2022

Leadership Strategies to Motivate and Retain Employees in Small and Medium Enterprises

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Abstract

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MS, Concordia University, 2012

MBA, Concordia University, 2007

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December 2022

Abstract

Organizational leaders find it challenging to determine what leadership strategies motivate and retain employees in their company, especially during a pandemic. Not knowing which leadership strategies would successfully motivate employees leads to higher turnover, less profitability, and higher costs to replace employees. Grounded in transformational leadership theory, the purpose of this multiple case study was to explore strategies corporate leaders use to motivate and retain employees in small and medium businesses (SMEs) in southeastern Wisconsin (WI). Data were collected from semi-structured interviews with eight participants from eight SMEs of southeast WI, as well as analyzing company documents. Yin's 5-step process was followed, and four themes emerged: meeting employees' individual needs, open communication and transparency, training and challenging employees, and increased compensation and benefits. A key recommendation is for organizational leaders to allow employees to work at home if they don't feel safe going to work. The implications for positive social change include the potential for organizations to realize greater profitability and communities to prosper because of more people working.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this study to my mom, Jean English, who encouraged me to move forward with my education even though others felt that I had enough education, and that a doctoral degree would not be worth the time, money, or effort. Unfortunately, she passed away, but I know she is looking down at me from the heavens, and that she is proud of me for going all the way.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the people who kept me going through this journey, even though there were times when I just wanted to give up because of multiple life trials and tribulations. First and foremost, I would like to thank my boss, Jeanne Seadler, who would always ask about my progress and encourage me to keep going even though she knew that there were difficulties with multiple chair changes and the difficulties of trying to get my participants. Others I would like to acknowledge are my husband, Kevin, and my granddaughter, Ellie (whom I adopted), as they understood that I could not partake in many family activities because I had to work on my study. I would also like to thank Dr. Erica Gamble for being there when I needed her and helping me to get to the end of this journey.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

With the introduction of COVID-19, corporate leaders are finding it harder to determine the correct leadership strategies to motivate and retain employees. What may have worked for the organizations pre-COVID, may not work at the present time and cause organizations to lose current and valuable talent. When organizations lose valuable talent, they will have to spend valuable resources and money to replace that talent. Therefore, this study is to help leaders understand what leadership strategies they can use to motivate employees and in turn alleviate employees looking elsewhere for employment.

Background of the Problem

When a company has high employee turnover, owners of the organization incur increased costs of business such as time lost because of loss of production and the marketing needed to hire new employees with the same experience to replace the ones who have exited (Letchmiah & Thomas, 2017; Li et al., 2016). High turnover can affect employees' morale, which can affect the bottom line of the organization (Gyensare et al., 2016). One of the causes of low employee retention can be the lack of leadership strategies to motivate employees (Mittal, 2016). Leaders can use strategies to motivate employees to continue with the organization to mitigate high employee turnover problems.

If leaders want employees to perform high-performance work and continue in the organization, leaders must determine what leadership strategies will help them accomplish employee motivation (Malik et al., 2017; Pongpearchan, 2016). The purpose of this study was to explore leadership strategies used by corporate executives in small to medium enterprises (SMEs) in southeast Wisconsin to motivate and retain employees. This research is relevant because when organizational leaders can maintain low turnover, they will not incur increasing costs for the organizations. Additionally, the unemployment rate will not increase because more people are staying employed. Working consumers will spend more, thus increasing the demand for jobs and improving the economy.

Problem and Purpose

Small to medium enterprises (SME) organizational leaders experience lower employee retention when leaders are not implementing strategies for increased employee job motivation and job satisfaction (Park et al., 2019). Replacing employees who leave due to lack of motivation can cost organizations up to 2.5 times the former employee's salary for lost productivity, recruitment, and training (Bussin & Brigman, 2019). The general business problem was that when employees are not satisfied with their employment, they look for jobs elsewhere, and corporations incur costs to find new employees to replace those who left the organization. The specific business problem was that some SME corporate executives lack leadership strategies to motivate and retain employees.

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore leadership strategies that SME corporate executives use to motivate and retain employees. The targeted population was corporate executives from eight southeast Wisconsin SMEs who demonstrated successful leadership strategy implementation to motivate and retain employees. Improved employee motivation could lower employee turnover and contribute to social change by maintaining higher employment rates in communities. As organizational leaders implement leadership strategies to motivate and retain employees, leaders might also improve family dynamics for their employees and increase prosperity in their communities.

Population and Sampling

At the beginning of a study, a researcher decides the appropriate population to answer the study research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2013), researchers establish a criterion strategy, such as successful leadership experience and length of service for this study, to select participants who are a fit for the research study with the goal of obtaining in-depth information (Anney, 2014). The criteria for selecting participants for this study was (a) participants who were over the age of 18, (b) who were corporate executives or high-level managers in small to medium enterprises for at least 5 years, (c) who operated in southeastern Wisconsin, and (d) who were successful in motivating and retaining employees. Only participants who met the sample criteria were recruited for the study.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative methodology researchers develop a deeper understanding of the responses to interview questions by asking *what*, *how*, and *why* of the situation (Yin, 2018). In contrast, quantitative methodology researchers test hypotheses to examine the significance of variables' relationships or groups' differences using numerical data that the researcher can analyze statistically (Abramson et al., 2018). Mixed method methodology researchers use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies to answer a research question (Turner et al., 2017). As such, qualitative methodology was more appropriate for this study than quantitative or mixed methods. Neither quantitative nor mixed-method methodologies were appropriate for this study because the object was to ask the *what*, *how,* and *why* of the research question, not test any hypotheses about the significance of variables' relationships or groups' differences.

A multiple case study was an appropriate design method for this research versus an ethnographic or phenomenological design method. According to Yin (2018), case study research is for situations where a researcher is not studying historical phenomena but contemporary phenomena and addressing the *what*, *how,* and *why* interview questions. Ethnography research design is for cases in which a researcher goes into the field and observes participants over time to characterize cultures (Trnka, 2017). Phenomenological design research is for conditions in which a researcher seeks to describe the meanings of participants' experiences phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). Case study research design was more appropriate for this study because observing certain cultures or groups for a prolonged period would not be viable and gaining precise details to explain a human experience was not the focus of this study. Instead, this study sought to answer the research question topic's *what, how, and why* inquiries. Therefore, a case study design was the appropriate design for this study.

Research Question

What leadership strategies did SME corporate executives use to motivate and retain employees?

Interview Questions

Researchers use open-ended interview questions to get participants to elaborate on the question being asked (Yin, 2018). Open-ended questions give the participant the ability to answer the *how*, *what*, and *why* of each question, rather than answering a short yes or no. This study consisted of the same nine open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview process with all participants of the study.

1. What leadership strategies are you using to motivate and retain your employees?
2. What leadership strategy works best to motivate and retain your employees?
3. How do you determine which leadership strategy works best to motivate and retain your employees?
4. What leadership strategies work best to inspire your employees?
5. How, if at all, do your motivation strategies differ from individuals to groups?
6. How do your employees respond to your different motivation strategies?
7. What principal barriers have you experienced when trying to motivate employees?
8. What did you do to overcome the principal barriers you experienced when trying to motivate employees?
9. What additional information would you like to add about how your leadership strategies motivate your employees?

Conceptual Framework

I chose to use transformational leadership theory as the conceptual framework for this study. In 1978, James MacGregor Burns first coined transformational leadership as characterizing a leader who could inspire and stimulate followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Bass then evolved the concept of transformational leadership into transformational leadership theory in 1985 (Bass, 1985a). Transformational leaders inspire and stimulate followers, empowering and enabling them to help set and meet attainable goals (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leaders also help followers exceed performance, thus helping them develop into leaders who commit to an organization (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leadership theory consists of four components: (a) idealized influence, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individualized consideration (Bass, 1985b). Bass and Riggio (2006) argued that if a leader can understand a follower's sense of worth by paying attention to individual needs, the leader can help followers develop their own leadership capabilities. Bass's transformational leadership theory aligned with this study as a lens for exploring and understanding the leadership strategies that help to motivate employees.

Operational Definitions

Contingent reward: Contingent reward is a reward offered by leaders to employees in return for a desired work performance and behavior when accomplishing tasks that are mutually agreed upon (Bedi et al., 2016).

Extrinsic motivation: Extrinsic motivation is the leadership use of praise and rewards for employees for a job well done, as well as punishment for infractions (Bear et al., 2017).

Idealized influence: Idealized influence is a leader's ethical and morally correct actions or behaviors because the leader is an example for their followers (Bass, 1998; Prasad & Junni, 2016).

Individualized consideration: Individualized consideration is when a leader listens to and helps each employee individually (Prasad & Junni, 2016).

Inspirational motivation: Inspirational motivation is when a leader motivates and inspires followers by involving them in the leader's vision for the future (Bass, 1998; Woolley & Fishbach, 2018).

Intellectual stimulation: Intellectual stimulation is when a leader challenges employees to take risks to stimulate creativity and innovativeness (Prasad & Junni, 2016).

Intrinsic motivation: Intrinsic motivation is when an employee is motivated by a feeling rather than receiving a tangible reward as motivation (Woolley & Fishbach, 2018).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are beliefs that researchers assume to be true but without evidence or verification (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). There were three assumptions to this research. The first assumption was that participants would answer the interview questions honestly. The second assumption was the collection of rich data from the responses to the interview questions would enable me to answer the research question of this study. Lastly, the third assumption was that study participants had used successful strategies to motivate and retain employees.

Limitations

Limitations are weaknesses in research that can influence the findings of a study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). There were three limitations to this study. Queiros et al. (2017) posited that the researcher's inability to generalize study findings is a limitation of case study designs. The first limitation was the study findings may not be generalizable to a larger population. The second limitation of this study was possible researcher bias, which would compromise the study's rigor. According to Fusch et al. (2018), qualitative researchers could compromise qualitative studies' reliability and validity when researchers introduce personal bias into the study. The third limitation pertained to the transferability of the study results. According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), transferability is something that the readers determine based on whether or not the study's research findings can be applied in other contexts. A detailed description of the research process will be provided so the reader can determine whether the results would be transferable; however, I recognize that the research findings are not transferable to all settings, groups, and people.

Delimitations

Delimitations of a research study are boundaries that researchers set during the study's initial planning phase (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). There were three delimitations to this study. The first delimitation was that one to eight participants from eight organizations would participate. The second delimitation was the participants' experience. Only employees with a minimum of 5 years of experience in a leadership position were invited to participate. Lastly, the third delimitation was only leaders from SMEs in Southeast Wisconsin would be recruited to participate in the study.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practice

When corporate leaders can determine and use the appropriate strategies to motivate and retain employees, leaders can decrease turnover rates in their organizations. Reduced turnover rates increase profits and competitive advantage (Mittal, 2016). Also, costs to replace employees can be two times the former employee’s annual salary (Kurdi et al., 2020). The expenses to replace employees who leave due to a lack of motivation include marketing for recruitment, hiring and training recruits, and loss of productivity (Li et al., 2016). Potential loss of knowledge the former employee takes with them is also part of the expense (Tlaiss et al., 2017). Retaining talented employees by challenging, motivating, training, educating, and promoting them can help organizational performance, create a competitive advantage, and increase profits (Chung & D'Annunzio-Green, 2018). The research findings may be valuable to SME corporate executives by providing insights into strategies that increase employee motivation and retention. When company leaders understand the needs and desires of their employees, leaders can be successful in reducing turnover rates (Sun & Wang, 2017).

Implications for Social Change

This research could contribute to positive social change because lowering employee turnover could result in more people employed in the community, thus increasing tax revenues. Also, the implementation of employee motivation leadership strategies can result in improved family dynamics for the employees. In turn, improved domestic dynamics can also result in an overall enhancement of community citizens' quality of life. An additional outcome of sustained community employment is increased financial support for charities and programs. Increased community activities and jobs can help government leaders to revitalize a community (Stephan et al., 2016).

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore successful leadership strategies that SME corporate executives use to motivate and retain employees. The literature review begins with a comprehensive critical analysis and synthesis of the conceptual framework used for the study: the transformational leadership theory. Also discussed are the theory components of employee motivation and retention, as well as the subset components of organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Next, the contrasting theories of transactional leadership, situational leadership, and leader-member exchange are noted, including a discussion of employee motivation and retention within each contrasting theory.

The databases used for conducting the research were Business Source Complete, Emerald Insight, Sage Journals, Proquest, ABI/Inform Complete, and Google Scholar. Keywords used to search the literature were *transformational leadership theory*, *transactional leadership*, *transactional leadership theory*, *situational leadership*, *leader-member-exchange leadership*, *motivation*, *job satisfaction*, *retention*, and *organizational commitment*. The literature review contained 120 sources, of which 91.89% were peer-reviewed, and 85.83% had publication dates within 5 years of my anticipated graduation in 2022.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Burns first discussed transformational leadership in 1978 as characterizing a leader who could inspire and stimulate followers (Burns, 1978). Bass later developed the transformational leadership theory based on Burn's first use to propose a leaders' approach to gaining trust and respect from their followers (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1996; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Because each follower is different, the effective balance of respect and trust also differs. Additionally, identifying and incorporating followers' needs and personal development is essential to successful transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006). When followers can meet personal goals, the followers will then help to meet organizational goals.

Transformational leadership benefits both employees and organizations by helping employees achieve organizational goals through empowerment and vision (Xu, 2017). Employees produce more for organizations when employees have a transformational leader because employees are more committed and engaged in their jobs (Alatawi, 2017b). Having transformational leaders in charge of organizations helps employees feel like an integral part of the organization; therefore, employees will work harder. Employees have more positive attitudes and work ethics when there is a transformational leader (Ohunakin et al., 2019). Organizational leaders and employees will benefit from a transformational leader because more productive employees will in turn benefit the company.

Leaders who adopt a transformational leadership style can positively transform employees and help them excel in corporations. Transformational leaders change employees in three ways: collective identification, value internalization, and self-efficacy (Bass, 1985b). Thus, followers of transformational leaders are part of a team, have values that align with the organization, and have the potential to accomplish personal and organizational goals (Siangchokyoo et al., 2020). A transformational leader is adept at motivating the followers to achieve more than followers thought possible (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leaders help employees develop work habits, which benefits both the employees and the organization.

Transformational leaders become change agents who develop followers by using motivation and inspiration to help employees achieve their goals (Alatawi, 2017a; Bass & Avolio, 1994). A leader who is a change agent also initiates and implements new ideas for employees within the organization (Ohunakin et al., 2019). Transformational leaders can also help employees reach their fullest potential (Bass & Avolio, 1994). When a transformational leader works as a change agent, followers can reach their fullest potential because leaders prompt employees to think beyond what the employee would ordinally do.

Additionally, transformational leaders look out for the best interests of their followers (Northouse, 2018). Sim and Lee (2018) conducted a study involving 188 full-time employees in organizations in Korea, finding that employees who felt like misfits felt better when a transformational leader believed in the employees. Employees will want to perform at their best when employees feel leaders acknowledge their efforts and understand their needs. When multiple organizational leaders focus on an employee's well-being and self-worth, the employee will go above and beyond reasonable work expectations (Pradhan et al., 2018). Transformational leaders who focus on followers' well-being help employees feel less stress within the organizational culture (Liborius, 2017). Employees feeling a greater sense of self-worth because their leader is looking out for their best interests will work at their highest potential to support their leader in achieving both personal and organizational goals.

Transformational leaders can positively influence organizations through employee commitment. Employees may work harder and commit to the organization when there is a transformational leader (Engelbrecht & Samuel, 2019). Additionally, employees who commit to the organization may not leave the organization for better opportunities (Park & Pierce, 2020). Transformational leaders can ensure that employees are devoted to the organization through the way leaders treat their employees. Therefore, organizational leaders will benefit from employing transformational leaders because employee talent remains constant through employee commitment.

Transformational leaders can also have a positive impact on organizations through encouraging and fostering their employees' creativity (Malik et al., 2017). By utilizing their imaginations, employees can find ways to be innovative and perform their jobs more efficiently (Boamah et al., 2017). Transformational leaders in organizations would challenge employees to be more creative in finding ways to fix old problems in new ways (Kimeto et al., 2017). Transformational leaders were found to encourage creativity and help employees be more innovative in a study of 53 managers and 230 followers from four different SMEs in Tunisia (Boukamcha, 2019). Employees who became more innovative were responsible for new business in their enterprises (Boukamcha, 2019).

