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Strategies for Improving Performance Management in Small and Medium Enterprises

Joseph Winingar
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Joseph Winingar

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

Strategies for Improving Performance Management in Small and Medium Enterprises

by

Joseph Winingar

MS, MidAmerica Nazarene, 2013

BS, Embry Riddle Aeronautical University, 2012

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

February 2021

Abstract

Ineffective performance management in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) can inhibit organizational growth. SME leaders understand that a lack of organizational growth can lead to business failure. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study, guided by the leader-member exchange theory, was to explore strategies SME leaders used to support performance management to promote organizational growth. The participants included 7 leaders of SMEs with at least 3 years of leadership experience of successfully using performance management strategies to promote SME organizational growth in Washington, DC. These leaders participated in semi structured individual interviews that were conducted virtually. Qualitative thematic analysis yielded 5 themes: components of performance reviews that promote organization growth, key obstacles in implementing performance reviews, performance review strategies influence supervisor-employee relationships, overcoming key obstacles, and benefits of positive employee-supervisor relations. A key recommendation for leaders of SMEs is to establish positive employee-manager relations through their performance management practices. The implications for positive social change include SME leaders' potential to improve employees' job satisfaction, job retention, quality of life, and productivity, resulting in enhanced economic stability within local communities.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this study to single parents working full time and still pursuing their doctorate. Never let anyone tell you it cannot be done. I also dedicate this study to my beautiful daughter, Sydney!

Acknowledgements

I want to acknowledge all my family and friends who have stood by me during my journey to become a doctor. To the leadership of the Federal Aviation Administration, Air Traffic Organization, thank you for promoting employee development and higher education. Additionally, I would like to thank my chair, Dr. Lisa Pearo, for her support and mentorship throughout my journey. I could not have done it without you! To my second committee member, Dr. Fred Walker, and my university research reviewer, Dr. Kim Critchlow—thank you for the invaluable feedback.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have been a growing focus within business literature, government policy, and academia (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017). One reason for this is that SMEs support the global economy and are strong employers (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017). As SMEs have a significant influence within the global economy, it is vital that management gets the most out of their employees to maintain their competitive advantage in the marketplace. *Performance management*, a recent term, refers to activities, policies, procedures, and interventions that are meant to aid, support, and improve employee performance (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017). This qualitative multiple case study explored the leadership strategies that result in improved performance management in SMEs. This section of the paper begins with the background of the problem, followed by the problem statement and purpose. The nature of the study, research, interview questions, and theoretical framework are then discussed. Following that, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and the significance of the study are discussed. The section ends with a literature review and summary.

Background of the Problem

SMEs are a growing driver of business within the global economy (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017; Massaro, Handley, Bagnoli, & Dumay, 2016). SMEs not only create new jobs, but they also contribute to new products and technical innovation. SME firms can differ between countries and organizations, but though there is a set limit of employee size to 500, there is no limit on investment (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017). However, due to the various definitions and requirements of SMEs, comparisons between countries and

organizations have been increasingly difficult, hindering the ability to compare optimal organizational practices (Massaro et al., 2016). Further, there has been limited research about the role of SMEs within North America, although 99% of businesses are SMEs, excluding governments, which account for 52% of the total employment (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017). Yet SMEs have been faced with challenges of appeal, incentive, improvement, and retention regarding employees (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017).

As previous researchers have pointed out, SME success is dependent on leadership, and there has been a growing movement to focus on performance management to adapt to the future (Bititci, Cocca, & Ates, 2016). Previous researchers have found that leadership within SMEs remain flexible and dependent on the leadership style of an individual (Ayandibu & Houghton, 2017). Today's management must build a culture of respect, idea generation, and collaboration throughout all levels of the organization for employees to reach maximum organizational output (Bititci et al., 2016). Performance management has been defined as a closed-loop process used to improve organizational output throughout a changing business environment (Bititci et al., 2016). Recently, the focus of performance has shifted from measurement, which is how a business measures and reports the results, to performance management that incorporates how to implement those measures to manage the performance of the business (Bititci et al., 2016). Performance management research focuses on the performance of individuals and attainment of their goals; however, researchers have found that researching this topic is difficult and requires further investigation (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017).

SMEs require constant leadership for organizational success; however, leadership is a broad topic, one in which a focus on specifics can lead to better organizational practices. In this research project, I explored SMEs in the context of performance management and leadership. By doing so, leadership provides opportunities for organizational change.

Problem Statement

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2015, SMEs in the United States employed 58.9 million people, or 47.5% of the private workforce (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Effective performance management is a driver of organizational growth in SMEs (Saunila, 2016). Performance management involves monitoring the progress of objectives and achievement for organizational growth (Chao & Spillan, 2010). But inconsistencies or hindrances that are not addressed can affect the effectiveness of performance management strategies (Cunha, Vieira, Rego, & Clegg, 2018). The general business problem is that ineffective performance management can inhibit growth and goal attainment within SMEs. The specific business problem is that some SME leaders have limited strategies for using performance management to promote organizational growth.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies used by leaders in SMEs to support performance management to promote organizational growth. The target population for this study included up to 10 leaders of SMEs with at least 3 years of successful leadership experience using performance management strategies to promote organizational growth of SMEs in Washington, DC. The

implications for social change from the results of this study include the potential economic impact of SME growth fostered by positive and effective performance management strategies. The growth of SMEs could promote job creation and greater availability of goods and services to the immediate community (Saasongu, 2015).

Nature of the Study

I used the qualitative methodology for this study. Available methodologies included quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. The qualitative method is an interpretive approach to data analysis that involved an inductive process. Quantitative data analysis is a positivist approach involving empirical analysis of data using a deductive process. A mixed method is a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. A deep exploration of strategies is not possible using a quantitative method, as these methods focus on quantifying relationships among variables. The mixed-method research was not chosen because a quantitative component was not relevant for this study. The qualitative research method is well suited for opened-ended and flexible approaches to explore phenomena (Yin, 2018). Therefore, I used the qualitative research method for the exploration of effective performance management strategies that leaders use to promote organizational growth in SMEs.

A multiple case study design was chosen as the best fit for this study instead of other qualitative designs. A case study design is well suited for exploring unknown aspects of a phenomenon that is freely occurring in everyday life (Yin, 2014). A multiple rather than a single-case study was chosen to allow me to explore the subject phenomenon in various situations and identify similarities and differences among the

cases (Yin, 2018). In a narrative design, researchers are restricted to hearing participants' life stories, which does not align with the purpose of this study. Additionally, phenomenological designs were not suitable for this study, as they focus on exploring the personal meanings of participants' lived experiences with phenomena. Ethnography, where researchers observe the participants in their lived environment (Yin, 2018), was not selected, as this research did not focus on lived experiences. Given the study's purpose of exploring SME leaders' effective performance management strategies, narrative and phenomenological designs were not suitable for this study, and a multiple case study was selected.

Research Question

The central research question that guided this study was: "What performance management strategies are used by leaders in SMEs to promote organizational growth?"

Interview Questions

I asked the following interview questions in this study:

1. In your experience, how do performance management strategies influence (SME) organizational growth within your organization?
2. What elements of performance management have you found effective at promoting organizational growth?
3. What were the key obstacles you faced in implementing performance management strategies?
4. How did your organizational leadership address the key obstacles when implementing performance management strategies?

5. How do performance management strategies influence your relationship with your subordinates?
6. Based on your organizational leadership experiences, what performance benefits occur through these positive leadership relationships?
7. What else can you share with me about the development and implementation of your organization's strategies for using performance management to promote your organization's growth?

Conceptual Framework

For this study, leader-member exchange (LMX) theory (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) served as the conceptual framework. LMX theory, initially known as vertical dyad linkage (Dansereau et al., 1975), states that high-quality relationships between supervisors and employees lead to more positive outcomes, including productive work behaviors and cohesiveness than lower quality relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Given the theory's usefulness in understanding supervisor and employee relationships, this model was an appropriate conceptual framework for this study for exploring the performance management of employees in SMEs.

Within LMX theory, supervisors create evolving relationships with employees, which can vary in quality (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Radstaak & Hennes, 2017). High-quality relationships are characterized by trust, respect, obligation, and loyalty. These relationships can enhance employees' work engagement and overall productivity (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Radstaak & Hennes, 2017). Previous researchers found that quality LMXs can promote trust within the relationship, job demands, and

resources, which increase employees' work engagement and overall satisfaction (Radstaak & Hennes, 2017; Tastan & Davoudi, 2015). Researchers also determined that performance management strategies' effectiveness could be influenced by the quality of leader-member relationships and employee perceptions about the performance management program (Du Plessis & Van Niekerk, 2017; Sachane, Bezuidenhout, & Botha, 2018). As leader-member relationships are associated with positive employee behaviors and performance, this conceptual framework was useful in evaluating how SME leaders foster organizational growth through SME performance management strategies.

Operational Definitions

The following are terms used within this project and their definitions:

Knowledge management: Knowledge management is the set of strategies and plans an organization uses to create and store data and knowledge for organizational improvement (Donate & Sanchez de Pablo, 2015).

Performance management: Performance management refers to activities, policies, procedures, and interventions that are meant to aid, support, and improve employee performance (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017). Performance management is a closed-loop process used to improve organizational output throughout a changing business environment (Bititci et al., 2016).

Performance measurement: Performance measurement is the act of gathering and analyzing data within an organization to assess output; performance measurement is

grounded in organizational management control theories and aims to quantify the effectiveness of a plan or action (Smith & Bititci, 2017).

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs): SMEs are primarily defined by their employment size (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017); the size of SMEs can range between 200 and 500 employees; for the purpose of this paper it was less than 500 employees.

Strategic leadership: Strategic leadership refers to individuals at the upper level management positions in an organization who create strategic plans, motivate others, and persuade others to follow that plan (Oladele & Akeke, 2016).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

The study has assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. Assumptions are conditions that the researcher accepts as true for the purpose of the research (Wargo, 2015). Subsequently, limitations are those areas the researcher does not have control over while delimitations are the boundaries of the study set by the researcher (Wargo, 2015; Yin, 2016).

Assumptions

Assumptions are statements that define and shape the conduct of the research (Fellows & Liu, 2015). This research study included multiple assumptions. The first assumption was that all participants would answer the questions honestly and openly. The second assumption was that all participants were well suited with adequate knowledge to answer each of the interview questions. The third assumption was that SMEs were comparable in terms of leadership and professional practices.

Limitations

Limitations explain the constraints regarding the scope of the study and its findings (Fellows & Liu, 2015). This study had several limitations. The first limitation was that due to the varying definitions of SMEs, the findings of the study may not be transferable to the public sector or across locations. To enhance transferability, this project included rich descriptions of the findings and clarified the readers' role so that they can apply this to their own situation. This study was also limited by the participants' knowledge of performance management, as each participant may have had different degrees of knowledge or experiences with leadership practices. The study was also limited to my preexisting bias and knowledge on the topic. To mitigate bias, I had a second researcher review the research questions and interview process. The researcher left a document trail so that any independent and outside analysts can follow how the data were gathered and analyzed. Last, the study was limited to the type of business or locations as rules, laws, and protocols vary.

Delimitations

Delimitations are characteristics imposed by the researcher that limit the scope of the study and define its boundaries (Simon & Goes, 2011). This study was delimited to the Washington, DC area. The study was delimited to a certain number of cases within the region. Moreover, the study was also delimited to interview questions focused on performance management to promote organizational growth.

Significance of the Study

This study was significant, as it involved the exploration of effective performance management strategies used by those in leadership roles and description of how these strategies influenced leader-member relationships and organizational growth in SMEs. A better understanding of successful performance management strategies can promote growth, as leadership may be crucial for SMEs' survival (Madanchian & Taherdoost, 2019). Further, improving professional practice through more collaborative leadership approaches to performance management or standardization of practices can influence organizational output (Mboweni & Makhado, 2017). The findings of the study can foster an increased understanding of the role of leader-member relationships on the efficacy of performance management strategies, as employee perceptions can influence this efficacy (Franco-Santos & Doherty, 2017; Klinck & Swanepoel, 2019; Van Berkel & Knies, 2015). An understanding of how employee perceptions affect performance management strategies could also enable leaders to create more positive work environments, resulting in improved work behaviors, job satisfaction, and organizational growth. The results could then catalyze trust and positive work behaviors for improving SME performance. Promoting organizational growth through effective performance management strategies can positively affect communities through greater social and corporate responsibility, which is associated with SME growth (Stephan, Patterson, Kelly, & Mair, 2016).

Contribution to Business Practice

With the information from this study, an increased understanding of how current performance management strategies affect employees of SMEs can occur. This could

provide a basis for additional support for transparency or a more objective performance appraisal system. Employees' perceptions of the performance management system influence its effectiveness (Franco-Santos & Doherty, 2017; Klinck & Swanepoel, 2019; Van Berkel & Knies, 2015), so understanding the influence of these perceptions can lead to a positive work environment that facilitates positive work behavior, job satisfaction, and overall organizational growth.

Implications for Social Change

Through the findings of this study, a clear understanding of leaders' use of performance management strategies may lead to an increase in the effectiveness of management systems within SMEs, which has implications for social change. One of the strongest implications is that with effective leadership comes increased employee satisfaction. Employee satisfaction could increase job retention. These benefits may also create a better quality of life for those employed. Additionally, a stronger business under better leadership can help sustain the local economy and create greater customer satisfaction. As an organization thrives so do its employees with a chance of increased salary, thereby strengthening the local economy and the employees' private life. These benefits would not just aid the local community but could also provide economic stability at the county and state level.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore effective strategies used by leaders in SMEs to support performance management for promoting organizational growth. The general business problem was that ineffective performance

management can inhibit growth and goal attainment within SMEs. The specific business problem was that some SME leaders have limited strategies for using performance management to promote organizational growth. SMEs must be equipped with effective management strategies to support the best organizational outcomes.

The success of SMEs depends on the leadership (Bititci et al., 2016); therefore, there has been a growing focus on performance management to adapt to the future business requirements. However, leadership within SMEs remains dependent on an individual's leadership style (Ayandibu & Houghton, 2017; Street, Gallupe, & Baker, 2017). Further, strategies for leadership and performance management for SME firms remain understudied in research (Street et al., 2017). The lack of effective leadership in SMEs can be a significant problem and hinder organizational growth (Asamany & Shaorong, 2017; Ayandibu & Houghton, 2017). Further, performance management involves monitoring progress of objectives and achievement for organizational growth (Mboweni & Makhado, 2017). But inconsistencies or hindrances, such as poor communication, time management, and distractions that are not addressed, can affect the effectiveness of performance management strategies (Cunha et al., 2018). There are possible effects on the United States because the economic impact of SME growth is fostered by positive and effective performance management strategies (Asamany & Shaorong, 2017).

Based on Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) LMX theory, the findings from this study could inform SME organizational stakeholders, human resources (HR) practitioners, and SME leaders. An increased awareness can help leaders better understand quality LMXs

and high-quality relationships with employees that are essential for SME organizational growth (Du Plessis & Van Niekerk, 2017; Sachane et al., 2018). The findings from this study could also have implications for leadership and management strategies as well as SME organizational growth, ensuring that effective leadership increases employee satisfaction and job retention. Therefore, a stronger business under effective leadership can help sustain the local economy and create greater customer satisfaction. When an organization thrives, so do its employees with a chance of increased salary; therefore, the local economy is strengthened.

Organization of the Literature Review

In this section, the process of identifying relevant literature is explained along with the theoretical framework and the study's target population. This section also includes a review of literature related to the strategies used by leaders in SME roles to promote effective performance management and to promote organizational growth. The review of literature also includes the ways in which leaders interact with employees and the interplay of these relationships on performance management strategies' efficacy and leadership approaches to performance management or standardization of practices. Next, the details of the framework based on Graen's and Uhl-Bien's (1995) LMX theory are presented with discussions about effective performance management strategies used by those in leadership roles and ways these strategies influence leader-member relationships and organizational growth in SMEs.

The Process of Identifying Relevant Literature

With the objective of a robust literature search, I accessed the Walden University library to locate applicable databases in relation to the topic of study. I searched Thoreau multi-database and other relevant databases. This helped certify and guarantee added control over the literature search resulting in the location of more accurate articles and sources. I used specific online databases and search engines, including Google Scholar, ERIC, Global Health, Ingenta Connect, JSTOR, Journal Storage, EBSCOhost Online Research Databases, and Journal Seek. The key search terms and combination of search terms queried in online databases were as follows: *effects of the leader-member exchange relationship, leader-member exchange, management strategies, performance management, performance management model, performance management systems, performance management strategies, and work performance*. By searching with these relevant key terms, the database search engines returned literature applicable to the problem statement and research question.

Other resources were also relevant, which included the following: (a) government websites related to LMX theory, (b) performance management strategies, and (c) research groups focusing on the topic. This expanded literature search strategy enabled a wider scope of relevant sources of statistics and reliable information in relation to the topic of SME performance management and leadership strategies in SMEs. Given the significance of reliability, I ensured that the resources I located were peer-reviewed to guarantee scholarly rigor. Achieving this objective entailed searching for journals in Ulrich's Periodical Directory.

Most sources reviewed (70 of 75, 93.3%) were published between 2016 and 2020.

The sources and articles were specifically related to leadership strategies, performance management, and the efficacy of performance management in SMEs. It was crucial to prioritize peer-reviewed sources that met the rigor of scholarly standards.

