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## Strategies Retail Managers Use to Retain High-Performing Salespeople

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Eric Packer

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Walden University  
March 2022

Abstract

Strategies Retail Managers Use to Retain High-Performing Salespeople

by

Eric Packer

MS, Southern New Hampshire University, 2017

BS, Southern New Hampshire University, 2015

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

March 2022

## Abstract

Some retail managers lack strategies to improve the retention of high-performing salespeople. Losing high-performing salespeople leads to capital losses that threaten organizational and community sustainability. Grounded in leader-member exchange leadership theory, the purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies used by four retail managers to retain high-performing salespeople in Atlanta, Georgia. Data were collected using semistructured interviews and a review of company documents. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, and three themes emerged: interpersonal relationships, recognition, and operational programs. A key recommendation for retail industry leaders is to develop a culture of trust by demonstrating transparency and using routine performance appraisals. The implications for positive social change include the potential for organizational sustainability to support community leaders with job creation and mitigation strategies to combat property devaluation.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this achievement to two of the most influential women in my life, my late grandmother, Willie Mae McCants, affectionately known as Big Momma, and my mother, Georgia Packer Taylor. Big Momma prophesized on my life when I was 5 years old and through her prayers, paved the way for this journey to occur. Born in the segregated South in 1911, my grandmother was denied her human rights to obtain an education because of her skin color and gender, but she asked God for my protection and made this moment possible. I love you, Big Momma, and as your first grandchild to earn a doctoral degree, I plan to fulfill your legacy.

To my mother, Georgia Packer Taylor. You embodied your mother's Spirit and birthed me during a time of hardship, confusion, and controversy. I have never taken the sacrifices and criticisms you endured explicitly for me for granted. It wasn't easy raising me, but I promised to make you proud by earning my college degree. I pray that your heart is blessed and that your Spirit is uplifted that I gave you three degrees and now a doctoral degree. I sincerely pray that this achievement compensates for the sacrifices you made for me. I love you sincerely!

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

The retail industry is one of the top three most significant employers in the American workforce (Kroes et al., 2018). Many occupations exist in the retail industry, but over 6 million people work in sales (Anderson, 2020). Retail salespeople establish the organization's financial foundation, but some managers struggle to retain top salespeople because of internal and external challenges. Mall storefronts are closing around the nation because of underperforming stores (Tokosh, 2019), and some managers take an average of 4 months to replace salespeople who leave the organization (Lai & Gelb, 2019). Retail managers must develop successful strategies to retain high-performing salespeople for their organizations' profitability and sustainability. I explored strategies that retail managers use to retain high-performing salespeople for this study.

### **Background of the Problem**

Retail managers experience some of the highest employee turnover rates among all industries. Retail managers lose 70% of their employees to employee attrition each year (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Managers who fail to retain profitable salespeople cause some organizations to lose over \$10,000 for each employee who leaves the company (Olubiyi et al., 2019). Additionally, the costs associated with losing high rates of employees extend beyond the employee. Over 10,000 retail stores closed nationwide between 2017–2018 (Badrinarayanan & Becerra, 2019). The retail organization's survival depends on leaders who overcome employee attrition by developing effective strategies to retain high-performing salespeople.

The modern retail workforce is diverse. Retail salesforces include multiracial,

multicultural, and multigenerational individuals (Mikkelsen & Wahlin, 2020). Young adults dominate the U.S. workforce (Baum, 2020), but more than 20% of retail managers are older than 55 (Lee & Ha-Brookshire, 2017). However, some management styles used by older managers may not be effective with younger generations. Micromanagement is the least effective strategy for younger workers like millennials, unlike earlier generations (Frankel, 2016; Mansor & Hossan, 2021). Further research on employee retention, specifically for the retail sector, is essential to provide sales managers with strategies to retain high-performing salespeople from every generational group.

### **Problem Statement**

Corporate costs and employee attrition devastate some retail organizations. Some organizational leaders lose billions of dollars because of high attrition rates among salespeople (Onyemah et al., 2021). Additionally, the consequences of losing high-performing salespeople may lead to capital losses that amount to over 200% of a salaried employee's annual income (Lee et al., 2018). The general business problem is that some retail managers lose an excessive number of salespeople. The specific business problem is that some retail managers lack strategies to improve the retention of high-performing salespeople.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore successful strategies that some retail managers use to retain high-performing salespeople. The target population included retail managers in one Atlanta department store who implemented retention strategies for high-performing salespeople. The findings in this study may

provide retail managers and business leaders with the ability to increase profitability through an awareness of how to retain high-performing salespeople. The implications for positive social change include increased employment opportunities, lower unemployment rates, and surplus tax revenue for the local community.

### **Nature of the Study**

Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method research were three methodological options for this study. Qualitative researchers explore unknown elements of phenomena in the natural business context to uncover the behaviors of the people within the organization (Runfola et al., 2017). The qualitative method was most appropriate for this study because the focus was to explore how retail sales managers successfully retain high-performing employees. In contrast, quantitative researchers seek justification of phenomena through numerical data (Park & Park, 2016). The quantitative method was inappropriate for this study because discovering a statistical causal relationship between managers and their employees was not the focus of this study. Mixed method research combines qualitative and quantitative methods but risks coherence in the research (Schoonenboom, 2018), making it also inappropriate for this study.

Phenomenological, narrative, and case study represented three possible research designs for this study. Researchers use the phenomenological design to capture the pre-reflective experiences of research participants (Cypress, 2018). Phenomenology was inappropriate for this study because the focus was to explore actual experiential accounts of the participants and not their preconceived assumptions. Researchers use the narrative design to capture participants' reflections through a sequential story-telling process

(Mohajan, 2018). The narrative design was inappropriate for this study because capturing long experiential reflections of the retail department was not the focus. The case study design emerged as most appealing for this study. Case study researchers explore phenomena in an actual context (Olubiyi et al., 2019). Researchers who use case study designs base the research on the reality and context of the phenomenon (Fletcher et al., 2018). The case study design was most appropriate to use the evidence collected from direct observations (Yin, 2018). I selected the case study design to explore successful strategies that retail managers use to retain high-performing salespeople in the context of an actual retail environment.

### **Research Question**

What strategies do retail managers use to improve the retention of high-performing salespeople?

### **Interview Questions**

1. What strategies have proven to be most effective in improving the retention of high-performing salespeople?
2. What are the barriers to improving the retention of high-performing salespeople?
3. How did you overcome the barriers to improve the retention of high-performing salespeople?
4. How do you assess the effectiveness of the strategies used to improve the retention of high-performing salespeople?
5. What internal marketing do you use to improve the retention of high-

performing salespeople?

6. How often do you evaluate the retention strategies for high-performing salespeople?
7. What strategies did you implement to identify high-performing salespeople who intend to quit?
8. What benefits should managers offer high-performing salespeople to improve their retention?
9. How might recognition strategies of high-performing salespeople improve retention rates?
10. What additional information would you like to provide about strategies you use to improve the retention of high-performing salespeople?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The leader-member exchange (LMX) theory provided this study's lens and conceptual framework. Dansereau et al. (1975) introduced LMX as the vertical dyad linkage theory (VDL), but the name changed to reflect the theory's primary principle. The basic principle of LMX is leaders have different relationships with each follower in the organization. Additionally, the quality of the relationships between leaders and followers dictates the dyadic exchange between each. Peesker et al. (2021) discovered distinct differences between high and low-performing salespeople. The theory of LMX was appropriate for this study's conceptual framework because the overall goal was to explore management strategies capable of retaining a specific subset like high-performing salespeople. According to Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), LMX consists of a relational

exchange based on distance, closeness, and communication between leaders and followers.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Attrition:* Attrition is the practice of employees leaving the organization voluntarily (Raman et al., 2019).

*Employee retention:* Employee retention is the ability of managers to keep employees with the organization (Letchmiah & Thomas, 2017).

*High-performing salespeople:* High-performing salespeople produce large sales volumes, positive customer satisfaction reports, and corporate profits (Coffre, 2017).

*Strategies:* Strategies are a complete set of policies to keep the organization's best talent (Lynch & Mors, 2019).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

#### **Assumptions**

I maintained specific assumptions with this qualitative study. Research assumptions are biases or positions held by the researcher (Wolgemuth et al., 2017). Researchers hold assumptions truthful without actual proof (Ellis & Levy, 2009). Further, researchers' ability to make inferences from data enable them to develop assumptions (Armstrong & Kepler, 2018). I assumed that I could best explore successful retention strategies used by retail managers through a qualitative methodology. I also assumed that managers would be motivated to support the retail industry by sharing successful strategies to retain high-performing salespeople. My final assumption was that the questions I asked would effectively extract the most valuable responses from the

managers.

### **Limitations**

Limitations in research represent the weaknesses of the study (Kirkwood & Price, 2013). Limitations, weaknesses, or uncertainties of the study occur naturally and are often unavoidable (Helmich et al., 2015). The literature represented one limitation of this study. Many researchers focused on the broader spectrum of employee turnover in the retail industry instead of employee retention strategies specific to retail salespeople. Second, because turnover in the retail industry is so high, finding managers who had the required experience to participate in this study was another limitation. A third limitation involved finding managers who had successfully implemented retention strategies to satisfy the study's requirement.

### **Delimitations**

Notable delimitations existed in this study. Delimitations are the limitations that researchers consciously set for the study (Helmich et al., 2015). Researchers use delimitations to establish boundaries for their research (Ellis & Levy, 2009). One delimitation of this study pertained to the location of the U.S. Southeastern region, where I conducted this study. Additional delimitations included retail managers who (a) were over the age of 21, (b) directly interacted with frontline salespeople, and (c) had 2 years or more of retail managerial experience. Furthermore, the research excluded the focus on overall employee retention; instead, I only focused on employee retention strategies for high-performing retail salespeople.



### **Significance of the Study**

An increase in online shopping, retail automation, and disruptions in the retail industry has enhanced the need for managers to retain their best salespeople. When salespeople quit, some retail managers pay twice the employee's salary to find a replacement (Olubiyi et al., 2019). Moreover, human capital, specifically high-performing salespeople, may significantly impact the organization's success (Dechawatanapaisal, 2017). Therefore, the findings from this study may be of significance to the business community and may contribute to positive social change.

### **Contribution to Business Practice**

Findings from this study could be essential to retail and sales organizations. Positive correlations exist between the retention of top-performing employees and the profitability of successful stores (Suhartanto & Brien, 2018). But the retail industry is volatile, with high attrition rates in the first 3 years of employment (Lee & Ha-Brookshire, 2017). Researchers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019) discovered that retail managers lost an average of 56% of their employees each year between 2014 and 2018. To mitigate severe financial consequences, retail managers must develop strategies to retain high-performing salespeople with the skills, capabilities, and intellectual competencies required for corporate sustainability (Simoës & Sebastiani, 2017). Business leaders and managers may use this study's findings to develop strategies that retain vital employees, increase organizational profits, and provide social benefits to the community.

## **Implications for Social Change**

Severe consequences occur to communities where retail stores go out of business. Leaders may use this study's findings to benefit the community by developing strategies that minimize retail store vacancies, unemployment, and vagrancy. Retail leaders who develop effective employee retention strategies enhance relationships between consumers, the retail facility, and the larger community (Briggs et al., 2016). Revenue generated from retail sales tax supports the community's overall stability (Walzer et al., 2018). Retail managers most successful at retaining high-performing salespeople may provide opportunities to increase sales tax revenues that boost the local economy with sustainable job opportunities.