Transformational leaders can also help benefit the organization by ensuring higher performance and productivity of employees through motivation. Transformational leaders who motivate employees experience increased productivity (Varma, 2017). Likewise, employees will work harder to meet organizational goals with transformational leaders, saving the organization from expenses because of lower productivity and lower performance (Alatawi, 2017a; Judeh & Abou-Moghli, 2019). Organizations can experience lasting benefits when employees are at peak performance and productivity.

Leaders who do not have a transformational leadership style can develop one through training (Alatawi, 2017a). Engelbrecht and Samuel (2019) conducted a study of 232 participants, of which 40.8% were middle managers from multiple organizations in South Africa. Engelbrecht and Samuel found if leaders received training to be transformational leaders, they can help keep retention high in organizations. Leaders who receive training in transformational leadership behaviors such as coaching, employee development, and feedback can also help followers continually develop their careers (Lee et al., 2019). Kimeto et al. (2017) studied 240 senior managers in commercial banks in Kenya, finding that when leaders coach employees to be more innovative, they help to further employee development and careers. Thus, leaders who participate in continual training and development programs can gain a better understanding of transformational leader characteristics.

Four Constructs of Transformational Leadership Theory

Four constructs are associated with transformational leadership theory. The underlying constructs are (a) idealized influence, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individual consideration (Bass, 1985b). Leaders who display behaviors associated with the four constructs of transformational leadership may gain the trust and respect of their followers (Jiang et al., 2017) and motivate followers to adhere to the leader’s vision (Andriani et al., 2018). Leaders who adopt transformational leadership behaviors can also help followers focus on individual development and creativity (Kimeto et al., 2017) while supporting employees' individual needs (Boukamcha, 2019). In summary, transformational leaders will bond with, inspire, stimulate, and consider the individual needs of their followers.

Construct 1: Idealized Influence

Idealized influence is the first of the four concepts supporting transformational leadership theory. Bass and Avolio (1994) defined idealized influence as a leader who bonds with followers by gaining their trust and respect through nurturing. Leaders who use idealized influence engage employees to trust and follow them (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Jiang et al., 2017). Followers respect and trust a manager who uses idealized influence because it is both ethical and moral (Northouse, 2018). Followers will trust and be loyal to an organization when a leader displays integrity and humility (Liborius, 2017). Leaders who practice idealized influence can help facilitate loyalty by respecting and trusting employees. Likewise, followers will be more apt to engage with trustworthy leaders.

Idealized influence can also be synonymous with charisma. A charismatic leader is a leader whose followers are loyal to because the leaders practice high standards of conduct, both ethical and moral (Boukamcha, 2019). Boukamcha also stated that transformational leaders should be charismatic and convince followers to follow their vision (2019). A leader who inspires loyalty ultimately helps employees and organizations (Bake, 2019). A combination of idealized influence and inspirational motivation is needed to make a leader seem charismatic (Bass, 1998). Leaders with charisma will inspire more loyalty from their followers because they will lead by example and hold themselves in the highest regard in their performance.

Construct 2: Inspirational Motivation

Inspirational motivation is the second of the four constructs of transformational leadership theory. Bass (1985a) defined inspirational motivation as inspiring followers' vision by appealing to their emotions and conducting inspirational conversations. Leaders can practice inspirational motivation by articulating their vision, stimulating enthusiasm, and sharing their vision with followers in an inspirational manner (Bass, 1998; Judge & Bono, 2000). Leaders speaking their vision and inspiring employees with words will benefit both the organization and the employees.

Inspirational motivation and idealized influence can sometimes be considered one construct. Bass (1999) determined inspirational motivation and idealized influence correlate when leaders articulate their vision for the future to followers and lead by example by setting high-performance standards. Barbuto (1997) noted that idealized influence and inspirational motivation should remain separate constructs because charisma and inspiration are not the same. According to Barbuto (1997), if followers identify with the leader, it is charisma; however, if the followers identify with the vision, it is inspirational motivation. Transformational leaders did not need charisma as inspirational motivation would suffice (Barbuto, 1997). Leaders using inspirational motivation alone can inspire followers to follow a leader’s vision.

The use of inspirational motivation can help leaders instill confidence in groups of followers. Leaders who encourage followers by communicating their vision can help followers reach goals that would otherwise be more challenging (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Through inspirational words, leaders can help followers gain confidence in themselves, allowing followers to complete group tasks (Heller et al., 2017; Yuki, 1981). Team spirit will be up when team members have confidence that members can achieve shared goals (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Leaders who use inspirational motivation with team members will help followers and the organization achieve their goals confidently.

Construct 3: Intellectual Stimulation

Intellectual stimulation is the third construct of transformational leadership theory. Intellectual stimulation is a behavior that leaders use to encourage followers to be innovative and creative thinkers (Bass, 1999). Leaders inspire followers to be more creative and innovative through ideas and imagination (Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016). However, Teymournejad and Elghaei (2017) argued that intellectual stimulation alone was not responsible for creativity in employees. Teymournejad and Elghaei (2017) further claimed a combination of all four transformational leadership constructs, intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and individual consideration, will ensure creativity in employees

Intellectual stimulation can also be a way to help followers with problem-solving by developing brain power (Liborius, 2017). Leaders encourage followers to realize when problems exist and to use their imagination to help resolve them (Bass, 1995; Rafferty & Griffin, 2004). Leaders also encourage followers to look at the problems from different perspectives and challenging themselves to find new and other ways to fix them (Avolio, 1999). Followers who can analyze and improve the issues through innovation and creativity can help operations run more effectively and efficiently (Kimeto et al., 2017). Problem-solving can be challenging, at best, but having a leader who intellectually stimulates their followers can help followers understand the problem and find innovative and creative ways to fix it.

Construct 4: Individual Consideration

Individual consideration is the fourth construct of transformational leadership theory. The behavior of a leader who practices individual consideration is like a coach that caters to an employee’s unique needs (Bass, 1985b). Leaders can attend to employees' individual needs through coaching, mentoring, and consulting with followers (Bono & Judge, 2004; Jauhar et al., 2017; Ogola et al., 2017). Each employee is unique, so leaders attending to employees' individual needs will want to learn what type of coaching or mentoring techniques will work for each employee (Bass, 1985a; Jiang et al., 2017).

Leaders practicing individual consideration may help to further the growth and developmental needs of the follower. Leaders who use individual consideration pay attention to their followers' capabilities, learning what each follower will need to grow and develop (Bono & Judge, 2004; Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016). In understanding that each employee is unique, a leader also knows that each follower's growth and development stage will differ (Jauhar et al., 2017). Ultimately, organizations will continue to grow and develop when leaders understand each employee’s capabilities.

Employee Motivation Through Transformational Leadership. To successfully retain employees in an organization, leaders can use motivation strategies. If leaders in the organization do not use successful motivation strategies, employees will leave to find better opportunities. There are two forms of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic (Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). Intrinsic motivation is not a tangible item (Bass, 1985a). Instead, intrinsic motivation consists of motivating an employee from the inside using incentives such as praise and leadership recognition (Morell & Abston, 2018). Employees who do not need material items to feel like their leaders appreciate them can be intrinsically motivated.

In contrast, extrinsic motivation consists of tangible rewards such as raises and promotions (Rather, 2018; Riaz et al., 2018). Leaders in organizations can determine the suitable form of motivation to help the employees perform optimally and achieve organizational goals (Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). Leaders also need to recognize that the same motivational factors that may work for some employees may not work for others (Vlaceskova & Mura, 2017), so leaders may need to adjust their motivational strategies from one employee to the next. Education for leaders regarding motivation strategies can help determine what arrangements with employees will be successful.

For organizational goals to be achieved, leader determination of employee motivation is needed (Vlaceskova & Mura, 1017). Employees may experience motivation with intrinsic rewards such as recognition (Krajcsak, 2019). Other employees prefer tangible rewards such as higher compensation and promotions (Syahreza et al., 2017). Some employees need both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation types to experience motivation. Employees need to not only experience intrinsic rewards like recognition but employees also want extrinsic rewards such as pay increases and bonuses (Landry et al., 2017). Riaz et al. (2018) suggested that a total reward strategy would offer tangible and non-tangible rewards to employees. Riaz et al. conducted a study with 207 middle and lower-tier managers and employees in a Pakistan telecom sector. Riaz et al.'s results were that a total reward system consisting of performance and career development, work-life balance, and compensation were all motivational factors that were important to the participants. Leaders in organizations can perform and discuss what leaders think are critical motivational factors to keep employees from leaving the organization.

Transformational leaders help to motivate employees by catering to their intrinsic needs. Leaders get followers to believe in their vision using clarity and articulation (Bass, 1990). Motivation from transformational leaders to employees may also come in rewards or recognition for exemplary job performance (Ogola et al., 2017). Motivation can also be showing respect and trust in one another (Bass, 1985a). Leaders who understand each employee’s motivational needs will gain their trust and respect, helping them reach their highest potential in the organization.

Forming better relationships with employees will motivate them to be more innovative and creative (Bass, 1990). By creating trusting relationships, transformational leaders help employees achieve goals employees may not have thought possible to be successful, both professionally and personally. Encouraging and motivating employees to work as a team can help employees achieve organizational goals and commitment (Kimeto et al., 2017). Transformational leaders need to use motivational strategies to earn the trust and respect of their employees. Trust and respect will facilitate positive relationships that benefit the employees and the organization.

The motivational strategies leaders in an organization choose to use with their employees can help retain them for an extended time or push them to leave and find employment to meet their needs. Employees need motivation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, to experience job satisfaction. Leaders in organizations can determine which type of motivation will satisfy their employees (Al Mamun & Hasan, 2017; Varma, 2017). Yamin (2020) surveyed 340 senior-level managers working in the public sector in Saudi Arabia and found that using intrinsic motivations had the highest importance in the organization and could retain employees. Shonubi et al. (2017) surveyed employees in Malaysia's telecom industry and found that extrinsic rewards affected employee retention. Shonubi et al.’s results showed that rewards such as compensation were more important to employees because higher salaries met their needs better. Organizational leaders can listen to their employees to determine their crucial motivational needs to decide what to use to keep them.

Employee Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment is defined as employees in organizations psychologically connecting and feeling strongly about obtaining the goals and practicing their values (Dalkrani & Dimitriadis, 2018). The three components that influence organizational commitment are affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment (Pawirosumarto & Annur, 2017). Affective commitment positively represents an employee's emotions toward the organization (Pawirosumarto & Annur, 2017). Continuance commitment describes an employee’s organizational choices (Dalkrani & Dimitriadis, 2018). Normative commitment means an employee’s social obligations toward the organization (Dalkrani & Dimitriadis, 2018; Pawirosumarto & Annur, 2017). Employees reach the status of organizational commitment when employees understand the goals of the organization. Employees may experience the feelings that make them want to help establish and maintain those goals for themselves and the organization through positive relationships with their leaders.

Leaders in organizations are responsible for creating a relationship with employees to relate to shared goals and influence each other with changes and outcomes (Al-Sada et al., 2017). When leaders have a positive relationship with employees, leaders can help influence employees to commit to the organization. Ezenwakwelu (2017) suggested three drivers leaders can use to influence organizational commitment; management effectiveness, positive work environment, and clear communication.

Management effectiveness is when managers make the right decisions by engaging and valuing their employees (Ezenwakwelu, 2017). A positive work environment is when managers provide employees with the tools needed to perform their jobs in a safe work environment (Ezenwakwelu, 2017). Last, clear communication is when managers can articulate organizational goals and obtain them (Ezenwakwelu, 2017). Positive relationships between leaders and employees alone will not ensure organizational commitment. Communicating and giving employees what is needed to feel valuable to the organization can ensure organizational commitment.

Leaders can motivate followers using intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, or a combination of both to help employees reach organizational commitment. Intrinsic motivations can empower employees, create a positive corporate culture, and ensure job security (Anwar et al., 2018). In comparison, extrinsic motivations are rewards such as promotions or salary increases (Riaz et al., 2018). Sometimes employees will need to experience both forms of motivation to reach organizational commitment. Kalhoro et al. (2017) conducted a study with 223 employees from the banking sector in Pakistan. Kalhoro et al. found that using both motivations (each equally important) was what employees thought was the best for them to reach organizational commitment. Each type of motivation will impact employees' organizational commitment differently (Krajcsak, 2019). Training leaders to understand which motivation will benefit both employees and leaders will be essential for organizational success.

Leaders in organizations can research human behavior and learn what motivation practices will be best for their organizational success (Varma, 2017). Leaders can do so by taking leadership programs (Vlaceskova & Mura, 2017) and enrolling in training programs to build positive employee relationships (Ocen et al., 2017). Byza et al. (2019) posited that leaders should also educate themselves on the importance and benefit of the similar beliefs that employees have about their social environment. Learning about what can affect the attitudes and behaviors of the employees can be beneficial to organizational success. Successful training in motivation styles will help leaders avoid poor work performance, absenteeism, and turnover (Kalhoro et al., 2017). Successfully motivating employees can lead to organizational commitment, which can lead to job satisfaction. Therefore, training in motivation styles can benefit employees and corporate leaders.

Employee Job Satisfaction

Nyanga et al. (2020) defined job satisfaction as an employee who is content with their job. Zhang and Li (2020) added that when employees can foster a positive attitude towards the organization, they reach job satisfaction. When employees experience high job satisfaction, they may increase job performance because they positively perceive their employer (Choi et al., 2016). Employees experiencing low job satisfaction can impede job performance and improve negative attitudes toward the organization (Nyanga & Sibanda, 2019; Nyanga et al., 2020). Employees with negative attitudes could lead to absenteeism and higher turnover rates (Nyanga et al., 2020). Not all employees will experience job satisfaction the same, and multiple factors can determine what level of satisfaction employees are experiencing.

Employees can experience job satisfaction in different forms, such as attitude toward an employee's job (Yildiz & Simsek, 2016), contingent rewards an employee receives (Lan et al., 2019), and an employee's relationships with leaders in an organization (Boamah et al., 2017). Employees will show high job satisfaction through their actions, such as commitment to the organization and higher productivity (Choi et al., 2016). In contrast, employees who experience low job satisfaction may show lower work performance and a negative attitude toward their job and the organization (Nyanga et al., 2020). How an employee experiences job satisfaction can determine how the employee performs for the organization.

When employees lack job satisfaction, organizations are affected negatively. For example, a lack of job satisfaction can lead to high turnover in organizations and less loyalty from employees (Jauhar et al., 2017; Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). According to Velmurugan and Sankar (2017), around 15% of employees in organizations who do not reach job satisfaction may leave to find better opportunities. To ensure organizations remain profitable, leaders can determine what influences employees to experience high job satisfaction.

Several factors can influence job satisfaction, such as compensation, work environment, benefits, and leadership styles (Visvanathan et al., 2018). According to Yildiz and Simsek (2016), leadership style, specifically transformational leadership, significantly influences job satisfaction. Aydogmus et al. (2018) conducted two studies regarding job satisfaction and transformational leadership. The first study was conducted with 221 white-collar workers in Turkey from three universities, and the second was with 348 academics in the engineering departments in the same three universities (Aydogmus et al., 2018). Aydogmus et al. found less organizational turnover if employees experienced job satisfaction through transformational leaders' motivation and inspiration. Transformational leadership's inspirational motivation component is essential to job satisfaction (Varma, 2017). Inspirational motivation can affect absenteeism, employees contributing less to the team, and less loyalty to the organization. Simultaneously, Ohunakin et al. (2019) posited that inspirational motivation adds to job satisfaction. The remaining three components of transformational leadership – idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration – are also crucial for improved job satisfaction (Ohunakin et al., 2019). Transformational leaders can ensure job satisfaction by understanding what employees' needs are.

Employee Retention Through Transformational Leadership

Leaders in organizations make decisions in effective retention strategies. Not retaining employees can cost organizational leaders to lose productivity from employees (Varma, 2017), lose time and money to replace employees, and lose employee talent (Rakhra, 2018). When organizational leaders can understand why an employee chooses to leave, leaders may rectify the situation leading to the employees' decision. With this understanding, leaders would retain more knowledgeable and experienced employees, leading to more profit for the organization (Rakhra, 2018). Having key personnel can also affect customer satisfaction and increase product sales, which also helps to benefit the organization (Jayaraman & Mohideen, 2017). For organizations to remain profitable, leaders can determine why key employees are staying or leaving the organization. Leaders can then adjust their leadership strategies to meet the needs of the employees.

