase approach using Quirkos software: open coding, axial coding, and thematic coding. In the open coding phase, the researcher read through Vince Hafeli's interview transcript line by line, identifying significant quotes and labeling them with descriptive codes, referred to as "quirks" in Quirkos. Each quote was tagged based on its content, with codes such as suicide, journaling, toxic masculinity, purpose, stigma, vulnerability, and therapy appearing throughout the transcript. These codes were grounded in the participant's exact words, with no attempt at interpretation or theme development at this stage. Quirkos' visual interface allowed the researcher to organize these initial codes spatially, making it easier to see emerging patterns and repetition in Hafeli's narrative.

The open coding phase was particularly important in identifying the recurring language and key experiences that shaped Hafeli's story. For example, the quote "I had a suicide plan" was coded as suicide, while "there's so much silence around this" was coded as silence and stigma. Another powerful moment occurred when Hafeli said, "I journal every day. I say affirmations," which the researcher coded as journaling and affirmations. These codes documented Hafeli's daily practices and internal strategies for emotional regulation. When Hafeli explained, "I'm not afraid to talk about it anymore," it was coded as speaking out, while "I had to go to counseling to understand why I was feeling what I was feeling" was labeled as therapy and emotional awareness. These codes were deliberately kept close to the text, avoiding assumptions or premature grouping. Even cultural and gender-based reflections were captured, as in the quote, "I didn't know what it meant to be a man," which was coded as masculinity and identity. Overall, the open coding process captured over 30 individual codes that reflected Hafeli's internal struggles, professional insights, and ongoing mental health journey. Each code was saved in Quirkos and visually displayed, setting the stage for deeper categorization and thematic analysis in the next phases.

In the axial coding phase, the researcher grouped related open codes into higher-level categories that reflected broader conceptual ideas. For example, codes like people don't talk about it, silence, and mental health stigma were linked together in preparation for the development of the theme "Silence and Stigma in the Industry." Similarly, codes such as journaling, speaking out, masculinity, and leadership style were organized around the theme of "Vulnerability as Strength." The third theme, "Power of Purpose," emerged from codes describing how Hafeli finds motivation and resilience through a deep sense of personal and professional purpose, reflected in quotes about living intentionally, leading by example, and wanting to leave a lasting impact. In the final thematic coding stage, these clusters were refined into the three themes mentioned above, each supported by multiple transcript excerpts. This process allowed the researcher to move from raw data to meaningful interpretation while remaining firmly grounded in Hafeli's own language and lived experience. Quirkos' features helped maintain transparency, allowing each theme to be traced directly back to the coded quotes.

Open Coding: Generating Initial Codes from the Data

In the first phase, open coding, the interview transcript was analyzed line by line to assign descriptive codes to significant phrases, behaviors, and experiences. These initial codes captured discrete ideas, perceptions, or emotions expressed by Vince Hafeli and were recorded under the "Quirk Title" section of the Quirkos output.

Examples of open codes identified include:

- Coping with Uncertainty
- Skepticism towards Therapy
- Need for External Support Systems
- Role of Journaling in Self-Reflection
- Challenging Industry Norms
- Suicide as Catalyst for Change
- The Power of Storytelling
- Masculinity and Emotional Suppression

- Redefining Success
- Cultural Shift in Safety Conversations
- Leadership as Service
- Vulnerability as Strength

These codes were assigned based on phrases and narrative moments where Hafeli described emotional events, shifts in his leadership style, and reflections on the broader construction industry culture. Each code captured a unique unit of meaning that could later be clustered into conceptual families.

Axial Coding: Organizing Open Codes into Conceptual Categories

In the second phase, axial coding, the open codes were grouped into related clusters that described larger patterns or categories of experience. These clusters revealed the relationships between codes and helped identify the underlying structure of Hafeli's leadership transformation.

The following axial code groups were created from the open codes:

Psychological Safety and Cultural Change

Includes: Cultural Shift in Safety Conversations, Normalizing Emotional Check-ins, Mental Health as Safety Concern, Challenging Industry Norms

Mental Health and Suicide Awareness

Includes: Suicide as Catalyst for Change, Silence Around Suicide, Crisis as Turning Point, Need for External Support Systems

Leadership Transformation

Includes: Leadership as Service, Coping with Uncertainty, Redefining Success, Embracing Empathy in Management

Emotional Vulnerability and Masculinity

Includes: Masculinity and Emotional Suppression, Skepticism towards Therapy, Vulnerability as Strength, Power of Storytelling

Purpose and Meaning-Making

Includes: Role of Journaling in Self-Reflection, Reconnecting with Purpose, Finding

Meaning through Advocacy, Impact on Others

Each axial code group represents an organizing concept that gives structure to the broader themes in Hafeli's story. These categories illustrate how lived experience, crisis, and reflection interact to shape a new leadership identity grounded in care and authenticity.

Thematic Coding: Synthesizing Core Interpretive Themes

In the final stage, thematic coding, the axial code groups were synthesized into five major themes that captured the essence of the interview findings. These themes are interpretive and conceptual, offering a narrative arc that explains how personal trauma and systemic change are deeply intertwined in Hafeli's life and leadership.