## **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

Researchers use the literature review to reveal the level of knowledge in a specific field, highlight the problem explored, identify current theories or practices relative to the problem, and identify gaps in the existing literature (Leite et al., 2019). In this professional and academic literature review, I explored business and scholarly articles on the turnover and retention of salespeople in the retail industry to address the purpose of this study—exploring successful strategies that some retail managers use to retain high-performing salespeople. Retail leaders and managers have numerous problems to mitigate before achieving success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Retail organization's success depends on the strength of the relationship between managers and frontline salespeople (Jung et al., 2021). Still, leaders in the retail industry have failed to retain high-performing salespeople and have lost capital in knowledge and skills (Claro & Kamakura, 2017). The

retail industry is a trillion-dollar industry (Select USA, 2019), and retail leaders employ 10% of the American workforce (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).

Extensive research exists on employee turnover, but gaps exist in the literature on employee retention of high-performing retail salespeople in the U.S. retail industry. This literature review consisted of over 97% peer-reviewed sources. Additionally, 88% of the sources originated within 5 years of the anticipated conferral date for this study. The literature review included multiple databases through Walden's University Library and Google Scholar. Some of the core databases accessed for this literature review include Journal of Retailing and Consumer Resources, Journal of Retail, Business Management, ScienceDirect, Sage Journals, Business Source Complete, Emerald Insight, and ProQuest. Keywords to conduct this research included *salesperson retention*, *employee retention strategies*, *salesperson turnover*, *retail employee retention*, *employee retention for retail*, *employee turnover*, *LMX*, *retaining salespeople*, *successful strategies for retail managers*, *social exchange theory*, *retention in retail*, *affective commitment*, *transformational leadership*, *leadership for retention*, and *attrition in retail*.

This section includes leadership theories best designed to mitigate human capital losses in retail environments. The organization of this literature review flowed from the following themes: (a) retail workforce, (b) LMX theory, (c) alternate leadership theories, (d) turnover intention, and (e) social exchange theory (SET).

### **Retail Workforce**

The retail workforce ranges from multiple industries, including food, clothing, fuel, automotive, and grocery. In the United States, managers in the retail sector employ

over 29 million people (Select USA, 2019). Moreover, close to 5 million jobs in the industry relate to sales workers, but experts projected losses of more than 200,000 sales jobs over the next 8 years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). More than 9,000 retail stores closed in 2019 (Collins-Thompson et al., 2021), and over 1.3 million retail workers lost their jobs between February and September 2020 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020a). Some people believe that losses suffered in the retail industry will eliminate any opportunities for financial recovery. Still, retail managers can mitigate employee attrition by developing strategies to retain the organization's highest-performing salespeople.

The primary focus of this study was on the American workforce, but retaining retail employees is also a global problem. India's industry leaders have reported turnover rates in the retail sector as high as 50% (Pandey et al., 2018). Universally, components of the retail environment remain constant regardless of geographical location. The dilemma for sales managers is how to prevent top performers from leaving. One report revealed that 34% of high-performing salespeople quit their companies (Castro-Gonzalez et al., 2021). Losing a third of the most productive members on the sales team is unsustainable for most organizations.

Each employee in the retail organization is essential and performs an intricate role in the company's success. Still, salespeople have the most critical jobs in the hierarchy in many scenarios because they directly interact with customers (Dechawatanapaisal, 2017). Many consumers base their shopping preferences on the professionalism demonstrated by retail salespeople. Industry leaders have discovered the importance of professional salespeople in the process of developing a customer-centric culture (Habel et al., 2020).

Salespeople generate profits and solidify the organization's operational functions (Farias et al., 2017). Managers who retain high-performing salespeople also increase organizational productivity and profitability (Xiong & Wen, 2020). Retaining high-performing salespeople is essential in a capitalistic society, but many retail managers struggle with this task.

The emergence of younger and older workers places additional stress on managers to develop retention strategies to motivate each group. The modern workforce consists of five generations. Retail employees from ages 16 to 80 can occupy the retail workforce (Smith & Garriety, 2020). Therefore, leaders must implement effective strategies essential for developing interpersonal relationships within diverse organizations (Mikkelsen & Wahlin, 2020). Older employees bring a depth of knowledge to the organization, but younger employees can offer unique learning styles. Research conducted on a Malaysian retail workforce revealed that younger employees use different cognitive approaches than older employees to successfully overcome work-related stressors (Chia & Kee, 2018). Leaders who implement effective strategies to retain high-performing employees understand that organizational stability depends on developing interpersonal relationships with followers.

Leaders' effectiveness can contribute to the organization's effectiveness (Jarvis & Williams, 2017). Influential retail leaders understand the valuable roles that sales professionals perform to achieve success for the organization. Sales professionals typically earn the highest income among retail workers, but retail leaders also use the highest resources to attract and retain them. Managers spend billions of dollars each year

for expenses related to the sales workforce (Lu et al., 2015). Retailers could earn more profits and increase market share if leaders develop effective strategies to prevent high-performing salespeople from leaving the company. An essential aspect of retaining talent or human resource management is identifying employees' motivations and values (Sainju et al., 2021).

### **LMX**

Retail managers need to execute a leadership philosophy capable of motivating diverse sales staff members, and LMX provides the best leadership philosophy for this phenomenon. Initially known as vertical dyad linkage (VDL), LMX theory has become an approach to understanding organizational leadership. Dansereau et al. (1975) introduced the VDL model of leadership to demonstrate that different exchanges occur between leaders and followers in the organization. Trust, rewards, and development are three essential tenets of high-quality LMX relationships (Wong et al., 2022). Before VDL, management philosophers used groups or units as the primary focus of leadership instead of considering individuals as central components to goal-attainment (Graen & Schiemann, 1978). But employees have individual needs and motivations for the job characteristics model (Hackman & Lawler, 1971). VDL theorists used the job characteristics model as the foundation of VDL and advanced the research to develop the interplay between managers and followers.

Organizational leaders primarily relied on the SET to understand organizational interactions between leaders and followers (Buch et al., 2018) before researchers began developing VDL to reveal that the quality of exchanges between leaders and followers is

the theory's most significant aspect (Jung et al., 2021). Proponents of VDL theory focused on the dyadic leadership exchange between supervisors and subordinates based on values that they considered essential. Researchers have also discovered that some leaders increase organizational appeal by establishing in-group and out-group categorizations among subordinates (Singh et al., 2019). VDL on a vertical scale indicates that leadership is the highest exchanges between supervisors and subordinates, but supervision represented the lowest exchanges (Graen et al., 1975). Lower-level exchanges create transactional-type relationships, but higher-level exchanges produce relationships more capable of building long-term benefits for the organization and its members (Yu et al., 2018). Researchers also developed VDL to show that successful LMXs occur more horizontally than vertically. In its most effective form, the exchange between leaders and followers occurs where both entities give equal value for something in return (Han & et al., 2018). Thus, VDL became better associated with LMX to highlight the reciprocating relationship between leaders and managers.

Managers can no longer rely on leadership theories designed for one type of employee; instead, managers must consider leadership styles that accentuate the unique relationships between leaders and each follower. There are many leadership styles and theories available for retail managers. Still, no other leadership theory appears to deal with diverse employees in the workforce and emphasizes the importance of relationships between managers and subordinate employees better than LMX. Unlike other leadership theories that need leaders to be the sole solution to organizational success, LMX requires high-quality collaborations between leaders and followers (Anand et al., 2018).

Proponents for LMX have suggested that high-quality exchanges between leaders and followers create better work attitudes, higher organizational success levels, and effective outcomes (Raghuram et al., 2017). Retail managers can implement effective retention strategies by using a leadership philosophy that values each employee's uniqueness.

LMX is a leadership theory adept for highly competitive, complex, and diverse retail workplaces. LMX managers have the flexibility to experience unique relationships with high-performing employees that occur through social exchanges. Complimentary social exchanges create reciprocity of commitment between leaders and followers, leading to higher employee retention rates (Pittino et al., 2016). Further, task-related behaviors, loyalty, and mutual liking are three currency exchanges between leaders and followers that often lead to positive organizational outcomes (Nandedkar & Brown, 2018). The effective use of LMX may establish a bond in the leader-follower paradigm capable of motivating employees to stay longer with the company.

Though some researchers consider LMX beneficial to organizational success, counterarguments exist against the leadership theory. Some researchers describe LMX as a weak leadership strategy for team effectiveness because, in some instances, LMX creates intragroup turmoil. Other researchers suggest that employee perceptions may cause more conflict than the theoretical concept of LMX. Different attributions of salespeople can impact their reality in the organization (Steward et al., 2009). Attribution theory provides the foundation and understanding of why employees interpret different management messages based on individual experiences and expectations (Malik & Singh, 2019). LMX may lower group cohesiveness and job satisfaction because



underperforming team members experience higher stress levels than high performers (Manata, 2020).

Opponents of the LMX theory also argue that the implementation of LMX disrupts the perception of equity within the organization and produces negative results (Chen et al., 2018). LMX can have detrimental consequences on team performance because of the leader's differential treatment of in-group and out-group members within the organization (Yu et al, 2018). The variation of individual perceptions, cognitions, and experiences in the organization with the leader defines LMX differentiation (Carnevale et al., 2019). Opposing theorists to LMX suggest that leaders who implement differentiation minimize Maslow's needs theory by diminishing belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Cheng & Shi, 2019; Maslow, 1943). Social actions and human motivations interconnect in understanding Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Abulof, 2017).

Though some researchers view LMX differentiation as unfavorable for group effectiveness, differentiation within the workplace often fuels the organization. Research on workforce differentiation reveals that differentiation is effective when based on task performance (Chen et al., 2018). Competitive employees enjoy performing at high levels and often thrive on the exclusiveness of being a top performer. LMX differentiation creates positive conclusions for employee behavior. Positive organizational outcomes occur when differentiated leadership creates transparency (Xie et al., 2019). Retail work can be stressful and motivate employees to leave the company, but leaders who have developed quality relationships with employees can minimize turnover intention. Differentiation based on the quality of exchanges between leaders and followers can help

employees navigate stressful work environments (Montani et al., 2017). Additional researchers on employee retention found positive correlations between higher levels of emotional intelligence and lower stress levels on the job among leaders and followers (Shukla & Srivastava, 2016). Leaders who understand the temperaments of members within the organization can overcome the harmful effects of LMX differentiation and develop positive organizational outcomes.

LMX provides a philosophy and strategy that enables organizational leaders to maximize trust individually with high and low performers. High and low performers interact differently with the organizational leader and experience different trust levels (Kim, 2019). Some high-performing salespeople expect relationships with managers that produce more resources in the context of compensation and information (Park et al., 2017). Managers must take different paths to acquire each employee's trust (Miao et al., 2017). The leadership position is complicated because the leader must identify and engage diverse personalities for successful employee retention.

### **Alternate Leadership Theories**

Transformational, servant, and transactional leadership represent three alternative theories that retail managers may consider for solving high employee turnover rates. Leaders identify in either a behavioral or relational category (Hartnell et al., 2016), and some aspects of each theory exist in the other. The workforce is forever evolving, particularly with older and younger generations sharing the same workspaces and learning in complex environments (Heisler & Bandow, 2018). Most organizations need leaders who earn the respect of followers and demonstrate the ability to navigate various

hurdles that threaten the organization's ability to thrive. Employee retention is essential to organizational effectiveness. The following literature explores alternative leadership theories that may effectively retain the highest-performing salespeople in the retail industry. The pros and cons of each theory provide contrasting views of the theory against LMX.

### ***Transformational Leadership***

Transformational leadership (TFL) is one of the most recognized leadership theories for change management and work-level implementation. Burns (1977) established the foundation for TFL based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. TFL theorists emphasize the importance of the leader's ability to motivate members and stretch their beliefs through a centralized vision. TFL has been effective for workplace implementation (Farahnak et al., 2020), and it is one of the most influential philosophies that leaders may use to motivate employees (Lee et al., 2018).