Lack of motivation is one reason employees seek other job opportunities (Kaliyamoorthy et al., 2018). When employees are experiencing successful motivational factors, employees will stay with their organization. If an employee is not experiencing the appropriate motivational factor, the employee will be unhappy. Employees will search outside the company for opportunities for a position that fits the employee's needs and happiness. Employees are motivated differently (Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). Understanding what motivational factors work best for employees may lead to better performance, helping leaders achieve company goals (Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). Kundu et al. (2017) surveyed 547 employees in 234 organizations in India. Kundu et al. found that when employees were experiencing lower motivation levels, their intention to leave the organization increased. Al Mamun and Hasan (2017) noted it would cost more to recruit and train new employees who depart because of a lack of job satisfaction. Also, leaders may have to determine new ways to motivate employees who still work in the organization (Al Mamun & Hasan, 2017). Leaders who understand what motivational strategies will satisfy employees' needs can then implement the appropriate methods to retain employees.

Employee Organizational Commitment

Leaders are responsible for ensuring the success of their followers' organizational commitment by using the appropriate motivation strategies (Firdaus et al., 2019). When a leader understands what works to motivate their employees, employees will achieve organizational commitment (Ezenwakwelu, 2017). When employees commit to the organization, employees will work harder and more efficiently and may not seek employment elsewhere (Kalhoro et al., 2017). Organizational commitment is directly related to employee retention because employees will leave the organization if they do not feel committed to it (Dalkrani & Dimitriadis, 2018). Employees committed to the organization may not go to find better opportunities, which can help the employees and the organization succeed.

Using a transformational leadership style can also help reduce voluntary turnover in organizations. Employees leaving voluntarily from an organization are defined as doing so without being fired, laid off, or retired (Caillier, 2018). Al Mamun and Hasan (2017) found that a significant factor affecting turnover in organizations is that employees are unhappy with their positions because managers are not fair or caring. Morell and Abston (2018) found that employees needed praise and attention to help reduce turnover intentions. Likewise, Maaitah (2018) suggested that reducing turnover happens when leaders take an interest in their followers. Transformational leaders who understand and are concerned with employees' needs can help to minimize turnover.

When employees leave an organization because of leadership behavior and actions, money that could be profits to the organization becomes money for recruiting new hires (Carter et al., 2019). It could cost 20% or higher of an employee’s salary to recruit and train new employees (Carter et al., 2019). Leaders in organizations can save the added cost of recruitment, training, and loss of productivity if leaders can reduce the rate of turnover because of unacceptable leadership (Sahu et al., 2018). Leaders who develop relationships and meet their followers' needs and expectations will minimize turnover (Siyal & Peng, 2018). When leaders maximize relationships and reduce employee turnover, leaders can stop corporate profits from being reinvested in activities needed to hire new employees.

Employee Job Satisfaction

Leaders who help employees commit to the organization through appropriate motivation strategies can also help employees reach job satisfaction. When leaders understand human behavior and precisely the behavior of individual employees, leaders will learn what motivates them to help them achieve job satisfaction in the organization (Ezenwakwelu, 2017). When employees experience job satisfaction, employees will have a positive attitude toward their job and organization (Aydogmus et al., 2018), making them more apt to remain with the organization. A lack of job satisfaction could cause lower organizational retention (Visvanathan et al., 2018). Employees who are unhappy with their present position will leave the organization for better opportunities.

According to Al Mamun and Hasan (2017), job satisfaction is one reason employees stay or leave organizations. Employees will not feel job satisfaction if leaders use the wrong motivational strategies (Varma, 2017). Employees want to feel job satisfaction with their job. When employees do not have the right motivation, employees search for employment in other organizations that will offer more satisfaction (Varma, 2017). Organizational leaders can increase productivity and profits for the company if leaders use appropriate motivational strategies to make employees feel high job satisfaction. Employees may perform more than employers ask of them when leaders use proper motivation (Riaz et al., 2018). When employees are experiencing lower job satisfaction because of a lack of motivational strategies, employees will have lower job performance, contribute less to teamwork, and be absent from work more often (Varma, 2017). If organizational leaders work with employees to determine what motivational strategies will increase their job satisfaction, it will help retain employees.

Three Contrasting Theories

While documentation links transformational leadership and positive outcomes, not all leaders adopt a transformational style (Sitthiwarongchai et al., 2020). This section analyzes and synthesizes three contrasting theories to transformational leadership theory, which is the study's conceptual framework. The contrasting theories are transactional leadership theory, developed by Bass in 1981 (Bass, 1985a); situational leadership, developed by Hersey and Blanchard in 1969 (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969); and leader-member exchange theory, developed by Dansereau, Graen, and Haga in 1975 (Dansereau et al., 1975). A discussion of each contrasting theory is below.

Contrasting Theory 1: Transactional Leadership

Transformational leaders offer employees intrinsic motivations: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In contrast, transactional leaders lead by offering extrinsic motivations: contingent rewards and management-by-exception (Avolio, 1999). Not all employees are the same. Some employees will prefer a transformational leader who offers intrinsic rewards that are not tangible, while others will choose a transactional leader who offers real extrinsic rewards (Musinguzi et al., 2018). The level of motivation that an employee finds necessary will determine what type of leader the employee prefers.

Researchers differ in opinions as to when a transactional leader is an appropriate leader for an organization. Sarwar and Mumtaz (2017) stated that a transactional leader is suitable for an organization as long as the leader makes it clear to employees what their role is. Sarwar and Mumtaz (2017) also stated that employees should understand their leaders' expectations. Baskarada et al. (2017) claimed that transactional leaders are suitable for an organization when employees are short-term. Different internal and external factors can also affect the appropriate leadership type (Baskarada et al., 2017). Transactional leaders can better meet employees' expectations in organizations with fewer followers (Moon & Park, 2019). Clarifying employee roles and offering feedback are more effective with smaller numbers (Moon & Park, 2019). Transactional leaders mindful of internal and external factors can adjust leadership strategies to fit the corporation's vision.

While some researchers feel transformational leadership is a leadership style that leaders can use to help employees achieve job satisfaction, some researchers believe that the transactional leadership style can be just as effective (Lan et al., 2019). Transactional leaders allow their employees to experience high job satisfaction by offering contingent rewards such as bonuses and promotions (Shonubi et al., 2017). Employees may have different goals for reaching job satisfaction. Some may need intangible rewards such as trust, commitment, and self-efficacy, but others may need to gain tangible rewards such as pay increases, bonuses, and promotions. Musinguzi et al. (2018) found that transactional leaders can help employees experience job satisfaction with teamwork but still prefer transformational leaders over transactional leaders by a margin of 20%. When leaders listen to employees, leaders can find out how or what helps employees experience high job satisfaction and adjust leadership strategies to meet employees' needs.

Transactional leaders can positively affect job satisfaction, teamwork, and knowledge sharing. Musinguzi et al. (2018) conducted a study with 564 health workers in Uganda to determine the relationship between transformational and transactional leadership. While Musinguzi et al. found that transformational leadership, motivation, job satisfaction, and teamwork were positively correlated, transactional leadership positively correlated with job satisfaction and teamwork. Lan et al. (2019) surveyed 499 Cram school faculties (faculties in an after-school program in Taiwan) and found that transactional leadership positively affected outer job satisfaction. Last, Hussain et al. (2017) conducted a study with 300 employees from the telecom sector. Hussain et al. found that transactional leadership positively affected employees using knowledge sharing to exhibit creativity. Transactional leaders can be beneficial for organizations depending on what employees' needs are within the organization.

Two Constructs of Transactional Leadership. Two constructs are associated with transactional leadership. The two constructs are contingent rewards and management-by-exception (Bass, 1985a). Contingent rewards are tangible rewards that employees receive for a job well done (Baskarada et al., 2017). Management-by-exception is punishment or a penalty for not completing a task as mapped out with an employee's leader (Bass, 1990). A discussion regarding both constructs follows.

Contingent rewards are the first construct of transactional leadership. Contingent rewards consist of giving employees pay raises, bonuses, or other rewards (Xu, 2017) and are issued when employees perform well (Deshwal & Ali, 2020). Bass (1990) stated that the rewards offered should be of value to the follower to be effective. Moon and Park (2019) noted that transactional leaders could determine what rewards will be more effective when leaders supervise smaller instead of larger groups of employees. Transactional leaders should understand what contingent rewards are of value to their followers to receive increased employee performance within the organization.

Transactional leaders use contingent rewards as an incentive program. Using contingent rewards as an employee incentive helps increase job performance (Nielsen et al., 2019) and employee motivation (Adriansyah et al., 2020). The better the performance, the better the reward. According to Hansen and Pihl-Thingvad (2019), leaders not giving rewards for stellar job performance could cause employees to be more careless and not consider problem-solving when performing their duties. Rewarding out-performing employees will keep them continuing to excel in the organization.

Management-by-exception is the second construct of transactional leadership. Management-by-exception is a punishment or negative reinforcement if an employee's job performance is subpar (Cote, 2017). Punishment can result in sanctions for employees who do not perform well (Deshwal & Ali, 2020). Sanctions can be in the form of demotions, termination, or salary decreases (Asghar & Oino, 2018). Not all low performers should receive sanctions. Leaders should forego the sanction if there is a valid reason for low performance (Sitthiwarongchai et al., 2020). Leaders need to determine the cause of inadequate job performance before punishing and sanctioning employees unnecessarily.

Employee Motivation Through Transactional Leadership. Transactional leaders try to motivate employees in two ways. Either through reward or punishment (Asghar & Oino, 2018). Leaders reward a job well done and punish for a poor job (Avolio & Bass, 2013). Leaders motivate employees to perform better when there is the promise of a reward when the job is done efficiently and correctly (Deshwal & Ali, 2020). The rewards should appeal to the employees to push them to perform well (Nielsen et al., 2019). Leaders should understand employees' needs and what type of reward will cause them to maximize their performance.

Motivating employees with rewards can benefit the organization, whereas encouraging them with punishment will not. If leaders rely more on management-by-exception instead of helping employees increase rewards, job performance will continue to be mediocre (Bass, 1990). According to Moon and Park (2019), employees may think that a transactional leader has too much control over work performance, so employees may decide to leave the organization. Receiving rewards may motivate employees, but employees will look elsewhere for employment when punishment outweighs the rewards.

Employee Retention Through Transactional Leadership. Transactional leadership can be helpful in some situations, but some researchers believe that transactional leadership is unsuitable for retaining employees. However, Moon and Park (2019) found that transactional leaders are better for smaller organizations. Moon and Park (2019) also found that employees may think leaders have too much control over employees. Employees may leave the organization when employees believe that leaders have too much power. According to Sheshi and Kercini (2017), employees may not commit to the organization if a transactional leader leads them. Caillier (2018) suggested that transactional leaders are more responsible for employees quitting organizations because leaders are not meeting the intrinsic needs of employees. Leaders in organizations should determine if a transactional leader can ensure employees' longevity. The transactional leadership theory is inappropriate for this study because although transactional leaders can motivate employees, no proof exists that leaders can retain employees for lengthy periods.

Contrasting Theory 3: Situational Leadership

Situational leadership was first developed by Hersey and Blanchard in 1969 and later revised in 1985 to situational leadership II (Northouse, 2018; Thompson & Glaso, 2018). The definition of situational leadership is a leader who may need to change their leadership style to match their employees' developmental level (Cote, 2017). The model consists of four leadership styles; directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating, which coincide with four follower development levels (Cote, 2017). Leadership understanding which level individual employees are experiencing is imperative to helping the development of employees. Not all employees may be on the same developmental level, and leaders must adapt to each employee's level to ensure continuous growth.

Four Leadership Styles of Situational Leadership. There are four types of leadership styles that are associated with the situational leadership style. Leaders are directors, coaches, supporters, or delegators (Zigarmi & Roberts, 2017). A leader's leadership style depends on the subordinates' level (Rahmat et al., 2019). A discussion of leadership styles of situational leadership is below.

If an employee is new to a task, the employee is a level one employee and may need a leader who will direct them to their responsibilities (Cote, 2017). Leaders may have to clarify, communicate, and make decisions for employees to complete tasks efficiently and correctly (Wuryani et al., 2021). Employees who are new to a job may need direction regarding what to do to perform the job, requiring a leader who will direct them.

A level two employee would need a leader who will coach them because the employee has developed some skills but may still need encouragement and input from the leader (Northouse, 2018). Leaders may see that employees can perform their job but may need coaching to help them execute their job more efficiently (Wuryani et al., 2021). Employees may have been at the organization for a while; however, employees may need extra encouragement to perform their tasks.

A level three employee has now become competent when performing their tasks, so the employee may need a leader that will be there to support them (Cote, 2017). A leader who supports subordinates may do so by offering praise or suggesting ways associates can take risks to perform better (Wuryani et al., 2021). Employees with a supporting leader may feel more self-confident to try different ways to be more efficient.

A level four employee has the highest competency and allows the leader to delegate tasks without micro-managing (Northouse, 2018). Leaders who trust and have confidence in their subordinates can achieve organizational goals without micro-managing (Wuryani et al., 2021). Employees with a leader who empowers them may have been with the organization for some time and understand how to perform tasks with little or no supervision.

Employee Motivation Through Situational Leadership. To help employees with motivation and productivity, a leader can adopt a situational leadership style. Leaders motivate followers by offering encouragement and advice to fix followers problems (Selviasari, 2019). Ghazzawi et al. (2017) conducted a study using a sample of 150 participants from six hospitals in North Lebanon to determine if the leaders had a substantial effect on them. Ghazzawi et al. found that leaders who used situational leadership were responsible for motivating and improving employee task productivity because the leader understood more of what the employees' needs were with each situation. A leader using situational leadership can help motivate employees. The leader has to determine the subordinate's level to choose the right type of leadership for the situation (Deshwal & Ali, 2020). If a leader decides on the wrong leadership style within the situational leadership theory, employees may not be motivated to complete tasks effectively and efficiently.

Employee Retention Through Situational Leadership. Rahmat et al. (2019) determined that when leaders put into practice the right leadership style for each unique situation, the employee was more apt to achieve job satisfaction, therefore continuing to remain with the organization. Zigarmi and Roberts (2017) conducted a study with 573 professional participants. Zigarmi and Roberts found that if leaders use the proper leadership style for each employee's development level, leaders will build a positive relationship with the employee. Building positive relationships with employees will facilitate trust between the leader and the employee, which improves productivity and the intention to remain with the organization (Zigarmi & Roberts, 2017). Leaders should understand what level an employee is at for each situation if leaders want to retain that employee in the organization. Situational leadership is not appropriate for this study because it concerns motivating employees to achieve individual tasks (Cote, 2017), not necessarily motivating them to stay within the organization.

Contrasting Theory 3: Leader-Member Exchange Leadership

Dansereau, Graen, and Haga developed the leader-member exchange theory in 1975 (Dansereau et al., 1975). The leader-member exchange theory focuses on the relationships between leaders and employees and how leaders influence work outcomes (Wang et al., 2019). The relationships between leaders and employees can be considered high-quality relationships or low-quality relationships. A high-quality relationship consists of employees willing to do more for leaders because leaders show employees more trust and give them more responsibility (Erturk & Albayrak, 2020). A low-quality relationship consists of employees performing only tasks within their employment scope; however, nothing above and beyond those tasks (Wang et al., 2019). Leaders who experience low-quality relationships will not extend themselves to offer employees new responsibilities (Wang et al., 2019). High-quality relationships between leaders and employees will benefit employees and the organization more. Employees will want to go one step further than leaders expect, ensuring the best work outcomes and organizational success.

Relationships of Leader-Member Exchange Leadership. There are two types of relationships associated with leader-member exchange leadership. One is considered a high-quality relationship, and the other is a low-quality one (Wang et al., 2019). The relationship between the leader and the follower will determine how leaders interact with the followers and what responsibilities or resources employees will receive (Amah, 2018). A discussion of the two relationships follows.

A high-quality relationship between the leader and employee will have leaders who coach their employees (Peng et al., 2019). Employees in high-quality relationships with their leaders are usually considered the in-group. Employees in the in-group will receive more support and trust from their leaders and generally perform crucial jobs (Amah, 2018). Leaders will gain confidence and give employees more responsibilities to make decisions (Erturk & Albayrak, 2020). Employees with high-quality relationships with leaders are given more responsibility and excel further than employees with low-quality relationships.

