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Leadership Strategies for Improving Employee Engagement

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Stacy Wright

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Leadership Strategies for Improving Employee Engagement

by

Stacy Wright

MBA, Texas A&M University, Commerce, 2015

MS, Texas A&M University, Commerce 2008

BS, Texas A&M University, Commerce, 2007

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

July 2022

Abstract

Small business leaders who lack effective strategies to improve employee engagement may be unable to retain employees, keep employees motivated, or improve employee performance, adversely affecting company productivity and profitability. Grounded in the transformational leadership theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies small business leaders use to improve employee engagement. Data were collected from three small business leaders in North Texas with 5 years of leadership experience who have successfully created and implemented employee engagement strategies. Data collection included semistructured interviews and publicly available organizational documents. Three key themes emerged from Yin's five-step data analysis process: supportive leadership behaviors cultivated employee engagement, open and honest communication promoted employee engagement, and recognition and compensation improved employee engagement. A key recommendation is for small business leaders to provide a communication strategy that sets clear and concise expectations for employees to understand their strong impact to the organization's overall success. The implications for positive social change include the potential for small business leaders to improve employee engagement that, might increase employee satisfaction, which can create prosperity for the communities by increasing employees' self-confidence and determination to carry out positive services in their communities.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my husband, Justin Wright, and my daughters, Kylie, and Aaralyn Wright, who sacrificed so much along this journey. Each of you pushed me day after day to ensure I met my lifelong dream of completing my doctoral degree. You believed in me when I did not. You helped me up when I fell. Thank you to all of you for your support along this journey. You will always be my inspiration to continue along life's journey. To my girls, remember no goal is out of reach. When you set your mind to accomplish something, you can do it. I thank you and love you all more than words can describe.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank God, my Lord and Savior, for he is the one who made this all possible. This road was not easy, but I completed this doctoral journey through his love and mercy. I would also like to thank Dr. Frank Bearden (chair), Dr. Tim Truitt (second committee member), and Dr. Jorge Gaytan (URR) for their professional guidance throughout this journey. I will forever be grateful for your contribution to my doctoral success.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Leaders must understand the significance of implementing employee engagement strategies to increase productivity and profitability. In 2019, the United States had 30.7 million small businesses that employed 59.9 million employees, accounting for 47.3% of the private workforce (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2019). To remain successful, leaders must achieve increased productivity and profitability in a rapidly changing business environment. Leaders must create an effective business model that combines employee engagement with organizational goals (Nienaber & Martins, 2020). Small business leaders must develop strategies to improve employee engagement to increase profitability and productivity. In this study, I concentrated on strategies that small business leaders used to improve employee engagement. Understanding and managing employee engagement is a critical component of sustainable business operations (Book et al., 2019).

Background of the Problem

Leaders are at the forefront of any organization to motivate, inspire, and engage the workforce to achieve the organization's operational goals and mission. Leaders play a pivotal role in imparting knowledge and skills to their followers in order to benefit the organizational growth and strategy (Mulievi & Tsuma, 2021). Employee engagement is the linkage for business productivity both qualitatively and quantitatively and is crucial for long-term sustainability (Tirastittam et al., 2020). Leaders are responsible for implementing successful strategies to engage employees to meet business goals. Leaders

must provide clear communication, direction, and effective engagement strategies for employees to reciprocate with positive actions for success.

Leaders face challenges when creating effective strategies to engage employees. Engagement can be defined as the extent to which employees are willing to commit their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral state toward accomplishing desired organizational outcomes (Chin et al., 2019). According to a 2016 Gallup survey, 87% of employees worldwide are not engaged, costing employers billions of dollars in lost productivity and turnover (Bhappu & Schultze, 2018). Many researchers have shown that employee engagement has positive relationships with performance management, productivity, employee satisfaction, and organizational outcomes (Tate et al., 2021). Research has also found a significant relationship between leadership and the level of employee engagement (Mulievi & Tsuma, 2021). This study may provide leaders with effective leadership strategies they can use to improve employee engagement.