Theorists have expanded TFL beyond the founding concepts. Bass (1985) expanded the concepts of TFL when he identified charisma, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation as the three most crucial theory factors. Many leaders motivate employees, but the most effective transformational leader uses charisma and intellect to influence followers (Chen & Wu, 2017). Unfortunately, some employees reject charisma, and leaders who only have skillsets based on charisma may fail to connect with employees. The development of TFL by multiple theorists over several years led to increased popularity and recognition.

Some theorists believe transformational leaders have the power to transcend

followers' abilities. Vieira et al. (2018) proclaimed that transformational leaders could positively influence the self-efficacy of followers. High self-efficacy is required for retail salespeople who receive commissions because working hard is not always synonymous with receiving large commissions. Tian et al. (2020) reported that transformative leaders facilitate and increase employee retention through clear communication of the organization's vision. Transformational leaders often use inspirational and intellectual motivation to implement strategies with followers (Farahnak et al., 2020). Some salespeople become anxious or insecure about their value with the organization, so leaders must develop effective strategies with followers to mitigate anxiety.

Leaders employ members from diverse backgrounds and cultures. In diverse workplaces, organizational leaders need a leadership strategy that offers the best opportunity to engage with each follower on an individual level (Mikkelsen & Wahlin, 2020). Eberly et al. (2017) purported that the TFL philosophy is effective in crisis scenarios. TFL may be effective in this context because high attrition rates create disastrous results for retail organizations. Nandedkar and Brown (2018) opined that TFL principles foster innovation in the organization. By building trust, empowering employees, and motivating employee engagement, transformational leaders can stimulate innovative work behavior that includes creative problem solving to enhance organizational sustainability (Li et al., 2019). For employee retention, innovation inspires transformational leaders to develop new ways of convincing employees to stay with the organization.

Transformational leaders may be able to achieve organizational effectiveness.

Xenikou (2017) found TFL ideal for organizational identification with employees. From this perspective and in the context of employee retention, TFL could be beneficial. TFL is effective for employee retention, but intrinsic motivation, organizational learning, and external connections have been more effective (Yamin, 2020). TFL has additional shortfalls in accommodating different personalities within retail organizations, making LMX more appropriate. TFL theorists debunk differentiation, but LMX theorists understand the plethora of benefits gained from differentiation (Chen et al., 2018). Leaders achieve full organizational effectiveness when members feel valued for their individuality.

TFL certainly adds value to the leadership community, but the theory includes subjective tenets that may not work in every scenario. Based on Bass's original findings, Alatawi (2017) discovered ambiguous conclusions of TFL and asserted that TFL yields no more significant results with employee retention than other leadership theories. Boer et al. (2016) argued that TFL does not work for all outcomes. LMX is more likely to create positive results because of the psychological foundation established between leaders and followers. The exchange between the supervisor and follower empowers and provides the follower with psychological motivation to own the action necessary to develop positive organizational outcomes. Chen and Wu (2017) reported that transformational leaders must successfully execute the principles of LMX for positive organizational outcomes because, with LMX, followers develop the ability to sustain outcomes. Some theorists believe TFL is best for organizational development at the group level (Warrick, 2017). However, successful talent managers develop employees

individually. Transformational leaders use trust and cooperation, but unlike LMX leaders, some transformational leaders focus on transforming organizational culture holistically instead of developing different exchanges with each follower in the organization.

Employee development should be the goal of any leadership theory to sustain a robust and thriving organization. Researchers have conversely discovered that TFL may hinder employee development and create dependent employees (Vieira et al., 2018).

Because TFL is discovered under the trait activation theory of leadership, transformational leaders command members to follow without developing an understanding of the followers' career or organizational motivation (Luria et al., 2019).

Tenets of the trait theory do not respect the diversity of each employee in an organization.

TFL for smaller organizations may be effective, particularly at the onboarding stage of hiring, but many retail employees leave the company after the first year of employment. Collaboration is one of the key ingredients to preventing employees from quitting, and collaboration is most needed in years 2 through 5 of employment (Cross et al., 2018). Employees typically enter the organization alone but rely on teams or groups to stay. According to Eberly et al. (2017), TFL only reduced turnover in fire, police, military, or high extreme contexts. The typical retail environment would not qualify as an extreme context, so TFL's benefits may have minimal impact on employee retail retention.

### ***Servant Leadership***

Servant leaders must demonstrate selflessness with followers. Servant leadership theory highlights interpersonal characteristics between leaders and followers (Needham,

2019). The premise of servant leadership is captivating because, in this theory, the leader must first serve followers in the organization before making demands. Greenleaf (1970) first introduced the concept of servant leadership and highlighted skills required of servant leaders. Serving first is a critical premise in management research because it signals value and appreciation to followers who typically respond with more extended employment (Sunder et al., 2017). Moreover, servant leaders are most concerned with followers' interests and least concerned about personal adulation (Jang & Kandampully, 2018). Transformational leaders inspire followers through charismatic means, but servant leaders inspire through action, demonstrating that managerial demands for service will not precede managerial demonstrations of service.

Servant leadership is perhaps the purest form of leadership for developing and engaging employees because the servant leader models desired behavior and work ethic. Lumpkin and Achen (2018) found that servant leaders place talent development and long-term relationships before attaining financial goals. The concept and emphasis on prioritizing social relationships over financial profits are problematic aspects of servant leadership, particularly in business. Still, servant leadership can be beneficial to organizational management. According to Yang et al. (2017), servant leaders increase employee engagement and produce positive outcomes in organizational contexts. The working theory around servant leadership is that leaders can commit to serving their followers without sacrificing financial stability.

In retail management, specifically employee retention, servant leadership is closest to demonstrating the tenets of LMX than any other leadership philosophy. Servant

leaders actively focus and facilitate long-term aspects of followers to levels that are often unhealthy (Zhou et al., 2020). Research on servant leadership reveals that servant leaders often create emotional imbalances by giving more than receiving in the interaction with followers, but sustainability is the goal for employee retention. Implementing empathy, support, and trust, servant leadership establishes direction and increases worker engagement (Yang et al., 2017). Organizational commitment is often more manageable when leaders authentically demonstrate that employees are the most valuable resources.

Servant leadership has demonstrated several favorable outcomes for leaders, but management experts rarely mention the theory in business contexts outside of research. The attributes of servant leadership resemble traditional and popular leadership theories and, in some cases, deliver better results (Lumpkin & Achen, 2018). Stewardship is the primary factor of servant leadership, and empowering followers with an awareness of their value to the leader is the goal. Coetzer et al. (2017) discovered that servant leadership positively impacted individual, team, and organizational levels for work engagement, commitment, and satisfaction. Also, servant leaders resist having a title or position within the company and instead focus on demonstrating actions that model desired organizational behaviors. Servant leaders embody trust, respect, and integrity and create some of the best opportunities to meet employees' psychological needs (Lumpkin & Achen, 2018).

Leaders who respect leadership's responsibilities understand that service is essential to the organization's success. According to Zhou et al. (2020), servant leaders reject self-interest and lead with others' interests in mind. Servant and LMX leaders have



similar leadership principles that contribute to organizational effectiveness. Elche et al. (2020) opined that servant leadership is also effective with employee organizational citizenship behavior. Through empathetic skills, LMX and servant leaders demonstrate that employees may become more engaged with the organization.

In the context of employee retention, leaders must execute the form of leadership best designed to reduce employee turnover. Muldoon et al. (2018) found LMX useful for calming followers' emotions who consider leaving the organization. LMX leaders share information with followers, specifically during tumultuous events that often develop into high exchange levels between managers and employees. Yang et al. (2017) discovered that servant leaders provide employees with feedback to enhance engagement and retention. Servant leaders use LMX to demonstrate deeper concerns for followers' well-being and success, increasing followers' value to the organization and minimizing turnover intention.

### ***Transactional Leadership***

Mutual dependence between leaders and followers is the basis of transactional leadership (TL). TL is used more by leaders who focus on individual than collective goals (Xu & Wang, 2019). Still, TL appears to be one of the most practiced leadership theories in modern management styles. Initially introduced by Burns (1977), the concepts of TL have become one of the most practiced leadership philosophies. Some may confuse TL with LMX because dyadic exchanges between leaders and followers occur in each theory, but TL principles are distinctly different from LMX. Unlike managers of LMX, TL managers often rely more on bartering for selfish gains than establishing quality

relationships with followers (Hassi, 2019). Nevertheless, reciprocity is the hallmark of TL and, in some instances, can be effective.

Managers may temporarily increase organizational effectiveness with TL, but Khan (2017) purported that gains associated with TL diminish after accomplishing goals and fail to produce follower development. Transactional leaders also focus on achieving the goal as a destination, and LMX leaders focus on building solid relationships for goal attainment. The relationship between leaders and followers creates interdependence between the two throughout the journey of LMX (Graen & Schiemann, 1978). Retaining employees, specifically the top performers of an organization, must be a continuous process instead of a single goal.

TL is still helpful in certain aspects of organizational management. According to Ma and Jiang (2018), TL helps overcome chaotic, unruly situations. Transactional leaders are capable of bartering rewards for good behavior. TL may be helpful in times of massive layoffs or weak economies in the context of organizational chaos. Managers implementing this leadership theory would be able to use the threat of terminating employees or the reward of maintaining jobs to gain specific organizational behaviors. Xenikou (2017) found that employees viewed TL as less favorable to innovation than goal orientation.

Successful leaders understand the importance of earning the members' confidence they lead. Successful leaders also understand that followers must believe that they have a sincere and authentic leader before buying into the organization's goals. Transactional leaders use power over employees to establish employee commitment to the organization

(Alrowwad et al., 2020). Every manager understands that leaders must be competent with identifying boundaries in the organization at some point throughout the management process. Still, managerial threats represent ineffective measures for long-term commitments. Hassi (2019) revealed that TL failed to create affective commitment among employees because employees felt undervalued.

The closest leadership theory to LMX in the exchange process is perhaps TL. Buch et al. (2016) linked the two theories but concluded that transactional LMX failed to generate affective commitment and job satisfaction and produced low work performance. Yu et al. (2018) warned that LMX differentiation could have a similar effect on group performance because of the reality or perception of member inequality. This study focused on retaining high-performing salespeople on an individual basis instead of focusing on the group. Employee retention of each sales team member is not always ideal or genuinely desired if the sales team fails to produce optimum results. Some researchers found a correlation between coworker support and employee retention (Elche et al., 2020). Still, TL represents a low-quality form of leadership (Yu et al., 2018). When leadership principles such as worker differentiation become counterintuitive, managers should balance worker differentiation and team cohesiveness to retain high-performing talent over low-performing teamwork.

TL has benefits and similarities to LMX for short-term and situational success, but the theory fails to secure the retail salesperson's sustainable behaviors. Leaders who believe in LMX theory focus on developing social relationships with followers to benefit both leader and follower (Buch et al., 2016). According to Hartnell et al. (2016), leader

effectiveness in establishing healthy social relationships is pertinent to maintaining productive organizational environments. Some LMX leaders experience better individual results and achieve positive organizational results by having the most committed employees who have lower propensities to leave the company.

### **Turnover Intentions**

Retail salespeople have some of the most challenging responsibilities in the job market. Researchers have linked high turnover intentions of salespeople with emotional and ethical stressors related to the job (Castro-Gonzalez, S. et al., 2021). The emotional and mental nature of the retail job, combined with often long work hours, is a tremendous challenge for some people. Retail managers seek employees capable of enduring fast-paced, sometimes competitive work environments, with alternating work schedules (Patel et al., 2018). Frankel (2016) found that many Amazon employees who earned large salaries left the company within the first year of employment because company leaders failed to connect with them on a personal level. Employee turnover is a realistic aspect in the retail industry, but managers must develop effective strategies to retain top performers. Voigt and Hirst (2014) believed that managers should establish strong relationships with employees to enhance employee commitment and provide financial rewards. Job satisfaction is relative to employee turnover intention (Lee & Ha-Brookshire, 2017). Corporate leaders may increase employee retention and experience more organizational success with employees who have positive attitudes toward the company.