Theoretical Foundation

Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) theory of LMX was the conceptual framework for this study and facilitated understanding the strategies leaders use in SMEs to promote effective performance management and organizational growth. Given LMX theory's usefulness in understanding supervisor and employee relationships, this theory was appropriate for this study in which I explored performance management used by leaders and those in supervisory roles in SMEs.

Leader-member exchange theory. Social sciences researchers have utilized the model of LMX for over two decades, as it provides a robust understanding of leader-member relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). LMX theory posits that high-quality relationships among supervisors and employees can lead to more positive outcomes (e.g., productive work behaviors, cohesiveness) than lower quality relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Additionally, LMX theory outlines that leadership is more effective when leaders and followers create strong and effective partnerships that mutually benefit both parties (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). High-quality relationships are characterized by trust, respect, obligation, and loyalty (Radstaak & Hennes, 2017), which can enhance employees' work performance and overall job productivity (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Radstaak & Hennes, 2017) as well as organizational commitment and altruistic behavior

(Lunenburg, 2010; Truckenbrodt, 2000). Subsequently, supervisors create evolving relationships with employees that can vary in quality. The LMX is a holistic framework for assessing and measuring the quality of these relationships, considering factors of trust within the relationship, job demands, and resources (Tastan & Davoudi, 2015). These factors influence LMX by increasing employees' work performance and overall job satisfaction (Radstaak & Hennes, 2017; Tastan & Davoudi, 2015).

Researchers also advanced Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) LMX by further expanding its utilization in the workplace setting, with consideration of various workplace variables (Du Plessis & Van Niekerk, 2017; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Radstaak & Hennes, 2017; Sachane et al., 2018). For instance, Du Plessis and Van Niekerk (2017) advanced Graen and Uhl-Bien's theory of LMX through the evaluation of performance management strategies and their impact on leader-member relationships., finding that performance management strategies could be influenced by managerial and employee perceptions and relationships. Furthermore, leader-member relationships are significantly associated with positive employee behaviors and performance (Sachane et al., 2018). Additionally, Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang, and Chen (2005) studied LMX as a mediator of transformational leadership in organizations throughout China and found that LMX makes transformational leadership more personally meaningful. Wang et al. further outlined how LMX results in enhanced and effective task performance, increased organizational citizenship behaviors, and increased willingness among followers to take on extra roles and change how they perform their jobs.

With the emergence of empirical research in this area and the widespread application of the theory of LMX, scholars noted the usefulness and effectiveness of LMX theory. The correlation between specific traits and behaviors of leaders, their employees' or followers' turnover intention, job satisfaction, and worker motivation became evident with continuous research (Braun, 2017; Wang, Zhang, Ding, & Cheng, 2018). With these constructs related to LMX theory, SME organizations, leaders, and HR practitioners may draw on this study's findings to effectively understand supervisor and employee relationships while using leadership strategies to increase performance management in SMEs. Effective leadership strategies geared toward increasing performance management in SMEs may be possible through a better understanding of the experiences of leaders of SMEs and their performance management, which is thought to be imperative for SMEs' organizational growth (Asamany & Shaorong, 2017). The LMX theory was useful in the current study's objective to understand supervisor and employee relationships, and in exploring the performance management of leaders and those in supervisory roles in SMEs.

Strategies for Performance Management and Organizational Performance

Strategies for performance management are essential to organizational success. Several authors have examined the impact of strategic management practices on SME performance (Omsa, Ridwan, & Jayadi, 2018; Rehman & Anwar, 2019). For example, Omsa et al. (2018) researched this topic in Indonesia, exploring how SMEs maintained or enhanced their marketing and financial performances. The results of the study showed that strategic management practices, such as strategic planning, strategic execution, and

strategic evaluation, have a positive and significant impact on SMEs' sales volume, breakeven point achievement, and profits (Omsa et al., 2018). The impact of strategic management practices was more apparent in medium-sized firms (Omsa et al., 2018).

Further, there is a need for more effective firm-level strategies for SMEs to achieve competitive advantage (Rehman & Anwar, 2019). Importantly, SMEs have higher risks within the context of globalization due to their size of 500 employees and under and limited resources, giving them a disadvantage when compared to large corporations (Rehman & Anwar, 2019). Effective business strategy has a significant impact on SME performance and enterprise risk management (Rehman & Anwar, 2019). This could justify the use and application of strategic management practices among SME firms, as these can significantly impact SME performance associated with sales turnover, breakeven point, risk management, and overall SME profit (Omsa et al., 2018; Rehman & Anwar, 2019).

Impact of small and medium enterprise leadership. Several authors have noted how organizational performance could be influenced by various factors, including leadership strategies and practices (Almatrooshi, Singh, & Farouk, 2016; Koohang, Paliszkievicz, & Goluchowski, 2017). For example, Leadership competencies (i.e., cognitive, emotional, and social competencies) are vital for leaders and have impacted both employee and organizational performance (Almatrooshi et al., 2016). Leadership impacts trust, knowledge management, and organizational performance (Koohang et al., 2017).

An effective leadership development strategy includes many aspects of performance management. Managers must craft effective leadership and management development strategies to enhance organizational performance outcomes (Burgoyne, 2016). SME organizational performance and success highly depend on leadership (Bititci et al., 2016). Additionally, among SME entrepreneurs, leadership strategy, knowledge management, and business orientation significantly influenced SME performance, but leadership strategy has been the most influential (Putra et al., 2019). Thus, SME leadership must be given more attention to ensure optimal results in SME performance management and results.

Certain leadership characteristics have been linked to organizational outcomes, making it important to identify pertinent leadership qualities that result in optimal organizational performance among SME firms (Trang, 2016; Zainol, Daud, Shamsu, Abubakar, & Halim, 2018). Research has indicated that vision, innovation, proactiveness, and risk-taking impact SME performance, though vision and innovation have the most significant impact (Zainol et al., 2018). SMEs usually face a highly competitive environment. In these settings, productivity and profitability of each SME organization are highly correlated with its leaders' management capacity (Trang, 2016). Furthermore, important leadership characteristics include knowledge of business and management, management skills, certain personal characteristics (i.e., flexibility, adventurous, and punctilious spirit), and the SME leader's experience (Trang, 2016).

Leadership team composition also impacts SME performance level. Based on a study of factors like age, education level, and tenure among SME leaders, SMEs with

lower mean industry tenure and higher age separation diversity were more likely to result in higher performance outcomes (Acar, 2016). Thus, it is not only important to consider the leadership competencies of SMEs, it is also essential to account for factors (i.e., age, education level, and tenure) among leadership team members, which could result in increased SME performance outcomes (Acar, 2016). Similarly, in addition to diversity, higher levels of cultural intelligence have increased SME performance (Jahanshahi, Nawaser, & Brem, 2018). This means that leadership teams that are more diverse have a higher tolerance for ambiguity. As a result, the effectiveness of these organizations' strategies is higher than those organizations with lower tolerance. This could result in increased overall performance outcomes (Acar, 2016; Jahanshahi et al., 2018).

Aside from diversity and cultural intelligence, management capabilities, innovation, and gender diversity in the top management team remain crucial factors for organizational growth in SMEs (Garcia-Solarte, Garcia-Perez de Lema, & Madrid-Guijarro, 2018; Ruiz-Jiménez & del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes, 2016). Analyzing data from 205 SMEs in Spain, Ruiz-Jiménez and del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes (2016) showed that management capabilities significantly impact innovation in SMEs, which, in turn, enhanced overall SME performance. Furthermore, gender diversity among top leadership teams was a significant factor that also enhanced strategic SME performance outcomes (Ruiz-Jiménez & del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes, 2016). Garcia-Solarte et al. (2018) noted similar findings, showing that SME organizations with high levels of gender diversity on their board of directors and in management teams had greater organizational change outcomes. Similarly, outcomes generated from transformational organizational style and

follower transformation resulted in higher SME performance levels (Garcia-Solarte et al., 2018). These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors that elucidate how top management teams and gender diversity in top leadership teams could result in greater organizational achievements among SME firms (Garcia-Solarte et al., 2018; Ruiz-Jiménez & del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes, 2016).

Leadership styles. Leadership styles significantly impact performance management and organizational outcomes in SME firms. Several authors have explored how leaders can develop strategies in terms of leadership styles in the context of SME firms (Hashim, Omar, Hamzah, & Umar, 2018; Israel, 2018). For example, Israel (2018) examined the leadership roles and behaviors of 550 owners and leaders of SMEs in Nigeria and found that leadership styles were highly and statistically associated with SME performance outcomes. Moreover, findings also revealed that transformational behaviors were significantly associated with sales, profit, employment growth, and owner satisfaction levels (Israel, 2018). Additionally, inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation were significantly associated with levels of employment growth, profit, and owner satisfaction (Israel, 2018). Furthermore, transactional styles of management by exception and contingent reward were associated with levels of sales growth, profit, and employment growth (Israel, 2018). These findings are consistent with those of Hashim et al. (2018) and Singh (2016), who noted that leadership styles (i.e., transformational leadership and transactional leadership) had a significant relationship with organizational performance of SMEs.

Leadership styles are recognized to influence SME growth. Several authors focused on transformational leadership style and how it could be an effective strategy to enhance performance management in SME firms (Afriyie, Du, & Musah, 2019; Mgeni & Nayak, 2016; Sharma & Nair, 2018; Sikalieh, Linge, & Asiimwe, 2016). Sikalieh et al. (2016) examined this topic further, by exploring the relationship between transformational leadership style and SME growth in the top 100 SMEs in Kenya. The authors of the study gathered data from 227 employees in SMEs using surveys and structured interviews (Sikalieh et al., 2016). Through inferential statistical methods, Sikalieh et al. showed that transformational leadership style had a positive and significant relationship with SME growth (Sikalieh et al., 2016). This underscored the adoption of the transformational leadership style as an effective strategy in enhancing organizational growth of SMEs (Sikalieh et al., 2016).

Afriyie et al. (2019) concurred, noting that the transformational leadership style is highly effective in enhancing SME performance and innovation results. Mgeni and Nayak (2016) also produced similar findings through examination of the impact the transactional leadership style has on business performance of SMEs in Tanzania. Mgeni and Nayak analyzed information from 60 participants after gathering data from questionnaires. The authors analyzed the data with Pearson product moment correlation and regression analysis and found a statistically significant and moderate positive correlation between transactional leadership style and business performance of SMEs (Mgeni & Nayak, 2016). The correlation between transactional leadership style and business performance was so significant that transactional leadership style was a

predictor of SME business performance (Mgeni & Nayak, 2016). These findings could provide more empirical results regarding the role of the transactional leadership style in enhancing performance outcomes in SME firms. Consequently, SME leaders and managers must cultivate a SME workplace environment through an effective leadership style, such as transformational leadership style.

Like Mgeni and Nayak's (2016) and Sikalieh et al.'s (2016) findings, several other scholars underscored the importance of promoting the transactional leadership style in SMEs (Arshada, Raslib, & Mohd, 2016; Manzoor et al., 2019). Arshada et al. (2016) examined the impact of transformational leadership on business performance from technology-based SMEs in Malaysia. Arshada et al. specifically examined critical dimensions of transformational leadership and business performance in SME contexts. With a quantitative approach, the authors gathered data from 86 SME employees (Arshada et al., 2016). The findings of the study showed that transformational leadership significantly enhanced SME business performance (Arshada et al., 2016).

The findings further revealed the following specific and critical dimensions of transformational leadership: (a) enthusiastic optimism, (b) idealized influence, and (c) individual consideration (Arshada et al., 2016). These dimensions of leadership could be used as an empirical reference for SME leaders to apply to enhance performance management outcomes (Arshada et al., 2016). Manzoor et al. (2019) concurred, underscoring the importance of leadership style and its impact on the enhancement of organizational performance and employees' job performance. The authors of the study analyzed the data from 130 respondents with regression analysis (Manzoor et al., 2019).

The findings of the study showed that transformational leadership positively and significantly predicted job performance in SME firms (Manzoor et al., 2019). This body of literature could provide more empirical data regarding the construct and dimensions of transformational leadership and its impact on SME performance (Arshada et al., 2016; Manzoor et al., 2019). This could help in understanding strategies employed by SME leaders that result in increased performance management outcomes.

The leadership styles of leaders and managers in SMEs impact the organization in various ways. Several authors focused on this topic and explored various factors within SMEs that are impacted by leadership styles (Dzomonda, Fatoki, & Oni, 2017; Fayaz & Shah, 2017; Madanchian, Hussein, Noordin, & Taherdoost, 2016). Dzomonda et al. (2017) examined the impact of leadership styles on the entrepreneurial orientation of SMEs in South Africa. This is vital to address given that entrepreneurial orientation of SME results in product innovation and SME organizational performance (Dzomonda et al., 2017; Fayaz & Shah, 2017).

Dzomonda et al. (2017) examined 103 SMEs using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and regression analysis to analyze and summarize the findings. The results of their study showed that leadership styles significantly impact entrepreneurial orientation (Dzomonda et al., 2017). This is vital information given that entrepreneurial orientation increases levels of performance, especially with the use of the transformational leadership style. Transformational leaders actively promote creativity and knowledge transfer within SME firms through their charismatic behaviors and traits (Fayaz & Shah, 2017). Fayaz and Shah (2017) concluded the same, noting the relationship among entrepreneurial

orientation, firm performance, and transformational leadership style. The authors of the study collected data through a structured questionnaire administered to 193 SMEs in Pakistan (Fayaz & Shah, 2017). The findings revealed that not only does entrepreneurial orientation increase firm performance, but the impact of entrepreneurial orientation is more significant in the presence of transformational leadership behaviors and traits (Fayaz & Shah, 2017). These findings could provide empirical information regarding the construct of transformational leadership style and how it impacts firm performance, specifically through its effect on enhancing entrepreneurial orientation in SME firms.

Other types of leadership have also been identified as effective strategies in enhancing SME organizational outcomes (i.e., performance). Several scholars studied this topic, examining various types of leadership and its impact on SMEs (Madanchian et al., 2016; Zhang, 2017). Madanchian et al. (2016) examined the factors of ethical leadership, leadership effectiveness, and organizational performance in the SME context. The authors of the study examined relevant literature related to these topics and found that ethical leadership and leadership effectiveness significantly enhance organizational performance in SME contexts (Madanchian et al., 2016).

Madanchian et al. (2016) further argued the need for more emphasis on ethical leadership within an SME organization, as it effectively motivates followers to perform optimally in their roles. In contrast, Zhang (2017) noted that SMEs' executive leadership styles impact firm performance. By exploring leadership styles in SMEs, the author argued that leadership styles can effectively sustain competitiveness in the market, and enhance financial performance (Zhang, 2017). Specifically, the two leadership types of

charismatic and adaptive are significantly effective in enhancing firm performance during an SME firm's early and later stages (Zhang, 2017). This body of results could provide more in-depth information and options regarding leadership styles and their impact on performance management and sustainability in SME firms. Thus, these findings could be used as reference when developing leadership strategies in the context of SME firms.

Sustainable leadership has been found to be an effective strategy in enhancing firm output and performance. Several authors underscored how sustainable leadership could increase and maximize business outcomes among SMEs (Burawat, 2019; Suriyankietkaew & Avery, 2016). Burawat (2019) examined the relationships among transformational leadership, sustainable leadership, lean manufacturing, and sustainability performance in the context of SMEs. Burawat focused on the Thai manufacturing industry regarding this topic, using a quantitative approach to collect and analyze data from 598 SME employees. The findings of the study showed that sustainable leadership resulted in improved SME sustainability performance (Burawat, 2019).

Transformational leadership also leads to increased sustainability performance among SME firms (Burawat, 2019). Burawat's (2019) findings were focused on the Thai manufacturing industry. However, the findings of this study detail the effectiveness of transformational leadership and sustainable leadership in impacting overall performance of SME firms (Burawat, 2019). Suriyankietkaew and Avery (2016) indicated similar findings, underscoring the role of sustainable leadership in driving financial performance.

Suriyankietkaew and Avery (2016) focused on the context of Thai SMEs and investigated 23 sustainable leadership practices and financial performance among firms. Utilizing a cross-sectional survey of 439 managers from SMEs, Suriyankietkaew and Avery noted that the majority of sustainable leadership practices lead to enhanced financial performance among SMEs. Specifically, sustainable leadership predicted predictors of financial performance and increased long-term firm performance. These sustainable leadership practices included building amicable labor relations, valuing employees, social responsibility, and sharing a strong and shared vision (Suriyankietkaew & Avery, 2016). This body of literature could provide more in-depth analysis regarding the ways in which leadership practices impact financial sustainability and performance among SME firms.

It is also vital to address leadership development among SME firms. Several scholars argued for the adoption of leadership development practices in SMEs to effectively increase firm performance (Garavan, Watson, Carbery, & O'Brien, 2015; Ogunyomi & Bruning, 2016). Garavan, Watson, Carbery, and O'Brien (2016) explored this topic further, noting the antecedents of leadership development practices in SMEs. Garavan et al. underscored the need for HR/leadership expertise and efforts in increasing leadership capabilities in SME firms. The reason for increased emphasis on leadership development practices was that they are lacking in SME firms despite the significant impact of leaders in organizational success (Bititci et al., 2016; Garavan et al., 2016). This is consistent with Bititci et al. (2016) who highlighted the need for leadership development practices and performance management systems to improve organizational

performance. Similarly, Ogunyomi and Bruning (2016) underscored the role of HR management in increasing organizational performance of SMEs.