Problem Statement

Employers struggle to attract the best talent, but getting the right talent does not mean employees will engage with the organization (Yadav & Morya, 2019). Engaged employees are more likely to provide an organization with valuable contributions to agility and productivity in an increasingly competitive and rapidly changing business environment (Amah & Sese, 2018). The lack of employee engagement costs between $483 billion and $605 billion in lost productivity every year in the United States (Bhappu & Schultze, 2018). The general business problem is that the lack of employee engagement negatively affects the organizations' productivity and profitability. The

specific business problem is that some small business leaders lack leadership strategies to improve employee engagement.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore leadership strategies that small business leaders use to improve employee engagement. The study population included three small business owners in North Texas with at least one but no more than 250 employees who have successfully used leadership strategies to improve employee engagement. The implications of this study for positive social change include the potential to improve employee engagement, which might increase employee satisfaction as well as employee self-confidence that can create prosperity for their communities through positive services they carry out in their communities.

Nature of the Study

Researchers have three methods from which they can choose when studying a phenomenon: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed (Levitt et al., 2018). Qualitative researchers seek to understand experiences lived in real-time from people's real-world experiences (Kyngas et al., 2020). The qualitative method was the most appropriate for this study as it allowed me to ask open-ended questions to explore and understand participants' real-world experiences with employee engagement and leadership strategies. A quantitative researcher seeks to examine variables' characteristics or the relationships among variables by using statistical analysis to examine phenomena (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). However, because this study focused on exploring employee engagement and transformational leadership through a leader's personal experiences, the

quantitative method was not appropriate. Researchers using a mixed-method study can produce more comprehensive results by combining the qualitative participant engagement with the quantitative statistical data outcomes (Ivankova & Wingo, 2018). The mixed methods research method is time-consuming and complex, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods of study (Kansteiner & Konig, 2020). Since my study did not use any quantitative methods, including data for testing a statistical hypothesis, the mixed-method approach was not appropriate for this study.

Qualitative researchers consider four primary qualitative designs when conducting research: case study, narrative, phenomenology, and ethnography (Saunders et al., 2019). A qualitative multiple case study design was the most appropriate design for this study. Using a case study approach enables the researcher to focus on a single phenomenon in a subject (Astroth & Chung, 2018). In a case study, researchers ask *how* and *why* questions to identify and explore the findings of their specific case-study topic (Ebneyamini & Moghadam, 2018). Using the multiple case study approach, I explored and compared the strategies that several small business leaders used to engage employees and increase productivity and profitability for the enterprise. The narrative design was not appropriate, as I did not collect personal stories to address the study's purpose (see Haradhan, 2018). A phenomenological researcher explores a participants' lived experiences with phenomena to uncover the meanings of these experiences (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). An ethnographical researcher thoroughly explores and understands the culture of the groups and organizations (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). This study's purpose was not intended to understand the culture or meanings of lived experiences of the small

businesses, so phenomenological and ethnographical designs were not appropriate methods for addressing this study's purpose.

Research Question

What leadership strategies do small business leaders use to improve employee engagement?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies have you used to engage your employees?
2. How do you communicate these strategies to employees?
3. How did the employees react to those strategies?
4. How did you evaluate the success of those strategies?
5. Which strategies were the most effective in improving employee engagement?
6. How did you implement these strategies?
7. What were the key challenges you faced when implementing strategies to improve engagement?
8. How did you address these key challenges?
9. What positive changes have you seen with improved levels of employee engagement?
10. What else could you add to this discussion about strategies to engage your employees?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was the concept of transformational leadership. Burns (1978) introduced the concept of transformational leadership. Burns's

theory asserted that leaders must motivate followers to action by appealing to leaders' shared values and expectations to have the greatest impact. Bass (1985) enhanced Burns's work by expanding transformational leadership theory to show how transformational leaders inspire workers to improve performance. Bass identified four key constructs of transformational leadership: (a) individualized consideration, (b) intellectual stimulation, (c) idealized influence, and (d) inspirational motivation. Each of the components of transformational leadership may positively affect employees' work engagement by enhancing their work-related self-efficacy (Winasis et al., 2021).

Transformational leaders are able to motivate, inspire, communicate as role models, and create value with confidence and charisma (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). While leading with a transformational style, leaders must engage employees to effect the transformation journey. Transformational leadership is a process by which leaders build successful organizations by influencing positive changes within the employees and the organization (Warrick, 2018). The use of the transformational leadership style allows leaders to actively engage their workforce by creating an inclusive, empowering, and enabling environment to be successful for both the employees and the organization's success. By creating job engagement, leaders could also increase the rate of job retention. Utilizing the transformational leadership framework enabled me to understand the effective leadership strategies utilized to improve employee engagement.