Retail managers should develop unique relationships with followers to capture

and retain top talent. Recent research on employee retention revealed that employees rate leadership as the determining factor when deciding to stay or leave a company (Letchmiah & Thomas, 2017). The success and failure of the organization rely on the success of the leadership and management teams. Effective leadership can develop relationships with followers that cultivate perceived organizational support (Gaudet & Tremblay, 2017) and affective commitment (Rathi & Lee, 2017). Human resource managers should discover leaders who understand practical leadership requirements as the retail industry evolves.

High turnover intention promotes employee turnover and excessive organizational expenses that minimize the organization's sustainability. Sunder et al. (2017) purported that companies lose billions of dollars due to employee turnover and training new salespeople. Nataraj and Rajendra (2018) discovered that in addition to upfront costs associated with hiring and training employees, companies jeopardize earnings when the relationship between the customer and the organization diminishes. Customer-oriented research revealed higher retention rates of customers and employees in organizations with solid customer-employee relationships (Fazel-e-Hasan et al., 2019). Failing to retain high-performing salespeople creates internal and external threats to the organization.

Threat identification is not always easy to discover after the hiring process has begun, and some experts think managers must better confirm employee compatibility. Olubiyi et al. (2019) acknowledged that managerial success begins in the hiring process's interview phase. The interviewer's goal is to ensure that the applicant can complement the organization's culture. According to Lu et al. (2015), employee-organization

compatibility leads to job satisfaction and better retention rates. Employee retention may be easier to maintain when leaders develop communication strategies that accentuate employees' relationships throughout the employment process (Brown et al., 2019). Trust developed between leaders and followers may lead to better identification of employee turnover intention.

Employee attrition is natural for many organizations because employees retire, move to other company divisions, or geographically relocate from the area. Carriger (2018) contended that strategic attrition could benefit organizational effectiveness. Organizations suffer when leaders fail to engage with employees and include them in their plans. According to Baharin and Hanafi (2018), effective talent management occurs when employees engage with corporate goals and commitments. Organizational leaders must develop strategies to retain the most productive and highest performing employees in competitive and capitalistic economies. Theorists of LMX, transformational, servant, and TL discovered that committed employees typically have fewer intentions to leave the company than employees who feel alienated by management. Maslow (1943) identified nine distinct human needs, and according to D'Souza and Gurin (2016), physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization are most known. Retail leaders must execute leadership strategies to preserve organizational resources through natural attrition and identify employees' needs.

The battle with employee turnover begins before employees resign from the company. Researchers discovered that a third of U.S. employees explore alternatives to leave the organization before quitting (Boichuk & Menguc, 2013). Organizational leaders

must identify dissatisfied employees and attempt to engage with them before they leave the company. According to Boichuk and Menguc (2013), employees who never express emotions towards the organization are likely dissatisfied and do not desire to verbalize personal concerns about the job. Organizational leaders must develop leadership strategies to create open communication levels that allow greater employee engagement.

In retail sales management, leaders' objective is to increase sales and minimize expenses. Lu et al. (2015) posited that the retention of high-performing salespeople is the most crucial objective for leaders to accomplish if they desire productive and efficient organizations. Researchers have also found that having positive workplace cultures is pivotal to retaining the organization's most productive employees (Xiong & Wen, 2020). The organization's culture must align with the organization's corporate identity to sustain a healthy workforce (Simoes & Sebastiani, 2017). An organization's message to the public on trust and reliability should resemble messages delivered to internal employees.

Employees continually seek employment with organizations where the level of engagement exceeds financial rewards. According to Boichuk and Menguc (2013), employees often contemplate leaving companies where management relationships fail to exceed financial transactions. Khalid and Nawab (2018) proclaimed that employees define compensation beyond a paycheck and want payment in full acceptance where employee input matters to the organizational regime. Followers feel more vulnerable when leaders fail to add listening and recognition quotients to the compensation package. Retail managers who demonstrate organizational support may establish affective commitment from followers.

### ***Perceived Organizational Support***

Traditional retail managers consider financial rewards in the forms of a salary, commission pay, or bonus as the most appropriate resources to attract and retain high-performing salespeople but fail to consider intangible resources that may be more appealing to some employees. According to Isa et al. (2018), leaders have a better opportunity to develop dedicated employees by demonstrating the willingness to support employees on personal, individual levels. In many cases, financial rewards only create temporary results because some high-performing salespeople want more from organizational leaders than monetary rewards. Retail managers must influence high-performing salespeople to believe that the organization's branding originates with the salesperson at the center of the process (Dechawatanapaisal, 2017). High performers expect fair compensation for their efforts but being treated as essential members is perhaps the best form of compensation.

Retail employees often struggle with work demands and personal responsibilities, increasing the need for support from organizational leaders to see employees beyond being profit earners. Wang and Wang (2020) concluded that perceived organizational support reduced mental exhaustion and employee retention. In addition to feelings of worth in organizational decision-making, high-performing salespeople need to know that the management staff supports individuality. Li et al. (2018) found a direct correlation between the effective use of perceived organizational support and higher employee retention rates. Leaders' social exchange must confirm that managers provide organizational support by valuing employees' cultures, beliefs, and ideas to earn their



commitment to the organization.

### *Affective Commitment*

Affective commitment is an essential feature that managers seek to enhance employee retention. Hassi (2019) determined that satisfied employees demonstrate affective commitment to the organization. Happy, satisfied employees think more about advocating than abandoning the organization. Affective commitment occurs when employees reward the organization with time, selfless acts of contribution, and team loyalty because of an emotional attachment with the organization or organizational leaders (Loi et al., 2015). Employees who go above and beyond the management team's expectations without receiving direct motivation from the management team are affectively committed to the organization. Affective commitment also leads to effective organizational outcomes (Shin et al., 2020). Leaders with high employee retention rates have employees who demonstrate higher affective commitment levels (Lee & Ha-Brookshire, 2017). Affective commitment is an essential concept for leaders to understand to establish strong interpersonal relationships with followers.

Successful employee retention efforts require leaders to commit to integrity and ethical discipline strategies. Turnover intention diminished, and employee job attitudes increased in organizations with high ethical levels (Brown et al., 2019). Leaders should develop effective strategies for establishing affective commitment, and LMX is a leadership philosophy that has proven effective. Garg and Dhar (2016) conducted a study of close to 500 participants and found that LMX positively influenced affective commitment among the organization's employees. Likewise, Cropanzano et al. (2017)

reported that higher-quality LMX relationships between leaders and employees increase employee affective commitment. Leaders who use internal organizational quality strategies can develop affective commitment among employees who often remain with the company (Brown et al., 2019; Kedziora et al., 2018)). The social exchange between managers and employees influences the retention outcomes for the organization.

### **SET**

The SET is the foundation of organizational behavior. Sungu et al. (2019) proclaimed that multiple interactions or exchanges occur between coworkers, vendors, and patrons within organizational operations. The basis of human interaction theory originated in the early 20s, but in the early 60s, George Homans developed SET to reveal social interactions' cultural and interpersonal aspects (Muldoon et al., 2018). Based on behavioral psychology, SET explains why people interact or respond to others based on the perceived benefits of a relationship (Nazir et al., 2018). Researchers have discovered strong correlations between individual ability and group centralization (Luria et al., 2019). In the context of employee retention, SET provides insight into how retail leaders can influence followers to stay with the organization using motivation and rewards (Kuvaas et al., 2020). Social exchanges occur between leaders and followers regardless of the management philosophy implemented.

Successful employee retention requires a robust social exchange between leaders and followers. Social exchange is identified by interpersonal relationships between employees and managers (Shin et al., 2020). Leaders need employees to commit to the organization's culture, processes, and procedures to develop sustainable measures.

According to Kurtessis et al. (2017), employees demonstrate higher social exchange levels when psychologically and emotionally connected with the company. Developing strong relationships between managers and employees is one of the feature benefits of LMX leadership. Chen et al. (2018) opined that LMX is most beneficial when differentiating between employees based on their commitment to the organization.

Social exchange occurs dyadically and demands equal participation from each member. According to Anand et al. (2018), social exchanges require leaders and managers to mutually contribute to the relationship for successful conclusions. Also, followers are more likely to stay with the organization if the interpersonal relationship is enriching and satisfying. Covella et al. (2017) posited that productive social exchanges and LMX diminished employees' desire to leave the organization.

Economic and social exchanges exist between leaders and followers in the organizational workforce. Nazir et al. (2018) suggested that organizations rich in social exchanges also found higher innovation and organizational support from followers. High-performing salespeople desire equitable financial compensation, but researchers continue to discover that high performers also demand inclusion, consideration, and respect from leaders before offering a total commitment to the organization. Li et al. (2018) argued that followers decide the quality of reciprocity with leaders on their social exchange quality. The responsibility of skillful leaders is to identify which follower desires economic exchanges over social exchanges and which follower desires a balance of both.

The exchange between leaders and followers is the basis of the employee-organization relationship. The foundation of organizational social exchange occurs when

employees determine the value of treatment received from managers and then decide the value of a reciprocated response (Kuvaas et al., 2020). Social exchange and LMX are interconnected and necessary to implement retention of the organization's highest-performing salespeople. Managers and employees must develop social exchanges to ensure job satisfaction remains high for employee retention (Park et al., 2017). The interpersonal relationship between leaders and followers is determined by each member's relationship instead of a universal set of rules for everyone.

Leaders with excellent listening skills usually demonstrate high empathy and emotional intelligence levels. In the context of LMX, active listening is the foundation of establishing solid bonds between leaders and followers (Lloyd et al., 2017). Active listening informs leaders that followers expect incentives for carrying out processes of the organization. Likewise, considering a social exchange perspective, employees should anticipate incentives for demonstrating behaviors and performances required by management (Chen et al., 2018). According to Montani et al. (2017), high LMX relationships' rewards increase affective commitment and employee satisfaction, culminating in the organization and employee's dual benefits.

Reciprocity is higher between leaders and followers who mutually commit to increasing the value of their relationship. According to Sungu et al. (2019), employers and employees should anticipate reciprocation when each demonstrates the behaviors desired by the other. After providing necessary economic and social compensation, employers should expect loyalty and commitment from employees. Employees who demonstrate high-performance levels, organizational behavior, and affective commitment

maintain the expectation that managers will reciprocate knowledge-sharing (Wu & Lee, 2017). LMX and social exchange incorporate equal balances of reciprocity for successful exchanges within the organization.

Social exchanges between managers and employees require work, commitment, dedication, and sacrifice to thrive. Interpersonal relationships between leaders and followers rely on the quality of social exchanges between them (Ahn et al., 2018). SET underscores the importance of each follower's exchange mechanism or ideology. Kim et al. (2017) suggested that social exchanges in the organization depend on followers' ideology to the extent that reciprocity with leaders is affected. According to Utkarsh (2022), reciprocity is the primary tenet of the theory. Through the lens of SET, LMX provided clarity to understanding the diverse nature of followers in the organizational environment.

### **Transition**

Section 1 included an overview of problems experienced by retail managers in the absence of effective retention strategies for salespeople. A key point revealed that some organizations lose over \$10,000 each time a salesperson quits. Additionally, in Section 1, I highlighted how leaders who use the LMX theory enhanced the potential for employee retention through differentiating between employees, and I provided a review of leadership theories relevant to employee retention strategies.

In Section 2, I discussed how I conducted the research and ensured trustworthiness. Critical points in Section 2 included ethical guidelines established by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and *The Belmont Report* that I followed in conducting

this study. I discussed my strategy for the informed consent form, data analysis, and how I ensured trustworthy research.