Employees with low-quality relationships with their leaders will not pursue anything more than what the leaders expect (Henkel, 2019). Employees who are in low-quality relationships are in the out-group. Employees in the out-group will not receive the trust, responsibilities, or resources that the in-group does (Amah, 2018). Employees with low-quality relationships with leaders have negative work behaviors and will not try to perform more than what is expected to finish the job (Liang & Yeh, 2020). Employees with low-quality relationships with leaders are at the organization to work and do not care about excelling in the organization.

Employee Motivation Through Leader-Member Exchange Leadership. The relationship leaders have with followers can motivate followers to use their voices and achieve job satisfaction. Liang and Yeh (2020) conducted a survey with 447 employer-employee dyads from a large manufacturing firm in Taiwan. Liang and Yeh found that when employees voice their opinion about processes that may be good for the organization, they will receive bullying from other employees. When leaders praise employees for their suggestions, employees will experience job satisfaction because of a sense of accomplishment and achievement (Liang & Yeh, 2020). Employees must be encouraged and empowered to perform efficiently (Erturk & Albayrak, 2020). Leaders in high-quality relationships with employees will motivate employees to speak up and not let other employees interfere.

A high-quality relationship between the two parties would benefit employees to experience motivation in an organization with a member-exchange leader. Erturk and Albayrak (2020) posited that when the leader-member exchange was the type of leadership in an organization, employees would want to build better relationships with leaders. Employees would also accept greater responsibilities that would, in turn, align more with the company's organizational goals (Erturk & Albayrak, 2020). High-quality relationships among the leader-employee dyad influence attitudes and performance at work (Wang et al., 2019). Employees that share a high-quality relationship with their leaders will feel less threatened to voice their opinion and, therefore, are encouraged to add insights to achieving organizational goals.

Employee Retention Through Leader-Member Exchange Leadership. Leaders who use leader-member exchange can positively or negatively affect turnover intention in an organization. High-quality relationships between a leader and employee can promote positive outcomes and lower the turnover intention of employees in organizations (Northouse, 2018). Wang et al. (2019) argued that a high-quality relationship does not mean that employees will experience job security. Therefore, it can affect turnover intention. Leaders should make the employee feel that the leader-employee relationship will be beneficial. When employees are in a mutually beneficial relationship, employees may stay with the organization, reducing turnover.

Low-quality relationships between the leader and employee that include stressors that can impact employees' attitudes and emotions may cause higher turnover (Muldoon et al., 2018). Offering training to leaders in organizations with low-quality relationships with employees will help leaders develop low-quality relationships into high-quality relationships. More high-quality relationships between leaders and employees lead to a mutual benefit for the employee and the organization. Leader-member exchange leadership is also inappropriate for this study because it does not explore motivation strategies for retaining employees.

Employee Turnover

Employee turnover can be costly and disruptive to an organization. Employee turnover can disrupt an organization and create costs that leaders in organizations would not expect (De Winne et al., 2019). Costs can be significant for recruiting and training new employees, as well as causing organizations to suffer from loss of productivity

(Carter et al., 2019). According to Ivanova (2019), however, not all turnover is terrible if the employees leaving are counterproductive and low producing. To help reduce the cost of high turnover, leaders in organizations need to understand the reasons why employees want to go and adequately address those reasons.

Poor Leadership

No one reason for an employee's desire to leave an organization exists. According to Al Mamun and Hasan (2017), 15% of employees intend to go unless organizational leaders can determine why employees want to look elsewhere. Employees leave organizations for various reasons. Poor leadership and lack of motivation are two prominent reasons employees leave an organization (Bake, 2019).

Poor leadership in an organization can cause employees to not care about their job and look for a position to feel appreciated. Leaders must be approachable and offer employees adequate job training (Kaliyamoorthy et al., 2018). Leaders need to give employees responsibilities and engage them in reaching company goals (Vlaceskova & Mura, 2017). Employees must also trust their leaders to create a better workplace environment (Rakhra, 2018). If employees cannot trust their leaders, employees will not work to their highest potential for the organization. Leaders also need to know how to motivate their employees.

Lack of Motivation

Lack of motivation is another critical reason an employee will leave a company (Kundu et al., 2017). Without motivation, employees will not reach job satisfaction (Kaliyamoorthy et al., 2018) or believe better company opportunities are achievable

(Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). Motivation is essential in keeping employees satisfied and not looking for employment elsewhere.

Not all employees experience motivation the same. Therefore, leaders must understand employees' needs (Varma, 2017). Employees inherently want to thrive in an organization, but employees will need a leader's motivation to accomplish their goals (Rakhra, 2018). There are various strategies for motivating employees. The motivation can be intrinsic or extrinsic and could affect each employee differently. Each employee is different and experiences motivation differently; the leadership must determine what works for each employee (Varma, 2017). A leader should understand each employee's basic psychological needs to assess what motivation strategy will satisfy them with no intention to leave (Heyns & Kerr, 2018). Learning the needs of each employee is crucial for a leader to succeed with their employees.

Cost of High Turnover

When workers leave voluntarily, leaders in the organizations face various costs to replace them. These costs can be up to 200% of the former employee's salary (Lee et al., 2019)**.** Costs can include recruiting and training new personnel (Carter et al., 2019). Recruiting and training are direct costs because the costs replace human resources because of the vacancy (Manzoor et al., 2020). Other costs include reducing productivity (Lee et al., 2019) and losing knowledge sharing among employees (Ju & Li, 2019). Production losses are indirect costs because the assumption that production will suffer because the remaining employees will have an extra workload (Manzoor et al., 2020). To mitigate the high turnover costs, leaders must employ strategies to ensure that employees want to stay.

Transition

Section 1 included what strategies leaders used to motivate and retain employees. This section began with the background of the problem and the problem statement. Then the purpose statement and the nature of the study were included. The nature of the study section was a discussion of the choice to use a qualitative research method and a multiple case study design. The section also included the research question, interview questions for participants, and the study's assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. The section ended with a critical analysis and synthesis of the literature about transformational leadership theory, the conceptual framework for this study. There was also a critical analysis and synthesis of three contrasting theories to transformational leadership theory: transactional leadership theory, situational leadership theory, and leader-member-exchange theory. Also included was a discussion on how employees' motivation and retainment relate to each theory within all theories.

Section 2 includes a restatement of the purpose statement. The section also includes an overview of the choice of research method and design appropriateness for the study and the participant sampling method. Section 2 also has a discussion of each of the following: the researcher's role, data collection techniques, data collection instruments, and data analysis. This section concludes with a discussion of ethical research practices and reliability and validity in qualitative research.

Section 3 includes the research results, applications in practice, and implications for social change. This section also has the presentation of the findings of the study and recommendations for future studies. This section ends with a conclusion of the study and final thoughts on the DBA process.

Section 2: The Project

Section 2 includes an in-depth discussion of my role in choosing the research design and method for the study, choosing the participants, and conducting the study ethically. The section also outlined how I collected, organized, and analyzed the data. The section concludes with how I ensured that the study would be reliable and valid.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore leadership strategies that SME corporate executives use to motivate and retain employees. The targeted population was corporate executives from eight southeast Wisconsin SMEs who demonstrated successful leadership strategy implementation to motivate and retain employees. Improved employee motivation could lower employee turnover and contribute to social change by maintaining higher employment rates in communities. As organizational leaders implement leadership strategies to motivate and retain employees, leaders might also improve family dynamics for their employees and increase prosperity in their communities.

Role of the Researcher

Conducting a study involves activities requiring proper coordination. Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that the role of the researcher in qualitative studies is to select qualified participants, collect and analyze the data, interpret and disseminate the results, and protect the study’s integrity. As the researcher in this study, I recruited and interviewed participants and collected and analyzed the data. As the primary data collection instrument, I conducted Zoom video conferencing interviews, recorded the discussions, and conducted member checking. Zook et al. (2017) noted that the researcher is responsible for protecting participants and including safety measures to protect any information provided by the participants. In my effort to do this, I provided a letter of consent (see Appendix C) to the participants that contained an outline of their rights and information on how I planned to protect their data to ensure confidentiality.

I have been a manager and subordinate employee in small and medium enterprises since 1980. While working as a front-end manager in a smaller grocery chain, I witnessed high turnover rates among cashiers and stockers in the store. As the manager, I realized that employees need more than just a paycheck to remain at an organization; however, at my place of employment, employee satisfaction was not as crucial to executives as customer satisfaction, which affected employees' motivation to stay with the company and led to a constant turnover cycle. While I have worked in organizations with high employee turnover rates, this is the first time I have conducted a study about the leadership strategies that leaders use to motivate and retain employees. I did not have any prior relationship with the prospective participants.

One of the primary roles of the researcher in qualitative studies is to mitigate harm or potential risks that participants may experience (Roth & von Unger, 2018). Marshall and Rossman (2016) stated researchers are responsible for conducting ethical research. To ensure ethical conduct, compliance with the guidelines on human subjects and the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report Protocol is essential. The three principles covered in the Belmont Report for a researcher to follow are (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (National Commission for the Protection of

Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Respect for person refers to respecting the participant's autonomy by allowing them to have their own opinions and make their personal choices regarding participation in the study (Farrugia, 2019). As the researcher, it is vitally important to inform the participants that their participation in the study is voluntary and that they may withdraw from the study at any time without any ramifications. Ross et al. (2018) noted beneficence refers to minimizing the risk for participants while maximizing the benefits of the study to the participant. To ensure beneficence, it is important that the participant chooses a setting where the participant can feel comfortable when answering interview questions. The third principle, justice, refers to enlisting participants without biases, discrimination, or favoritism (Paxton & Griffiths, 2017). Ensuring justice means not preventing employees from becoming participants based on personal biases, including age, gender, or race.

The mitigation of bias is a significant obstacle for qualitative researchers utilizing interviews to gather data from the participants (Chenail, 2011). It is the researcher's responsibility to know how to mitigate bias when conducting qualitative research. Bias involves the researcher bringing their personal beliefs to the study, which can skew the results of the data (Fusch et al., 2018). To mitigate researcher bias, researchers can use techniques such as triangulation (Renz et al., 2018; Varpio et al., 2017; Yin, 2018) and member checking (Iivari, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Renz et al., 2018). Methodological triangulation involves using multiple data sources such as semi structured interviews and archival documents to answer the research question (Fusch et al., 2018). Member checking is a method of interpreting the data from the responses to the interview questions and submitting a summary to the participant to validate, change, or add any new data (Candela, 2019). Using methodical triangulation and member checking are essential steps to mitigate bias. For the methodological triangulation, data was collected from multiple sources of evidence, such as semi structured interviews of the participants and organizational and archival documents. In addition, member checking was conducted, which allowed participants to review the interpretation of the data from the responses to the interview questions. Summaries of the interviews were sent to the participant to validate, change, or add any new information.

Jimenez et al. (2019) underscored the importance of preparation before the commencement of the interview process. Additionally, Rubin and Rubin (2012) noted that preparing and using an interview protocol as a checklist can lead to a higher level of dependability and consistency because it reduces potential issues that may arise during the interviews. The use of interview protocol (see Appendix E) during the interview process helped to ensure uniformity with all participants.

Participants

Choosing qualified participants is integral to conducting a qualitative study. It is the responsibility of the researcher to recruit participants who have experience and can meet the criteria regarding the phenomena the researcher is exploring to answer the research question (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2018). As such, the participant selection is of the utmost importance in qualitative research (Hoyland et al., 2017). To be eligible to participate in this study, the participants had to be leaders who (a) had at least 5 years of successful leadership strategy experience in motivating and retaining employees, (b) were corporate leaders or high-level managers in small to medium enterprises, and (c) worked for a business in southeastern Wisconsin (WI).

Walden University requires Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before doctoral students can actively recruit potential participants. For that reason, there was no contact of potential candidates before approval was gained from the IRB review board. Yin (2018) suggested that the researcher could employ a two-phased approach to recruit potential candidates for a multiple case study. For the first phase, Yin (2018) suggested using a central or archival source from which the researcher could collect data, such as a database listing of firms, to aid the researcher during the screening process of candidates.

The central source for company information was the list of top workplaces in Wisconsin to work for from the Journal Sentinel Online website. The reason for choosing the website was that there was a comprehensive list of companies in Wisconsin by size, location, and number of employees. The list consisted of top workplaces in WI to work for, so it was assumed that corporate leaders in those companies were employing leadership strategies to retain employees. With the information obtained from the list, there was a determination of which organizations were small to medium businesses and located in southeastern WI. Companies were chosen from the list that met the criteria of small to medium enterprises.

Organizational websites were then perused to find contact information for a gatekeeper, such as a human resource manager, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), or others in a higher leadership position. According to Lund et al. (2016), the gatekeeper possesses the knowledge of potential candidates for a research study. Gaining access and developing a relationship with the gatekeeper is crucial for a researcher to gain access to potential participants (Amundsen et al., 2017; Lund et al., 2016). An email script was sent to the contacts on chosen corporate websites explaining the purpose of the study and the criterion for potential participants. After receiving emails back from possible participants, I sent a letter of invitation (see Appendix A) to the potential candidates by email. Due to not gaining all participants by email, I utilized multiple post mailings that included the letter of invitation to potential participants. I was not able to get the required number of participants, so I went back to Walden University IRB to get approval to include higher level managers in the study. After receiving approval, post mailings were continued until the three remaining participants for the study were obtained.

For qualitative research to be successful, strong working relationships between the researcher and participants is essential (Pinnegar & Quiles-Fernandez, 2018). Researchers can develop a relationship with participants by fostering trust and openness and answering questions the participants may have before, during, or after the interview process (Harvey, 2017). It is up to the researcher to develop a trusting enough relationship with the participants that the participants will answer questions honestly without fearing repercussions from their organization (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). After access was gained to the eligible participants, I began to develop a relationship with the participants by setting up Zoom video conferencing appointments to review the consent form and the data gathering process. The participants had the ability to ask any questions before a scheduled Zoom video conference meeting to gather data and conduct the interviews took place. They were made to feel comfortable and respected. Taking the time to establish mutual respect with the potential candidates by answering any questions the participants had regarding participation before and after the study, including during the interviewing process, was essential.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

Selecting the appropriate methodology to answer the research question is an essential early step in conducting a study. Three popular research methodologies are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018). Qualitative methodology is appropriate when a researcher wants to answer *what*, *how*, and *why* regarding the research question (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2018). Yates and Leggett (2016) stated that researchers who conduct a study using a qualitative method explore the central phenomenon in ways that researchers who conduct a quantitative or mixed method methodology cannot. Further, the focus in qualitative research is on how participants understand the world and the way participants experience it by exploring the meanings of their experience regarding social phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Murshed & Zhang, 2016). Merriam (2014) posited qualitative researchers focus on discovery, insight, and understanding from the experiences and perspectives of participants. In addition, researchers who conduct qualitative research studies ask open-ended questions during interviews to elicit participants' experiences, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions about a phenomenon (Patton, 2015). The qualitative research method was appropriate for this study because it enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the successful strategies that corporate leaders use to motivate and retain employees.

The quantitative research method was not appropriate for this study. Hammarberg et al. (2016) stated that using a quantitative method is appropriate when the researchers want to test a hypothesis and obtain factual data to examine relationships between variables. Unlike qualitative studies, quantitative researchers gather numerical data and conduct statistical analyses to answer the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Yates and Leggett (2016) also stated quantitative research methods are appropriate when a researcher is exploring variables in a population, such as attitudes and trends. The data that a researcher obtains from a quantitative study is comparable and generalizable (DeVaney et al., 2018). The quantitative research was not appropriate for this study because my goal was to answer the *how*, *what*, and *why* of the research question, not obtain numerical data to test hypotheses or relationships amongst variables.

Mixed research methodology is a combination of the qualitative and quantitative research methods (Yin, 2018). When using the combination of qualitative and quantitative research data, researchers use non-numerical and numerical data to answer the research question (Twining et al., 2017). Hammarberg et al. (2016) stated mixed research method is the appropriate research method to use when a researcher wants to corroborate, elaborate, or complement one or the other research method. Mixed method would be appropriate when researchers wish to use a quantitative approach but need to elaborate on the information of the data using a qualitative approach (Hammarberg et al., 2016). The mixed method methodology was not appropriate for this study because I was only using qualitative research and had no need for quantitative data.