Transformational leaders provide a clear and concise vision, inspire and motivate, offer intellectual challenges, and show a genuine interest in the needs of the employees (Chin et al., 2019; Northouse, 2018). Researchers use the transformational leadership

theory as a critical mediating mechanism to value the follower and allows the leader to achieve a wide range of positive effects in the organization (Groves, 2020). The theory of transformational leadership emerged as a leading trait in small business owners to help successfully drive employee engagement strategies because these leaders motivate, engage, and inspire others. The leader participants having used successful engagement strategies displayed the characteristics of transformational leaders.

Operational Definitions

Disengaged employee: When an employee disconnects from daily responsibilities or others in the workplace, often associated with burnout and exhaustion (Yanchus et al., 2020).

Employee engagement: When people employ themselves cognitively, physically, and personally when completing job assignments (Khan, 1990).

Leader: A person who trains and influences a follower to have abilities and skills and focuses that follower on achieving organizational goals by causing the follower to willingly expend spiritual, emotional, and physical energy to achieve the organizational goals (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018).

Leadership style: A leader's characteristic behaviors demonstrated when motivating, inspiring, leading, and directing others; can be autocratic, laissez-faire, or democratic (Miloloza, 2018).

Small business: An independently owned, for-profit business of any legal structure that is physically located in the United States (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2021).

Transformational leader: Transformational leaders motivate subordinates to commit to themselves by heightening the awareness and importance of the designated goals, encouraging them to transcend individual interests to achieve group objectives, and activating higher-order needs by articulating an inspiring vision while acting as role models to achieve the said vision (Khan et al., 2020; Steinmann et al., 2018).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are parts of a study that a researcher believes to be true, reasonable, and widely acceptable (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The first assumption for this study was that participants would provide honest and thorough responses to the interview questions based on their experiences. I assumed that the case study method was the most appropriate method to discover the strategies small business leaders use to improve employee engagement. I also assumed that the participants' responses would lead to improved employee engagement strategies for increased productivity and profitability in other small business enterprises.

Limitations

Limitations in a study are potential weaknesses that are typically out of the researcher's control that may affect the study design and validity (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). One of the main limitations of this study was the limited geographical region. The second limitation included a limited sample size of three small business leaders who implemented strategies to engage employees. The third limitation of the study included time constraints for interview completion. To mitigate this limitation, I

informed all participants of the expected interview duration to achieve rich data collection. Research conducted with a small population may not produce generalizations that would be applicable to all business industries in all geographical locations.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the scope and boundary parameters set by the researcher that are within the researcher's control (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). For this study, I chose to limit the participants to small business owners rather than large corporations. Another delimitation of this study included participants from three small businesses in North Texas who have successfully implemented engagement strategies. The results of this study may not apply to medium or large enterprises.

Significance of the Study

Creating an operational environment that promotes employee engagement can lead to organizational improvement and advancement in organizational success. The climate transformational leaders create has a positive and significant effect on employee engagement (Winasis et al., 2021). Engagement is strategically essential for any organization but especially critical to small businesses, as it is more difficult to absorb the cost of the lack of employee engagement. Small business leaders may use this study to develop effective leadership strategies to improve employee engagement, which can reduce employee turnover, increase retention, performance, and increase profitability.

Contribution to Business Practice

Business leaders must understand the significant effects that the lack of employee engagement can have on the organization's productivity, profitability, and sustainability.

Human capital has become the most important asset in an organization as companies realize that employees affect direct business outcomes such as innovation, productivity, and financial performance (Markos & Gossaye, 2021). Engaged employees are happier at work, take more ownership of the organization, and focus on the value they can add to the operation (da Costa & Loureiro, 2019). Often, employees disconnect from the organization because of the lack of effective strategies from leadership (Taneja et al., 2015). Small business leaders may develop and deploy new strategies to improve employee engagement and thereby increase their organizations' performance.

Implications for Social Change

Leaders have the potential to use effective strategies to improve employee engagement in organizations. Employee engagement may create a cumulative effect for the employee by empowering and enabling the employee to meet goals, creating happiness, and allowing this positive energy to carry into employees' home lives and communities. Social change is incremental, and those who respond to social problems can bring a process that promotes and eventually leads to social change (Yang et al., 2022). Keeping employees happy reduces turnover, typically reducing unemployment in the community and providing more financial benefits for the families within the local areas. Successful small business owners have the motivation and ability to turn local challenges into opportunities and create social change by focusing on financial, human, and community development (Lumpkin et al., 2018).