In Section 3, I present the study's findings, answer the research question, and include how retail leaders could use the study's findings in their employee retention programs. Section 3 concludes with my recommendations for further research on salesperson retention, personal reflections, and a conclusion to this study.

## Section 2: The Project

Section 2 of this study includes the strategy for researching this topic. I introduce Section 2 with the (a) purpose of the study, (b) my role as the researcher in this qualitative study, (c) criteria for the selection process of the participants, (d) justification for the methodology and design of the study, and the (e) defense for the sampling method. This section also addresses ethical requirements provided by the IRB and *The Belmont Report*. Finally, I conclude this section by discussing the reliability and validity of the collected data.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore successful strategies that some retail managers use to retain high-performing salespeople. The target population included retail managers in one Atlanta department store who implemented retention strategies for high-performing salespeople. The findings in this study may provide retail managers and business leaders with the ability to increase profitability through an awareness of how to retain high-performing salespeople. The implications for positive social change include increased employment opportunities, lower unemployment rates, and surplus tax revenue for the local community.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I was the primary data collection instrument for this research study. Qualitative researchers operate as the main instrument to collect and report data from research participants (Yin, 2018). Researchers must guard against projecting subjective views onto research participants (Karagiozis, 2018). The researcher's proximity to the research topic

may create unique challenges with conducting an objective study. Researchers can mitigate subjectivity by developing deep, reflective conversations with participants (Halling et al., 2020). I have a unique perspective on this research topic after having personal experience of 35 years in the sales industry, 16 years in retail, 28 years as a manager, and 15 years of retail management experience. Still, I adhered to strict ethical behavior to conduct this study. I selected participants from a retailer where I had no business relationship with the company or the employees.

I also followed guidance from *The Belmont Report* to adhere to ethical standards for this research. In *The Belmont Report*, respect for persons, beneficence, and justice are the three principles researchers use to protect participants (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects and Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Qualitative researchers rely on *The Belmont report* to maintain ethical behavior throughout the research process. Additionally, the foundation of all IRBs is *The Belmont Report* (Lantos, 2020). Case study researchers also have an individual responsibility to adhere to the ethics of scholarship to ensure accuracy (Yin, 2018). Therefore, the consent form and interview protocol were tools that I used to demonstrate respect, maximization of benefits, and fairness with the participants.

In addition to following ethical guidelines, I conducted member checking to mitigate personal biases and increase the study's reliability. Researchers validate collected data and enhance trustworthiness using the member checking technique (Birt et al., 2016). I provided each participant with my summary and interpretation of their responses to confirm the accuracy of my interpretations. I used a reflective journal as an



additional strategy to document personal interpretations, thoughts, and opinions during the data collection process. Reflective journals allow researchers to uncover hidden biases when used with peer debriefing (Noble & Smith, 2015). I maintained and reviewed my notes as part of the data collection process and member checking to mitigate bias.

Open-ended interview questions also helped to mitigate personal researcher bias and establish reliability in the study. The most effective interview questions relate to the participants' experiences, knowledge, and feelings (Rosenthal, 2016). I asked the interview questions by using an interview protocol (see Appendix) that assisted participants in understanding the purpose and process of the interview. Researchers use the interview protocol as an instrument of inquiry to guide the interview session with scripted questions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). I asked each participant the same questions in sequence to ensure consistency. Participants and researchers also gain an enhanced ability for reflexivity by having an interview protocol (Perera, 2020). The sample size for this study was small, but the implementation of the interview protocol aided in capturing unique data. Moreover, qualitative interviews provided an in-depth opportunity to explore the phenomenon, particularly in cases that involve a smaller number of people (DeVaney et al., 2018). Because of consequences relative to the Covid-19 pandemic, I conducted virtual interviews via Zoom, and I used a total of three audio recording devices after one of my first devices malfunctioned and stopped recording on the initial interview.

### **Participants**

I implemented eligibility criteria for participants to participate in this study. The basis of purposeful selection for qualitative researchers is deciding who and what matters

as potential data to collect (Reybold et al., 2012). The participants for this research were retail managers who had implemented successful strategies for retaining high-performing salespeople. Qualitative researchers use purposive sampling to select experienced participants for the study (Knechel, 2019). Therefore, to meet additional eligibility criteria, participants had to be over 21, directly interact with frontline salespeople, and have 2 years or more of retail managerial experience.

My strategy to gain access to participants included identifying the organization's gatekeepers. Using gatekeepers is one of the best strategies to gain access to participants (Vuban & Eta, 2018). After receiving Walden's IRB approval to conduct this study, I contacted each gatekeeper via email to formally introduce myself. I invited gatekeepers to participate in the study and explained the purpose of the research by using the informed consent form. However, there are multiple hurdles researchers encounter when accessing participants that they are responsible for overcoming (Amundsen et al., 2017; Perera, 2020), which in this study included the complexities associated with Covid that made the establishment of relationships with the gatekeepers particularly difficult. Additionally, many retail managers work in fast-paced environments and have significant time constraints. I attempted to build rapport and demonstrate transparency with participants by explaining my management role and experience in the retail industry. Researcher transparency is an essential guideline by the IRB (Connors et al., 2019). For transparency, I used the informed consent form to reveal the study's interview questions and a written explanation that participants could stop the interview at any time if they decided to participate.

## **Research Method and Design**

### **Research Method**

The qualitative method offered three distinct benefits to this study. First, qualitative researchers want to extend beyond the knowledge gained from identifying phenomena and advance knowledge through critical thinking (Bansal et al., 2018). For this study, high employee attrition rates in the retail industry represent knowledge that many leaders accept as truth. Still, managers who successfully retain high-performing salespeople in high turnover cultures represent a new phenomenon. Additionally, qualitative researchers capture real-world, authentic perspectives of the phenomena' environments (Ospina et al., 2018). For this study, exploring the retention phenomenon through the qualitative method was advanced beyond describing or identifying the phenomenon of understanding the strategies managers utilize to create the phenomenon.

Second, the retail industry benefits from qualitative research with an opportunity to view employee retention through a different lens. Many articles researched for this study were quantitative rather than qualitative research. Valuable research exists on employee turnover, but researchers may have left a gap in the literature on retaining top-performing salespeople. Quantitative researchers consider relationships between independent, dependent, and extraneous variables that focus on predictive behavior or hypotheses. Predicting what may occur if one variable influences another variable is not the focus of this study. The use of variables could distort observed relationships and negatively affect research (Bernerth et al., 2018). Therefore, the quantitative method did not apply to this study.

Finally, sales managers could learn meaningful strategies in the retail industry from qualitative studies. Qualitative researchers who unpack knowledge may discover new insights from observations learned through collected data (Bansal et al., 2018). By conducting this study, I explored distinct steps practical for minimizing turnover and, more specifically, for retaining high-performing salespeople. Quantitative or mixed method methodologies may be informative but more explanatory than an explorative perspective. Mixed method researchers approach studies thoroughly but fail to provide the clarity necessary for this study. Mixed method researchers demand a thorough examination of quantitative and qualitative methods (Van Griensven et al., 2014). The lack of clarity in mixed method research made the mixed method inapplicable for this study. Therefore, the qualitative method was the best method to answer the research question regarding strategies retail managers use to improve the retention of high-performing salespeople.

### **Research Design**

I used an exploratory single case study design to conduct this qualitative study. Researchers use the case study design when their goal is to develop an in-depth and real-world exploration into a phenomenon (Guetterman & Fetters, 2018). The case study design was most appropriate for this study to explore practical strategies that retail managers use to retain high-performing salespeople. Researchers using the case study design have practical purposes for their research (Rule & John, 2015). Exploring retention strategies in the context of an actual high-paced retail environment can only occur in the case study design where the researcher controls the format and timing.

Before deciding on the case study design, ethnography, phenomenological, and narrative research designs were considered. Ethnography and phenomenology are two of the most prominent designs for qualitative research (Jamali, 2018). Ethnography requires a long-term, in-depth study of the culture where the phenomenon occurs (Rashid et al., 2019). Phenomenological research explores the meaning of human interactions (Dinkel, 2005). Researchers who use the phenomenology design analyze the phenomenon's meanings without assuming a specific methodological approach (Crowther et al., 2017). Ethnography and phenomenology designs were inappropriate for this study because the focus in this study was not to explicitly understand the culture of the retail facility nor examine the meaning of human interactions within the facility.

### **Population and Sampling**

The sample size for this qualitative study was four retail managers from a retail facility in Atlanta, Georgia, who implemented successful strategies to retain high-performing salespeople. The sample size was small, but the depth of experience of each participant justified the small sample. Qualitative researchers explore phenomena more for depth than the breadth of knowledge and could use a minimum of one participant (Boddy, 2016). Moreover, qualitative researchers commonly use sample sizes as small as four for single case studies (Sim et al., 2018). Researchers do not have a consensus for sample size sufficiency, but using small samples is valuable when researchers seek depth in case-oriented analysis (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Additionally, knowledge gained from the context of the phenomenon is more pertinent than the number of participants in the study (Englander, 2018). Therefore, using four retail managers who implemented the

most successful strategies to retain high-performing salespeople justified the number of participants for this study.

Researchers use sampling methods to identify participants within a population who have the best characteristics to represent the study. Researchers choose probability or non-probability categories to select the appropriate sampling method (Berndt, 2020). Random selection is the basis of probability sampling, but the researcher's judgment is the basis for nonprobability sampling. Researchers who use nonprobability sampling seek convenience, snowball, or purposive methods. Moreover, researchers who use convenience sampling risk losing generalizability for the study's results, and using the snowball method prevents direct participants' recruitment (Emerson, 2021; Leighton et al., 2021). I used purposive sampling to maintain generalizability and directly recruited participants for this study. Researchers who have prior knowledge or experience with the overall population use purposive sampling to select participants capable of providing the most relevant information to the study (van Rijnsoever, 2017; Vasileiou et al., 2018). To satisfy the sampling criteria for this study, I selected retail managers who (a) had implemented successful strategies for retaining high-performing salespeople, (b) were over the age of 21, (c) directly interacted with frontline salespeople, and (d) had more than 2 years of retail management experience. Researchers who use the most inclusion and exclusion selection criteria benefit most from purposive sampling (Andrade, 2020). Directly selecting participants who had specific qualifications, skills, and knowledge justified the use of purposive sampling for this qualitative single case study.

Data saturation is essential to the quality and validity of the study. Researchers

achieve saturation when collected data no longer yield new information to the study (Fusch & Ness, 2015). To ensure data saturation, I used the interview protocol (see Appendix) and asked the participants open-ended questions that required detailed responses until new information ceased to develop. Researchers who ask open-ended questions offer the best opportunity to achieve data saturation and uncover the most pertinent themes from participants (Weller et al., 2018). Researchers must seek saturation through themes instead of data (Constantinou et al., 2017). Most new information occurs within the first five interviews for thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2020). Therefore, I continued data collection with the four participants until the repetition of themes emerged.

I established an interview setting where the participants felt comfortable answering open-ended questions via video conferencing. Qualitative researchers can use a question-answer sequence using the participants' own words to ask follow-up questions (Roulston, 2017). To uncover themes, I asked permission from the participants to record the interviews. Qualitative researchers traditionally use audio recorders and transcribe interviews to identify themes (Young et al., 2020). I used multiple audio recording devices to record the interviews and create an opportunity to make personal notes as the participants spoke. I continued to collect data until the repetition of themes occurred.