Delving further into this topic of leadership development, Ogunyomi and Bruning (2016) specifically focused on SMEs in developing countries and analyzed survey data from 236 respondents working in SMEs. The findings of their study showed that SMEs need more leadership development practices to increase performance sustainability (Ogunyomi & Bruning, 2016). The study findings also revealed that leadership practices and development are associated with employee performance management, financial performance, and non-financial performance of SMEs (Ogunyomi & Bruning, 2016). This body of literature could provide an initial context regarding the impact of leadership development practices and performance management in enhancing overall firm performance in SMEs (Garavan et al., 2016). This could be used as a strategy by SME leaders in ensuring increased financial and non-financial organizational outcomes (Ogunyomi & Bruning, 2016).

Performance management. Performance management systems are known to impact performance management outcomes and practices of organizations. Several authors noted the need to develop performance management systems to increase firm output (Audenaert, Decramer, George, Verschuere, & Van Waeyenberg, 2019; Bititci et al., 2016). Bititci et al. (2016), for example, explored the use of visual performance management systems and its effect on organizational performance management practices. The authors of the study examined seven manufacturing SMEs across Europe, developing a novel visual performance management approach in these firms (Bititci et al., 2016).

Using visual strategy and performance management techniques, the findings of the study showed that these performance management systems have various positive effects on organizations (Bititci et al., 2016). According to Bititci et al. (2016), the positive benefits that aid in overall organization performance include: (a) supporting strategy development and implementation, (b) facilitating performance measurement and review, (c) promoting people engagement, (d) increasing levels of internal and external communication, (e) enhancing collaboration and integration, (f) continuously developing company culture, and (g) innovation.

Audenaert et al. (2019) similarly explored employee performance management in public firms and the impact of employee performance management on employee innovation. Audenaert et al. found that employee performance management increases employee innovation when the organization focuses on consistent employee performance management and LMX. The findings further revealed that the impact of employee performance management on innovation increases when employee followers and leaders have positive relations (Audenaert et al., 2019). This body of knowledge could provide empirical justification regarding the impact of performance management in improving firm outcomes, such as innovation and enhanced company culture (Audenaert et al., 2019; Bititci et al., 2016).

Audenaert et al.'s (2019) and Bititci et al.'s (2016) findings are consistent with those of Jardiouï, Garengo, and El Alami (2017). Jardiouï et al. underscored the impact of organizational culture on performance measurement systems and vice versa. Jardiouï et al. explored SMEs in Morocco, their use, and implementation of performance

measurement systems. Their findings revealed that the performance measurement system life cycle is significantly associated with organizational culture (Jardioui et al., 2017). Performance measurement systems resulted in improved positive organizational culture, while promoting performance management resulted in positive performance measurement outcomes (Jardioui et al., 2017). Thus, these findings could be used to develop leadership strategies in SME firms to enhance performance management outcomes (Audenaert et al., 2019; Bititci et al., 2016). Additionally, the findings could also be used to guide SME leaders in promoting and using strategies linked to organizational culture that focus on performance management and measurement, which could lead to successful use and implementation of performance management systems in SME firms (Audenaert et al., 2019; Bititci et al., 2016; Jardioui et al., 2017).

Performance management systems are significant factors to consider in enhancing organizational performance. According to Shin and Konrad (2017) and Okwir, Nudurupati, Ginieis, and Angelis (2018), strategic HR management must include high-performance work systems and performance management systems in their organizations to enhance performance outcomes. The authors explained how these systems resulted in productivity among workers (Shin & Konrad, 2017). Smith and Bititci (2017) added by noting the significant correlation between factors of performance measurement and management, employee engagement, and performance. The authors of the study examined two dimensions of organizational control, technical and social, to further explore this topic (Smith & Bititci, 2017).

The findings of the study showed that having an effective performance measurement system in place significantly increased employee engagement and performance (Smith & Bititci, 2017). SME leaders and SME firms could use this pool of knowledge to implement performance measurement and management systems, as this increases employee engagement and performance (Okwir et al., 2018; Shin & Konrad, 2017; Smith & Bititci, 2017). Ensuring performance measurement and management systems could be an effective strategy to increase SME firm performance overall.

According to Na-Nan, Chaiprasit, and Pukkeeree (2017), performance management was significant in the successful operation of an organization. Several authors underscored the importance of performance management in SMEs. Similarly, Na-Nan et al. examined the impact of performance management in high-growth-sector SMEs in Thailand. Through mixed-method research, the authors of the study underscored the need for more performance management strategies linked to enhancing recruitment, retention, and retirement (Na-Nan et al., 2017). Further results showed that several factors needed to be improved to enhance the effectiveness of performance management. These factors included the following: (a) employee participation, (b) unclear goals, (c) unfair evaluations, (d) ineffectual communication, and (e) ineffective application of evaluations (Na-Nan et al., 2017). This characterizes a need to identify and enhance points of opportunities within SME firms, which must first be improved to enhance performance management outcomes.

Performance measurement systems result in various demonstrable benefits. As such, to gain competitive advantage, SMEs must have performance measurement

systems. Mustapha, Sorooshian, and Azizan (2016) and Bryson and Forth (2018) noted that SMEs may see positive returns from their implementation of performance management systems. Contrary to the idea that SMEs do not need performance management in place due to the small nature of the firm, Bryson and Forth (2018) argued that implementing performance management systems in SMEs resulted in demonstrable benefits (i.e., sustainable growth, increased productivity, and overall profits). The authors further argued that HR leaders and departments needed to focus on performance-focused management practices (i.e., trainings and incentive pay), resulting in higher levels of productivity based on past research (Bryson & Forth, 2018).

Mustapha et al. (2016) added to these assertions, indicating there is a lack of performance measurement systems customized to SME characteristics. The authors of the study argued that SME was not only an organization, but also a business entity (Mustapha et al., 2016). As such, Mustapha et al. underlined the need for SMEs to employ performance management practices and systems to produce significantly enhanced results in SME business outcomes. The authors further argued that one of the causes of failure in SMEs was that they did not use the performance management systems (Mustapha et al., 2016). These findings could provide more information regarding the need to promote performance management systems within SME contexts. This could increase the risk of success of SMEs given that there was more efficient management of the organization's management and processes (Bryson & Forth, 2018; Mustapha et al., 2016).

Many authors concurred with the assertions of Bryson and Forth (2018) and Mustapha et al. (2016). Larsson, Syberfeldt, and Säfsten (2017) noted how SMEs could improve their communication of performance measures through performance management systems. Performance management systems could positively affect employee performance, thereby strengthening the company (Larsson et al., 2017). Through a case study and a survey, Larsson et al. focused on outlining the strengths and weaknesses in communication of performance measures of the SME organization. The authors proposed that a model of visualization of performance measures in SMEs with the following principles and guidelines: (a) keep the visualization as simple as possible without compromising understanding, (b) use symbols and colors consistently, (c) use simple words and do not include too much information in the visualization (Larsson et al., 2017).

Larsson et al.'s (2017) findings are consistent with those of other empirical research, indicating the impact of visual performance management systems on the overall performance of the SME organization (Bititci et al., 2016; Larsson & Säfsten, 2016). According to Larsson and Säfsten (2016), visual performance management systems were most effective for manufacturing SMEs. A visual communication of performance measures aids in continuous improvement with manufacturing SMEs (Larsson & Säfsten, 2016). This enables constant motivation among employees and provides a holistic view of progress (Larsson & Säfsten, 2016). Overall, the use of visual communication of performance management measures as a system was effective in enhancing

organizational growth among SME organizations (Bititci et al., 2016; Larsson & Säfsten, 2016; Larsson et al., 2017).

Performance management systems are relatively new to SME contexts. However, SMEs are now on the path toward development and competitiveness by implementing various organizational structures (Murphy, 2016; M'zungu, Merrilees, & Miller, 2019; Sorooshian, 2017). Rojas-Lema, Alfaro-Saiz, Verdecho, and Rodríguez-Rodríguez (2019b) delved further into this topic, exploring organizational structures in SMEs and their performance measurement systems. The findings showed that performance measurement systems were integral to the success of SME firms (Rojas-Lema et al., 2019b).

Furthermore, Rojas-Lema et al. (2019b) found that performance measurement was a key element inside the performance management due to its results supporting strategic, tactical, and operational decision-making. Rojas-Lema Alfaro-Saiz, Rodríguez-Rodríguez, and Verdecho (2019a) similarly underscored these findings when they evaluated worldwide research about performance measurement for SMEs. The authors analyzed the development of performance management from 2006 to 2016 in the SME context (Rojas-Lema et al., 2019a).

The analysis of 388 records revealed that performance management systems significantly increased performance outcomes of SMEs (Rojas-Lema et al., 2019a). However, the authors noted a need to further promote the implementation of performance management systems in SMEs given their significant impact on organizational outcomes (Rojas-Lema et al., 2019a). This body of literature could help in relevant analysis

regarding the importance of implementing performance management systems in SMEs, as performance measurement is linked to positive organizational and employee outcomes (i.e., improvements in strategic, tactical, and operational decision-making; Rojas-Lema et al., 2019a, 2019b).

Continuous innovation can be effectively managed through performance management systems in SMEs. Several authors noted how performance management measures may have led to increased outcomes in SME creativity, innovation, and continuous improvement (Mahmood, Lanz, Toivonen, & Otto, 2018; Saunila, 2017; Wu, 2016). Saunila (2017) focused specifically on the topic of continuous innovation through performance measurement. With the objective to measure innovation in terms of size and operational and financial performance, Saunila (2017) collected data from various SMEs in Finland. Saunila's findings showed that firms with various types of innovation measures reported above-average financial and operational performance compared to SME organizations that did not use innovation measures as part of their performance management systems.

Mahmood et al. (2018) concurred, noting the need for performance management systems and performance evaluation for SMEs for innovation and continuous improvement. Mahmood et al. indicated in their study's findings that performance levels of individuals within the SME organization need to be known and visible within the system. This was vital for effective collaboration, to continuously improve and innovate, and to maintain competitiveness (Mahmood et al., 2018). These findings could have significant value in understanding alternative options in enhancing performance

outcomes and measures within SME firms. Implementation of performance management systems and measures could result in increased productivity, enhanced innovation, and competitiveness (Mahmood et al., 2018; Saunila, 2017).

Implementation of Performance Management Systems

Leadership is vital in the successful implementation of performance management systems. According to Sang and Sang (2016) and Pak and Kim (2018), performance management systems had immense positive outcomes for SMEs. Nevertheless, without the support and competencies of leadership in its implementation, the performance management system and its benefits will not come to fruition (Popovič, Puklavec, & Oliveira, 2019; Sang & Sang, 2016).

Sang and Sang (2016) examined this topic further, underscoring the role of leadership styles in successful implementation of a performance management system. The researchers used 2,040 participants in their study, analyzing the impact of transactional and transformational leadership on the adoption of performance management (Sang & Sang, 2016). The findings of the study showed that leadership style (transactional and transformational leadership) had a significant and positive impact on the implementation of a performance management strategy (Sang & Sang, 2016). Moreover, the correlation between leadership and a performance management system was stronger among men, those with less education, and older adults (Sang & Sang, 2016).

Leite, Baptista, and Ribeiro (2016) underscored similar findings, noting how leadership played a critical role in implementing lean and agile techniques in SMEs, as

well as its performance management system. De Waal and Counet (2009) concurred with these findings by Leite et al. and Sang and Sang (2016), identifying the main problems during the implementation and use of a performance management system.

De Waal and Counet (2009) outlined the following six challenges to performance management system implementation: (a) the absence of top management commitment of performance management system use and implementation, (b) the lack of a performance management culture, (c) a low priority of performance management, (d) lack of use or being abandoned after a change of management, (e) management putting low priority on the implementation, and (f) people's perceptions regarding the implementation.

Employees did not see the significant benefits from performance management systems and culture (de Waal & Counet, 2009). This means SMEs needed to consider the adoption of strategic leadership styles along with the implementation of performance management systems in SMEs (Mui, Basit, & Hassan, 2018). This was vital to address given that, without the support and commitment of leaders in SMEs, performance management system usage and implementation within the firm eventually leads to failure (Leite et al., 2016; Sang & Sang, 2016; Waal & Counet, 2009).

Pak and Kim (2018) stated similar findings to those of Sang and Sang (2016) regarding the role of team managers' implementation on high-performance work systems intensity and performance. The authors of the study identified the factors contributing to an effective implementation of a performance management system (Pak & Kim, 2018). Per the study findings, team managers and leaders were integral in the process of effective implementation of performance management system (Pak & Kim, 2018).

Team leaders and managers act as a primary interpretive filter, which enables team members and employees to perceive differences in performance management work systems. In turn, this increased perception among team members and enhanced employee performance outcomes (Pak & Kim, 2018). The authors also advocated for the use of HR policies in performance management work systems within organizations, which could result in improved performance outcomes (Pak & Kim, 2018).

Raffoni, Visani, Bartolini, and Silvi (2018) similarly noted the challenges of implementing performance management systems in organizations. The authors also outlined the following diagnostic issues in relation to implementation of the following performance management and measures: (a) information overload, (b) absence of cause-effect relationships, and (c) lack of a holistic view of the organization (Raffoni et al., 2018). As such, leaders and organizational HR departments must work together toward the implementation of performance management systems within SME firms.

This body of literature provides substantial evidence regarding the role of leaders in the implementation of performance management systems (Raffoni et al., 2018). Given the impact of performance management systems on SME firms, leaders needed to be educated and trained in advocating implementation of performance management systems, which increases in-role performance and organizational behavior among employees (Pak & Kim, 2018; Raffoni et al., 2018).

The use of performance management and measurement systems in SMEs is highly dependent on the leaders of the firm. Several authors noted the need for leaders to be aligned with the overall objective of performance management systems prior to and

throughout its implementation (Pešalj, Pavlov, & Micheli, 2018). Pešalj et al. (2018) explored the use of performance measurement systems for managing organizational performance of SMEs. The authors examined the effective management practices for successful performance management system implementation (Pešalj et al., 2018). Pešalj et al. found that leadership style was significantly influential in producing outcomes of successful performance management system implementation and use. Similarly, Ahenkan, Tenakwah, and Bawole (2018) noted the performance management implementation challenges in local government systems.

The authors of the study interviewed 20 heads of departments and their employees and analyzed the data with qualitative analysis (Ahenkan et al., 2018). The findings revealed various challenges with implementing performance management systems related to leadership abilities, knowledge, and commitment (Ahenkan et al., 2018). The authors outlined these challenges as the following: (a) poor communication, poor integration, (b) low commitment by the top officials, (c) absence of training, (d) inadequate capacity for setting clear targets and objectives, and measuring and evaluating criteria for performance assessment, (e) cultural issues, (f) absence of rewards for good performance, (g) financial constraints, and (h) weak and highly bureaucratic management systems (Ahenkan et al., 2018). These findings could provide more empirical insight regarding the importance of leadership competencies, buy-in, and commitment to the implementation of performance management systems (Ahenkan et al., 2018; Pešalj et al., 2018).

Ensuring leadership commitment and knowledge to performance management systems in SME firms could result in higher chances of success in its use and implementation. In turn, this could result in improved organizational outcomes in SME firms such as financial profit and increased employee motivation (Ahenkan et al., 2018; Bourne, Melnyk, & Bititci, 2018; Pešalj et al., 2018).

Small and Medium Enterprise Performance and Total Quality Management

There are other factors that impact performance management in SME firms. Several authors underscored the relationship between total quality management (TQM) and SME performance, for example (Abubakar & Mahmood, 2016; Sutrisno, 2019). Abubakar and Mahmood (2016) collected survey data from 212 SMEs to explore this topic further. The findings of the study showed that TQM was significantly associated with SME performance (Abubakar & Mahmood, 2016). This was especially true and more significant for SMEs in the manufacturing context. Sutrisno (2019) had similar findings, focusing on the context of food production SMEs. Sutrisno collected data from 136 SMEs in the food production sector and used confirmatory factor analysis to analyze the results. The findings of the study showed that to increase operational performance in SMEs, TQM must be developed (Sutrisno, 2019). A quality-oriented organizational culture is needed among SMEs for promotion of TQM practices, which could result in optimal organizational performance outcomes for SMEs (Abubakar & Mahmood, 2016; Sutrisno, 2019). This is especially relevant in the production and manufacturing industries (Abubakar & Mahmood, 2016; Sutrisno, 2019).

Transition

SMEs help support the global economy and employ a large part of the population. Leadership and performance management can determine organizational output. The general business problem is that ineffective performance management can inhibit growth and goal attainment within SMEs. The specific business problem is that some SME leaders have limited strategies for using performance management to promote organizational growth.

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies used by 10 leaders in SME organizations with effective strategies to support performance management to promote organizational growth. The target population for this study included leaders of SMEs, with at least three years of leadership experience at SMEs in Washington, DC. In this study, I employed a qualitative method with a multiple case study design. Qualitative research methods are well suited for opened-ended and flexible approaches to explore unknown concepts (Yin, 2018). A multiple case study design was the best fit for this study instead of other qualitative designs. A case study design is well suited for exploring unknown aspects of a concept that is freely occurring in everyday life (Yin, 2014). The central research question used to guide the study was what performance management strategies are used by leaders in SMEs to promote organizational growth? For this study, LMX theory (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) was the conceptual framework. This study is significant because it explores effective performance management strategies used by those in leadership roles and ways these strategies influence leader-member relationships and organizational growth in SMEs.