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore leadership strategies to improve employee engagement in the small business environment. Burns's (1978) and Bass's (1985) work in relation to the transformational leadership theory informed the conceptual framework. The literature review consisted of recent and past sources focused on leadership strategies to positively engage employees and increase productivity. Throughout the literature review, I identified gaps in the existing literature and looked to close those gaps through further development of the scholarly research. The research question was "What leadership strategies do small business leaders use to improve employee engagement?" The seminal and preceding authors' work referenced in this literature review contributed extensive knowledge in the leadership field that influenced transformational leadership and employee engagement strategies.

I searched peer-reviewed and full-text articles from reputable, peer-reviewed databases. This study's research came from databases, including ABI/INFORM, Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, Emerald Management Journals, Google Scholar, and ProQuest Central. Keywords used for the database searches included: *transformational leadership, transactional leadership, authentic leadership, servant leadership, organizational productivity, employee engagement, motivation, communication, employee morale, engagement strategies, and disengagement.* For this doctoral study, I used a total of 199 sources, including seven books and 192 journal articles. Of the 199 references for this study, six are seminal works. The 193 remaining sources are peer-reviewed journal articles, representing 97% of the total. In addition, 183

(91%) out of the total of 193 references were published during or after 2018. The literature review contains a total of 130 sources, including five books and 125 journal articles. Of the 130 sources, 91% of the total were published during or after 2018.

The literature review contains an extensive analysis of research on leadership theories and employee engagement strategies. The first topic discussed in the literature review is the conceptual framework discussion on transformational leadership and transformational leadership theory, followed by employee engagement and strategies for improving employee engagement. The literature review contains the foundation and framework to address leadership strategies that might improve employee engagement for the small business enterprise.

Conceptual Framework

Leadership is a process that involves influence, entails working with others, and is concerned with effective goal accomplishment (Northouse, 2018). Some of the drivers of employee engagement include leadership behaviors and organizational culture created by leaders and leader–employee relationships from within the organization (Amah, 2018). Leadership is an important component that can help create employee engagement, and visionary leaders help create a culture of engagement that can increase overall satisfaction, improve retention, and drive optimal levels of profit and productivity (Ismail et al., 2021). Leadership effectiveness relates to the leader possessing drive and the ability to inspire and prioritize needs that, in turn, produce a sense of safety and calm for the followers (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). Leaders are an essential part of company operations. Leadership development can be guided by traditional, situational, behavioral,

transactional, transformational, or visionary models (Al Khajeh, 2018). For this doctoral study, I chose to use the transformational leadership theory for the conceptual framework.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Burns (1978) introduced the concept of transformational leadership, emphasizing that leaders must motivate followers by appealing to employees' shared values and expectations. Bass (1985) expanded transformational leadership theory to show how transformational leaders inspire workers to improve performance. The transformational leadership theory builds on the need to recognize change and create a vision of what should occur and focuses on the subordinates' exchanges on achieving that vision (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). Transformational leadership is a process by which leaders build successful organizations by influencing positive changes within the employees and the organization (Warrick, 2018). Transformational leadership centers on changing others, inspiring employees to accomplish results, and building up their own leadership limit (Al-Nawafah et al., 2022). The four key constructs of transformational leadership are (a) individualized consideration, (b) intellectual stimulation, (c) idealized influence, and (d) inspirational motivation (Bass, 1985). Transformational leaders provide a clear and concise vision, inspire and motivate, offer intellectual challenges, and show a genuine interest in employees' needs (Chin et al., 2019; Northouse, 2018). Transformational leaders engage their followers to create organizational environments where followers perform beyond expectations (Bass, 1999; Brown & Nwagbara, 2021).