### **Ethical Research**

Governing authorities in the research community require qualitative researchers to conduct ethical research for participants' protection and preservation of research integrity. I adhered to Walden's IRB guidelines and *The Belmont Report*. Before

initiating the interview and data collection, I adhered to ethical guidelines and ensured ethical treatment of participants by gaining informed consent before interviewing and collecting data. In research, respect for people, beneficence, and justice represent three standard principles in *The Belmont Report* for researchers to follow (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects and Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Vilma (2018) also posited that ethical standards include (a) integrity, (b) objectivity, (c) carefulness, (d) openness, (e) respect for intellectual property, (f) confidentiality, (g) responsible publication, (h) legality, and (i) human protection. I demonstrated openness and transparency with each participant by providing specific information on the study's purpose in the informed consent form.

In the informed consent process, participants could consent or reject participation in the study. The participants had to sign a consent form to confirm the understanding of their ethical rights and establish an open communication level in the research process (Biros, 2018). Foe and Larson (2016) argued that researchers must inform research participants with readable and understandable consent forms. Bloswick and Skowron (2019) found that participants comprehend better with short consent forms. Therefore, I used a short consent form to provide thorough but concise information that detailed the study's purpose.

*The Belmont Report* includes specific guidelines for researchers on protecting the rights of research participants. According to Miracle (2016), (a) respect for participants, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice represent three ethical standards established in *The Belmont Report*. Research participants have a right to autonomy and do not have to



participate in research studies. I demonstrated respect for participants' autonomy by providing an informed consent form (see Appendix B) via email and allowed the participants the opportunity to accept participation in the study. I requested that the participants simply sign and email the informed consent form back to me within 5 business days if the participants consented to participate in the study. I further respected participants' autonomy by providing a physical address to return the consent form for participants who preferred traditional mail to email. I demonstrated beneficence or goodwill by using the consent form to make participants aware of potential harms associated with this study. Finally, to demonstrate the standard of justice, I used the consent form to inform participants that they could refuse or withdraw from participating in the study at any time without experiencing any negative consequences from their company or me.

I used the consent form to inform participants that their names and company name would remain confidential and not shared. Oye et al. (2019) explained that the research's confidentiality is the researcher's responsibility. To preserve their confidentiality, I refrained from using participants' names and instead used the pseudonyms of P1, P2, P3, and P4 for each participant. Additionally, I informed the participants to refrain from using their names, employees, and organization's names. Participants received written notification that their information would be held for at least 5 years and retained on computer devices requiring password access. The participants' responses and information will be destroyed after 5 years by shredding documents and deleting information from hard drive and thumb drive devices. Honest communication is essential to the informed

consent process (Burr & Gibson, 2018). I used the consent form to inform participants that they would not receive any financial incentives or compensation for their participation. I also provided the participants with a sample of the interview questions to clarify the study's purpose and intent. Walden's approval number to conduct this study is 11-23-21-0750926 and it expires on November 22, 2022.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

As the primary data collection instrument for this qualitative single-case study, I initiated data collection only after receiving IRB approval. I used semistructured interviews to guide the data collection for this qualitative single-case study by following the interview protocol (see Appendix A). Researchers can build rapport with research participants by conducting face-to-face interviews (Alita & Lucinda, 2017), but I conducted interviews virtually because of the Covid-19 pandemic. I asked the participants 10 open-ended interview questions in sequence as outlined in the interview protocol, and I asked follow-up questions when appropriate to confirm clarity. Luna-Reyes and Anderson (2003) purported that data collection through interviews allows researchers to gain clarity from the often-unsupported participants by other data collection techniques.

I recorded the participants' answers to my interview questions to complement the interview instrument. Yin (2018) posited that case study researchers use multiple data collection sources to discover confirmatory evidence. Additionally, I reviewed a portion of the participants' bonus and performance documentation as secondary data collection instruments. I sought industry publications on the company to confirm the information's

reliability, but no publications existed. For IRB compliance, I concealed the participants' identities and their company's identity on any documents that I collected during the process.

I conducted the interviews using virtual media via Zoom. According to Brown (2010), case study researchers must prepare and expect problems to occur during the data collection. Interestingly, one of the first recorders that I used, a brand-new device, stopped functioning within 5 minutes of the first interview. Thankfully, I had an additional recorder that captured the interview in totality. Lloyd et al. (2006) posited that interviewers should prepare for the potential language difficulties of the participants. I secured each participant's consent and used digital recorders to record the interview process to mitigate language difficulties. Peesker et al. (2019) suggested that qualitative researchers record semistructured interviews to capture rich data provided by the participants. I also used the recorder to record personal notes and observations throughout the interview process.

I used member checking as an instrument to confirm data collection, but member checking is risky if misused. Birt et al. (2016) argued that qualitative researchers must implement member checking to mitigate researcher bias and validate the collected data. According to Morse (2015), member checking is most effective if confirmed between each participant throughout the data collection process instead of allowing participants to review all the collected data. I reported the data as collected and allowed the participants to confirm my recordings' accuracy without jeopardizing the research's integrity.

### **Data Collection Technique**

Qualitative researchers have a range of techniques to consider for data collection. Chu and Ke (2017) purported that interview, observation, and questionnaire techniques are three of the most popular data collection techniques for researchers. Moreover, Wiseman et al. (2019) found that one-on-one interviews are among the most utilized data collection techniques for qualitative and quantitative researchers. Therefore, I used semistructured, one-on-one interviews, and I followed the interview protocol (Appendix A) as the data collection technique for this study.

Case study researchers, particularly in a qualitative context, want to understand a phenomenon by exploring the participants' environment where the phenomenon takes place. Peesker et al. (2019) argued that semistructured interviews allow researchers the necessary flexibility to capture the experiences and feelings of the participants. Therefore, I asked open-ended questions to provide the participants with the best opportunity to express their experiences.

Data collection is critical to conducting thorough research but equally important is how the data is collected. In the context of interviews, Rosenthal (2016) purported that researchers must digitally record in-depth interviews. I used digital audio recorders to capture direct responses from the participants. Document analysis is also essential for quality research. According to Siegner et al. (2018), effective analysis of documents adds to the overall inquiry. I reviewed the participants' documents and assessed if the documents were relevant to this study. Bowen (2009) posited that researchers must view documents critically and confirm that the documents support the conceptual framework. I

viewed the documents, particularly to seek qualitative value instead of focusing on how many documents the participants produced.

### **Data Organization Technique**

I used digital recording devices with playback functionality that captured the participants' verbal statements in real-time. I made written notes during the interview, but I captured intricate details with the digital recorder. Audio recordings are more reliable than recalling conversations by memory (Yin, 2018). The recording devices used were solely for this study and only consisted of audio recorded from the participants. I used NVivo software to assist with coding and transcribing the collected data. NVivo is a superb software tool for managing and analyzing qualitative data (Maher et al., 2018). The IRB's federal guidelines mandate researchers to protect data collected from participants (Connors et al., 2019). Therefore, I secured copies of notes, logs, and audio recordings collected from the participants in a locked safe only be accessible by me for 5 years after completing the study. After 5 years, I will delete the recorded data.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative researchers rely on analyzing collected data to gain knowledge from the research. Moreover, Roger et al. (2018) believed researchers' success relied on the data analysis quality. Yin (2018) recommended case study researchers (a) explore, (b) categorize, (c) tabulate, (d) test, and (e) recombine evidence as five steps for analyzing data. Braun and Clarke (2006) believed qualitative researchers could use thematic analysis to extract essential data. Qualitative researchers use thematic analysis's flexibilities to use multiple analysis techniques and develop unique strategies to identify

and analyze data themes (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). For this single case study, I used thematic analysis as the data analysis process.

Researchers can conduct thorough, in-depth, and credible investigations by implementing multiple phases of thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) introduced six phases of thematic analysis that include (a) familiarization with the data, (b) generating codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining themes, and (f) producing the report, but Nowell et al. (2017) cautioned that Braun and Clarke's method is more iterative than linear because researchers constantly weave between each phase. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) condensed thematic analysis from the six-phased method into five steps that include (a) compiling, (b) disassembling, (c) reassembling, (d) interpreting, and (e) concluding. I used the five-step method of thematic analysis.

### **Thematic Analysis 5 Step Method**

**Compiling-**I developed an intimate relationship with the data by reading, transcribing interviews, and collating the responses. According to Castleberry and Nolen (2018), researchers develop a greater understanding of the meaning of terms and phrases after becoming familiar with the data. I reviewed field notes of participant observations, audio recordings, transcriptions, and journal entries to develop familiarity with the data. Yin (2018) emphasized the importance of qualitative interviewers to utilize data transcriptions software to mitigate the time-consuming process of data transcribing. I used NVivo software to facilitate the data analysis.

**Disassembling-**After reading to become immersed in the data, I separated the data into meaningful groups through coding. Researchers can extract specific characteristics

from data through coding (Nowell et al., 2017). I utilized my interview questions as a guide to establishing a path for identifying and interpreting data characteristics.

Additionally, I used NVivo software to organize the data into different categories. NVivo is accurate, fast, and flexible to work with all data types (Yakut Cayir & Saritas, 2017).

According to Constantinou et al. (2017), the first step towards saturation is coding into categories. I also use colored pens and highlighters to help manage and analyze collected data.

Reassembling-I placed the codes into context to create themes. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) opined that themes are patterns in the code. I organized themes into main themes and subthemes around my research question. Braun and Clarke (2006) posited that this is the stage where researchers begin differentiating between codes, themes, and different levels of themes. I used NVivo as a digital source to show code clusters across the data.

Interpreting-I initiated the interpreting process from the onset of analyzing. Interpretation is essential during the first three data analysis steps (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Specific to this stage, I developed a thematic map to highlight descriptions of themes and patterns in the data. Schaab et al. (2020) found thematic maps helpful with revealing patterns and relations because researchers could focus more on the quality than quantity of themes. I used interpretations gained from this step as the foundation for my conclusions.

Concluding, I described coding procedures of how codes and patterns of codes led to themes. Nowell et al. (2017) informed researchers to conclude the analysis with a

concise, coherent, and logical summation of the data across themes. I provided a final analysis of the findings by presenting the themes uncovered in the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the conclusion must provide more than a data report, and Castleberry and Nolen (2018) purported that the researcher must yield meaningful results. I triangulated the collected data and provided a conclusive analysis of my research question.

To triangulate the data, I used methodological triangulation. Researchers who use methodological triangulation collect data from multiple sources, gain a deeper understanding of the data, and minimize personal biases (Fusch et al., 2018). Farquhar et al. (2020) purported that the findings' internal validity increases for case study researchers who use methodological triangulation. I collected data from interviews and company documents. Saks (2018) supported using multiple data collection sources because researchers develop more opportunities to compare results. I used methodological triangulation to triangulate multiple qualitative data sources in this case study.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Qualitative researchers have the responsibility to demonstrate quality and rigor in qualitative inquiry. According to Yin (2018), researchers use reliability and validity criteria to judge research quality. Reliability and validity represent essential elements of the qualitative process because researchers must prove that the research is trustworthy. Thus, researchers use the criteria of dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability to ensure research quality (Constantinou et al., 2017). I used the four



concepts to demonstrate quality and rigor in this study.

### **Reliability**

Qualitative researchers provide research participants with opportunities to present their reality to the world, but the researcher ensures that the presentation is reliable. Yin (2018) purported that researchers obtain research reliability when the repetition of their data collection measures produces similar results for future researchers. Constantinou et al. (2017) believed researchers must ensure dependability to achieve research reliability. According to Maher et al. (2018), researchers ensure dependability with detailed audit trails. I ensured dependability by using member checking. Member checking is a technique researchers use to validate collected data with participants for accuracy (Birt et al., 2016). Still, Young et al. (2020) highlighted distinguishable challenges using member checking as a post-interview technique and argued that researchers should use member checking in real-time during the interview phase. In addition to member checking, I used an interview protocol to ensure dependability.