With the first section completed, Section 2 includes the methodology and design elements of the project. This section also includes discussions of the role of the researcher, participants, research design, population and sampling, ethics, data collection, organization, analysis, reliability, and validity. Section 3 includes a summary of the data analysis, results, and conclusions drawn from the findings of the study.

Section 2: The Project

SMEs must be equipped with performance management systems to ensure the best of organizational outcomes. With this research, I intended to close the gap among SMEs, leadership, and performance management strategies. Section 2 of this paper includes the research strategies of this project. It begins with the purpose statement followed by the role of the researcher and the participants involved. The research methods and design are discussed along with population and sampling. The next section includes details about how I, as the researcher, upheld ethical standards. Following that, data collection instruments, techniques, organization, and analysis are described. Last, reliability and validity are discussed, and the section ends with a summary.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies used by leaders in SMEs to support performance management to promote organizational growth. The target population for this study included up to 10 leaders of SMEs with at least 3 years of successful leadership experience using performance management strategies to promote organizational growth of SMEs in Washington, DC. The implications for social change from the results of this study include the potential economic impact of SME growth fostered by positive and effective performance management strategies. The growth of SMEs could promote job creation and greater availability of goods and services to the immediate community (Saasongu, 2015).

Role of the Researcher

Nature of Researcher-Participant Relationship

It is up to the researcher to manage all aspects of the research project. This includes selecting the methodology and design, choosing the participants fairly, organizing the data, analysis, and interpretation. In qualitative research, the researcher's role must be clear and concise, as they are often the primary instrument to gather, analyze, and synthesize the data. In qualitative research, the researcher's primary goal is to assess participants' thoughts and feelings (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The role of the researcher is also complex, as it often means the investigator must inquire about thoughts and feelings that may be personal to the participant (Råheim et al., 2016; Sutton & Austin, 2015). The responses from participants vary due to their experiences; therefore, the researcher must be as detailed as possible when transcribing their responses (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

With regard to the nature of participant-researcher relationship, there is an uneven power balance between the two (Råheim et al., 2016). It is up to the researcher to create a fair relationship while maintaining boundaries. The researcher must also be aware that the participants may bring their own agenda into the research project (Råheim et al., 2016). Although there should be a distance between the participant and researcher for ethical reasons, this relationship must be correctly balanced to avoid the participants feeling their knowledge is inferior to the superior knowledge the researcher may showcase (Råheim et al., 2016).

Another important role of the researcher is to ensure that the participants and their data are closely safeguarded (Sutton & Austin, 2015). This ensures not only ethical research practices but also maintains the credibility of the findings. The researcher is responsible for the gathering and recording of all data; therefore, it is also up to the researcher to ensure the data are soundly maintained (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The researcher should utilize field notes to document the research process so that others can follow along and maintain that the research was valid, reliable, and ethical (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Additionally, the researcher should avoid preconceived ideas and biases, so the participants' voices are accurately documented (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Therefore, the researcher must be clear when transcribing and checking all gathered data (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

As the researcher, I brought a unique perspective to this research. I have 14 years of specialized experience as a senior manager within the Federal Aviation Administration. Though I have not been involved with SMEs, I have extensive experience with leadership, both as a leader and in my personal training. This experience allowed me to understand basic leadership principles while offering a fresh and untarnished perspective on SMEs. By utilizing my experience as a leader, I was able to better interpret the leadership side of the report having a neutral perspective toward SMEs. I was also the sole source for data collection. I conducted the semistructured interviews, gathered pertinent documents, and recorded all observations. The interviews were conducted via Zoom.

The sources of data aligned with those found in qualitative research (Yin, 2016). As a researcher, I maintained an unbiased position by having a second researcher approve my research questions, recording the interview process, and leaving the document trail so that any independent and outside analysts could follow how the data were gathered and analyzed. Additionally, I ensured that all data were safeguarded to protect the participants' identities.

Ethical Dimensions of the Research Study

This study adhered to the Belmont Report (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). There are three basic tenets of the Belmont Report to ensure ethical research among human subjects. The first is respect for persons and ensuring that participants are treated humanely and have given their consent to participate. Additionally, researchers must be truthful and clear about the purposes of the research (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). The second aspect is beneficence, which is to do no harm and minimize the risk to participants. The final aspect is justice, which maintains that participants are not exploited in the processes and procedures are followed fairly (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). To minimize the risk to participants, anonymity, confidentiality, and data protection principles were adhered to as recommended by the American Educational Research Association's (2011) Code of Ethics and the Belmont Report of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1979). Ethical principles adhered to in the study included the following: (a) protection from harm, (b) informed consent, and (c) right to privacy. As the researcher, I

ensured that all three of these aspects were followed as well as the school's institutional review board (IRB) process.

Bias is another element that researchers contend with. Models that are built on bias end up being discredited (Lhoia et al., 2018). Additionally, institutionalized biases could also damage the research; therefore, it was vital that I adhered to the IRB protocol to help reduce potential biases. Bias was mitigated by creating an interview protocol and interviewing the interviewer, which helped reveal any potential biases and upholding the integrity of the project.

Participants

Participants for this study were leaders of SMEs within the Washington DC area. For the purpose of the study, leaders included management, CEOs, and company founders. The target population for this study included leaders of SMEs with at least 3 years of leadership experience in successful management of SMEs in Washington, DC. This sample of leaders was chosen to explore performance management and organizational growth strategies within SMEs.

It was imperative that participants felt welcomed during the research project. Participants should feel comfortable with their responses to ensure a more open and honest response (Yin, 2016). Participants picked the time and type of the interview, face-to-face, telephone, or via videoconferencing (Zoom, Skype, Google Hangout). By allowing them to contribute to this minor detail of the study, participants were more likely to feel like contributors rather than subjects (Yin, 2016). Participants were also allowed to review and revise their answers at any time or simply withdraw from the

study. Additionally, if the business leader was middle management, the gatekeepers were allowed to follow the research process to ensure transparency. It is also important to protect the participants' identity, to ensure more open answers, and prevent possible reprisal (Flick, 2018; Sutton & Austin, 2015; Yin, 2016). Therefore, the names of the participants were redacted and replaced with relevant codes for anonymity.

Research Method and Design

In this study I utilized a qualitative method with a multiple case study research design to address the purpose. Qualitative methodology should be used when the research questions focus on finding answers of *how* and *why* (Yin, 2016). The following section includes a summary of the research method, design, and a rationale for each selection.

Research Method

I chose a qualitative method for this research project. Qualitative research is when the investigator is within the middle of the phenomenon and uses interpretive and material data to describe the phenomenon (Flick, 2018). Qualitative research relies on representations from the data, which include field notes, interviews, pertinent documents, and observations. From these data, qualitative research requires a naturalistic approach to facilitate interpretation of the phenomena (Flick, 2018). Qualitative data tend to be interpretive and are used when the investigator wants to observe or interpret an event within the confines of its lived environment, which helps provide in-depth details on feelings and perspectives (Rahi, 2017).

Conversely, a quantitative method is a scientific study rooted in a positivist paradigm (Rahi, 2017). This approach examines data collected from a large population

and the analysis does not focus on the participants' emotions and feelings about the immediate environment. Quantitative research relies on numerical, quantifiable data to prove or disprove a hypothesis within limits of confidence (Rahi, 2017). Quantitative research focuses on describing the findings rather than interpreting the results.

Quantitative research focuses on surveys or other instruments to numerically place value on the responses (Yin, 2016).

The qualitative methodology was the best fit for this study because it allowed me to focus on subjective questions of how management strategies are linked to SME performance. The study involved conducting interviews, researching existing documents, and conducting observations as prime sources of data that had no numerical value assigned to them. A quantitative approach would have been acceptable if the research were measuring the success of strategies used by leaders to promote effective performance management and to promote organizational growth. However, as I was not focused on measuring the success rather than the participants' strategies in performance management, a qualitative method was selected instead of quantitative or mixed-method approach. I did not choose a mixed-methods approach for this study because there were no quantitative elements measured within the project.

Research Design

I chose a multiple case study research design for this research project. A case study is best used when a phenomenon is studied within the constraints of its natural environment (Dasgupta, 2015). Researchers use case studies to focus on a phenomenon within a specific context and situation where ordinary measurement fails to take any

consideration of contextual elements (Stake, 2013). The study design relies on open-ended questions to generate responses in which a researcher has minimal control (Dasgupta, 2015; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2018).

I employed a multiple case study approach for this research, as multiple case study research is usually found within social science disciplines as well as practicing professions such as in business (Yin, 2018). A multiple case study design differs from single-case studies in that varying sites are selected to provide extended insight and context (Dasgupta, 2015; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2018). Though singular case studies are not as time consuming and can provide deeper analysis (Gustafsson, 2017), a multiple case study allows for comparison to identify differences and similarities between groups and allow for a cross-case analysis (Dasgupta, 2015). Multiple case studies rely on multiple groups across a variety of participants for comparison, which could then offer more of a conclusion to the study subject (Gustafsson, 2017). Multiple case studies also provide a deeper understanding of the theoretical evaluation and provide more context and understanding of the selected research questions (Gustafsson, 2017). I selected the multiple case study method for this research to examine SMEs and compare leadership practices. Multiple case studies help understand performance management beyond that of a specific instance of the phenomenon. In this study, the phenomenon was leadership practices employed in SMEs, which was studied with each leader participant.

Other research designs were considered but not selected. The alternatives included grounded theory, ethnography, narrative, and phenomenology. Narrative research focuses on asking questions about life experiences of the participant, and how

they occurred over time (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007; Sutton & Austin, 2015; Yin, 2018). This design was not selected because I was not interested in individual stories. Other types of study were not selected because they did not allow for the comparison between industries. Phenomenology is used when the researcher wishes to comprehend lived experiences of those directly affected by the phenomenon; however, this approach was also ultimately rejected because it did not focus on lived experiences of leaders (Creswell et al., 2007; Yin, 2018). Last, ethnography, which is the study of observation and interaction in real-life environments, was rejected because there was no observation of everyday action in its natural environment.

Population and Sampling

Sampling in qualitative research refers to the selection of people, groups, environments, and situations to gather data (Flick, 2018). Non-probability sampling was utilized in the study, which is a procedure where participants are gathered in a manner where they are not given a random chance of being selected (Etikan & Bala, 2017; Flick, 2018). Non-probability sampling is suitable in qualitative research for selecting participants with a purpose. Non-probability sampling was selected for this project, as I deliberately chose a variety of industries and firms for participation.

There are multiple forms of non-probability sampling. Quota sampling is when the researcher selects participants based on the characteristics of a major population for proportional representation (Etikan & Bala, 2017). However, one difficulty of quota sampling is identifying a specific set of characteristics that can be shared across all participants (Etikan & Bala, 2017). As there were no set specific characteristics, quota

sampling was not used. Expert sampling is used when the researcher gathers expert participants as a prime source of data, and purposive sampling is when the researcher makes his or her own judgment as to who will provide the best information to reach the study's goals (Etikan & Bala, 2017). As the researcher, I was not looking for experts, but I sought SME leaders; therefore, I did not use purposive sampling.

Research has suggested sampling six to 10 cases for multiple case studies (Yin, 2016). To ensure that enough data were gathered, participants were selected until data saturation occurred. Data saturation occurs when no more useful data are gathered (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Saunders et al., 2018). Data saturation may sometimes diminish content validity; however, there is no one-size-fits-all approach, as each research design requires a different degree of data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). There are multiple ways to reach data saturation, one of which is interviews (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Saunders et al., 2018). The interviews were conducted via Zoom. This study used a saturation grid where the topics gathered from the interviews were listed on a vertical line and the interviews conducted were on a horizontal one. I also had a second party review the coding to ensure the data saturation occurred. Once no new data were gathered, no additional interviews were completed as the necessary amount of data for saturation was reached (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Saunders et al., 2018). Data saturation occurred after seven interviews.

Participant selection must correspond to the research question, methodology, and design (Dasgupta, 2015; Yin, 2016). Businesses were selected from the Washington DC Business Journal Book of Lists. SMEs from a variety of sectors were included for cross comparison; participants were selected from a total of five different industries to generate

a wide range of understanding. It is vital to select participants who are well-versed in knowledge and practical abilities (Flick, 2018; Sutton & Austin, 2015; Yin, 2016). Participants were selected based upon leadership experience wherein participants needed to have at least three years of experience in leadership in SMEs. Participants had a decision-making position in an SME, knowledge of management practices, particularly performance management, and were within the geographic location of Washington, DC.

A formal documented procedure was created to obtain informed consent from the participants. This document was in accordance with IRB standards and can be found in the Appendix A. As the researcher, I crafted an introductory letter detailing the purpose of the research. The letters were sent to the company's CEO as they are gatekeepers to the population of the study. In the letter, I asked to set up a telephone call between the CEO and researcher so that both parties could be clear about their expectations. Upon building a good rapport, the researcher gave the CEO additional letters that they distributed to their leadership.

Participants for the study were leaders located in the Washington DC area with at least three years in a leadership role, who had considerable knowledge of leadership practices and performance management, and were employed within an SME. As this was a multiple case study, the participants' business fields were from diverse industries rather than a singular one.

Ethical Research

This researcher adhered to Walden's ethical requirements and followed the guidelines set by the IRB. All researchers have an obligation to the participants, research,

and society to ensure that their research is ethical (Lune & Berg, 2016). Ethical research focuses on harm, informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality of the gathered data (Dongre & Sankaran, 2016; Lune & Berg, 2016). Poor research practices can harm the integrity of the results. As mentioned within the Belmont Report (1979), a central component of ethical research is to do no harm.

There is no guide to ethical research, as it tends to be multifaceted and complex; however, adhering to IRB standards along with the Belmont Report is a good way to mitigate ethical consequences (Dongre & Sankaran, 2016; Lune & Berg, 2016). The IRB includes individuals who ensure ethical research and are charged with the responsibility of reviewing any such investigations that involve human subjects. The three fundamental ethical elements for using any human subjects for research are respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (Belmont Report, 1979). As such, I obtained official IRB approval prior to beginning data collection and the secure signed informed consent forms can be found in Appendix A. I also ensured participants' privacy and confidentiality. I allowed the participants to review their responses; this step also supported credibility (Silverman, 2016). IRBs are meant to weigh the risks and benefits to the subjects, the scientific knowledge that can be gleaned from the data, that informed consent was offered, and that the rights and well-being of the participants were protected (Dongre & Sankaran, 2016; Lune & Berg, 2016).

Participants provided informed consent to comply with ethical standards. Informed consent occurs when the participant knowingly partakes in the investigation free from fraud, deceit, or duress and without any manipulation in the researcher (Lune &

Berg, 2016; Yin, 2016). Informed consent typically consists of a written statement of the risks and benefits of participating in the study. During the informed consent process, I informed potential participants about the purpose of this study, the research procedures, data security, and participant rights (Flick, 2018; Yin, 2016). The sheet was signed by both the participant and the researcher and is stored for security, safety, and anonymity. Informed consent sheets will be stored for a minimum of five years, after such time they will be destroyed (Lune & Berg, 2016). I reached out to participants through a letter of invitation whereupon if a participant showed interest in the study, he or she was offered an informed consent sheet.

Confidentiality and anonymity are also important to ethical research.

Confidentiality should protect a subject's identity while anonymity ensures that the subject remains nameless (Dongre & Sankaran, 2016; Lune & Berg, 2016). All participants' data will be kept securely and safely. Confidentiality requires a researcher to code the participants' names to protect them from any repercussions from participation. Without anonymity, a future population for a study may be reluctant to participate in future studies (Dongre & Sankaran, 2016; Lune & Berg, 2016). This study does not contain the participants' actual names, as they were redacted and replaced with relevant codes. The codes refer to the type of business and the participants themselves. For example, if a participant came from real estate the code was R-1. Another example would be if the participant came from the financial sector, the code was F-1. To safeguard the participants and anonymity, the coded data will be kept for three years, after which it will be disposed of.

The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (1979) stipulated that all participants must know the objective of the study. Therefore, participants were informed of the benefits that this research may bring, hopefully enticing them to participate. Although some scholars suggest providing incentives for participation, no such incentives were given. Participants were aware of their ability to withdraw from the study at any time as well as their ability to review and revise their responses (Yin, 2016). The researcher provided personal contact details so that the participants could reach out at any time for purposes regarding the research. The participants were volunteers and did not receive any form of compensation to participate in the study.

Last, Yin (2016) stated that all data must be stored securely for a set period of time. Therefore, the data will remain within a safe for five years after the study. Data were handled to ensure they would not fall within the wrong hands and to protect the participants' identities (Lune & Berg, 2016). Interviews were digitally recorded and stored upon universal serial bus (USB) drives, whereupon after the set period has passed, they will be destroyed through shredding. The final document for this paper was the Walden IRB approval number. I ensured that any identifiable information for individuals and organizations was redacted.