Transformational leadership theory is one of the most researched and practiced areas in management (Groves, 2020; Jangsiriwattana, 2019; Mulievi & Tsuma, 2021;

Yaslioglu & SelenayErden, 2018). Even after years of study, scholars continue to define and update the transformational leadership style as more data becomes available. Many recent studies focus on the relationships between transformational leadership and job satisfaction, employee engagement, and organizational commitment (Eliyana et al., 2019). Among other leadership theories studied by scholars, transformational leadership is distinctive for improving workplace performance (Chin et al., 2019; Mufeed, 2018; Winasis et al., 2021). Many scholars stated that transformational leadership could positively affect other phenomena, such as employee engagement, employee empowerment, and job retention. For example, transformational leaders create self-confidence, intrinsic motivation, inspiration, personal development, and supports social relationships between employees (Bass, 1997; Al Harbi et al., 2019). Employees who feel empowered by transformational leaders are more inclined to perform more in-depth and extra role actions for the organization (Khan et al., 2020). Thus, scholars have used transformational leadership theory to understand leadership engagement strategies that engage employees and produce increased profitability (Birbirsa & Lakew, 2020).

Effective leadership depends on the approach that aligns with the nature of the business and employees (Bonsu & Twum-Danso, 2018). The successful management of employees is mainly dependent on the leadership style and how effectively leaders can affect employees' attitudes, behaviors, and work motivations (Phong et al., 2018). A proper leadership style improves employees' work motivations, inspires followers, and enables them to become enthusiastic about the organization's vision (Birbirsa & Lakew, 2020). Transformational leaders encourage employees to transcend individual interests to

achieve group objectives (Al Harbi et al., 2019; Steinmann et al., 2018). Transformational leaders can also activate higher-order needs in employees by articulating a vision while acting as role models (Khan et al., 2019; Steinmann et al., 2018). Leaders thus stimulate commitment and performance, leading to positive direct and indirect impacts on organizational performance (Qadir & Yesiltas, 2020). Understanding the impact that communication, leadership style, and personality attributes have on engagement can help leaders derive positive strategies that improve engagement (Saad et al., 2018). An engaged workforce has lower perceived stress levels, higher self-efficacy, higher optimism, and greater resiliency (Bhattacharya & Banerjee, 2018). Organizations with highly engaged employees also have higher levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty, more productivity, and more profitability (Dash & Mohanty, 2019). It is important to understand where transformational leadership applies to current research.

Transformational Leadership in Current Research

Transformational leaders are vital to company performance because they create a culture that builds a bond between leader and employee. Transformational leaders can identify the challenges of changing environments and adjust response strategies to meet these challenges by creating a strong vision, providing empowering opportunities, and boosting employees' confidence in adapting to a new environment (Yue et al., 2019). Today, transformational leadership is the most acclaimed leadership theory that promotes significant and sustainable change (Villanueva et al., 2020). Current literature on transformational leadership shows the positive effect transformational leadership has on

employees' creativity, trust, and communication (Al Harbi et al., 2019; Kark et al., 2018; Yue et al., 2019).

Transformational Leadership and Creativity

Leadership is a driver of team creativity as creative leaders can create original solutions to problems, direct creative strategies, and bring innovation into the daily organization's productivity (Li & Yue, 2019). With the rapidly changing global environment, creativity is essential for any organization trying to sustain their competitive advantages (Ramalingam et al., 2021). Transformational leadership relates to creativity through individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and enhancing followers' self-efficacy (Al Harbi et al., 2019). By using intellectual stimulation, transformational leadership can develop individual creativity (Ghimire et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020). Transformational leadership provides the inspiration followers need from an emotional aspect for the leader to create engagement for the follower to seek new ideas that produce new results (Odetunde & Ufodiama, 2017). Research has shown a positive association between transformational leadership, employee creativity, and organizational productivity (Al Harbi et al., 2019). Transformational leaders contribute to employees' innovative and creative behaviors by creating an inspiring environment (Kark et al., 2018). The creativity of employees is important to organizational success and innovation, and transformational leadership is an important variable to enhance followers' ability and willingness to create new approaches to solving problems (Al Harbi et al., 2019).

Transformational Leadership and Trust

Transformational leadership is a superior leadership style due to its criteria with follower effectiveness, satisfaction, and employee trust (Akhtar et al., 2019). Employee trust defines the level of faith an employee has in the leader's intentions and the confidence that the leader will act fairly and ethically (Asencio & Sun, 2020). Employees who trust an organization believe their interests are aligned with those of the organization, whereas distrusting employees feel that leaders do not have their best interest in mind during decision-making (Yue et al., 2019). Disengaged employees are less likely to engage with the organization (Yue et al.). Transformational leaders play a crucial role in building trust among employees, which is crucial for the organization's long-term stability (Asencio & Sun, 2020).