Research Design

Three common qualitative research designs are case studies, ethnography, and phenomenology (Cruz & Tantia, 2017; Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Case study research design is appropriate when a researcher seeks to answer the *how* and *why* of the research question, as well as when the behavioral events are out of the researchers' control (Yin, 2018). Conducting a case study enables understanding of events that happen at any point in time to a group or person (Yin, 2018). Case studies are also appropriate for exploring a particular phenomenon (Cruz & Tantia, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) and can help to advance theory (Ridder, 2017). Investigators conducting a case study advance the knowledge base in any given field (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and can use multiple sources to answer the research question (Houghton et al., 2017). According to Yin (2018), a case study research design is appropriate when answering *how*, *what*, and *why* questions, as well as when using description to illustrate events and their specific context. Therefore, the researcher focused on answering the *how* and *why* questions about leadership strategies that corporate leaders use to motivate and retain employees, so a multiple case study was the appropriate design for this study. In addition, I had the opportunity to ask *what* questions to SME corporate executives to gain contextual meaning about the strategies SME corporate executives use to motivate and retain employees.

Ethnography is another qualitative research design. Ethnography involves observing participants in their natural setting, such as the place where the participants live or work (Chu & Ke, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). When choosing ethnography, researchers use multiple techniques to collect data, such as interviewing and observation, to answer the research question (Chu & Ke, 2017; Trnka, 2017). Conducting an ethnographic study requires commitment and lengthy periods over which the researcher observes the participants in their natural habitat; further, it can be difficult to draw precise conclusions from such a study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Conducting an ethnographic study was not appropriate for this research study because observing certain people or groups for lengthy periods or collecting data by immersing myself, as the researcher, into the culture of a group for an extended time was not the purpose of this study.

A phenomenological design is another qualitative research design. Phenomenological studies are appropriate when the researcher is seeking to characterize the meaning of the participants' lived experiences of a particular phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Gaus (2017) noted that when researchers choose phenomenology, researchers ignore objective and external realities to focus more on the participants' personal lived experiences. When researchers use a phenomenological design, researchers explore the experiences of the participants in their world and try to make sense of them (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). A phenomenology design was not appropriate for this study because obtaining information about the lived experiences of participants was not the purpose of this study.

Population and Sampling

At the beginning of the research, a researcher decides the appropriate population to answer the study research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2013), researchers establish a criterion strategy such as successful leadership experience and length of service to select participants who are a fit for the research study. The criteria for selecting participants for this study was (a) participants who were over the age of 18, (b) participants who were corporate executives or high-level managers in small to medium enterprises for at least 5 years, (c) participants who operated in southeastern Wisconsin, and (d) participants who were successful in motivating and retaining employees. Researchers selecting the right participants can gain in-depth information (Anney, 2014). Only participants who meet the sample criteria were recruited for the study.

I used purposive sampling to recruit eight high-level corporate executives and high-level managers in small to medium enterprises in southeastern Wisconsin who had been successful in motivating and retaining employees and were in their position for at least 5 years. Three types of sampling techniques for case studies are purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). When recruiting participants or obtaining archival data for a study, researchers who use purposive sampling do so because the researcher relies on their judgment and can be selective of the participants and any archival data for the study (Sharma, 2017). Convenience sampling is when a researcher’s first choice is participants that are easily accessible to them (Rahi, 2017), and snowball sampling is when the researcher networks with potential participants to gain recommendations of others who may fit the criteria for the study (Etikan & Bala, 2017). According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), researchers start with two-tier sampling. This sampling approach refers to starting with convenience sampling by choosing a few participants and then escalating it to snowball sampling if the researcher does not have enough candidates to answer the research question. Purposive sampling was used for this study. Data saturation was accomplished after interviewing eight participants, so no additional participants were contacted.

Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted the sample size depends on the type of research method the researcher will use. Regardless of the selected sample size, the researcher should reach data saturation and gain rich information to answer the research question (Boddy, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Eight participants from eight different southeastern Wisconsin companies were chosen for this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated a researcher should terminate the sampling process when the researcher has not received any new information from participants, therefore, reaching saturation. Yin (2018) suggested using the 5-step approach to analyzing the sample data which are (1) compile that data, (2) dissemble the data, (3) reassemble the data, (4) interpret the data, and (5) conclude the data. Yin's 5-step approach was used until data saturation was reached. Data saturation was met after all eight participants were interviewed, so there was no need to gain additional participants.

Reaching data saturation in qualitative research is essential (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Data saturation can affect the sample size because a researcher could reach data saturation after interviewing a few or many participants (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Van

Rijnsoever (2017) stated that data saturation is met when no codes or patterns emerge from the researcher’s sample population. To ensure data saturation, I continued to gather data through semi structured interviews and organizational documents related to the research question until there was no new information gained from the participants and secondary data. Once there was no longer any new information extracted from participants, the interview process was stopped.

Ethical Research

Ethical consideration is a critical part of any research because researchers need to provide reliable findings that pose minimal harm to participants (Patton, 2015). Participants received an informed consent form before interviews began. Informed consent forms provide information to participants about the purpose of the study, participants' rights, risks and benefits, and confidentiality (Nusbaum et al., 2017). Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted providing participants with informed consent forms helps assure review boards that the researcher is informing the participants about the purpose and scope of the research, the nature of the participants’ participation in the study, and the risk and benefits of participation. The informed consent form also helps to ensure the researcher’s commitment to protecting the integrity of the research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). As the researcher, I had the participants sign the informed consent form (see Appendix C) before the participants agreed to participate in the study. Biros (2018) suggested that potential participants understand the research to which participants are consenting to. Thus, the use of the informed consent form was imperative for this study.

Yin (2018) noted participation in research should be strictly voluntary, and according to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2019), a participant shall not experience any loss or penalty if the participant chooses to withdraw from a study at any time. An explanation was given to the participants that participation was voluntary, and that the participant could withdraw from the study at any time without any ramifications.

Polacsek et al. (2017) posited it is a common practice for researchers to offer incentives to increase the recruitment of participants for a study. Kelly et al. (2017) found when researchers offer incentives to participants; researchers can achieve higher response rates. Gelinas et al. (2018) suggested that it is essential to consider the ethical dimensions when using incentives for recruitment. There was no monetary offer or other incentives, such as gift cards, to participants for this study. It was suggested to participants that their participation in this study, would add valuable information to the research and understanding of how leaders can successfully motivate and retain employees.

Because of the personal information that participants are relaying to the researcher, conducting ethical research is imperative and necessary to protect participants' rights (Twining et al., 2017). Before interviewing participants, the researcher should understand the ethical principles outlined in The Belmont Report, which are (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Respect for persons is that the researcher will respect the anonymity, privacy, and the right to participate of the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Beneficence refers to ensuring that the participants will experience no harm from participating in the research, and justice refers to minimizing risks and increasing benefits to the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The ethical guidelines outlined in The Belmont Report were followed to enable protection of the participants in this study.

Keeping the participants' identity confidential is imperative. Yin (2018) noted protecting the anonymity of the participants as well as the organizations, is crucial. Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggested that to keep the identity of the participants and organizations confidential, a researcher can use pseudonyms or codes for identification. To protect the identity of participants, a unique code was assigned to each participant. Participant codes were P1 through P8, and organizational documents were coded C1 through C8 since there were 8 companies participating.

Spurlin and Garven (2016) indicated storing data in a safe place facilitates easy retrieval for future use and ensures the privacy of the data sources. Rubin and Rubin (2012) noted it is imperative for researchers to keep the data collected from participants in a safe place where others cannot access it by either using password-protected programs or storing in a locked environment. It is essential that researchers assure the participants that the information shared will be safe and secure from outsiders (Alase, 2017). To protect the confidentiality of participants, the information has been stored on a flash drive and secured it in a locked fireproof safe for five years. After 5 years, information will be deleted from the flash drive.

Data Collection Instruments

Clark and Veale (2018) acknowledged the researcher is responsible for collecting and analyzing the data. Yin (2018) stated the primary data collection instrument in qualitative research is the researcher, with the researcher being responsible for mapping out and completing the data collection process. The researcher is also the keeper of all information received from participants (Twining et al., 2017). As the researcher, I was the primary instrument for collecting data in this study. In qualitative research, data collection approaches include methods such as interviews, written documents, and observations (Yin, 2016). For this study, the data collection methods were semi structured interviews and company documents.

There are multiple types of interviews that qualitative researchers can use to collect data, such as structured, unstructured, and semi structured (Yin, 2018). For this study, conducted semi structured interviews were done with participants. Researchers using a structured interview process ask questions that generally require yes or no answers, which does not give the participant a chance to expound on the phenomenon the researcher is studying (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). With unstructured interviews, the researcher does not follow a script. Thus, the participant can veer from answering the research question, leaving them open to talking about anything but the phenomenon that the researcher is studying (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Using semi structured interviews to answer a research question in qualitative studies works best because an interviewer can ask the participants scripted questions and, at the same time, allow for more probing questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

An interview protocol (see Appendix E) was followed to conduct the semi structured interview with the participants. The purpose of following an interview protocol is to keep the researcher focused on the interview and to ensure that the researcher is consistent and asks each participant the same questions (Arsel, 2017; Yin, 2018). Arsel (2017) noted the interview protocol shall consist of an introduction to the study, specific interview questions, and an explanation about member checking so that the researcher can confirm answers to questions were interpreted correctly. A researcher could enhance the quality of the data that the researcher receives by following an appropriate interview protocol process (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). To start the process, I introduced myself to the participants and explained what the study entailed, as well as answered any questions participants may have had about the study. After the initial questions were asked by participants, the interview questions outlined in the interview protocol were addressed.

Yin (2018) stated that sources of data collection could be interviews, participant observation, company documentation and records, and physical artifacts. For this study, there was a second data collection method of document reviews. Contacting human resources of the participating organization to obtain personnel records as well as the company's policies and procedures manual and any archival documents that may pertain to employee motivation and retention is essential. Examples of document reviews were employee of the month programs, and rewards and recognition programs for outstanding job performance.

Enhancing the reliability and validity of the data collection process, can be done by conducting methodological triangulation and member checking. Fusch et al. (2018)

stated when the researcher can look at multiple sources of evidence, the researcher can look at the data from different views. Twining et al. (2017) acknowledged using multiple sources of evidence would enhance the reliability and validity of the data if the researcher uses the data correctly. Member checking involves summarizing the data from the participant and allowing them to determine if the researcher's interpretation of the data is accurate or if the participant would like to change, clarify, or add any new information (Varpio et al., 2017). Researchers also use member checking to reduce any bias, which would make the study more reliable and trustworthy (Smith & McGannon, 2018). For this study, conducting both methodological triangulation and member checking occurred. Methodological triangulation in case studies consists of examining data from more than one source of information such as interviews, company records, and historical data (Smith, 2018). When researchers use methodological triangulation, researchers provide a richer and thicker description of the data (Smith, 2018) and increase the validity and reliability of the study (Kern, 2018). A researcher also uses methodological triangulation to diminish researcher bias and to include multiple perspectives of the phenomenon the researcher is studying (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Renz et al., 2018).

Data Collection Technique

To start the data collection technique process of the study, approval was obtained from Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). There was no contact with potential participants until IRB approval was obtained. After approval was received and approval #07-28-21-0740296 was given from Walden University's IRB, the recruiting process of the participants for the study began. The central source for the recruiting process was the list of Milwaukee and Southeast Wisconsin Top Workplaces 2018-2021 from the Journal/Sentinel online website (topworkplaces.com/award/jsonline). The reason for choosing this website is that there was a comprehensive list of top companies to work for in southeast Wisconsin by size, location, and number of employees. This list contained 75 small, 50 medium, and 25 large top workplaces in southeast Wisconsin for each year. Consideration for this study was small and medium companies. The methodology for choosing the top workplaces for the list starts with employees of companies in southeast Wisconsin filling out the Energage Workplace Survey. The survey measures four cultural imperatives (a) company alignment, (b) connection of employees, (c) coaching of employees by leaders, and (d) performance of employees. Other measurables are (a) employee engagement, (b) confidence in leadership, and (c) basics such as benefits, pay, and training. To be considered a top workplace, there must be a 35 percent response rate from employees for each company. Because this list contained top places to work for, I assumed corporate leaders in the companies are employing leadership strategies to retain employees. With the information obtained from the list, small to medium organizations were chosen that were listed as top workplaces in southeastern WI, which are appropriate for this study.

To start the recruiting process, eight companies were chosen from the top workplaces list that met the criterion of small to medium enterprises, and I began to peruse their corporate websites to find leadership information. If there was an email address, I sent an email script (see Appendix B) explaining what my study is about, and the criterion for the study and asked if any possible leaders would like to participate in the study. If there was no email address, I looked up the address to the corporation and sent the potential participant a letter of invitation (see Appendix A) by post mail. I explained to the participant that participation in the study was strictly voluntary. There were also no tangible incentives offered for participation. Offering incentives may gain more involvement, but it may also have gained participants for the wrong reason, potentially skewing the study. For this study, I sent out a total of 279 invitation letters (240 which were high-level corporate leaders and 39 which were high-level managers) to potential participants from 113 different companies. Initially, eight potential participants from eight companies were emailed. When I received no response after a week, I emailed an additional 62 potential participants from 21 more companies. When I could not gain the eight participants I needed for the study from those emailed, I did multiple post mailings to 189 potential participants from an additional 84 different companies. I finally was able to obtain five high-level corporate leaders who wished to participate in the study. For the remaining three participants, I went back to the Walden IRB and asked if I may include high-level managers in the study so that I may gain my last three participants. Walden IRB approved my request, and I was able to obtain my last three participants. Out of the 279 invitations, one participant was obtained from the initial emails, and the remaining seven were obtained from the post mailings. Once the potential participant emailed me to confirm participation in the study, a Zoom video conferencing appointment was scheduled with the participant to begin the interview process.

When I initially started gaining participants for this study, COVID-19 was still very prevalent, so all but two participants were working remotely. Therefore, Zoom video conferencing was the method of choice for this study because using this tool would avoid human contact during the COVID-19 pandemic. Zoom video conferencing is an acceptable way to conduct interviews because the program has security features that can detect if someone else is trying to breach a meeting you are conducting (Paulus & Lester, 2021). The security feature ensures that the interview between the researcher and the participant would remain private. The date, time, place, and method of participation were determined by the interviewee for the study. All but two participants chose to conduct their interview during their lunch hour in a home office with their door closed to ensure privacy and no interruptions. For the remaining two participants, one was in their corporate office at lunchtime with the door closed and the other was alone in their vehicle at a job site in the late afternoon. It is important that the participant feel comfortable in their surroundings to enable the participant to speak freely without any disruptions (McGrath et al., 2019). All eight participants chose Zoom video conferencing as the method of communication for this study because of the COVID-19 pandemic. After all, parties logged into Zoom, introductions were made followed by interviewees answering the interview questions. After all the questions were asked and answered, I explained to each participant that I would follow up within one week with a summary of how I interpreted the interview. The participants were then asked to respond within one week if they felt that something needed to be changed, added, or deleted. Each participant agreed, and the call ended.

Before the interview began, by Zoom video conferencing, the participant had to sign a letter of consent (see Appendix C). Because the interviews were through Zoom video conferencing, I emailed the consent form to the participant prior to the interview. I informed the participant that after reading the consent form, they could either send an email stating “I consent” if they wished to participate in the study or respond by stating they decided not to participate. However, all participants chose to participate in the study, so I received emails with “I Concur” from all participants. When the participant chose to move forward, the interview process began using a semi structured interview to collect the data. One week after analyzing and interpreting the data, member checking with each participant was followed up in an email (see Appendix D) to each participant, to confirm that I understood correctly the information the participant conveyed. Member checking involves the researcher interpreting the data into their own words and then reviewing with the participant to ensure that the data the researcher analyzed was as the interviewee intended. (Varpio et al., 2017). Member checking also gives the participant the ability to change or add data that the participant may have forgotten. The participant was given one to two weeks to confirm, edit, or make changes, to the collected data by email. All but one participant complied with the request. One participant was on vacation, so they replied one week later than requested. Out of the eight participants, there was only one participant that wanted to add some additional information. Otherwise, each summary to the participant was accepted as sent.