Data Collection Instruments

This research focused on leadership and performance management related to SMEs. The primary data gathering instrument was semi-structured interviews. I conducted the interviews via Zoom. Questions were proposed to address the overarching research purpose. These questions focused on organizational growth, leadership, and

performance management. There are different leadership styles, which include: (a) autocratic, (b) participative, (c) laissez-faire, (d) charismatic, (e) participative, (f) transactional, and (g) transformational (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). Leaders must also have self-insight, flexibility, emotional intelligence, and the ability to foster cooperation and trust within the organization (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). The research questions focused on leadership through these lenses. They utilized a situational approach on how leaders are effective within different organizational environments and tasks.

Performance management components include resource management, occupational psychology, organizational behavior, accounting, operations management, team leadership, and organizational outcomes (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). The overall goal of performance management is to understand what needs to occur for the organization to reach performance goals, the ability to develop people, and cultivate an environment to reach performance goals (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). Leadership and management involve the ability to work with people with the objective of achieving specific goals through planning, organization, and staffing (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). Leadership and management often overlap. Leadership refers to those in a position to lead a team, division, or organization. Management refers to those in official management capacities. Leadership positions are often in management; although, they do not always need to be. The selected research questions were based upon leadership and performance management theory and were meant to reflect the multiple variables included above.

As the researcher, I was the primary data collection instrument. I conducted semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data, researched and requested pertinent documents, and recorded observations throughout the research process. Conducted via Zoom, I utilized semi-structured interviews to gather the data. Semi-structured interviews have limited structure whereupon the wording of the questions is flexible, and the level of the language can be adjusted (Lune & Berg, 2016; Newcomer, Hatry, & Wholey, 2015). Interview questions should focus on how or why the organization works, its outcomes, and policies (Yin, 2016). Interviews are meant to gain the participants' viewpoints (Sutton & Austin, 2015; Newcomer et al., 2015). Additionally, the interviewer answered participant questions and asked for clarification. Researchers adjust the language and semi-structured interviews to make the participant answers as open and honest as possible (Lune & Berg, 2016; Newcomer et al., 2015).

Outlining the steps of developing interview questions by listing the conceptual areas of the overall topic is important (Lune & Berg, 2016; Newcomer, et al., 2015). As an interviewer, I reflected on leadership theory and performance measurement standard to craft the interview questions. I formed interview questions from these conceptual areas.

Each question was edited for sequencing, content, and style to yield the best possible data. This included starting with a nonthreatening question, focusing on the more important questions for the study, then initiating any sensitive questions. Follow-up questions were used to validate their responses throughout the interview process (Lune & Berg, 2016; Newcomer et al., 2015). The interview protocol can be found in Appendix B and contains the step-by-step approach for engaging participants. Member checking

occurs when participants are provided with copies of the transcripts to review their answers and validate the authenticity of the work conducted (Newcomer et al., 2015). I utilized member checking and offered contact information so that participants could complete a transcript review, allowing them to confirm the interpretation of their responses from the interview process.

All interviews were recorded digitally and stored on a USB drive. The participants were allowed to choose the time and type of interview to leave them feeling more like contributors rather than subjects. I conducted the interviews via Zoom. This created an environment where participants could answer the questions more openly and honestly (Yin, 2016). Additionally, throughout the interview process, I observed and wrote field notes to provide further context (Mayer, 2015). Last, I requested organizational documents regarding their performance measurement standards and any in-house leadership training that they may use. By collecting three sources of data, triangulation can occur to help improve the validity and reliability of the research (Mayer, 2015). For the purpose of this paper, the data for triangulation included interviews, observations, and pertinent documents.

Data Collection Technique

To address the purpose and guiding research question for this study, primary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews in a face-to-face or telephone setting or via videoconferencing. There are benefits and drawbacks when conducting semi-structured interviews. The interviewer must be intelligent, poised, and knowledgeable about the topic being discussed (Newcomer et al., 2015). Semi-structured interviews are

appropriate when the researcher must ask probing open-ended questions for thoughts from each individual, when the participant might not feel comfortable in a focus group, when there is a need to understand program management with leadership, and when further themes must be developed (Flick, 2018; Newcomer et al., 2015). It is especially important to note that semi-structured interviews are useful for probing leadership about their policies (Newcomer et al., 2015; Yin, 2016). However, there are drawbacks to semi-structured interviews—it is extremely labor-intensive when setting up, conducting, and analyzing the interviews and can be extremely time-consuming when interviewing more than 10 individuals (Newcomer et al., 2015).

Interviews

The first step when conducting a semi-structured interview was to select the participants for the study (Flick, 2018; Newcomer et al., 2015; Yin, 2016). Participants who feel like contributors are more likely to answer questions with more depth and honesty (Yin, 2016). It is important to respect the participants' time during the interview phase; therefore, the questions should be tested and measured for time to ensure that the researcher is not taking up too much of the participants' time (Newcomer et al., 2015).

Researchers must draft the questions accordingly. It is important to determine which items are critical to the data and not to pack too many into the interview (Newcomer, et al., 2015; Yin, 2016). Closed-ended questions result in follow-up questions of why and how (Flick, 2018; Newcomer et al., 2015). Last, it was important not to draft questions that may lead to socially responsible answers. The participant should have no pressure about answering the questions and must not worry about

retribution or recourse. When beginning the interview process, researchers should begin with a couple of easy questions to create a more comfortable environment and to develop rapport (Lune & Berg, 2016; Newcomer et al., 2015). The researcher should begin by examining the positive scientific topics and then follow-up with discussions of the drawbacks (Newcomer et al., 2015).

The step-by-step protocol for conducting interviews can be found in Appendix B. Each participant was asked the same questions while a digital recorder recorded the responses. Simultaneously, I took note of observations to further interpret and describe the participants' demeanor in response to the questions (Yin, 2018). Prior to the interview, the participants were reminded of the informed consent process, the interview format, and their right to withdraw and review their answers at any point. Last, before recording began, the participants granted their consent and the steps for this process can be found in Appendix A.

To ensure validity, I relied upon member checking. Upon finishing the interviews, I gave the participants my contact information for any questions or concerns, reminded them that they could cease participation should they wish, and informed them that they would participate in member checking. Member checking is the process wherein the participants review and confirm the interpretation of their responses within the interview process to support the validity and trustworthiness (Birt et al., 2016). A better rapport can be created, and participants are more likely to respond openly when participants are given an opportunity to review their answers to ensure that they answered in an open and honest manner (Birt et al., 2016). Furthermore, triangulation is used when there are

multiple types of data within the same study of the phenomenon (Flick, 2018; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Lune & Berg, 2016). I used triangulation to support validity and map the phenomenon from multiple points of view as suggested by Lune and Berg (2016), Flick (2018), and Fusch and Ness (2015).

Secondary Data Sources

The final source of data was pertinent documents. Participants were asked if they had any leadership or performance management documents that they were willing to share. I also examined the companies' websites to understand each organization's goals and values. Last, I used previous research on leadership to compare the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews.

Data Organization Technique

All gathered data were stored in the researcher's password-protected laptop in addition to USB drives that are securely maintained in a safe. The USB sticks contain the audio files for the interviews, participant coding, and the transcriptions; pertinent documents and observations are stored on my laptop. The returned hard copies of the informed consent document are also stored within the safe. It is important to protect the participants' identities to ensure confidentiality and participant-researcher trust (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). As per IRB regulations, all data will be destroyed after five years.

Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis to analyze the study data. By utilizing two sources of data, the data can be cross checked to offer increased insight into the topic (Flick, 2018;

Fusch & Ness, 2015; Lune & Berg, 2016). Yin (2016) stipulated a five-step process which includes: (a) compiling the data, (b) taking apart the data, (c) reuniting the data, (d) interpreting the data, and (e) presenting the data.

I used thematic analysis to label, organize, and interpret themes across a data set (Braun, Clarke, & Terry, 2014; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017; Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016). Thematic analysis permits a researcher to identify shared themes and experiences that are not found within a singular item but are appropriate for case study research (Yin, 2016). Thematic analysis attempts to make sense of all elements of the yielded data (Braun, Clarke, & Terry, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Thematic analysis often yields answers to the research questions (Braun, Clarke, & Terry, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). The phases of thematic analysis include the following: (a) familiarize oneself with the data, (b) generate initial codes, (c) search for themes, (d) review the potential themes, (e) define and code the themes, and (f) produce a report (Braun, Clarke, & Terry, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Thematic coding emerged from the semi-structured interviews and the observations. These codes were created and presented within an Excel spreadsheet. I used the Excel spreadsheet to facilitate triangulation of the various types of data.

Coding in theme generation was used in conjunction with the data analysis software NVivo. Qualitative analysis software can help generate spreadsheets, codes, and themes while creating visual displays of the data (Lune & Berg, 2016). Yin (2016) stated that software programs can streamline the analysis process and help researchers identify

patterns and themes from the gathered data. Once NVivo generated themes, I compared them to the existing literature and determined how they aligned with the theoretical framework.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Reliability refers to the consistent nature of the analytical procedures that include personal research bias or any other variables that may have altered the findings (Noble & Smith, 2015). Reliability allows other scholars to replicate the process of the research project (Leung, 2015). I took multiple steps to ensure that the study was reliable. I used in-depth recordkeeping to show a clear data trail and there was an open and honest accounting for any biases. Triangulation should be used to show a clear thought process presented during the data analysis and interpretation phase (Leung, 2015). To ensure reliability, experts reviewed the instruments before use, member checking supported that participants were pleased with their answers, and data saturation ensured reliability.

Validity

Validity can be interpreted as the appropriateness of the instruments, procedures, and gathered data (Leung, 2015). It is described as the degree to which variables are measured and represented within the phenomenon. Validity is associated with authenticity, adequacy, possibility, and neutrality (Lub, 2015). There are three components of validity that should be addressed. These are credibility, confirmability, transferability.

Credibility is a study process such as data gathering and analysis procedures that have been carried out in such a manner to make sure that no data were excluded (Bengtsson, 2016; Messner, Moll, & Stromsten, 2017). To ensure credibility, the researcher must utilize awareness and insight throughout the entire research process (Stewart, Gapp, & Harwood, 2017; Messner et al., 2017). Credibility often relates to the trustworthiness of the findings, which seeks authenticity rather than absolutes (Stewart et al., 2017). Credibility can be maintained for using rich and dense data, building a chain of evidence comparing the data, and using techniques such as saturation, member checking, peer debriefing, observation, and an audit trail (Stewart et al., 2017). I relied upon member checking and observations to support credibility. Credibility can be maintained by utilizing saturation and member checking (Eisner, 2017). Data saturation was reflected in the sample size. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) noted that in most homogeneous qualitative studies, saturation occurs between 12 and 15 participants. At that point, no new meaningful information or major themes occur with the introduction of additional participants (Guest et al., 2006).

Confirmability occurs when the generated themes can be confirmed within the participants' views and feelings (Connelly, 2016). Confirmability focuses on neutrality, as the researcher should not interpret the data based on preexisting viewpoints but based on the collected data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). One way to ensure conformability is to create an audit trail (Chowdhury, 2015; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). An audit trail allows fellow researchers or readers to see the decisions that were made throughout the research

process (Chowdhury, 2015; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I utilized an audit trail, triangulation, and member checking in this study to ensure conformability.

Transferability is how the findings can be generalized or used within other research projects (Connelly, 2016; Noble & Smith, 2015). Transferability and qualitative research can be ensured by following the above-mentioned research protocol. This includes interview protocols, observation protocols, and data saturation. Taking these steps ensures the data are valid.

Transition and Summary

Section 2 included information about the role of the researcher, participants, and how they were selected. The methodology and research design were then justified with support from existing literature. The data collection instruments and how the data were collected, stored, and analyzed were also discussed. There was an outline of how the interview questions were created and how I adhered to ethical standards. Last, validity and reliability of the data collection and analysis were detailed.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies used by leaders in SMEs to support performance management and thereby promote organizational growth. Performance management was defined as activities, policies, procedures, and interventions to aid, support, and improve employee performance (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017). Through semistructured interviews, I gained insight into seven SME leaders' experiences with implementing performance management strategies within their organization. Qualitative thematic analysis strategies were utilized to identify patterns and themes within the participants' responses. Research findings indicated that to promote organizational growth for their SMEs, participants used performance management strategies that included providing employee performance feedback and conducting regular employee performance reviews. Successful performance management strategies were believed to promote both the growth of employees and the growth of the organization.

The research question that guided this study was: "What performance management strategies are used by leaders in SMEs to promote organizational growth?" In seeking answers to this question, I also gained insight into the components of performance review strategies that contribute to SME organizational growth, the benefits that result from performance reviews, the key obstacles related to successful performance management, and the ways in which leaders can overcome obstacles.

In this section, study findings are presented. This section begins with a description of study participant demographics, including an overview narrative of each participating SME leader. A brief discussion of the qualitative thematic analysis process is also provided. Findings in the form of key themes identified are discussed in turn. Each theme is described in detail and then supported with direct interview quotations. Following the presentation of findings, the findings are applied to the professional practice. The implications of the findings are discussed, and I provide recommendations for the application of findings within both academia and professional practice.

Presentation of Findings

Participant Overviews

Semistructured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of seven participants to achieve the study purpose. Originally, the target number of participants was 10, but data saturation was reached at seven participants. All participants were located in Washington, DC, held a decision-making position in an SME, and had knowledge of performance management. Four of the seven participants were female and three were male. Participant were between 25 and 45 years old, and the average age of participants was 35. All seven participants were college graduates, two of which held bachelor's degrees and five held master's degrees. Additional demographic information of the participating SME leaders can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Race	Education	Occupation
P1	F	40	White	Master's	Director
P2	M	40	Asian	Master's	Business owner
P3	F	25	Black	Bachelor's	HR manager
P4	M	45	White	Master's	Director
P5	F	26	Asian	Bachelor's	Digital marketing manager
P6	F	28	White	Master's	Business owner
P7	M	38	Asian	Master's	Online consultant

All interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom videoconferencing software. Because of the remote interview format, participants were able to join the interview from the location of their choosing. Participants were asked to select a time that would accommodate their personal schedules, thereby ensuring that participation in the interview resulted in as minimal inconvenience to the participants as possible. I conducted the interviews from my private office and utilized the Zoom recording function to record each interview. Prior to beginning the interviews, participants were reminded of the study purpose and the voluntary nature of their role. I reviewed the informed consent document that they had signed prior to being invited to participate in the interview, ensuring that participants were ready and comfortable in the Zoom format. The interviews then commenced.

In addition to the interview video and audio recording, I also took observational notes to supplement the interview transcriptions. In the following sections, I provide a brief overview of the participants based on my observations and field notes. Participant

descriptions are included to provide context to the interview responses, which are shared in the presentation of findings.

Participant 1. Participant 1 was a 40-year-old White female who was a director in her organization. Working within the optical industry, she oversaw the operations of six different locations and was passionate about her work. Participant 1 participated in the interview from the living room of her home. Strong eye contact and comfortable body language signaled that she seemed confident and calm throughout the interview. Participant 1 stated that she enjoyed her work and seemed passionate about her role in performance review. She emphasized the importance of helping employees grow within the organization and stated that she was proud to see many of her employees get promotions and progress their careers within the field.

Participant 2. Participant 2 was a 40-year-old Asian male who owned a property management business. His highest level of education obtained was a master's degree. Participating in the interview from his backyard garden, Participant 2 appeared formal in appearance and demeanor, wearing a gray suit and a tense facial expression. Participant 2's interview responses were concise. He emphasized the importance of taking time regularly throughout the year to conduct performance reviews and set goals. He also stated that the 2019 coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) impacted how evaluations were currently being conducted.

Participant 3. Participant 3 was a 25-year-old Black female who was an HR manager. Participant 3 had been working with her organization in the travel insurance industry for 8 years. She participated in the interview from her home office and appeared

casual and relaxed throughout the interview. Overall, Participant 3 described performance reviews as a strategy for helping individuals and the organization grow, highlighting the importance of customer service in her industry. She mentioned that despite the COVID-19-related limitations, her business was performing well, and she enjoyed the additional time with her family.

Participant 4. Participant 4 was a 45-year-old White male. He was a director within his organization and described himself as having “been in management [his] whole life.” Participant 4 specialized in the construction industry and had managed as many as 100 employees simultaneously. He participated in the interview from his private office and asked to pause midway through the interview to take another call. Throughout the interview, Participant 4 highlighted the importance of motivating employees to increase employee satisfaction and productivity.

Participant 5. Participant 5 was a 26-year-old Asian female who was a digital marketing manager within her organization, which was in the transportation industry. Participant 5 participated in the interview from her home office, dressed professionally, and appeared relaxed throughout the interview. Throughout the interview, she emphasized the importance of using performance reviews to help get everyone within the organization on the same page. She mentioned that the COVID-19 response had side-tracked some of her work, but this interview was a timely topic, as her organization had recently been considering its management strategies.

Participant 6. Participant 6 was a 28-year-old White female business owner. P6’s business was a fundraising organization. The highest level of education that she obtained

was a master's degree. Participating in the interview from her living room at home, Participant 6 stated that her business was forced to suspend operations because of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the matter of performance reviews, Participant 6 repeatedly stated that the success or benefit of performance reviews depends on the individuals involved. Some employees take the reviews more seriously and therefore receive more positive benefits from the process.