I used an interview protocol (see Appendix A) and asked each participant the same interview questions in the same sequence. Castillo-Montoya (2016) found the interview protocol most beneficial for refining interviews. According to Hitchings and Latham (2020), researchers who conduct interviews provide detailed information regarding the number of participants in the study and the selection process. I documented the interviews by taking detailed notes of the participants' verbal comments and corporate documents. I also documented the criteria used for the selection process and notated the qualifications of the participants. I used an interview protocol that systematically

described the research process to ensure dependability.

### **Validity**

Qualitative researchers use credibility, confirmability, and transferability as criteria to measure research validity. Researchers develop research credibility with accurate and truthful accounts of participants' lived experiences and confirmability when participants verify the researcher's data collection and analysis (Cypress, 2017; Hayashi et al., 2019). Moreover, only research participants can validate or provide credibility because the qualitative researcher collects data through the participants' lens (Maher et al., 2018). I ensured credibility and confirmability by using member checking with participants. According to Wiseman et al. (2019), researchers must allow research participants to identify discrepancies with collected data or interpretations of the data to ensure credibility. I used member checking to confirm my interpretations and to ensure credibility. Pandey et al. (2018) opined that researchers achieve confirmability by conducting meticulous observations throughout the study. I used member checking and a reflexive journal to record my observations, decisions, and interpretations from this study to ensure confirmability.

The transferability of the research will be subjective to future researchers. The basis of transferability is the ability of research findings to be transferred to different settings in different contexts (Maher et al., 2018). Morse (2015) explained that researchers must provide clear, thick descriptions of the research context for transferability to exist. I ensured transferability by engaging in transparent documentation to provide detailed descriptions of the data collection process, participants' selection

process, the context of the phenomenon, and research findings.

I used methodological triangulation to ensure data saturation by collecting participant interviews, hiring documents, performance reviews, direct observations, and online articles. Researchers achieve data saturation when the volume of captured data ceases to produce new themes or results (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data saturation informs researchers when to stop the data collection process, so I continued interviewing participants until no new information emerged. Moon (2019) opined that data triangulation legitimizes the study and is one of the best methods to demonstrate rigor. I ensured data saturation by collecting and analyzing data until new information ceased to occur.

### **Transition and Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore successful strategies that some retail managers use to retain high-performing salespeople. In Section 2, I discussed how I conducted the research and ensured trustworthiness. Critical points in Section 2 included ethical guidelines established by the IRB and *The Belmont Report* that I used to conduct this study. Section 2 also revealed how I planned to use the informed consent form to demonstrate respect, beneficence, and justice with research participants. I also shared in Section 2 how I used the 5-step method of thematic analysis for the data analysis process. Finally, in Section 2, I concluded with an overview of how I implemented the interview protocol and member checking for research reliability and validity.

In Section 3, I present the study's findings. Moreover, I answer the research

question in Section 3 and intimate how retail leaders could use the study's findings in their employee retention programs. Furthermore, in Section 3, I present recommendations for future research on retail employee retention strategies and general business practices. Finally, in Section 3, I provide personal reflections on my experiences throughout this doctoral process.

### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore successful strategies that some retail managers use to retain high-performing salespeople. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), retail managers experience employee attrition rates of 70% each year. Additionally, some organizational researchers discovered that organizational productivity and efficiency diminished with high employee turnover rates (Xiong & Wen, 2020). Furthermore, there have been positive correlations between the retention of high-performing employees and the profitability of successful stores (Suhartanto & Brien, 2018). Exploring how current retail managers retain their high-performing salespeople in a disruptive, pandemic market is essential to the overall sales industry and the communities they serve.

In this study, I collected data from four retail sales managers from a retail store located in Atlanta, Georgia. Participant identification for the four sales managers is P1, P2, P3, and P4. Average managerial experience for the participants exceeded 20 years, and in answering the research question, the findings revealed that the retail managers used (a) interpersonal relationships, (b) recognition, and (c) consistent programs or procedures to retain high-performing salespeople successfully. In Section 3, I include a comprehensive review of the findings, how the findings may be applied to professional practice, and what social change implications may occur from the research findings. Additionally, I discuss recommendations for useful action and further research, including my reflections and the study's conclusions.

## **Presentation of the Findings**

This study's overarching research question was "What strategies do retail managers use to improve the retention of high-performing salespeople?" I conducted semistructured interviews via Zoom with four retail managers who successfully implemented employee retention strategies in response to the research question. The managers articulated their strategies to retain high-performing salespeople on their teams by responding to open-ended questions. I recorded the audio of the interviews and used NVivo software to organize and analyze the collected data. Thematically, I used Castleberry and Nolen's five-step method of analyzing data into themes. Castleberry and Nolen's five-step method is a revised, condensed version of Braun and Clarke's six-step technique. The following themes emerged from data provided by the retail managers: (a) interpersonal relationships, (b) recognition, and (c) operational programs/processes. Additionally, (a) differentiation, (b) rewards, and (c) respect emerged as three subthemes of the collected data.

### **Theme 1: Interpersonal Relationships**

Interpersonal relationships emerged as the first theme from the data because each of the four participants stressed the importance of gaining or earning their salespeople's trust. Moreover, each participant emphasized the importance of trust in building solid relationships with salespeople. This finding supports the literature that identified trust, rewards, and development as three essential tenets of high-quality LMX relationships (Wong et al., 2022). According to P1, managers must honor all promises made to employees, P2 mentioned that managers must demonstrate that they genuinely care about

the personal success of their salespeople, P3 stated that managers earn trust when salespeople know that they are valued beyond the numbers they produce, and P4 proclaimed that people do not work for a company, but instead they work for people.

The theme of interpersonal relationships is also supported by literature on the SET. Based on behavioral psychology, SET explains why people interact or respond to others based on the perceived benefits of a relationship (Nazir et al., 2018). Trust, confidence, and loyalty are three essential benefits of interpersonal relationships in the social exchange context (Utkarsh, 2022). The participants in this study appeared to base successful retention efforts on their relationships with their salespeople. The emergence of interpersonal relationships revealed a subtheme on the value of differentiation within the organization.

### ***Differentiation***

Differentiation emerged as a subtheme to interpersonal relationships because the participants mentioned the words different, difference, or differently over 59 times when referencing how they established relationships with each salesperson. This additional finding supports existing literature and connects with the conceptual framework of LMX in this study. Based on the literature, leaders have different relationships, interactions, and experiences with each follower (Graen & Schiemann, 1978). Moreover, LMX differentiation positively affects leader humility and follower engagement (Carnevale et al., 2019). P1, P2, and P4 made the strongest statements about differentiation.

P1 emphasized that managers must engage with 10-year and 10-month tenured salespeople differently. P1 clarified that the differentiation he applies is based on

coachability, positive attitudes, and willingness to learn instead of employee tenure. P2 stated that managers must deal with different variables for each salesperson. Specifically, P2 explained that each salesperson has different demands based on their personality. This is perhaps where researchers caution the use of differentiation in the literature. According to Yu et al. (2018), the differential aspect of LMX has detrimental consequences on team performance because of the leader's treatment of in-group and out-group members within the organization. However, P4 referenced the 41-year tenure in retail sales being a direct result of senior management's differentiation strategy. P3 places the value of differentiation on the context of the moment. Specifically, P3 emphasized the importance of connecting with salespeople to know when to push and when to cradle them.

## **Theme 2: Recognition**

Recognition emerged as the second theme from collected data. The participants referenced recognition over 54 times during the interviews. This finding supports existing literature such as Meyer et al. (2022), who discovered that leaders who emphasize recognition also increase organizational support from followers. P1 believed that positive recognition is the most critical technique managers can use to prevent voluntary attrition. P4 believed that recognition is equally crucial to long-term and new employees. Additionally, P4 shared experiences of how salespeople compete against each other just to have their names mentioned on the intercom for recognition.

Findings of the recognition theme also confirmed existing literature on social exchange within the organization and the potential for positive effects when used correctly. In the context of employee retention, the SET provides insight into how retail



leaders can influence followers to stay with the organization using motivation and rewards (Kuvaas et al., 2020). Each participant highlighted how they use rewards as a recognition technique to retain salespeople.

### ***Rewards***

In the context of recognition, rewards emerged as a significant subtheme in the data. Rewards provide socioemotional support for employees (Kuvaas et al., 2020). Each participant rewarded their salespeople differently but agreed in the overall principle of rewarding salespeople for retention or behavioral purposes. Both monetary and non-monetary rewards are valuable for different roles or jobs in the organization (Meyer et al., 2022). P1 agreed with the literature and mentioned consistent uses of words to encourage and demonstrate appreciation for salespeople. P1 believed that showing appreciation to employees encourages them to come to work and commit to the organization. P2 used monetary and non-monetary rewards by providing time off for salespeople or cash bonuses. This participant stressed the importance of knowing their staff to understand the reward most appropriate for the employee. P3 used cash bonuses and recognized salespeople in front of their peers. P3 believed that salespeople feel more important when they publicly receive positive recognition and are more likely to remain with the organization. P4 agreed with the use of non-monetary rewards and implemented a program where salespeople could earn lapel pins for years of service, good work performance, and customer compliments.

### **Theme 3: Process/Programs**

Organizational processes or programs emerged as the third theme from the

collected data. The participants discussed the importance of implementing programs and procedures that support the desired organizational cultures. Mikkelsen and Wahlin (2020) opined that creation, interpretation, and enactment represent the three interrelated organizational culture processes. P4 discussed the value of programs extensively and how maintaining effective processes and programs created positive work environments where salespeople did not quit. P4 led a recognition program and had experience measuring the effectiveness of recognizing employees for anything positive. P4 also mentioned how working through effective programs created the opportunity to develop interpersonal relationships with salespeople.

P3 provided experience from a different perspective of what happens when effective processes or programs cease existence. P3 also explained how new management shuttered existing programs and subsequently led to a massive turnover on the sales staff. More importantly, P3 explained how reimplementing those strategies stabilized the organization and increased employee and customer retention. Mulligan et al. (2021) purported the value of programs for high-quality organizational effectiveness and competitiveness. P1 and P2 mentioned their reliance on programs to train and develop salespeople for successful outcomes. P1 and P2 also emphasized that managers must create successful programs where salespeople can witness personal success. From this perspective, respect emerged as a significant subtheme to processes and programs.

### ***Respect***

In high volume sales, some managers can get lost in processes and programs and fail to apply appropriate focus to the value of respect every salesperson deserves from

their manager. According to Isa et al. (2018), leaders have a better opportunity to develop dedicated employees by demonstrating the willingness to support employees on personal, individual levels. Existing literature provides evidence that employees who affectively commit to the organization usually remain with the organization. According to Hassi (2019), managers who respect their salespeople more successfully gain their commitment. Each participant mentioned that managers must demonstrate respect for their salespeople by seeing them first as human beings.

P1 mentioned experience with recharging high performers who lost their productivity by viewing salespeople as human beings instead of mechanisms in the sales chain. Letchmiah and Thomas (2017) discovered that leadership styles could directly affect turnover intention. Demonstrating respect to salespeople appears to connect to the existing literature in this study. P2 also believed that treating employees like human beings and listening to their concerns is essential to successful retention efforts. According to Isa et al. (2018), leaders have a better opportunity to develop dedicated employees by demonstrating the willingness to support employees on personal, individual levels. P3 and P4 each recalled how their experiences with managers who treated them with respect caused their lengthy tenures in the retail industry.

### **Theoretical Applicability**

The peer-reviewed articles highlighted in the literature review aligned with the emergence of themes from data collected and analyzed from (a) semistructured interviews, (b) compensation, and (c) performance documents. Themes that emerged included: (a) interpersonal relationships, (b) recognition, (c) operational

programs/processes, (d) differentiation, (e) rewards, and (f) respect. Nazir et al. (2018) identified interpersonal relationships, rewards, and management processes as implementation considerations for sustainable organizations. The retail managers' responses provided in this study indicated they used strategies discovered in the literature to retain high-performing salespeople.