The data collection techniques for this study were Zoom video conferencing semi structured interviews and attained organizational policy documents and information about the company from the participant and the company website. Semi structured interviews allow a researcher to ask the participant a list of specific questions in a particular order to gain the data the researchers need to answer the question concerning the phenomenon the researcher is studying (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). An interview protocol (see Appendix E) was chosen for interviewing the participants. Using an interview protocol keeps a researcher focused on the interview process and could help the researcher move to the next question in the case of awkwardness on behalf of the participant (Arsel, 2017).

Researchers can educate themselves about the organization before interviewing participants (Yin, 2018). I learned more about the organization by researching the organization on the Internet before interviewing the participant. Participants may be more at ease during the interview process because the researcher has taken the time to inform themselves about the organization (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A researcher may obtain more information from participants when participants feel at ease with the researcher because the participant knows the researcher took the time to learn about their organization. Using semi structured interviews in case study research has some advantages and disadvantages. One advantage of using semi structured interviews is that the researcher has more control over the interview, thereby directing the participant to answer the scripted questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Another advantage of using semi structured interviews as a data collection instrument is that the researcher can ask for clarification or meaning of something the researcher does not understand (Johnson et al., 2017). A disadvantage of interviewing is that the participants may feel uncomfortable answering specific questions, thereby discontinuing the interview (Yin, 2018). Another disadvantage is that the researcher may influence the interview process by allowing their experiences to introduce bias, affecting the study's reliability and validity (Clark & Veale, 2018).

The secondary data collection instrument that was used to record the interview process was a voice recorder on a cellphone. Using a voice recorder allows the researcher to have an audit trail and accurately interpret the participant's data (Edwards & Holland, 2020). Unless the interviewer has extensive training in taking notes in interviews, the researcher should use a voice recorder to not miss valuable information from the interview (Rutakumwa et al., 2020). The interviewer, however, must be familiar with the voice recorder that he or she will be using before the interview process can begin to avoid any mishaps (McGrath et al., 2019). Using a voice recorder in the interview process helped the interviewer recall everything said in the interview.

Types of document reviews appropriate for qualitative research are company policy documents, news media, Internet-based data, and historical records (Natow, 2020). To gain access to company documents, permission was asked from the participants to contact the Human Resource Department of the organization to obtain documents that may help with the study. Corporate documents such as an employee handbook and references to rewards programs for employees were requested. For other documentation, I conducted searches through news media and the Internet relating to the participant's company. The documents I reviewed included documentation outlining training programs for employees who wanted to excel, company newsletters, employee recognition programs and moments, employee value statements, and newspaper articles highlighting employee achievements. Obtaining the company documentation helped in data analysis because they added to the information already given by the interviewees, such as meeting employees' individual needs and challenges through training, communicating with employees through value statements, and benefits (tangible or non-tangible) employees received through recognition. The information obtained through the company and research helped triangulate the data to mitigate bias and keep the validity and reliability of the study's findings.

Document reviews also have advantages and disadvantages. Marshall and Rossman (2016) stated that when researchers review organizational documents such as policies or rewards programs, the documents should pertain to the research question. Some advantages of using corporate documents in research are that the documents can provide background information on the organizations and alert the researcher to organizational values and beliefs (Yin, 2018). Yin (2016) stated that gathering and reviewing organizational documents can help reduce reflexivity issues. The interview with participants was more fluent due to having prior knowledge of the organization before the interview. Some disadvantages are that perusing company documents can be time-consuming and that the documents could be harmful to the organization or the participants if the researcher uses false documents (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Yin (2018) noted that not all documentation is truthful, and a researcher can invest large amounts of time perusing documents that may not help or pertain to their study. A researcher should make sure they obtain the documentation from a reliable source, and that the documentation relates to the research question because the wrong information could skew the results of the data.

To ensure that a study will be valid and reliable, a researcher can conduct member checking with study participants. Member checking is the basis of high-quality qualitative research (Patton, 201). Member checking refers to transcribing the data that the researcher received from the interviews and preparing a summary for the participant to ensure the interpretation of the data is accurate (Candela, 2019). By conducting member checking, participants can inform the researcher if he or she has taken something out of context or if the participant would like to add additional information (Varpio et al., 2017). Iivari (2018) noted member checking could increase the reliability and validity of the research if the member checking does not harm the participant.

Data Organization Technique

In qualitative studies, data can come from participant interviews and company documentation. To gain access to company documents, I asked participants to contact their Human Resources Department to see if they could obtain documents that may help with the study. I received documentation regarding training and recognition programs from all participants. For other documentation, I conducted searches through news media and the Internet relating to the participant's company. The documents I reviewed included documentation outlining training programs for employees who wanted to excel, company newsletters, employee recognition programs and moments, employee value statements, and newspaper articles highlighting employee achievements. Obtaining the company documentation helped in data analysis because they added to the information already given by the interviewees, such as meeting employees' individual needs and challenges through training, communicating with employees through value statements, and benefits (tangible or non-tangible) employees received through recognition. Marshall and Rossman (2016) stated a researcher should keep a research activity log that would contain information such as dates, places, activities, who the participants are, and what the researcher is exploring. I kept a research log that included whom I contacted and when, whether potential participants responded to email or post mail, and *when*, *where*, and *how* interviews would be conducted. I also added any company documentation I had received from participants or obtained through my research. Keeping this log made it easier to track how many participants I had invited, how many did or did not respond, and that I did not send any participant multiple requests. Keeping the log also helped to make sure that I did not schedule two interviews at the same time or request duplicate documentation if I had already obtained it. Having all this information in a log was helpful because it saved a lot of time when loading the data into NVivo. After loading the data into NVivo it was easier to understand the data and include it in the data collection, data analysis, and presentation of findings section of the study. Phillips and Lu (2018) suggested that software packages like NVivo are beneficial to a researcher because such software packages enable researchers to manage and analyze different forms of data, saving time and money. Maher et al. (2018) noted that NVivo is an excellent choice for data management. NVivo12 was used to organize the data by inputting the information received from the participant interviews, and company documents.

All data had a different naming convention depending on the material and the number assigned to the company and participant. For example, the label for company one with participant number one was C1P1 interview. When the data were company documents, the file was labeled C1 and the document's name. The information would be the same for each subsequent company. So, the companies would follow as C2P1 interview or C2P2 interview if there was a second participant in the company. Using the generic naming convention regarding the company, participants, and documentation protected the participant's and the company's identity.

Qualitative researchers not only have to organize the data from participants but also keep it in a safe and secure place. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) stated that it is of utmost importance that researchers keep the data secure to ensure that only the researcher can access it. Boileau et al. (2018) suggested that researchers store collected data in a locked cabinet or on a password-protected computer. If the data is secure, the researcher could store information in the cloud or on a flash or backup drive (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). All hard copies of data and a flash drive containing all pertinent information are stored in a locked fireproof safe for five years. After five years, I will destroy all hard copies with a paper shredder and delete all information off the flash drive.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process for this study involved methodological triangulation. Methodological triangulation is a process that researchers use to ensure that the data results of a study are reliable and valid (Fusch et al., 2018). Researchers use triangulation to diminish any bias the researcher may have about the study (Renz et al., 2018). Four types of triangulation are data, methodological, theory, and interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Jackson, 2018). Methodological triangulation involves the use of multiple sources of data, such as semi structured interviews and organizational documents, to study the phenomenon in case studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Smith, 2018). The data sources for this multiple case study design were semi structured interviews and organizational documents such as programs for employees who wanted to excel, company newsletters, employee recognition programs and moments, employee value statements, and newspaper articles highlighting employee achievements.

Yin (2016) suggested using the 5-step analysis process to analyze the data for case study research. Yin’s five steps to analyze the data are: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Yin, 2016). Compiling the data consists of organizing and sorting the data into a manageable order (Yin, 2016). Disassembling the data consists of putting the data into groupings that are more manageable for the researcher, and reassembling the data is when the researcher starts to see themes or patterns, which leads to reassembling of the data into groupings that include the same themes and patterns (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Interpretation refers to the researcher’s understanding of the meaning of the gathered information, and concluding is when the researcher renders a report about the study’s findings (Yin, 2016). For this study, I followed the 5-step analysis process. The computer-assisted qualitative analysis software (CAQDAS), NVivo 12 was used to analyze the data.

Yin (2018) suggested using a CAQDAS software program to help aid in analyzing data. Even though CAQDAS programs will help analyze the data, the researcher will still have to enter the data, define initial codes, and study the output of the data to identify patterns and themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). NVivo 12 was used to help analyze the data. NVivo is easily attainable, and researchers use it to transcribe, manage, query, and store large amounts of data, making data analysis more manageable (Phillips & Lu, 2018).

I then correlated themes with the study's conceptual framework, which is transformational leadership theory. It is up to the researcher to identify themes and patterns that are relevant to their study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The themes correlated with the four constructs of transformational leadership theory. The four constructs of transformational leadership are (a) idealized influence (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1994). The first theme which was motivation by meeting employee's individual needs correlated to individualized consideration. The second theme which was open communication and transparency correlated to both idealized influence and inspirational motivation. Bass (1995) argued that both idealized influence inspirational influence can be considered one construct. The third theme which is motivation by training and challenging employees correlated to the last construct of intellectual stimulation. While the last theme which is motivation through increased compensation and benefits did not fall under any of the constructs of transformational leadership theory, I would like to argue that organizations have found that to keep employees, they have to offer all the constructs of transformational leadership as well as add higher compensation and benefits. By assessing the themes in the study using the four constructs of transformational leadership theory, a better understanding of what leadership strategies corporate leaders use to motivate and retain employees was obtained.

Reliability and Validity

For a qualitative study to be thought of by researchers as trustworthy and having rigor, the study must be valid and credible (Maher et al., 2018; Nowell et al., 2017).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that the four criteria to determine the reliability and validity of a study are (a) dependability, (b) credibility, (c) confirmability, and (d) transferability. Is it imperative that a study is reliable and valid so that the study may be duplicated in future research.

Reliability

Yin (2018) suggested a study is reliable when another researcher can replicate the study using the same data collection techniques, resulting in the same findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that for a study to be reliable, it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that it is dependable. According to Nowell et al. (2017), researchers can ensure dependability by creating an audit trail that contains details of how the researcher will conduct the study. Creating an audit trail would be using an interview protocol and member checking. Using an interview protocol with all study participants will ensure that the researcher asks participants the same questions in the same order (Arsel, 2017). An interview protocol (see Appendix E) was followed to introduce myself, explain the logistics of the study to the participants (including the ability to withdraw if not comfortable), and include the questions to be answered by participants.

As the researcher, I also used member checking to increase the study’s dependability. Researchers use member checking to ensure the accuracy of their interpretation of the interviews with the participants (Candela, 2019). Smith and McGannon (2018) posited a study is more reliable and trustworthy when a researcher conducts member checking. Marshall and Rossman (2016) suggested the way to perform member checking is to approach the participant within a reasonable amount of time after the interview with a summary of the interpretation of the data from the researcher. A summary of the interpretation of the data received from the participants' responses was sent within 7 days to participants. Sending the interpretation promptly enabled the participants to alter, add, or delete any information as necessary.

Validity

When a qualitative study is credible, confirmable, and transferable, it has validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2018). Triangulation is a process that adds credibility to a qualitative research study (Fusch et al., 2018; Varpio et al., 2017). Four types of triangulation are (a) data triangulation, (b) investigator triangulation, (c) theory triangulation, and (d) methodological triangulation (Fusch et al., 2018). For this study, however, methodological triangulation was used. Methodological triangulation is when a researcher uses multiple data sources to ensure the data's reliability and validity (Jackson, 2018; Smith, 2018). Methodological triangulation was conducted using data gathered through interviews with the participants and organizational documents. Credibility in a research study helps ensure that the researcher is portraying the accurate reflections of the participants regarding their experiences in terms of the study (Maher et al., 2018). To ensure credibility, methodological triangulation and member checking were used.

Researchers should ensure that their study can be confirmable. Confirmability refers to another researcher's ability to confirm the study's findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Confirmability occurs when a researcher can demonstrate how the researcher arrived at the results of the study (Nowell et al., 2017). To achieve confirmability, I conducted member checking to ensure that I had accurately interpreted the data received from the participants.

Transferability in qualitative research is that the study findings can be transferable to other settings (Nowell et al., 2017). While the researcher is responsible for providing a thick description of the research process, the reader will need to determine if the study findings can be transferable to their location or context (Maher et al., 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated the reader of the study is the only one who can determine if the study would be transferable to their given situation because the researcher does not know future situations. Thick descriptions of the research and data analysis process are so that the reader can determine whether the study findings from this study will apply to their location or context.

Data saturation is when researchers cannot collect additional data to answer the research question (Nelson, 2017). Saunders et al. (2018) noted data saturation ensures rigor in a qualitative study. According to Hennink et al. (2017), when the data begins to repeat itself and when the researcher cannot identify more themes, data saturation occurs. Constantinou et al. (2017) noted a researcher could stop collecting data when no additional information or new themes emerge from the data analysis. Data was collected and analyzed to ensure data saturation until there was no further information.

Transition and Summary

In section 2, I restated the purpose of the research study and discussed my role as the researcher. I presented a description of the proposed research method and design, outlining the reasoning for the selection of a qualitative, multiple case study to explore the leadership strategies corporate executives in SMEs in southeast Wisconsin use to motivate and retain employees. I also discussed the data collection instrument, data collection techniques, and data organization techniques. Finally, I explained how I would ensure reliability and validity in the study. In Section 3, I will explain the study's findings, the application in professional practice, how the study could contribute to social change, and recommendations for actions and future research. Lastly, I will add reflections and conclude the study.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore leadership strategies that SME corporate executives use to motivate and retain employees. The data came from Zoom-based, semi structured interviews with executive and high-level managers from eight SME companies in southeast Wisconsin; corporate documentation was also reviewed to confirm and corroborate the interview data. The corporate executives and high-level managers interviewed all had at least 5 years of successful leadership strategy experience in motivating employees, were leaders in small to medium enterprises, and were located in southeastern WI. Prior to conducting the interviews, I used both email and post mail to gain potential participants. Participants who accepted my invitation did do so by sending an email to my Walden University email address. I then sent the consent form to the potential participant through email; if the participant agreed with the consent form and chose to participate in the study, they responded with "I consent." Interview times were negotiated, and interviews took place using Zoom video conferencing where I asked participants nine interview questions (Appendix E).

In this section, I present the findings by explaining methods executives and high-level managers used to motivate employees, resulting in higher retention within their respective companies. I will also address the application to professional practice, implications for social change, and recommendations for actions and further research. I will conclude the section with my reflections and the conclusion of the study.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question for this qualitative multiple case study was, "What leadership strategies do SME corporate executives use to motivate and retain employees?" To answer the research question, I conducted semi structured interviews using Zoom video conferencing, and I also used audio recording as a backup method, with eight corporate executives or high-level managers. Each of the executives or managers had been with their company for 5 years or more. Before each interview, participants were sent a consent form through email, to which they responded "I consent" before their interview was conducted. I asked each participant nine open-ended questions about motivation strategies that retained employees. The interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. After each interview, I had the video transcribed by a transcription company, and then I reviewed them to make any changes that the transcription company may have misinterpreted or missed. I then imported either the Microsoft Word file or Adobe Acrobat PDF file into NVivo 12 so that I could code and analyze the data. I also reviewed company documents such as documentation outlining training programs for employees who wanted to excel, company newsletters, employee recognition programs and moments, employee value statements, and newspaper articles highlighting employee achievements. Documentation was submitted by participants or located through the Internet or media by myself. I then imported all additional documentation into NVivo 12 as well. Having the data regarding the documentation helped to confirm information that was given by participants in the interview process when developing the themes and developing the findings section.

I used an anonymous labeling system to protect the identity of all participants. When loading the transcriptions into NVivo 12, I labeled them sequentially, starting with P1 and ending with P8. Therefore, P1 was Participant 1, and P2 was Participant 2. I conducted member checking with each participant by sending them a summary of how I had interpreted the interview before I loaded the transcribed interview into NVivo. By sending the summary to the participants, the participant had the option to add, change, or delete information from the interview. With the information from NVivo, I was able to identify four themes from the data analysis: (a) motivation by meeting employees' individual needs increased retention, (b) motivation by open communication and transparency increased retention, (c) motivation by training and challenging employees increased retention, and (d) motivation through increased compensation and benefits increased retention. The four themes identified through data analysis aligned with the research question and the conceptual framework for the study.