Participant 7. Participant 7 was a 38-year-old Asian male who was an online consultant for a real estate development company. He had worked for numerous companies in the past and had worked with his current organization for just over one year. The highest level of education that he obtained is a master's degree. Participant 7 completed the interview from his private office. He was dressed in business casual and appeared relaxed throughout the interview. He emphasized the importance of goal setting and evaluation within performance reviews.

Thematic Data Analysis

Having established an overview of the backgrounds and demographics of the participants who composed the seven cases analyzed in this study, I now provide a brief description of the qualitative analysis strategies employed in my research. Upon completing the data collection via the Zoom interviews, each interview was transcribed into text in a Word document. Utilizing my handwritten observation notes and the interview transcripts, I interpreted each participant's responses to the questions and drafted a summary of each participant's responses. Member checking was completed by e-mailing the participants a copy of their interview transcript and the summary of my

interpretations of their responses. Participants were asked to review the transcripts and summaries to ensure that I had interpreted their responses accurately. Participants were instructed to contact me if they desired any changes to their interview responses.

Once participants completed confirming the accuracy of the transcripts and the interview summaries, all transcripts were uploaded into NVivo software. NVivo was utilized to assist with data organization and the thematic analysis process. The thematic analysis strategies of Braun, Clarke, and Terry (2014) were employed, enabling me to label, organize, and interpret themes across the data set. Thematic analysis was conducted in six stages: (a) familiarize oneself with the data, (b) generate initial codes, (c) search for themes, (d) review the potential themes, (e) define and code the themes, and (f) produce a report (Braun et al., 2014).

First, I conducted a preliminary reading of each interview transcript in full to familiarize myself with the data. While familiarizing myself, I began to note common or recurring words and ideas within the interview responses, such as discussion about communication or the regularity with which performance reviews are conducted. Once I had read each interview transcript in full and felt familiar with the contents, I began the initial inductive coding process. During this process, I reread each interview transcript and applied codes to the responses.

Conducting the initial round of coding served to organize the data by classifying components of the response into more easily organizable groups. For example, when SME leaders stated that they conducted performance reviews quarterly or annually, those responses were coded accordingly so that patterns within the frequency of employee

reviews could be identified. Similarly, keywords or phrases were coded in a manner that would support further organization in the subsequent stages of coding. For example, responses that highlighted *engagement*, *collaboration*, and *teamwork* were each coded accordingly so that in additional stages of analysis, closely related coding groups that may be reflective of a broader pattern (*spirit of teamwork*) could be more easily identified.

Once the initial coding stage was complete, I reviewed the coding groups that had been identified, searching for themes and patterns within the groups. The data were reviewed through the lens of LMX (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) to identify what variables of leader and employee interactions resulted in positive outcomes according to participants. Similar coding groups were considered carefully alongside one another and combined or reorganized where applicable, at which time the themes of the data began to be formed. For example, responses that stated specific and consistent timelines for conducting performance reviews within their organization were grouped into the theme of *regularly scheduled performance reviews*.

Once I completed my review and reorganization of coding groups into themes, I again reviewed the coding groups and responses within to ensure that the responses within the groups remained clearly related and the themes were accurate representations of patterns within the seven interview responses. Once all codes were clearly organized and defined, I reread the interview transcripts and compared the themes to the transcript content to ensure one final time that all key themes had been identified from within the interview transcripts and that the remaining themes were accurate reflections of the

participant responses. The codes and resulting themes are shown in Table 2. These themes, which resulted from the careful organization of data through multiple stages of coding and review through the LMX lens, are described in detail and supported with interview excerpts in the sections that follow.

Table 2

Data Analysis Codes and Themes

Themes, subthemes, and codes	# of participants	# of data excerpts
Theme group 1. Components of performance reviews that promote organization growth		
Theme 1.1 Regular performance reviews and feedback for employees promote organizational growth.	6	9
Quarterly meetings	1	1
Monthly meetings	1	1
Regular meetings	1	1
Annual review	2	3
Regular review	3	3
Theme 1.2 Encouraging teamwork promotes organizational growth.	6	6
Teamwork	3	3
Building units	1	1
Collaboration	1	1
Everyone on the same page	1	1
Theme 1.3 Supporting individual employee growth promotes organizational growth.	5	5
Impact on an individual will impact org. overall	3	3
Play to employee strengths	1	1
Employee goal setting	1	1
Theme group 2. Key obstacles in implementing performance reviews		
Theme 2.1 Employee behaviors or attitudes impact manager ability to implement successful performance reviews	4	4
Employee unwillingness to change	2	2
Employee overly comfortable with supervisor	1	1
Employee pushback or excuses	1	1
Theme 2.2 Some barriers are outside of supervisor control	4	5
Time	2	2
COVID-19	2	2
Assessment scales	1	1
Theme group 3. Performance review strategies influence supervisor-employee relationships		
Theme 3.1 Performance reviews have a negative impact on employee-supervisor relations	2	2
Negative impact	1	1
Cause problems	1	1
Theme 3.2 Performance reviews have a positive impact on employee-supervisor relations	4	4
Employee more comfortable	2	2
Honest and fair	1	1
Community building	1	1
Theme group 4. Overcoming key obstacles		
Theme 4.1 Utilizing strong communication strategies can help supervisors to overcome performance-review-related obstacles	3	3
Meetings	1	1
Hands-on work with employee	1	1
Ensure the employee is comfortable when communicating	1	1
Theme 4.2: Utilizing management strategies can help supervisors to overcome performance-review-related obstacles	3	4
Performance review process review meeting	1	1
Manager training	1	1
Surveys about the performance review process	1	2

(table continues)

Themes, subthemes, and codes	# of participants	# of data excerpts
Theme group 5: Benefits of positive employee-supervisor relations		
Theme 5.1 Positive relations between managers and employees contribute to positive employee outlooks	3	3
Happy employees, positive org. outcome	2	2
Help employees see the bigger picture	1	1
Theme 5.2: Positive relations with supervisors contribute to increased employee productivity.	2	2
Increased productivity	2	2

Emergent Themes

Qualitative thematic analysis yielded five key groups of themes related to the guiding research question: “What performance management strategies are used by leaders in SMEs to promote organizational growth?” All identified themes address participants’ strategies to build high-quality relationships between leaders and members, thereby stimulating positive outcomes in employees and organizations, as Graen and Uhl-Bien have demonstrated (1995). Each of the themes is discussed in detail in the sections that follow. A thick description is provided for each theme, and direct interview quotations are utilized to support the theme.

Theme Group 1: Components of Performance Reviews That Promote Organizational Growth

In discussing their organization’s performance management strategies, various components of performance management were mentioned by multiple SME leaders. The components of performance management strategies repeatedly stated to have contributed to organizational growth are described in the themes below. Asamany and Shaorong (2017) stated that effective leadership strategies can increase performance within SME’s to increase organizational growth. Garcia-Solarte et al. (2018) supported the idea that leadership practices support organizational growth. While, there was no specific research

that indicated that performance reviews increased organizational growth, it's up to the leader to offer effective performance reviews.

Theme 1.1: Regular performance reviews and feedback for employees promotes organizational growth. Six of the seven SME leaders participating in this study stated that regularly scheduled performance management reviews and meetings contribute to the growth of employees and the organization. How frequently these performance reviews are conducted varied between participants, ranging from monthly to quarterly or annually. For example, Participant 1 stated:

I think it's extremely important [to review performance], and I think it's important to do it continuously. With my organization, performance management and connecting with the employees—we do that on a monthly basis, but we give them feedback throughout the month, so it keeps them engaged in what they're doing.

Participant 1 expressed the belief that it is important to be continuously reviewing and providing feedback to employees so that employees can stay engaged in their work and find success within their role. Rather than only having a fixed schedule of performance review meetings (monthly), Participant 1's organization also provided feedback on an ongoing basis, as they saw fit.

Participant 4 expressed similar sentiments to Participant 1, emphasizing the need to provide feedback to employees promptly. Participant 4 stated:

Let me tell you why I do [quarterly reviews]. Because if they're doing something right, I don't want to wait too long to give them credit. If they're doing something

wrong, I don't want to wait too long to where it hurts the company. So quarterly—I came up with my own solution—I think is a fair time to implement, to put in how they're doing, what they're doing, and how I feel they're going to fit in with the company. I think it's important that I be able to sit down also when I'm doing the management report. Before I do, I like to sit down with each one of them and take the time to talk with each of them and have a personal feel for them.

Like Participant 1, Participant 4 wanted to provide feedback promptly to reinforce good work habits and resolve any issues that may arise. Rather than wait for an annual or bi-annual review, Participant 4 decided to hold quarterly reviews with employees.

Although they did not explicitly reference having regularly scheduled review meetings with employees, Participants 5 and 7 also stated they thought it important to provide regular feedback to employees. Participant 5 stated:

I feel like—you know—just having continuous meetings, making sure everybody is doing their job, making sure that everybody's adhering to the policies, making sure that we're constantly trying to improve each and everybody. I think that definitely has an effect overall on the whole business.

Similarly, Participant 7 explained the belief that in addition to annual reviews, feedback should be provided when necessary:

Just feedback when necessary, whether that's informal conversations or meetings, or whether it's like at an annual performance review or something along that line. I don't like to catalog issues and then wait six months to discuss it with an

employee. I think if it's an important issue, it needs to be addressed as quickly as possible. And not bombard the company once a year with things they should be doing better. I think it sends a negative sign to the employee if they wait that long to review those kinds of things with them.

Echoing the sentiments of other participants, Participant 7 explained clearly why he thought feedback should be provided as needed, rather than merely at regularly scheduled reviews. Managers should address any issues that may arise as quickly as possible so that employees are aware of any issues with their work and overall organizational productivity and success can be improved upon.

Participant 2 stated that the organization has quarterly meetings to keep the employees on the same page and the organization moving toward success as efficiently as possible. Participant 2 stated:

For us most of the (inaudible) we do tend to have meetings with the employees sometimes, at least quarterly, where our company gets together, goes through what's going on so that we know what's going on with the company, what their goals are, what they're looking forward to, what they're doing.

Last, Participant 3 described conducting annual reviews, stating:

That's a big thing in the annual review—the teamwork—because we really look for that—somebody that's a really good team player and does the things that help out the other members of the team.

Participant 3's organization assessed the skills and characters of their employees, such as teamwork, throughout the year. However, managers only had a formal employee review once per year.

Participant 6 was the only SME leader who did not state whether she had a consistent performance management review schedule. Participant 6 described the process and timeline for reviewing the performance reviews but did not provide a statement on how frequently she implemented performance reviews of employees. As demonstrated by the responses from six of the seven SME leaders, conducting regularly scheduled reviews and providing feedback to employees as necessary helped to bring about organizational success.

Theme 1.2: Encouraging teamwork promotes organizational growth. Five of the seven SME leaders highlighted teamwork and collaboration as employee character traits that could promote organizational growth when encouraged. Participants 3, 4, 5 and 7 each referenced the organization and employees as a "team." For example, Participant 7's statement was: "I treat my team fairly." Similarly, although Participant 6 did not explicitly describe employees as a team, Participant 6 highlighted the aspects associated with teamwork, stating: "good communication and collaboration skills. Those are really important to me."

Another example of an SME leader who found that teamwork promotes organization growth can be seen in this response from Participant 4:

I'm looking for team players. . . . the company comes first. Not her, not you, not me. I want to see the people that are going to put the company ahead of

everybody. The company—it's got to be a team effort. Cause when the company makes money, we all make money.

Participant 4 described the work that the organization did as a team effort in which the teamwork serves to bring more success, and ultimately, more money into the company.

Participant 5 described a similar sentiment when explaining, “you have people come on your team who's ready to build and change and adhere to whatever needs to be done for the business.” Like Participant 4, Participant 5 also thought employees needed to consider themselves part of a bigger team than themselves. Both participants suggested employees should be willing to put the company ahead of themselves, as they strive to bring success to their team. Participant 3 did not necessarily express an expectation that employees put their work or colleagues ahead of themselves. However, they did describe a preference for employees who were willing to help out their team. Participant 3 stated: “We really look for that—somebody that's a really good team player and does the things that help out the other members of the team.”

Participating SME leaders demonstrated their preference for establishing a team mentality among their employees to promote organizational growth. By encouraging teamwork and collaboration among employees, they hoped to increase organizational effectiveness and increase the organization's overall success.

Theme 1.3: Supporting individual employee growth promotes organizational growth. SME leaders expressed that supporting individual employee growth also

contributed to the growth of the organization. For example, Participant 5 summarized it as a trickle effect, which starts at the employee level. Participant 5 stated:

In my experience, I think they influence it a lot. The performance management, I feel like, has a big effect on the employees, and the employees have a big effect on the business. And then, of course, that business reflects on your customers and your revenue. So, I just kind of think it's a pretty big trickle effect where—you know—the performance management will have an effect downhill from the business itself and then to the customers and the employees.

Participant 5 described a system in which, to ensure that the company was successful, managers should encourage growth from the bottom up. If employees, who are the base of the organization, are encouraged to grow and improve, then this positively benefits the organization. Participant 7 expressed similar sentiments, stating:

I guess in general, if the employee and I are both striving to make them better, then the company should be better as a result. But I've never looked at the company as the end goal. I've always looked at the individual.

Despite expressing the same belief that if individuals are encouraged to grow, this will promote organizational growth, Participant 7 saw employee growth as an end goal.

Participant 7 was not merely supporting employee growth for the sake of the company's growth; he would like to see employees grow and improve simply for the benefit of the employees. It is a fair estimation that the company also benefited from such growth.

However, the key difference between Participant 7's and Participant 5's responses lies in their ultimate motive.

Participant 4 and Participant 3 expressed similar sentiments to Participant 5, that when employees are supported and encouraged to grow, this inevitably has positive impacts on the organization. Participant 4 stated:

I like to sit down with each one of them and take the time to talk with each of them and have a personal feel for them. My strategy is always to get the best out of each person, the most talent, and utilize the talent they have. I feel everybody has talent; it's just what area is it in? And how can I get it out of them?

Participant 4 sought to play to employees' strengths to maximize employee and organizational effectiveness and success. By understanding employee motivations, the manager is better suited to guide and encourage the employee within their role.

Participant 3 stated:

When we do an annual review with an employee, we have been keeping track of how they've been doing all year. And we base their goals for the upcoming year on things they need to improve on, things that they need to keep doing that they're doing well. That also helps with the overall strategy of the entire company to make sure that everyone is on the same page and we're all moving forward. We try to help our employees to grow year over year and learn new skills. . . . That always looks good on their annual review year after year, but also if they leave, they have something extra they can put on a resume, and that really helps the entire company grow to cultivate our staff's potential basically.

Participant 3 described the efforts to help employees grow and achieve their goals, believing that the cultivation of employee skills can help move the organization forward

while also benefiting the employees with new skills and experiences that can be carried beyond their current job. Participating SME leaders believe that by promoting growth within the individuals who compose the backbone of the organization, the organization will benefit from the enhancement of employee skills and experiences as well.

Theme Group 2: Key Obstacles in Implementing Performance Reviews

SME leaders discussed a number of barriers related to promoting organizational growth via performance management strategies. Key themes within these responses included the belief that employee unwillingness to change behavior and that variables outside of supervisor control were barriers to the successful performance review and organizational growth. Du Plessis and Van Niekerk (2017) stated that the relationship between managers and their employees can either increase or decrease organizational growth. It is the leader-member relationship that can influence positive behavior and performance (Sachane et al., 2018). The literature supports the idea that the relationship between employee and management can either be an obstacle or benefit to the organization.

Theme 2.1: Employee behaviors or attitudes impact manager ability to implement successful performance reviews. SME leaders stated that employee attitudes or behaviors can be barriers to promoting growth via successful performance reviews. Such barriers include employees' unwillingness to change behaviors, lack of employee motivation, and lack of employee accountability. As an example of employee unwillingness to change or take responsibility for actions, consider the response of Participant 1, who stated:

Pushback from the employees [is a barrier]. If they're not doing well, they always have a reason or excuse for why they're not doing well. You know, "a customer doesn't need glasses" or "they don't want glasses." Whatever line of business you're in doesn't matter—it's always pushback from the employee.

Participant 1 believed the barrier to employee growth was the lack of employee receptiveness to performance feedback from supervisors. Participant 1 described the perception that employees often pushback against negative feedback, choosing to provide an excuse rather than change their behavior for a better outcome. Participant 5 expressed a similar experience of having difficulty promoting positive behavioral changes in their employees. Participant 5 stated:

I think one of the biggest obstacles is just the fact of comfortability because, when I started this, I started with people that were familiar with me outside of business and before I really got into business. And sometimes you have people who get comfortable and feel like they know you personally, so it's kind of hard for them to make a change.

While expressing similar experiences as Participant 1, having experienced a barrier in the form of employee pushback against the supervisor, Participant 5 contributed this barrier to employees feeling overly comfortable with the supervisor. Due to friendships, or perceived friendships, between the employee and the supervisor, employees felt it unnecessary or were unwilling to accept their supervisor's feedback and change their behavior.

Participant 7 also described having had negative experiences with employees who were unwilling to change their behaviors to resolve issues. They described performance reviews as essential for documenting the unwillingness to change behaviors, suggesting that although the performance review process is not always successful at stimulating positive change in the employees, they are still useful as a tool for documenting the attempts to promote change. Participant 7 stated:

I think one of the obstacles that comes up if you don't have sort of formal program put in place is when an issue comes up with an employee where they're not improving or they're causing issues, or there's morale problems and when you go to dismiss them—I think if you dismiss someone for cause, they need to be fully aware that there are issues that haven't been resolved, addressed and taken care of on their part. And it shouldn't be a surprise when you call them in the office.