The five resulting themes are:

Psychological Safety as a Leadership Imperative

Hafeli treats psychological safety as an essential component of organizational culture. By promoting emotional check-ins and open conversations, he reframes safety to include mental well-being alongside physical protection.

Suicide Awareness as a Personal and Professional Mission

His personal experience with suicidal ideation becomes a defining turning point. Suicide is not treated as a private burden but as a cultural and organizational issue that requires visibility, systems, and leadership intervention.

Personal and Professional Transformation: Evolving Leadership Through Trauma

Hafeli's leadership philosophy evolves from control and stoicism to empathy and transparency. His coping mechanisms, including journaling and therapy, become leadership tools rather than private practices.

Redefining Masculinity Through Vulnerability

By challenging deeply embedded norms in construction, Hafeli models a form of masculinity that embraces emotional honesty. He shows that vulnerability is not weakness but a source of strength and connection.

Purpose as a Source of Sustainability and Impact

Everything Hafeli does is grounded in purpose. He speaks openly about his "why"—to save lives—and encourages others to lead with intentionality. Purpose, for him, is what transforms adversity into advocacy.

These themes form the analytical backbone of the study, linking Hafeli's lived experiences to sustainable career theory, particularly the dimensions of meaning, personal agency, and social support. The coding process not only documented his leadership transformation but illuminated a broader roadmap for organizational change in emotionally suppressed, high-risk environments.

Appendix C: Path from Open Code to Theme

A linear path from data to insight

"Silence Around Suicide"

→ Axial Group: Silence and Stigma

→ Theme: Suicide Awareness and Prevention

"Leadership Philosophy Shift"

→ Axial Group: Leadership Evolution

→ Theme: Personal and Professional Transformation

"Role of Journaling in Self-Reflection"

→ Axial Group: Tools for Openness

→ Theme: Emotional Vulnerability

"Mission Alignment"

→ Axial Group: Anchoring in Meaning

→ Theme: Leading Through Purpose

"Normalizing Emotional Check-Ins"

→ Axial Group: Building Emotional Infrastructure

→ Theme: Psychological Safety

Appendix D: Coding Tables

Table D1: Open Codes Organized by Axial Code Group and Theme		
Theme	**Axial Code Group**	**Open Codes (Quirk Titles)**
Psychological Safety	Redefining Safety	Redefining Safety, Challenging Traditional Notions of Protection, Cultural Shift in Safety Conversations, Mental Health as Integral to Safety
	Building Emotional Infrastructure	Meeting Rituals, Team Communication Strategies, Psychological Safety Through Dialogue
Suicide Awareness and Prevention	Silence and Stigma	Silence Around Suicide, Fear of Speaking Out, Cultural Avoidance of Mental Health
	Crisis and Consequence	Suicide as Catalyst for Change, Loss of Colleagues, Personal Crisis
Personal and Professional Transformation	Leadership Evolution	Leadership Philosophy Shift, Redefining Success, Servant Leadership, Coping with Uncertainty
	Turning Points	Asking for Help, Career Shock, Identity Transformation
Emotional Vulnerability	Breaking Masculine Norms	Masculinity and Emotional Suppression, Skepticism Toward Therapy, Learning to Express Emotion
	Tools for Openness	Storytelling, Role of Journaling in Self-Reflection, Modeling Vulnerability
Leading through Purpose	Anchoring in Meaning	Reconnecting with Purpose, Mission Alignment, Advocacy as Calling
	Impact and Legacy	Saving Lives, Fuel for Leadership, Impact on Others

Table D2: Direct Quotes Matched to Open Codes and Final Themes		
Theme	**Open Code (Quirk Title)**	**Direct Quote**
Psychological Safety	**Redefining Safety**	**"If people are afraid to be honest, then safety is an illusion."**
	Emotional Check-Ins	**"I start every meeting with the same two normalizing questions: 'How are you?' and 'How's your head?'"**
Suicide Awareness and Prevention	**Suicide as Catalyst for Change**	**"I sat in my truck with a loaded gun. That moment is why I do this work."**
	Silence Around Suicide	**"When we say, 'We don't talk about that here,' we kill people quietly."**
Personal and Professional Transformation	**Leadership Philosophy Shift**	**"I used to lead with toughness. Now I lead with love."**
	Asking for Help	**"The strongest I've ever been was the moment I said, 'I need help.'"**
Emotional Vulnerability	**Storytelling**	**"I recorded a video… that video saved lives, including mine."**
	Masculinity and Emotional Suppression	**"I used to think therapy was weakness. Now I see it as a strength."**
Leading through Purpose	**Saving Lives**	**"I keep a journal. I write: 'Why do I do this?' And the answer is always the same: 'To save lives.'"**
	Impact on Others	**"Every time I speak out, someone emails me. They say, 'You helped me see I'm not alone.'"**

Table D3: Color Key	
Theme	**Visual Color**
Psychological Safety	**Blue**
Suicide Awareness and Prevention	**Red**
Personal and Professional Transformation	**Green**
Emotional Vulnerability	**Orange**
Leading Through Purpose	**Purple**