Theme 1: Motivation by Meeting Employees' Individual Needs Increased Retention

The first theme that emerged from the analysis of participant interviews and organizational documents, such as documentation outlining training programs for employees who wanted to excel, was motivation by meeting employees' individual needs and increased retention. Most of the participants (P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, and P8) implied that getting to know their employees by establishing personal relationships helped them determine what each employee needed to perform their job and stay with the organization. The same six participants explained that what might be a need for one employee may not be the same for another, and that needs may change from one day to the next. P7 stated

> To motivate my employees, I learn what is interesting to them. Employees can be motivated by a number of things such as title, salary, or work type. Every day brings a new person, new change, new environmental influence and something else going on with them.

P5 said, “We connect to our employees and help them, their families, and their communities outside of our four walls.” P4 similarly shared, “The key is getting to know people and forging relationships so that we can determine what motivates them.” In a newspaper article, an owner of one of the companies emphasized, “we want everyone to go home to their families at the end of their shift, healthy and happy.” Based on responses from the participants, it is essential that leaders understand employees’ personal needs because learning about each employee’s needs help leaders to forge relationships and understand what strategies work to motivate each employee.

Another need participants agreed on is flexibility. In a world where COVID-19 has forced many companies to change to either a completely remote or partially remote model, corporate executives have had to learn ways to be flexible to keep people working. For example, it is essential to give people the opportunity to work at home when they can if they don’t feel safe going to work (P6). P4 stated, “At least in the last COVID-19 couple, everybody is really motivated by the flexibility.” In a Corporate Social Responsibility Report, a letter from the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) addressing all employees emphasized that their workers have worked with tremendous flexibility and commitment. Leaders who understand their employees and what is happening in the world today understand the need for flexibility if they want to retain their employees.

Many participants (P1, P3, P5, P6, and P7) also emphasized that employees who feel they are struggling should have access to training. P5 stated, “We think the best gift we can give our employees is to develop them, and so we provide many tools and resources for that.” P3 has found it semi

successful to get employees a personal coach in the organization if it would help them perform their jobs successfully. Online training is available, but it may not be something that the employee is working directly with but still may be interested in (P6). P7 stated, “I find employees training, and that keeps them motivated to keep going.” One company has developed a program for training to help instill enthusiasm in their employees (P1). Based on the responses from the participants, training is an integral part of motivating employees. Employees with the tools to do their jobs correctly will be more apt to stay within the organization than employees who may be frustrated because they cannot do their job efficiently without training.

Correlation of Theme 1 to the Literature

Theme 1 emphasized the importance of meeting the needs of employees. Forging relationships and offering flexibility and training to help employees leads to employee retention and also aligns with existing literature. Sahu et al. (2018) found establishing employee-employer relationships helps to develop a psychological attachment between leaders and employees, which can play a crucial role in retention. Olubiyi et al. (2019) found that when employees have a good relationship with their leaders, they feel less stress in the workplace and are more willing to stay with the organization. Thacker et al. (2019) stated that leaders can build relationships with employees by learning about their lives both in and out of the workplace. Employees who trust leaders enough to feel comfortable discussing their personal lives will not want to leave the organization (Carter & Walker, 2018). Forging relationships where employees feel that leaders care about what their needs are inside and outside of the organization will lead to employee retention.

The ability to have flexibility in the workplace is another need employees have found will keep them with the organization, especially in a world where COVID-19 is still running rampant. Flexibility can encompass the ability to work remotely or work hours that are more convenient for employees striving for a work-life balance, as previous literature suggests. Alajmi and Lengyel (2020) suggested the ability to work flexible hours will gain commitment from employees and make them less likely to leave the organization. Marx et al. (2021) agreed that putting flexibility measures in place can contribute to the higher retention of employees. Olubiyi et al. (2019) determined when employees have flexible work schedules, they can also pursue other interests and pay more attention to family needs. Rombaut and Guerry (2020), however, found in a study that it was older employees who had multiple children who found flexibility in the workplace to be more critical than younger employees. Flexibility has become a hot commodity in a world with COVID-19. Organizations will retain more employees for a more extended period if they work with employees to meet their needs.

Training is also a need that many employees require to stay in an organization, as previous literature suggests. Training employees lead to higher employee productivity as well as higher retention because it enhances employee confidence and skills, which is not only suitable for the employees but the organization as well (Cernatescu et al., 2021; Deepa & Rajasekar, 2021). Pich and Fendy (2021) noted training employees increases the chances of job satisfaction, which also influences relationships with leaders in the organization. Destra (2021) conducted a study that resulted in training and development integral to employee commitment, suggesting that human resources should consistently implement training for all employees. Urbancova et al. (2021) posited continuous training of employees helps to develop potential and shape competencies. Employees with access to training learn how to do their jobs more efficiently and with less stress. When employees experience satisfaction in their jobs, they will be less apt to leave the organization.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

Theme 1 aligns with the individual consideration component of the conceptual framework, which is transformational leadership theory. Transformational leadership theory is based on leaders who instill confidence in their followers, which results in the followers performing beyond the leaders' expectations (Burns, 1978). The individual consideration component of transformational leadership theory involves leaders who support the unique needs of their followers and helps them accomplish their personal goals (Bass, 1985a). Bass (1999) stated that leaders must pay attention to the developmental needs of their employees, and support the process to ensure that the employee can grow. Participants in this study found that it was crucial to meet the needs of their employees to motivate them, so it would deter them from looking elsewhere for employment.

Leaders will establish relationships with followers when they are sensitive to the needs of their employees (Allen, 2017). Most of the participants in the study found that learning what each employee needed helped to foster relationships and gave the leader an understanding of what it would take to keep employees in the organization. The needs of the followers can change from day to day depending on the current climate in the organization and the outside world (Bakker & Breevart, 2018). According to many of the participants in this study, the most crucial needs of employees were flexibility and training. Flexibility has remained vital because of COVID-19. Employees who have leaders who are flexible with whether the employee was working in-office or remote found that the leaders met their needs. Therefore, employees stayed with the organization.

Training was also a key point with participants regarding employees' needs. Ogola et al. (2017) suggested leaders listen to what employees need and make time to coach and train employees. Tian et al. (2020) posited leaders providing employees with training and development will help to retain employees. Leaders who arrange for employees to participate in training and learning programs will maintain employees in the organization because the employees will be satisfied with their positions (Velmurugan & Sankar, 2017). Muterera et al. (2018) stated leaders can instill pride when they spend time teaching employees how to develop their strengths, which will give employees a sense of satisfaction within the organization. Employees who have the tools to perform their jobs without getting frustrated because of a lack of knowledge will stay in the organization because they are accomplishing their goals.

Theme 2: Motivation by Open Communication and Transparency Increased Retention

Motivation by communication and transparency increased retention is the second theme that emerged from the participant interviews and organizational documents. Communication, or a lack thereof, can decide if an employee wants to stay at a company. Participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P7) emphasized communication's importance when motivating employees. They noted that it is essential to communicate with employees regularly (P1), and transparency will keep employees connected with leaders (P4). P5 stated, "It's all about communication and keeping people aware of what's going on." P7 has weekly team meetings to keep the lines of communication open. Without communication, employees do not know what is going on with their company or individual positions, so the motivation to stay may be non-existent.

According to participants P4, P6, P7, and P8, transparency and trust are as important as communication in motivating employees. Leaders' transparency helps employees understand what is going on within their company and with their positions. P4 emphasized they were super transparent with employees. P7 stated, "I do take pride in being very transparent with employees and am genuinely interested in who they are." One participant shared that employees need to see the big picture so that they know their part in the goal and objective of the company (P8). When leaders are transparent with employees, the employees know what is expected of them.

With communication and transparency comes trust. Participants (P4, P7, and P8) asserted that trust is something leaders earn through communication and transparency. According to P4, “No matter what motivates employees, I think you have to have trust in order to build on it.” P8 gave an example of when a remote worker would log on for the day. explaining that if the employee’s work was done, it did not matter. P8 stated, “So I think having the level of trust that I have in my employees has motivated them and made them feel empowered to be their best selves, and bring their best selves to work every day.” P7 commented, “My actions and my words. They know exactly what to expect and that I have a genuine interest in them.” Leaders have to earn the employees’ trust so that the employees will want to stay with the company. Employees who cannot trust what they see or hear may move on.

Correlation of Theme 2 to the Literature

Theme 2 emphasized the importance of communication, transparency, and trust, which further aligns with the literature. Urbancova et al. (2021) posited that quality communication is essential when trying to solve employee problems. Chung et al. (2022) stated when there are voluntary turnover problems in the organization, then it is crucial management understands why the problem is happening and suggests clear communication with employees. Communicating with the right entity and communicating clearly can help resolve retention problems. Holzwarth et al. (2021) emphasized how communication can be a stepping stone to recognize employees for jobs well done, as well as help employees reach organizational career goals. Leaders need to know when to communicate with employees and need to understand their day-to-day work, so they can communicate encouragement (Erickson, 2021). Communication is a key part of making sure employees know what is going on in the company and what is expected of them.

Transparency of leaders to employees is also an essential part of keeping employees in the company as shown in previous literature. According to Yue et al. (2019), when leaders are transparent with employees, employees will trust them and commit to the organization. Dramicanin (2019) conducted a study of employees in travel agencies and found that leaders transparency affected the commitment of employees in a positive way. Transparency is a crucial characteristic for leaders because it will foster other characteristics such as accountability and empowering employees (Patri et al., 2021). Holtz et al. (2020) posited that employees will believe more in a leader when they are transparent, leading to trust and commitment to the organization. Employees want leaders to be transparent with them so that they know they are part of the organization.

Previous literature has shown that trust in leaders is a crucial element to keeping employees retained in the organization. Leaders who communicate and are transparent with employees garner a level of trust that will keep employees committed to the organization (Yue et al., 20019). Trust in leaders can also garner creativity and convince employees to perform more than just their daily tasks (Akter et al., 2021). Ampauleng and Abullah (2021) suggested that employees will increase their performance in the organization when there is personal trust in their leaders. Employees who trust leaders will want to stay within their organization because they will feel valued by their leaders.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

Theme 2 aligns with the idealized influence component of the conceptual framework of transformational leadership theory. Bass (1995) described the idealized influence component of transformational leadership theory as leaders who are role models for their followers, and who can gain the trust of their followers by fluently expressing the vision of the organization. Bass and Avolio (1994) stated leaders who gain respect and trust from their subordinates will encourage bonding between the leader and subordinate.

Gaining employee's trust starts with leaders who can communicate and be transparent with the expectations of employees. Ivanov et al. (2018) posited leaders creating an environment where they communicate with employees, will help foster trust and commitment of employees. Communication of the organization’s vision is something leaders can do to be transparent, which will help to motivate employees to commit to the organization (Engidaw, 2021). The participants in this study believed they must be able to clearly communicate their vision, and that it would help employees to trust that they were doing what was best for them in the organization. Clear and precise communication from leaders is imperative to gain employees’ trust.

Trust is earned, never given. Legood et al. (2021) suggested that employees will trust in their leaders only if they believe the leader has only good intentions. Leaders will motivate employees by creating a sense of trust, which will also help the organization because employees will stay (Ivanov et al., 2018). Leaders who gain employees' trust through their actions could improve employee retention (Engelbrecht & Samuel, 2019; Ohunakin et al., 2019). Once trust is established between leaders and employees, there is a better chance that employees will continue to commit to the organization.

Theme 3: Motivation by Career Opportunities and Challenging Employees Increased Retention

Motivation by career opportunities and challenging employees increased retention is the third theme that emerged from participant interviews and organizational documentation such as training docs for professional growth. Based on some of the participants interviewed, employees put career development and employee empowerment as priority goals, and they look to their leaders to help them achieve those goals. P2 explained that employees need a path to follow, including whatever the employee finds personally interesting and rewarding. P1 stated, "working with employees to build their career goals and go the direction they want is a top priority for us as leaders." P4 explained that leaders need to listen to their employees. It is not the responsibility of the leader to choose the path for the employee, but for the employee to provide the information as to what direction they want their career development to go (P4). Employees with a leader who shows interest in helping them reach their career goals may not want to leave the organization because they will be satisfied with reaching their goals.

Employees may also need extra training to reach their career objectives. While there is training for employees to perform their jobs and meet their general needs, there is also more challenging, extensive, and focused training to help employees reach their career objectives. P1 commented that their organization has a specialized software program that is more geared toward the employee moving forward in their career. The program helps to instill enthusiasm in their employees by allowing more focused training on where the employee really wants to be in their career journey. P5 also stated that they have a learning center that offers more focused classes for employees who want to advance within the organization. P7 said, sometimes employees don’t have the ability to move up in the organization, so the organization offers online training that may not be something the employee can do at the moment, but something the employee may still be interested in for the future. The extra training for employees to go through to reach their career goals can be challenging, but also rewarding as it will help the employee to meet their goals of having a successful career within their current organization.

Employees who are given proper training and can meet their career objectives may feel a sense of empowerment within the organization because they have leaders who believe in them. P8 found, that helping employees to meet their objectives in the company also helped the employees feel like they were a bigger part of something and that suggestions the employees would make mattered. P7 and P3 stated, that giving employees a voice at the table was motivating and empowering to employees. P3 commented, that empowered employees can make decisions and do not have to be micro-managed. Encouraging employees to obtain their career goals can lead to employees feeling that they belong in the organization. A sense of belonging can help employees believe that they can do good things for the organization and convince them to not move on to other opportunities.

Correlation of Theme 3 to the Literature

Theme 3 emphasized how crucial it was that leaders help employees follow a career path that will benefit them and the importance of challenging employees, which aligns with the literature. Shi and Cao (2022) explained it is essential that leaders understand that employees want to grow, and leaders should help employees to accomplish their goals. Shi and Cao (2022) also stated that when leaders provide more growth opportunities for employees, there will be more encouragement for employees to stay, and the probability of attracting new employees will be increased. Encouraging employees to follow a career path that they are interested in will help retain employees because they will be satisfied with the organization (Mayangdarastri & Khusna, 2020). Addressing the needs of employees who want to grow in the organization can also forge positive relationships with leaders as well as increase commitment to the organization (Deas & Coetzee, 2020). Employees who want to grow in organizations need leaders who believe in them and will offer encouragement to follow the career path of choice if organizations want to retain talented employees.

Not only is a career path important to employees, but the employees also want to be challenged in their positions as it gives employees a sense of empowerment which aligns with previous literature. Da Silva et al. (2019) suggested employees who are challenged in their work will stay with the organization because they feel that the organization is investing in them. Relationships with employees and their leaders can become strengthened when leaders believe enough in employees to make their positions more exciting and challenging (Chahar et al., 2021). Leaders who delegate tasks and responsibilities as challenges, help to empower employees and create a happy work environment (Vela et al., 2022). Employees who are challenged by leaders are encouraged because there is a sense of being a part of the organization. Therefore, employees are going to want to stay where they feel that they belong.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

Theme 3 aligns with the intellectual stimulation component of the conceptual framework of transformational leadership theory. Intellectual stimulation as described by Bass (1985) is leaders encouraging followers to be creative, innovative, and problem solvers. This component of transformational leadership theory also challenges followers to use their imaginations (Bass, 1985a). Employees use their imaginations and creativity when they decide that they want to change their career path. The participants in this study believed that employees under their leadership imagined what type of career path they wanted to choose and looked to the leaders to help them achieve their goals. Houssein et al. (2020) posited leaders who help with the career development of employees will also help with retention in the organization. Deas and Coetzee (2020) explained that organizations that are aware of employees who what to develop their career paths should do so with interest because it will foster employee satisfaction. According to Botoc et al. (2019), when organizations can financially contribute to the career development of younger executives, it will benefit the employee and the organization. Leaders who listen to employees who want to develop their careers and find ways to ensure that it happens will gain commitment from employees.

Sitthiwarongchai et al. (2020) suggested that transformational leaders encourage followers to take on complex challenges. Training and coaching for career paths differ from the training leaders offer for day-to-day operations. Career path training may be more focused and challenging for employees but more rewarding at the same time. Houssein et al. (2020) suggested that to retain talented employees; leaders have to offer more challenging training that would help employees keep on their career paths. Boukamcha (2019) posited that employees who are encouraged by leaders to want more difficult training will also be more innovative and self-renewing. Training for career development may be more challenging for employees, but the training will also help to empower employees because they become more knowledgeable and valuable to the company.