Similarly, Participant 6 described the role of performance reviews as an accountability mechanism to encourage employees to change in response to supervisor feedback.

Participant 6 stated:

We're a fundraising organization, so [performance review] is really a tool to hold people accountable for the work that they're doing, and if they're doing satisfactory work, it means that they are going out there, meeting with donors, raising money. If they're not doing that, it shows up in the performance review. So, we either deal with that issue like, "why isn't that happening?" or we deal with it another way like, "maybe this is not the right place for you to be."

SME leaders expressed that if employees are unwilling to change their behaviors, and supervisors are unable to motivate the employees to change, this is a key barrier to promoting organizational growth via performance reviews.

Theme 2.2: There are barriers that are outside of supervisor control, which impact promoting growth via performance reviews. SME leaders stated that, at times, there were factors outside of their control that impacted their ability to successfully conduct performance reviews as they would have liked. Such factors included the COVID-19 pandemic impacts on business operations, an inadequate amount of time available, and ineffective assessment scales put in place by senior leadership. For example, Participant 2 stated, “Most of [the barriers] ended up being time. Time to get in the time for reviews and taking the time to get them. That’s our most difficult thing: making enough time to make sure we get the reviews done.” Such a response demonstrates the challenge of finding enough time in the employee and supervisors’ schedules to conduct a thorough review together. Regardless of what strategies or plans the supervisor has for the review process, if he cannot take the time to employ these strategies and conduct a thorough review, then the strategies are useless.

Participant 3 expressed a similar sentiment, describing the challenge of sticking to the review schedule during the busiest times of the year. Participant 3 explained:

I’d say we’re supposed to be doing one-on-one meetings monthly or quarterly.

Some of the people do monthly. Some people have the luxury of time to do that.

We’re supposed to do quarterly, and it’s difficult to do during certain times of the

year, like during our busy season, which is normally starts in January and goes through until about September when school starts.

Describing time as a luxury, Participant 3 stated that time is a barrier to the performance review process. Participant 3 also continued, stating that additional barriers outside of her control included the COVID-19 pandemic and the changes to business operations related to the pandemic. Participant 3 continued with:

Now with covid-19 and we're all working from home, it's more difficult because there's a lot of different things going on . . . so it's a really tough time to be able to implement things like that—the quarterly check-ins one-on-ones with our staff. I didn't even get to annual reviews in April for four of my staff because it's just been crazy. So, that's another obstacle: COVID-19.

In addition to the challenge of finding time under normal operations and circumstances, Participant 3 stated that conducting performance reviews was now even more difficult due to the pandemic. With many employees working from home in response to the pandemic, it became more difficult than ever before for employees and supervisors to connect. Participant 2 expressed similar experiences, stating:

Most of the times, being as times are now, it is even more difficult to get the evaluations done just because of what's going on because, again, you have to be in a close proximity. Yes, you can still maintain the six-foot distance, but it just makes it a lot more difficult because obviously we're not as busy as we normally would be, and some people are working from home, so that does add to the difficulty of getting the reviews done.

In addition to the barriers of time and COVID-19, having worked at a number of different companies in the past, Participant 7 identified another performance review barrier as the over-complication of assessment tools. Participant 7 stated:

I worked at a number of different companies, and even though I don't necessarily like ours entirely, I think it probably better fits what I think is an appropriate way of evaluating somebody. We basically have a three-point scale, and I would rephrase how we list them, but I think an employee needs to know if they exceed expectations, if they meet expectations, or if they need improvement. If you have a 10-point scale, that's too much. To me, even a five-point scale is too much. I think it needs to be kept as simple as possible. If you meet expectations, that's a good thing. That doesn't mean that you're a bad employee. If you exceed expectations, then you're doing something exceptionally well. Obviously, if you need improvement, there's areas that you're lacking, so I kind of like that three-point range because I think it's fair, I don't think—if you have a ten-point scale and you give somebody a seven, what's the difference between a seven and an eight? Most of the time, if you give somebody a one—they need improvement. If you give them a five or a six, they're average. If you give them a 10, then they're exceeding that. You know, just call it what it is and just evaluate people fairly and effectively.

Participant 7 expressed that assessment tools that have too many options or too wide of a scale can result in the unnecessary over-complication of the process. Although stating that he did not have the ability to change the assessment tool, Participant 7 thought

performance reviews should provide honest feedback to the employees in a simple structure.

Theme Group 3: Performance Review Strategies Influence Supervisor-Employee Relationships

SME leaders thought performance review strategies had the potential to have both positive and negative impacts upon the relationship between employee and supervisor, depending on the situation. Negative impacts included the employees reacting negatively to poor performance reviews or feedback. Positive impacts included an increase in trust and comfort between employee and supervisor, and a sense of community building related to performance reviews. Radstaak and Hennes (2017) stated that high-quality relationships are characterized by trust, respect, obligation, and loyalty, while Koohang et al. (2017) underscored the impact of leadership on trust, knowledge management, and organizational performance. Conversely, negative relationships can lead to poor communication, poor integration, absence of training, and measuring and evaluating criteria for performance assessment. Therefore, this theme is supported by the existing literature.

Theme 3.1: Performance reviews have a negative impact on employee-supervisor relations. Some SME leaders thought performance review strategies may have a negative impact on their relationships with their staff. Both Participant 3 and Participant 5 described that when providing critique or negative feedback to the employees, this sometimes resulted in the employees feeling unhappy with the supervisor. For example, Participant 3 explained:

I think it depends on the rep. Some are more receptive to feedback than others.

I've had some pretty tough meetings with reps and also during the annual reviews, but as a manager, you have to get used to the difficult conversations and deal with conflict sometimes. So, if someone isn't performing as they should, that goes right into the annual review. . . . We will go over whatever is wrong, what they're doing, if they're having issues following a procedure. . . . Sometimes, they hate me.

Participant 3 explained that although it could be difficult to have these conversations with the employees, issues and conflict must be addressed to keep the organization moving forward. As a result of conducting the performance review honestly, the supervisor may believe the relationship with the employee is less positive.

Participant 5 described a similar experience, stating:

It's not easy sometimes, because you have to come—like I said—not trying to be critical, but you definitely want to be serious. And I think that only comes into—I think previously before that came into a difficult part where people knew me personally before I started the business. . . . You know it's no longer a personal thing, it's strictly business. I think that's what kind of moved it on to a serious note. That management can get tricky when you are dealing with certain people that have known you for a long time. But like I said, once it got serious, and the business got serious and eventually some people who—you know—a decision was made: are you going to take this serious? Are you going to move with us or are you going to separate?

Participant 5 echoed the sentiments of Participant 3, describing the necessity of having difficult conversations with employees to grow the business, even if that sometimes meant that the performance review had a negative impact on the relationship between supervisor and employee.

Theme 3.2: Performance reviews have a positive impact on employee-supervisor relations. While some SME leaders highlighted how conducting performance reviews could have a negative impact on employee-supervisor relations, other SME leaders opted to highlight how relations are improved through the performance review process. SME leaders stated that the performance review process helped employees and supervisors to feel comfortable with one another, evoking a sense of honesty, fairness, and community building in the process. As an example, consider the response of Participant 7, who stated:

I think I treat my team fairly, and if I'm giving them honest and fair feedback, I think that affects positively our relationship and how our unit as a whole works within the company structure. I think that's the positive and the good thing about it.

This response highlighted the benefits of supervisors speaking honestly while providing fair feedback to employees. Even though employees may not enjoy hearing negative feedback, speaking honestly to employees and judging their performance fairly establishes a sense of trust in the relationship between the employee and supervisor. Participant 7 even believed this positive impact affects the relationship between the two individuals and positively impacts the work of the larger unit within the organization.

Participant 1 described experience with speaking openly to employees as having positively impacted both employees and supervisor. Participant 1 stated:

I give them feedback if I feel as though something could be a little different, or we could approach something differently. I'm not afraid to suggest something, and my subordinates are very good at listening to any ideas I do have. Some of them they put into place, and some of them they don't, so they enjoy the fact that I have a voice because some people just want to say, "oh yeah, this is great, this is great, this is great," when in fact some things are not great, and maybe you have a better idea. So, my company has open arms as far as that goes, I have to honestly say.

Participant 1 thought his employees respected and welcomed his willingness to speak his mind, and as a result, he was not afraid to voice his opinions. He highlighted a preference for speaking his mind openly and honestly to employees, to have a conversation about how things could be improved, rather than provide false approval of the current operations.

Participant 2 described community building as a positive impact resulting from conducting performance reviews. Participant 2 stated, "When you're reviewing an employee, and you're getting with other managers to see how things are going, it creates a community, a bond—you know—so they know what's going on, they just feel more comfortable." By sharing in the experience of the performance review, the SME leader thought the community was strengthened through the process.

Theme Group 4: Overcoming Key Obstacles

SME leaders believed strategies could be employed to overcome key obstacles and barriers to promoting organizational growth through performance reviews. They highlighted employing communication strategies and maintaining strategic management of the review process as key ways to ensure successful performance review outcomes. Bititci et al. (2016) asserted that increasing levels of internal and external communication can lead to better business outcomes, while Na-Nan et al., (2017) found that ineffectual communication hinders performance. Larsson et al. (2017) concluded that SMEs could improve their communication of performance measures to positively affect employee performance, thereby strengthening the company. Therefore, communication is an important aspect when overcoming key obstacles as supported by the literature.

Theme 4.1: Utilizing strong communication strategies can help supervisors to overcome performance-review-related obstacles. SME leaders expressed that enhancing communication helps supervisors to overcome any barriers or obstacles related to promoting positive change out of performance reviews. While many SME leaders previously stated that employee unwillingness to change behavior or accept feedback was a primary obstacle in the performance review process, leaders now believe communication can help overcome such an obstacle between employee and supervisor. SME leaders stated supervisors should listen to, ask questions, and engage employees in discussion. For example, Participant 1 emphasized the importance of making employees feel comfortable so that they would be more receptive to any feedback that one needed to share. Participant 1 stated:

You know, the one thing I would say is that when you're doing the performance management, and you're sitting down with someone—first of all, the thing that works the best for me is we sit down and talk for a few minutes about something that has nothing to do with performance management, just to get them comfortable in the situation. And then we go into the performance management. I can tell you, I like to just tell them, “We're going to go into the performance management, there are areas of opportunity, there are areas that are excellent. I need your feedback if you have any concerns.” You know, make sure they know you are open to anything they have to say to make them feel comfortable. Because the last thing you want to do with a performance management—there's always room for opportunity—is never make them feel uncomfortable because it's just going to get worse after that.

Participant 1 used strategic communication with employees to ensure the employees felt comfortable and valued. In addition to taking the time to connect with the individual outside of the performance review subject matter, Participant 1 was also careful to phrase critical feedback as “room for opportunity” to encourage employees to change and grow in their position.

Participant 4 described the strategy of connecting with the employees while engaging directly. Participant 4 found it important to lead by example, and therefore, take the time to work alongside employees, to better communicate with employees and learn more about them. Participant 4 explained:

Well, I mean, the most important strategy to me is, we're trying to take the company to where we want to get it to and where we want to be at. So, my strategy is to lead—I like to lead by example. . . . So, my strategy is always to work next to the individual, work side-by-side, see what they're thinking, what they're not thinking, see if I can help them with ideas, and maybe I can learn something.

By working alongside employees, Participant 4 liked to take the opportunity to hear the thoughts and ideas of the employees. This helped them better understand one another and led to a more positive performance review experience when the supervisor provided feedback and could refer back to the time spent directly working together.

Participant 5 also highlighted using communication to overcome obstacles, stating:

I feel like the best way that we address the key obstacles is meetings. I feel like when we make the time to make sure everybody got together to discuss what was going on, discuss any issues, discuss what needs to be changed whether it be positive or negative, I think it's the fact that we're all together to put in our input on what needs to go on, what needs to be changed, what problems anybody may be having. I think the part of communication and coming together is a big part of making sure everything is running right.

In the response, Participant 5 stated clearly that the belief that communication and collaboration are important to ensure the organization runs smoothly. By taking the time to conduct meetings and discussions where everyone can share their input, employees

feel valued, and any issues that may arise can be discussed and then handled in a timely and effective manner.

Theme 4.2: Utilizing management strategies can help supervisors to overcome performance-review-related obstacles. SME leaders expressed that by utilizing management strategies to review and refine the performance review process, they could overcome performance-review-related obstacles. Management strategies included in this discussion included conducting surveys and meetings to review the performance review process, utilizing goals and time management strategies, and providing additional training for managers. For example, Participant 6 described the organization's use of committee meetings and surveys to regularly assess the performance review process. Participant 6 stated:

We have regular meetings when it comes performance reviews in terms of updating them, trying to change them. And they have changed them over the years, and there's usually a committee that gets together, and they do a survey of what we like and what we don't like about the reviews and how they can be better. So, they're constantly looking at ways to improve the performance reviews so that we as managers can get the most out of them, and the people that we're supervising can also feel that they are being held accountable for the work they're doing.

Participant 6's company conducted regular meetings to ensure that performance reviews were effective and useful for managers and employees. Managers and employees were also invited to share their opinions about the review process in a survey shared by the

review committee. Regular assessment of the review process enabled managers to adjust the performance review strategies if obstacles or barriers were identified, which may benefit from utilizing a different tactic for reviewing employee performance.

Participant 5 stated her organization hoped to use enhanced management skills to promote growth among employees. By providing training to managers, the organization hoped that managers would be better suited to train, support, and evaluate employees, resulting in a more positive performance review experience and an increase in organization growth. Participant 5 explained:

I would hopefully like to—actually looking into it now—to kind of partner with a company that may give us some tips or some strengths or some type of coaching on the managers and what we all feel like if we can enhance a way of doing some type of management skills with our managers as far as what different aspects we may need to come together in and do together. . . . I feel like once we get together and enhance ourselves that will fall back on the employees.

While Participant 5 explained how her organization hoped to improve the employee experience and performance review process by providing additional training to managers. Participant 2 highlighted the importance of establishing goals for the performance review process. He stated the performance review process is able to overcome barriers such as time limitations by striving to meet the goals that were set. Participant 2 explained:

Setting up a goal of when to get these perform things—when to get the reviews done by, giving us a timeframe to work with as in—you know—by within 60

days when we're trying to review all these employees. You know, just setting goals, how much to get done and that they do get done.

Participant 2's organization strove to keep managers on track and ensure that reviews maintained a consistent schedule by providing a goal and timeline for the managers.

Theme Group 5: Benefits of Positive Employee-supervisor Relations

SME leaders thought that successfully conducted performance review processes and positive relations between employees and leadership resulted in benefits for employees and organizations. Employees benefited by having a more positive outlook because of the positive experience. Organizational benefits included an increase in the productivity of employees and organizational success. Audenaert et al. (2019) established that employee performance management increases employee innovation when the organization focuses on consistent employee performance management. Leader-member exchange theory (LMX), revealed that high-quality relationships between supervisors and employees lead to more positive outcomes, including productive work behaviors and cohesiveness than lower quality relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). This research supports the findings of theme five.

Theme 5.1: Positive relations between managers and employees contribute to positive employee outlooks. SME leaders expressed that they thought one of the benefits that resulted from positive relations between employees and leadership was an improvement in employee outlook. When leadership utilizes performance management strategies and communicate well with their employees, the result is an increase in trust and understanding between employees and supervisors. As Participant 3 explained:

Well, [employees] realize we aren't out to get them. We're trying to help them grow and be a better employee. And that's really the whole point of meeting with somebody who is struggling or having an issue following procedures. The whole point of the annual review is to help them understand how they fit into the bigger picture of what it is we do. . . . So, it's just to help them understand that they don't live in a bubble, they affect everything that goes on in the organization.

Participant 3 strove to establish a deeper level of employee understanding and engagement with her role in the company so that she can see leadership and her job in a more positive light. She intended to utilize performance management strategies to shift employee mindset from believing supervisors and performance reviews are "out to get the employee," to helping them understand the important role that employees play in the success of the organization.

Similarly, Participant 2 highlighted how positive performance review experiences resulted in a positive impact on the perspective of the employee. Participant 2 described:

[Management] end up being looked at in a different light; we end up being trusted, and, you know, the general outlook of the employees is much better. They feel you have their best interest in mind when you're going through that. They know you're looking out for them, at least.

As Participant 2's response indicates, thoughtfully conducted performance reviews improve the employee's image and understanding of leadership. When employees believe that their supervisor has the employee's best interest in mind and cares about seeing them

grow, then employees have a more positive experience and outlook within the organization overall.

Participant 1 also found that positive employee-supervisor relations contributed to a positive experience for employees. Participant 1 explained:

Well, definitely, the employee feels good about what they're doing. When you feel good about what you're doing, you do a better job. You also go over and beyond. When you go over and beyond it overflows to the customers, this is how you grow your business. . . . If you have the right people and you train them properly, they're going to feel great about their job. They're going to do very well with their job, and the company is going to benefit—it's just a domino effect.

Participant 1 stated that if supervisors provide quality training and support to their employees by conducting fair performance review processes, employees will feel positive about their work and company. When employees feel positive about their job, they are more likely to remain dedicated and engaged with their work, which benefits the employee and the organization.