Interpersonal relationships, recognition, and operational programs/processes represented three themes that emerged from the data and were identified by researchers throughout the literature review. Wong et al. (2022) proclaimed in the literature that rewards and high levels of interactions between leaders and followers characterized high-quality organizations. Also in the literature, Utkarsh (2022) highlighted the importance of interpersonal relationships to organizational effectiveness, and Brown et al. (2019) purported in the literature that managers employ employee retention strategies easier with employment processes that develop clear communication strategies. The participants confirmed their use of techniques discussed in the literature for retention strategies they use to retain high-performing salespeople.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

The findings could be significant to the applications of professional practice in the retail industry. Moreover, the results of this study support existing literature on strategies implemented by managers to prevent their employees from leaving the organization. Epler and Leach (2021) argued that the salesperson's position must be viewed through macro and micro lenses instead of a universal approach to each salesperson. From a macro perspective, retail leaders, managers, and salespeople have had to re-imagine

business operations because of challenges created or exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Labor shifts, store closures, shifting consumer behaviors, elevated business costs, and panic led to chaos at each level in retail (Stewart & Stewart, 2021). Retail managers have had to work with a smaller staff and diminished inventories while maintaining the focus to maximize profits.

The findings in this study provide retail leaders with insight into how essential salespeople view trust for relationship-building. Carnevale et al. (2019) believed that trust between leaders and followers is the foundation of LMX and positive social exchanges. Retaining the most productive and profitable employees is not a new revelation, but findings in this study provide retail professionals with tools on how the retention process is executed. Although the e-commerce market increased by over 20 billion dollars during the early stages of the pandemic, some forecasters think a resurgence of retail storefronts is possible (Collins-Thompson et al., 2021; Park & Lee, 2021). However, retail leaders need to retain their best salespeople regardless of whether a surge of retail storefronts occurs because consumers demand professional, prompt, and courteous delivery of services through any medium they choose to use. Effectively, the findings in this study provide retail professionals with (a) trust-building, (b) direct communication, (c) recognition, and (d) respect as effective retention strategies that retail leaders and managers may implement in a modern, disruptive sales environment.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The inability of managers to retain high-performing salespeople continues to plague the retail industry and diminishes the survival opportunity for retail facilities and

the communities they serve. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, researchers discovered retail store closures in the United States exceeded 60% over store closures in 2018 (Burayidi & Yoo, 2021). Undoubtedly, numerous retail executives have closed or considered closing stores during the pandemic. Consequently, negative financial costs related to retail store closures are devastating to neighborhood stability (Talen & Park, 2021). Fox et al. (2021) identified store closures, specifically building vacancies, as drivers of violent crime and neighborhood devaluation. Therefore, in addition to job creation, the implications of this study's results on social change provide industry, organizational and political leaders with an opportunity to develop mitigation strategies for communities plagued by high volumes of building vacancies, high rates of crime, violence, and property devaluation.

### **Recommendations for Action**

The participants in this study shared intimate knowledge on what they experienced and overcame in a modern, Covid-19 era retail environment. Eroglu et al. (2022) discovered that customer rapport with retail salespeople is one of the most significant factors determining consumers' shopping behaviors during the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, it is of utmost importance that retail managers retain salespeople who have a range of soft skills to demonstrate with consumers. Retail managers can use the findings in this research to retain high performers on the sales team. The managers who find this study's findings useful and adopt critical elements shared by the participants may offer their organizations the best opportunity for success in the current and post-pandemic era of retailing.

Based on the findings in this study, personal experiences as a manager, sales professional, and customer, my recommendations for action include:

- **trust development:** Each of the participants in this study mentioned the importance of earning the salesperson's trust. Xu et al. (2019) opined that retail employees thrive at their job by minimizing absenteeism and increasing organizational effectiveness in the presence of positive dyadic relationships. On a practical level, I suggest that retail managers under promise but over deliver on employees' expectations because salespeople are often distrusting, superstitious, and sometimes negative. Bharadwaj et al. (2022) discovered that salespeople's emotions negatively affected sales production in close to 50% of transactions. On the surface, this statistic appears negative, but in retrospect, informed leaders can use this data to implement routine performance appraisals to develop transparency and trust.
- **disseminate findings to organizational leaders:** Human resource (HR) managers, regional, district, and store managers need to pay attention to the results of this study. The managers can benefit from the qualitative approach and collection of data in this study. In the context of high-performance work systems, Jewell et al. (2022) criticized the disconnect between existing literature and real-world applicability in the workforce. In this study, industry leaders can benefit from the real-world applicability of the findings because the participants in this study are current managers leading diverse sales teams during a global pandemic. Automated systems appear to be the wave of the

future. Still, leaders of brick-and-mortar retail facilities need real-world solutions to retain customers and employees in this disruptive retail era.

- **disseminate findings to industry leaders:** The results of this study may be disseminated at sales and retail management conferences. The overall purpose of this research was to explore proven strategies for the modern retail environment. Therefore, the results of this study may indeed be disseminated in organizational training rooms to develop future leaders in the sales industry.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The results discovered in this study provide industry and thought leaders with valuable tools for employee retention. The depth of responses gained from the interviews provided personal confirmation that the qualitative approach was appropriate for this study. Considering the societal events throughout this research study, providing statistical data about current retail problems would have been insufficient and outdated because employee statistical data changed dramatically within the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The decision to gain current, accurate, and in-the-field data during a disruptive period in business illuminated information that sales managers can immediately implement.

However, for further research on retention strategies for retail salespeople, I recommend researchers consider multiple organizations for participation instead of one organization. Because of Covid restrictions, having only one company as a participant organization became a major limitation and disruption to the completion of this study. The final company participant was not the original participant of this study. I had to resubmit documentation to the review committee and repeat the recruiting process



multiple times before finding a company that could participate. Additionally, interviewing managers from multiple organizations would have enriched the study with experiences from different organizational cultures.

Finally, I recommend future researchers explore internal documentation from the department. Conflicts of confidentiality occurred in this study but having internal documentation from HR could have provided more insight into the organization's culture regardless of the management staff. Retention strategies are prevalent for every organization, but strategic human resource management must lead from onboarding talent to developing sustainable strategies. P4 shared experiences of how employee retention suffered when senior management changed. The lack of internal documentation of this study limited my ability to ascertain if the organization's HR department fully supported the efforts of the retail managers in this study. For further research, collecting internal documentation that pertains to recruiting and the onboarding process could enhance the development of successful retention strategies for high-performing salespeople and other employees in the organization.

### **Reflections**

I have endured multiple challenges on this doctoral journey. I understood that pursuing this process required sacrifice, commitment, and determination. Still, I did not understand how difficult it would be to maintain personal motivation after experiencing the death of six family members to the Covid-19 virus. The experience of losing a family member can be devastating by itself, but in the context of Covid-19, we had no time to prepare, mourn, or memorialize our loved ones. Pursuing this journey after such tragic

events seemed unnecessary and a waste of time, but I am grateful for the strength bestowed by God to stay on the course and complete this journey.

Academically, I have been in the second phase of my collegiate experience for the last 10 years. I benefited from earning three consecutive degrees before pursuing this doctoral degree, and I believed that I had the discipline required for this journey. However, I was unprepared for the level of structural resistance from previous faculty members. Specifically, this was the first experience in my academic career where I felt that I had faculty members who wanted me to fail instead of wanting me to succeed. Thankfully, I was blessed with a student advisor and program director who cared and resolved my concerns. Consequently, I now have advocates on this journey with me with my current committee and I am forever grateful.

Professionally, I am excited to implement what I have studied and learned throughout this process. I am now as confident as a professional researcher as a professional in the retail sales industry. I have improved my written and verbal communication skills through this journey. Additionally, I have reviewed my leadership strategies from a macro lens and have become a better leader.

### **Conclusion**

No one knows precisely how retail will change post-covid, but progressive retail leaders understand that the role of human resources is vital to the organization's success. Successful organizational leaders understand that retaining the most valuable members of the organization is essential to the organization's sustainability. For many retail managers, salespeople represent the most important members of the revenue process. The

purpose of this qualitative single-case study was to explore successful strategies that some retail managers use to retain high-performing salespeople. I conducted semistructured interviews of four sales managers currently working in the retail industry to explore and answer the research question. Using methodological triangulation and data analysis, I discovered (a) interpersonal relationships, (b) recognition, and (c) programs as three themes that emerged from the data.

Each theme aligned with current literature and the conceptual framework of LMX. I discovered specific strategies that modern-day retail managers use to retain high-performing salespeople. In addition to the three prevalent themes, I discovered that retail managers use (a) differentiation, (b) rewards, and (c) respect as subthemes of implementation. I conducted this study during a global pandemic where retail leaders experienced shortages of workers and inventory. Findings in this study provide current and future retail managers with relevant strategies for retaining high-performing salespeople in diverse, disruptive, and traditional markets.

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## Appendix: Interview Protocol

Participant Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Total Time: \_\_\_\_\_

What to do	What to say
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce myself to the participant.</li> <li>• Go over the contents of the consent form.</li> <li>• Answer questions or concerns from the participant.</li> </ul>	<p>Hello, my name is Eric Packer. I am a doctoral student at Walden University in the Department of Business Administration, and I am researching Employee Retention Strategies for Managers in the Retail Industry. My research and your participation will aid retail organizations by exploring retention strategies for high-performing salespeople. First, I want to thank you in advance for your time and participation in this study. Previously, I provided you with the consent form, but do you have any questions or concerns that we need to answer before we begin? If not, I will turn the recorder on, and we shall begin.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Turn on recording devices.</li> <li>• Introduce the participant by the pseudonym and verbalize the date and time.</li> <li>• Ask the interview questions beginning with question #1 and proceed to the final question in succession.</li> <li>• Ask follow-up questions if necessary.</li> <li>• Conclude the interview and demonstrate courtesy by thanking the participant.</li> <li>• Confirm contact information of the participant and interviewer for follow-up.</li> <li>• Inform the participant that the interview is over and the recording ends now.</li> <li>• End of the interview protocol</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What strategies have proven to be most effective in improving the retention of high-performing salespeople?</li> <li>2. What are the barriers to improving the retention of high-performing salespeople?</li> <li>3. How did you overcome the barriers to improve the retention of high-performing salespeople?</li> <li>4. How do you assess the effectiveness of the strategies used to improve the retention of high-performing salespeople?</li> <li>5. What internal marketing do you use to improve the retention of high-performing salespeople?</li> <li>6. How often do you evaluate the retention strategies for high-performing salespeople?</li> <li>7. What strategies did you implement to identify high-performing salespeople who intend to quit?</li> <li>8. What benefits should managers offer to high-performing salespeople to improve their retention?</li> <li>9. How might recognition strategies of high-performing salespeople improve retention rates?</li> <li>10. What additional information would you like to provide about strategies that you used to</li> </ol>

improve the retention of high-performing salespeople?

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Wrap up interview thanking participants for their time.

Thanks again for participating in this study and sharing your retention strategies. Your participation will provide other retail leaders with practical strategies to retain high-performing salespeople and increase value to the overall industry. After transcribing the data received today, I will provide you with a summary to review and confirm the accuracy of the data collected from the interview. Please remember that your name, the name of your organization, and your organization's specific location will remain confidential.

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Schedule follow-up member checking interview

I should have the data transcribed and ready for review within the next 14 days, and it would be advantageous if we could schedule a follow-up meeting to review the recording. The review process will last no longer than 45 minutes, so would you like to check your calendar for the best day of availability in the next 14 days?

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