Theme 4: Motivation Through Increased Compensation and Benefits Increased Retention

The fourth theme that emerged from participant interviews and company documentation, such as employee recognition programs, employee recognition moments, and newspaper articles recognizing employees, was motivation through increased compensation and benefits increased retention. While many participants agreed that employees' intrinsic needs, communication, and career opportunities play an integral part in retaining employees, most also asserted that salary and other contingent rewards were just as important (P1, P2, P5, P6, and P7). P1 stated, "We understand the importance of good pay because some people are motivated by pay, so we offer a competitive total compensation package." P2 found that offering a competitive salary and bonus package attracted employees in the first place to at least get the employees in the door. P5 stated that they offer retention bonuses for new hires and that with their company profit-sharing plan, employees can be well rewarded if the business continues to remain profitable. P6 believed money talks, and that offering incentives and motivators will also help to retain employees. P7 said, "If it is money that helps to motivate the employees, the leaders will work towards fulfilling those requirements by working on their budgets." In a world where COVID-19 is still predominant in our society, employers have had to offer more than just intrinsic rewards to keep their employees. Therefore, adding considerable compensation and benefits helps to keep employees motivated and retention high.

Correlation of Theme 4 to the Literature

Theme 4 emphasized how crucial compensation and benefits are to retain employees in the workplace, which aligns with the literature. In a world of COVID-19, employers are finding it hard to keep employees. Therefore, employers are finding they have to offer compensation and benefits to fit the employee's needs to hire and retain them. Kalyanamltra et al. (2020) found that compensation and benefits positively influence retaining employees. Rombaut and Guerry (2020) suggested that if employers wanted to retain younger employees, there must be adequate compensation. Strengthening employees' willingness to stay within the organization requires leaders to focus on salary and benefits that fit the employee (Chahar et al., 2021). Mohan and Lavanya (2019) suggested that most employees preferred compensation such as cash rewards and health benefits. Salary and benefits have become a factor in retaining employees, especially in a world where employees are risking their health to go to work every day.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

Theme 4 does not directly align with the literature, but I would like to suggest an addition to Burns (1978) theory that rewards and compensation be added to transformational leadership theory. Burns (1978) told the main objective of transformational leaders was to motivate followers so that they may gain confidence to perform beyond their expectations. When followers perform beyond their expectations, the organization will achieve its goal and mission (Bass, 1985a). Our world has changed due to circumstances that are beyond the control of organizations and their leaders. Rewards and compensation have become just as important in retaining employees as was evident from the participants of this study. Riaz et al. (2018) investigated how a total reward system affected employee performance. Riaz et al. (2018) found a significant relationship between total rewards, employee motivation, and employee performance. Employees were found to perform well if they received both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Riaz et al., 2018). Susanto and Siswoyo Haryono (2020) found that leadership and compensation could significantly improve work performance, increasing work motivation and leadership capacity. Landry et al. (2017) found that a total reward system that offers tangible and non-tangible rewards will promote a workforce that will be more engaged. Improved work performance can help the organization reach its goals.

Applications to Professional Practice

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore what leadership strategies SME corporate executives use to motivate and retain employees. The applications to professional practice in this study focus on strategies that corporate leaders and high-level managers use to successfully motivate employees so they will not want to leave the organization. I interviewed 8 participants for the study, and the most important motivational strategies that the participants found helped to retain employees were meeting employees' individual needs, communication, career opportunities, and increased compensation.

With the introduction of COVID-19 in the United States and worldwide, it has been harder for employers to hire and retain employees for lengthy amounts of time. For organizations to remain profitable and enjoy longevity, employee retention is crucial (Krishna & Garg, 2022). To keep employees long-term, corporate executives and high-level managers must use motivational strategies to help employees develop a work-life balance. Employees who achieve a work-life balance will enjoy job satisfaction and, therefore, have less intention of leaving the organization (Lamane-Harim et al., 2021).

The findings of this study may help corporate leaders in small to medium enterprises understand what motivational strategies help obtain employee satisfaction and keep employees in the organization long-term. The findings of this study also have proven that it isn't just intrinsic rewards that will keep employees any longer. Employees are also seeking higher compensation, and leaders must understand that to stay strong talent in the organization, they must accommodate these changes. This type of information can be beneficial to leaders of organizations because reducing turnover will keep talented employees and help the organization stay profitable.

Implications for Social Change

Corporate leaders in SMEs who implement the findings of this study, because they now have a better understanding of how to address the needs of their employees, may bring positive social changes to their employees and the organization. Meeting the needs of employees will help to reduce employee turnover, which will increase organizational profits. The findings of this study could also improve the prosperity of organizations and communities, and improve family dynamics.

When organizations are meeting the needs of employees and those employees are staying long-term, it makes the organization more attractive to potential employees. The organization may gain a reputation for being a great place to work, therefore, attracting more knowledgeable and talented employees. As employees increasingly keep joining the organization, those employees may move into surrounding communities. Employees may then invest their money by frequenting small to medium businesses more often in their community, making the community thrive.

When employees are working for organizations long-term, family dynamics may also be improved. Families may be able to afford their own home or be able to purchase a new car because they will have longevity at their job. Employees may even choose to have more children because they know they will be working at the same organization for a long time. Improving family dynamics helps to also increase spending in the community and continue the lineage for workforces in the future.

Recommendations for Action

The objective of this study was to explore what leadership strategies leaders use to motivate and retain employees in SMEs. The results of the study could be valuable to organizational leaders as a tool to help understand and implement strategies that can reduce employee turnover in the organization. Therefore, based on the results of this study, I have four recommendations:

Learn the needs of employees by forging relationships. Most of the participants in this study determined that getting to know their employees was crucial in forging long lasting relationships. When the employees felt that their leaders cared about them enough to learn about them in and out of the organization, it increased job satisfaction and made employees want to stay. Learning what employees need within the organization will also help the organization because when there is high retention, organizations will keep talented employees and continue to be profitable.

Communicate and be honest with employees. Leaders should communicate and be transparent about what is happening in the organization. Employees need to feel important in the organization and if they believe their leaders are communicating honestly and being transparent, they will not want to leave.

Offer training to employees. Employees may want training for their current position or for other career opportunities in the company. Organizational leaders should offer training for employees to excel in their current positions because it will help with job satisfaction as employees feel they are doing good at their job. When leaders offer training for future career opportunities, it gives employees the feeling that organizational leaders care about their future.

Offer greater compensation and benefits. Employees are looking for compensation and benefits that fit their positions. Not everyone is motivated by just intrinsic rewards. Employees have other goals in their lives and to reach those goals, they need money and other benefits. Organizational leaders can help motivate employees if they offer the employees what they need to achieve their goals.

I will disseminate the findings of this study in two ways. I will send each of the participants a brief summary of the findings of this study as requested in the interviews. The study will also be published in and made available through the ProQuest/UMI database, so that any interested parties may have access to it.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this study are a small representation of what leadership strategies leaders in SMEs in southeast Wisconsin need to use to motivate and retain employees. The findings of the study also help to expand existing research on what motivates employees to stay with organizations. Recommendation for further research include duplicating the study for larger organizations, duplicating the study for specific types of organizations, interviewing employees to see if they agree with the leader’s perspectives, conducting another study when the world is more stable, and using a different geographical area.

This study focused on small and medium enterprises, and they were of no specific industry. Further research could include larger industries to see if the results would be transferable. Further research could also include specific industry types of small, medium, or large industries to determine if specific industries use different leadership strategies to help motivate and retain employees. Further research could also include conducting a study that included a leader-employee dyad to see if employees agree with the motivations in this study or to investigate other variables that may help employee retention. I also recommend further research in a time when the world is not rampant with COVID-19, because COVID-19 has affected the need for flexibility and greater compensation as a condition of employment. Lastly, the study was focused in southeastern WI, so further research could include different geographical areas to see if employees in different areas of the country or world value the same types of leadership strategies.

Reflections

My reasoning for starting this journey was to earn a doctoral degree. My plan was to complete the program within three years, but the trials and tribulations of life made that impossible. From the death of my oldest son, the changing of the committee members due to promotions or leaving the university, to the most recent COVID-19 pandemic. To say the journey was challenging would be an understatement. One of the biggest challenges was learning to exercise patience when things were not going as fast as I thought they should, or how COVID-19 made it harder to gain my participants for the study. There were many times when I just wanted to give up, but I told myself that I have come this far, and I was going to make it to the finish line.

As the researcher, I had to ensure the reliability and validity of the study, I had to mitigate any personal bias I may have had regarding the findings. I have worked in numerous positions where I have seen leaders not engage in leadership strategies that would help to retain employees. Therefore, to ensure personal bias was not an issue, each participant had to meet the same criteria, and I used an interview protocol where all participants were asked the same questions. By all participants meeting the same criteria and being asked the same questions for the study, I was able to ensure the findings of the study were reliable and valid.

My perception of this study changed from the beginning to the time that I interviewed participants. When I started this study there was no such thing as COVID-19. COVID-19 has made leaders in organizations take a step back and analyze the way they treat employees if they want to keep them. If leaders want to retain a knowledgeable and talented workforce, they should include a multitude of strategies to make that happen. I have learned through this study that employees' needs are not all the same, and it is up to leaders to create individualized plans for each employee to help keep the employees within the organization. Leadership strategies will differ, and it is up to leadership to determine what strategy will work best for each individual employee.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore leadership strategies that leaders use to motivate and retain employees. Retaining employees in organizations reduce costs associated with high turnover, low productivity, and the cost to recruit, hire, and train new employees (Bake, 2019). Employees who leave an organization because of a lack of motivation can cost organizations up to 2.5 times the former employee's salary for lost productivity, recruitment, and training (Bussin & Brigman, 2019). Leaders should use strategies to alleviate talented employees from leaving the organization.

Previous researchers have researched the correlation between transformational leadership and employee retention (Engelbrecht & Samuel, 2019; Lan et al., 2019; Ohunakin et al., 2019). However, the findings of this multiple case study have revealed that although transformational leadership is still relevant, employees also want a leader who is going to reward them with other benefits such as higher salaries, bonuses, and promotions. To reach this conclusion, I interviewed eight participants in small to medium businesses in southeastern WI, with no specific industry applied. Using NVivo12 to analyze the data, I was able to identify four themes shared by all participants. The themes were meeting employees' individual needs, open communication and transparency, training and challenges for employees, and increased compensation and benefits. The findings of the study are in line with existing literature. However, from the findings of this study employees want more than just a transformational leader. Employees also want to be recognized and rewarded for the efforts they put forth in their job. By leaders applying the strategies outlined in this study, they may enjoy increased retention of knowledgeable and talented employees which will not only benefit the employees but also the organization.

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Appendix A: Letter of Invitation

Dear Possible Candidate,

My name is Shirley Doescher, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I am conducting a study on what leadership strategies corporate leaders in small to medium enterprises use to motivate and retain employees successfully. As a leader who has shown success in motivating and retaining employees, I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

If you agree to be a participant in this study, I would like to set up a time to conduct a 60-90-minute interview, either face-to-face or through Zoom video conferencing to discuss your successful leadership strategies. After I analyze the data, I would then like to set up a follow-up interview to go over the data to make sure that I have interpreted it correctly and to see if there is anything you wanted to change or add. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and you will have the ability to withdraw from the study at any time. Any information you supply will be kept confidential, and your identity will remain anonymous throughout the study.

Your participation in this study would add valuable information to research and understanding of how leaders can motivate and retain employees successfully. If you would like to participate or have any other questions about this study, please feel free to contact me at [redacted]. I will be happy to answer any questions or set up a time and place of your choosing that will be convenient for an interview if you choose to participate in the study. Also, if you know of any other corporate leaders who would be an ideal candidate for this study, please forward me their contact information so that I may send them an invitation.

Thank you for your consideration,

Shirley Doescher
Walden University

Appendix B: Email for Initial Contact with Company

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Shirley Doescher, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I am working on a study about what leadership strategies leaders use to motivate and retain employees in small to medium enterprises in [redacted]. I have chosen your company because it has been recognized as one of the top workplaces in [redacted] and [redacted] website. If interested, the criteria to participate in the study are (a) participants must be over the age of 18, (b) participants must be corporate executives in small to medium enterprises for at least 5 years, (c) participants must operate in southeastern Wisconsin, and (d) participants must have been successful in motivating and retaining employees. If you feel that there are corporate executives in your corporation that fit the criterion for the study, please email me contact information at [redacted] and I will send a letter of invitation to the contact or contacts.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Shirley Doescher
Doctoral Student
Walden University

Appendix C: Letter of Consent

My name is Shirley Doescher and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I am working on my doctoral degree and would like to invite you to participate in my study on what strategies corporate leaders use to motivate and retain employees.

Participation:
I will conduct a 60-90-minute face to face or Zoom video conferencing interview where you will answer questions regarding the strategies you use to motivate and retain employees. Participation in the study will be strictly voluntary, which is that if you choose not to participate, your decision will be respected. There will be no compensation whatsoever for participating in the study, and if at any time during the interview you feel uncomfortable, you will have the option to withdraw from the study without any ramifications.

Risks and Benefits from Participation in the Study:
There are no potential risks or benefits to you as a participant in this study. The study could benefit others in identifying strategies that corporate leaders may use to help them motivate and retain employees.

Confidentiality:
The information you provide in the interview will be kept confidential. Therefore, I will not share any of your personal information that would identify you as a participant. The only people who will have access to the information you extend in the interviews will be myself, my doctoral chair, and the Walden Institutional Review Board. I will also take the liberty to secure the information in which you have given for 5 years by keeping it on a flash drive and locked in a safe. After 5 years I will delete the information from the drive.

Please remember that participation is strictly voluntary for this study and if you have any questions, you may contact me at: [redacted] or [redacted].

By signing this document, I have chosen to participate in the study voluntarily and acknowledge that I have read the agreement and understand all the terms and conditions as stated above.

Participant:____________________________

Date:___________________

Appendix D: Member Checking Email to Participant

Dear Participant:

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my study of “What leadership strategies leaders use to motivate and retain employees in small to medium enterprises in Southeast Wisconsin.” I have transcribed the attached data from our interview and have interpreted the data as I interpreted it. I would like you to review the attached document and confirm that my interpretation of our interview is correct. Feel free to approve, edit, or add any information you feel may not be accurate or may have been left out.

If you could conduct your review and return it to me at shirley.doescher@waldenu.edu by XX-XX-XX (date to be added when interview is transcribed), it would be greatly appreciated. Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns at [redacted].

Regards,

Shirley Doescher
Doctoral Student
Walden University

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Interviewee: Time of Interview: Date:

Interview Position in Company:

This purpose of this qualitative multiple case study interview is to answer the research question of what leadership strategies leaders in small to medium enterprises use to motivate and retain employees. The participants will consist of leaders in small to medium enterprises that use successful leadership strategies to motivate and retain employees. I will start each interview by introducing myself and going over the consent form with the participant. I will let the participant know that withdrawal from this study at any time is acceptable, even in the middle of the interview if it becomes uncomfortable. I will then ask the following questions:

10. What leadership strategies are you using to motivate and retain your employees?
11. What leadership strategy works best to motivate and retain your employees?
12. How do you determine which leadership strategy works best to motivate and retain your employees?
13. What leadership strategies work best to inspire your employees?
14. How, if at all, do your motivation strategies differ from individuals to groups?
15. How do your employees respond to your different motivation strategies?
16. What principal barriers have you experienced when trying to motivate employees?

17. What did you do to overcome the principal barriers you experienced when trying to motivate employees?
18. What additional information would you like to add about how your leadership strategies motivate your employees?

After each interview, I will thank the participants and explain how member checking works and that I would like to conduct the process with them after I have interpreted the data from the interview. I will explain to the participant that I will develop a brief synopsis of my interpretation from the interview and present this to them at a later date. I will explain that this will be the time where the participant will be able to clarify, correct, or add information to the interview if needed. The questions I will ask the participants during the member checking process will be:

1. Is the interpretation that I have provided you correct to the best of your knowledge?
2. If the interpretation is incorrect, what would you like to change?
3. Would you like to add any additional information that may help to clarify any questions from the interview?