Theme 5.2: Positive relations with supervisors contribute to increased employee productivity. SME leaders stated that when employees have positive experiences and relations with their supervisors, employee productivity increases. Participants thought that by ensuring the employees feel valued and connected to their work and leadership, they were more willing to work hard and succeed within the organization. For example, Participant 5 stated:

I feel like you just get more work out of people. I found that acknowledging and reflecting on the positiveness people are doing in the business made a bigger impact on the business. I felt like just putting things in place—employee appreciation, or certificates, or “hey this month we want to honor somebody,” or celebrating birthdays, something like that—I feel like that all puts into play of a positive organization because you have happy employees. . . . Even though you want to reflect on what needs to be changed and what needs to be improved, you do also want to reflect on what is going in a good direction. We want to celebrate what you are doing, we want to celebrate that you’re working with us, we want to celebrate the fact that you’ve been with us for a while or the fact that we may have had a customer—you know—call and give positive feedback on something. I feel like that has to be celebrated as well so that the employees know that we do appreciate what they’re doing.

Participant 5’s organization strove to celebrate the employees and the good work they were doing to create an atmosphere of positivity in the workplace. In their experience, this positive work environment resulted in getting employees to remain dedicated and productive in the workplace.

Similarly, Participant 7 highlighted the importance of establishing a positive employee-supervisor relationship to encourage employee satisfaction. Participant 7 explained:

If you give your employees positive feedback and honest feedback and treat people fairly, they tend to do their job, they tend to do well, and they tend to stay

with the company for longer periods of time. I think—I don't know who said this, I don't know how long it was said but, I do believe that most people don't quit jobs or companies—they quit managers. Whoever their immediate supervisor is has a dramatic impact on how they do their job and how long they stay at the company. I think if that relationship is positive on both parts, it leads to the possibility of a long-lasting employment relationship.

The more positive an individual's experience with the job, the more likely he or she will remain employed by the company. Managers directly impact their employees' satisfaction rates, and positive employee-manager relations can result in higher employee retention and productivity rates.

Applications to Theory

The findings that resulted from this study demonstrated a close connection to the LMX theory of Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), which served as the conceptual framework in this study. Graen and Uhl-Bien stated that high-quality relationships between supervisors and employees lead to more positive outcomes, including productive work behaviors and cohesiveness than lower quality relationships. Themes identified in this study's findings support the work of Graen and Uhl-Bien, demonstrating that according to the SME leaders included in the study, the establishment of positive employee-manager relations can result in positive employee outlooks and increased employee productivity.

One way managers attempted to provide employees with positive experiences was to engage and communicate with employees, reassuring individuals that the management is interested in the growth of the individual employee and the company. Many of the

study's participants stated that they sought to establish a sense of comfortability with their employees, where employees and managers felt comfortable and unafraid to speak their mind and provide honest feedback. Such comfort between manager and employee is what Graen and Uhl-Bien referred to as a high-quality relationship between organizational leadership and employees. Such relationships are more likely to lead to more positive outcomes than lower quality relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), a finding that was echoed in theme group 5 of this study.

SME leaders reported that when conducted properly, performance reviews served to establish a more positive relationship between employee and manager and employee and organization. Lunenburg (2010) and Truckenbrodt (2000) found that high-quality LMX relationships are vital in promoting and enhancing altruistic and yielding organizational citizenship behaviors among followers. Alternatively, my study found that promoting a sense of teamwork helped establish a positive relationship between employees and managers. SME leaders stated they strived to help their employees see how they fit within the larger team or organization they worked for, working to build a sense of teamwork within the employees. As employees came to understand the role of both supervisor and employee, employees began to feel less like the leadership was "out to get them" and were able to establish closer relationships with their supervisors.

Findings also indicated that the formation of a positive relationship between leadership and employees helped create more satisfied employees, more productive employees, and promote overall organizational growth. Thus, this study's results bolstered the appropriateness of LMX theory for this current study and expanded the

applicability of LMX theory to include SMEs, which Graen and Uhl-Bien did not originally include within the scope of their theory.

Applications to Professional Practice

In addition to the theoretical implications described above, this study's results directly apply to the SME industry. Bititci et al. (2016) argued that the success of SMEs was largely dependent on the respective leadership. As SMEs often have fewer management personnel than do larger organizations, Ayandibu and Houghton (2017) indicated that individual leadership strategies were especially crucial to the success of SMEs. Similarly, Almatrooshi et al. (2016) found that leadership in SMEs was directly related to organizational performance. As Participant 7 stated, "most people don't quit jobs or companies—they quit managers." The leadership of one single manager can have a strong impact on the employees he or she manages and, therefore, upon the organization's success. If leaders can establish higher-quality relationships with their employees, they can enhance worker productivity and success (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

As various performance management strategies can impact organizational performance (Almatrooshi et al., 2016; Ayandibu & Houghton, 2017), it remains imperative to identify which performance management strategies are most successful at building positive leader-member relations. This study's findings indicated participants used various performance management strategies to promote organizational growth for their SMEs. First, as demonstrated in theme group 1, participants highlighted the importance of providing employee feedback by conducting regularly scheduled performance reviews. SME leaders also spoke about encouraging a spirit of teamwork,

collaboration, and open communication within both employees and supervisors of the organization. Moreover, participants also discussed the importance of assessing management assessment tools to ensure that performance review processes remained relevant and effective for employees (theme group 4).

The first strategy participants discussed was making time to regularly schedule performance reviews or regularly provide employees with feedback (theme 1.1). By prioritizing performance review, managers established a process for engaging with their employees and providing recommendations for improvement promptly, which they believed contributed to promoting organizational growth. These findings mirror those of Mustapha, Sorooshian, and Azizan (2016) and Bryson and Forth (2018), who both noted that SMEs may see positive returns from their implementation of performance management systems. Even though SMEs are relatively small-scale organizations in terms of the number of employees, performance management processes remain an important component of ensuring employee and organizational growth. SMEs benefit from establishing a consistent performance review process.

Another strategy that SME leaders employed was the encouragement of a spirit of teamwork, collaboration, and open communication within the organization (theme 1.2). In encouraging such traits, managers utilize transformational leadership strategies, in which they support the growth and creativity of employees. Participants noted that they strove to understand their employees' thoughts and motivations to best support employee growth, thereby supporting the organization's growth. These findings resemble those of

Arshada et al. (2016), who showed that transformational leadership significantly enhanced SME business performance.

Additionally, participants emphasized the importance of managers communicating clearly with employees to overcome obstacles and establish positive relationships with their employees (theme 4.1). Clear communication served to inform the employees of the leader's intentions to support and assist the employee through a fair and honest performance review, not merely judge the employee harshly. In doing so, more positive and friendly relations between employee and supervisor were established, which, according to participants, resulted in improved employee attitudes and productivity levels. These findings were consistent with earlier research completed by Audenaert et al. (2019) and Suriyankietkaew and Avery (2016). According to Suriyankietkaew and Avery, building amicable labor relations is imperative within effective leadership practices. Similarly, Audenaert et al. found that a positive relationship between employees and management often led to increased innovation and employee productivity.

Finally, participants described the importance of reviewing assessment tools and refining them for enhanced effectiveness (theme 4.2). It is difficult to conduct a successful performance review if one does not have a suitable performance evaluation tool. Participants stated that their organizations regularly conducted a review of their performance review process by conducting a survey among employees and managers and discussing the current assessment process's pros and cons. By doing this, SME management could better ensure the effectiveness of their performance review processes

year to year to continuously provide high-quality reviews of their employees and promote employee growth and retention within the organization. As Rehman and Anwar (2019) pointed out, SMEs have higher risks within the context of globalization due to their size of 500 employees and under and limited resources. This can give SMEs a disadvantage compared to large corporations. It is important for SMEs to train and retain quality employees to maintain their competitive market edge. The strategic use and application of strategic management practices and performance reviews among SME firms have significantly impacted SME performance (Rehman & Anwar, 2019).

Implications for Social Change

In addition to the theoretical and practical implications, this study's results have implications for social change. Leaders of SMEs interested in performance management and organizational growth can use the information provided by this study for guidance in the future. As SMEs often have fewer resources than larger counterparts, a better understanding of how to promote growth through successful performance management could be critical for SME leadership (Madanchian & Taherdoost, 2019).

Similarly, this study established results that could help standardize performance management initiatives within the future. By creating more effective management systems, leaders of future SMEs could minimize ineffective practices and invest resources in policies that promote both organizational output and growth (Stephan et al., 2016.) As participants of this study have done, SME leaders could establish a fixed schedule for conducting performance reviews throughout the year. The fixed schedule

would help to ensure that employees and managers have time to engage and connect throughout the year to discuss goals, successes, and steps for future improvement.

Findings from this study could also be used to spur social change for SME employees. Participants indicated that providing clear communication, honest feedback, and personalized recognition for employee efforts was associated with employees feeling more positively about their supervisor and more satisfied with their role within the organization. Participants expressed the belief that there was a connection between employee growth and organizational growth. As a result, it would benefit SME leadership to support employees in their endeavors to grow professionally. While this would serve to promote growth within the organization, it would also have a positive impact upon the employees, who would be offered increased opportunities to engage with leadership and grow within their positions. As employees grow within the organization, the employees enhance their skills and increase their responsibilities and salaries, thereby improving their living standards. Organizational output and employee retention are also likely to increase as a result of positive employee relationships. This would positively impact employees' economic stability, which would also be reflected in their community's economy.

Recommendations for Action

This study's findings have implications for social change and resulted in some recommendations for future action. Based on the emergent themes of this study, recommendations for action are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3*Recommendations for Action*

Recommendation	Related Theme
Review employee performance and provide employees with feedback regularly throughout the year	1.1
Promote teamwork and collaboration among employees	1.2
Encourage the individual growth and development of employee skills	1.3
Communicate clearly with employees	4.1
Provide training opportunities to managers	4.2
Review the organization's performance review process regularly	4.2

As the findings of this study demonstrate that positive employee-manager relations contribute to increased employee productivity and organizational growth, leadership in SMEs should strive to establish positive employee-manager relations through their performance management practices. As demonstrated in theme 1.1, performance review processes should be established to provide consistent feedback to employees throughout the year. Leaders should also promote teamwork among their employees to foster a more positive work environment, which may contribute to more positive organizational outcomes (theme 1.2). Employee individual growth should also be actively encouraged by leadership. As theme 1.3 showed, when leadership encourages employees to set personal goals and strive for continuous personal growth, the organization also benefits from enhancing employee knowledge and skills.

SME leadership should also be prepared to reevaluate their performance management strategies on an annual or semi-annual basis to ensure that practices remain relevant and effective for their organization, as described in theme 4.2. Owners and top executives within the SME should provide management training to ensure that SME

leadership at all levels of management understand how to implement the performance management strategies determined for one's organization (theme 4.2). Within these training sessions, leadership should be encouraged to engage with their employees and provide clear communication. As theme 4.1 demonstrated, if leadership is willing to take some time to better understand their employees by asking questions, listening carefully, and learning about employee motivations, they will be better prepared to support these employees and address any issues that may arise in the future.

Recommendations for Further Research

The limitations associated with this study created a variety of topics for future research. First, there were a variety of limitations regarding the scope of this study. Findings may not be generalizable to the public sector, organizations outside Washington, DC, or other organizations that do not meet the definition of SMEs used within this study. Future researchers should complete similar studies in public SMEs that are located outside of Washington, DC. Future researchers may also want to consider narrowing the research into one or more specific industries to better understand how, if at all, industry impacts SME performance leadership tactics.

Another limitation of this study was the varying degree of participants' knowledge of performance management. Some participants were newer in the field or their position and held only one or two years of experience, while others had 10 or more years of management experience at the time of the interview. To account for the varying degrees of leadership experience, future researchers could complete mixed-methods

research that collects quantitative leadership experience data prior to gathering qualitative information regarding the perspective of SME leadership.

Additionally, future research conducted using a strictly quantitative methodology and survey process could be utilized to gather data and results from a larger sample size. Although this would not provide qualitative insight into the leaders' lived experiences as this study has done, it would enable the researcher to establish a broader understanding of frequencies related to SME leadership strategies, barriers, and experiences. For example, future research could determine how many leaders have experienced specific issues or utilized specific strategies in their organization by collecting quantitative data from a much larger sample using a quantitative survey. These quantitative data could supplement the qualitative findings of this and other qualitative studies by identifying whether the strategies and barriers identified through qualitative research are commonplace among other SME leaders.

It may also be interesting to expand the research to include employees at the SME who have been on the receiving end of the performance review process. Including employee experiences and perceptions would help to broaden the base of understanding related to SME performance leadership. Participant responses in this study included the assumptions that SME leaders were making regarding how positively or negatively their employees felt about the performance review process. Future research could gain insight into the employee perspective directly by asking how SME performance reviews impact employee satisfaction or opinion of their job and organization.

Reflections

As stated earlier, I spent the past 14 years as a leader in the Federal Aviation Administration and have a great deal of leadership experience. I had no personal experience with the management of SMEs. Therefore, I possessed no preconceived notions about how SMEs should be managed, especially regarding how to promote organizational growth. This allowed me to remain neutral and impartial while conducting interviews and organizing the results of the study. Additionally, my lack of expertise with SME leadership allowed me to reduce the implicit power dynamic between researcher and participants.

Although I had no prior experience with SMEs, I did have many preconceived ideas regarding motivating employees and increasing employee productivity. To mitigate any bias facilitated by my leadership experience, I ensured that a second researcher approved my research questions before any interviews occurred. Additionally, I provided a document trail and recordings of all interviews to ensure that future researchers could independently conclude that any bias that naturally occurred did not impact study results.

At the onset of this DBA doctoral study process, I was unsure how to complete a study of this magnitude. However, the resources and guidance I received from Walden allowed me to comprehensively and comfortably explore the themes central to this study. Moreover, through the tutelage I received from Walden, I understood my own biases and how my biases could impact my study.

I was convinced that leadership in SMEs was like leadership in the Federal Aviation Administration. More specifically, I was under the impression that the

leadership had the same concerns and strategies across most organizations. However, through the completion of this study, I realized that the problems of SME leadership are different from my personal experiences with the Federal Aviation Administration and other organizations with which I had been previously affiliated. Instead, SME leaders must think about a great many problems not associated with larger organizations such as the Federal Aviation Administration. They must motivate employees and increase productivity with limited resources. Leadership in SMEs must also always think of organizational growth and sustainability. Otherwise, SMEs may fail. Failure of SMEs was especially concerning to leadership during the sustained COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 was not a focal point of this study. However, some of the participants addressed the effect of the pandemic directly.

I learned a great deal regarding leadership in SMEs. The completion of this study provided me with a new and more comprehensive understanding of the concerns of SME leadership. The completion of this study provided insight into the strategies those in leadership roles use to increase employee productivity and organizational growth. Finally, with the skills and knowledge I gained from Walden, I am confident I could continue to study leadership strategies in the future.

Conclusion

In seeking insight into the performance management strategies used by leaders in SMEs to promote organizational growth, this study has found that providing feedback to the employees regularly throughout the year served to promote the growth of the organization, as did encouraging teamwork in the workplace. SME leadership may also

promote organizational growth through the encouragement of individual employee growth. Findings demonstrated that employees felt more positive about their job when supervisors established a positive employee-supervisor relationship, which contributed to an improvement in the employee outlook and increased employee productivity.

Key obstacles that SME leaders identified in the implementation of employee performance reviews included employee unwillingness to change and factors outside of supervisor control, such as time and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the supervisors overcome these barriers by implementing communication strategies such as listening and asking questions of their employees and engaging employees in discussion. Obstacles may also be overcome with management strategies, such as regularly reviewing the organization's performance review processes, setting goals for employees and supervisors, and providing additional management training.

Understanding the performance management strategies implemented by those in SME leadership positions to increase or promote organization growth is critical. Unlike larger organizations, SMEs must address growth issues and sustainability continuously or risk failure. Although much more research is needed regarding SME growth strategies, this study has provided insight into the perceptions and experiences of SME leaders with performance management strategies. The results generated through the completion of this study are an essential first step in fully understanding how SMEs can best implement performance management strategies to improve organizational growth.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Hello {name of participant}. Thank you for agreeing to be a part of my research study. You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as a leader with at least 3 years of leadership experience in a successful SME. This study will explore successful performance management and organizational growth strategies within SMEs. The questions I intend to ask you will be about the totality of your personal characteristics and work experiences over an extended period in the past and leading up to the present. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

To meet our human subject requirements, you are asked to provide an informed consent form. The interview process will take 60-90 minutes and will be audio-recorded to facilitate notetaking for later transcription. For your privacy, only the researcher, mentor, committee members and transcriptionist will be privy to the audio recordings, which will be destroyed after being stored for 5 years.

Interview Questions:

1. In your experience, how do performance management strategies influence (SME) organizational growth?
2. What elements of performance management do you find effective at promoting organizational growth?
3. What were the key obstacles you faced in implementing performance management strategies?
4. How did your organization address the key obstacles when implementing performance management strategies?
5. How do performance management strategies influence your relationship with your subordinates?
6. Based on your organization's experiences, what performance benefits can occur through these positive leadership relationships?
7. What else can you share with me about the development and implementation of your organization's strategies for using performance management to promote your organization's growth?