Trusting employees work hard to complete assigned tasks, often going beyond basic expectations (Asencio & Sun, 2020; Khan et al., 2019). Distrusting employees create greater transaction costs for the organization and find ways to avoid vulnerable situations affecting their overall performance (Asencio & Sun, 2020). Trusted leaders create more positive employee attitudes, greater engagement, more knowledge sharing, and more open engagements with followers (Altunoglu et al., 2018; Asencio & Sun, 2020; Khan et al., 2019). Transformational leaders build trust by empowering employees to make their own decisions, motivating employees to achieve goals, and encouraging followers to approach situations from new perspectives by showing commitment to individual development (Asencio & Sun, 2020; Bass & Avolio, 1995). The effects of

trust in a transformational leader are important to improve work and task performance in an organization.

The influences of transformational leadership have a postive effect on followers' task performance throught he mediating role of trust (Altunoglu et al., 2018). Transformational leadership provides a postive impact to follower trust and task performance when leaders apply motivating and influential tactics, creating an enivornment where follwers want to achieve higher performance and have more trust in the leader (Altunoglu et al.). Research has shown a postive association between employee trust and transformational leadership when leaders have transparent communication and employees are open to change (Yue et al., 2019). When explored from the followership perspective, studies have shown that that active engagement and independent critical thinking positively affected all four constructs of transformational leadership (Khan, 2019). The trust in leadership partially mediates the direct relationship between the followership dimensions and transformational ledership constructs (Khan). Transformational leadership and knowledge sharing are also positively related, providing another critical component for the company to maintain and sustain its competitive advantage and remain profitable (Phong et al., 2018).

Transformational Leadership and Communication

Communication refers to transferring meaning between two or more people (Crews et al., 2019). Communication can be verbal or nonverbal and transmitted through a variety of mediums. Organizational leaders persuade, motivate, inspire, engage, and lead followers through effective communication (Liderlik et al., 2019). Effective

leadership cannot achieve its greatest potential without communication (Yue et al., 2019). Employee communication should create an active partnership between management and employees, providing a support system to ensure employees are engaged communicators (Mazzei et al., 2019). Positive and effective communication creates a significant relationship with employee engagement, thus building the employee's engagement level (Mazzei et al.). Transformational leaders use communication as a primary tool to build relationships and improve employee engagement (Chaudhry & Joshi, 2018).

The transformational leader's ability to convey values and increase mission valence rests on their ability to communicate the organization's vision and mission clearly and concisely to employees. Transformational leaders create progress and momentum for their followers by setting examples and building commitment with their daily acts and practices (Al Kindy & Magd, 2021). Effective communication in an organization increases performance, employee motivation, and helps employees understand how the organization can achieve its goals (Zeinab et al., 2019). Transformational leadership provides the most complete leadership style that exhibits versatility, charisma, communicative, empathetic, and produces positive changes within an organization (Villanueva et al., 2020).

All four constructs of transformational leadership impact communication performance and help create meaningful relationships (Zeinab et al., 2019). Effective communication is directly linked to the intellectual stimulation of transformational leaders (Boies & Fiset, 2018). Employees' affective commitment to change increased by 3% when leadership provided effective communication, including content, climate, and

various communication mediums (Chaudhry & Joshi, 2018). Change in an organization starts with a well-aligned communication plan to bridge the gap between strategy and execution (Liderlik et al., 2019; Schroeder & Modaff, 2018). Employee communication satisfaction mediated the relationship between employee perceptions of transformational leadership, communication competence, and job satisfaction levels (Liderlik et al.).

Analysis of Other Leadership Styles

To evaluate the extensive literature available on other leadership styles, I conducted a comprehensive review of complementary and alternative theories. My analysis includes a discussion on transactional leadership, servant leadership, and authentic leadership theory to understand these leadership styles' effects on employee engagement. The following information is an overview of the three alternative theories.

Transactional Leadership

Samanta and Lamprakis (2018) defined transactional leadership as a process in which a "transaction" happens between the leader and others. Burns (1978) provided a definition of transactional leadership, and Bass (1981) explored the theory in greater detail (Bian et al., 2019). Transactional leaders persuade followers by utilizing a reward system instead of using individualized inspirations, emphasizing extrinsic rewards for good work and punishment for negative outcomes (Alharbi & Aljounaidi, 2021; Northouse, 2018). Transactional leaders are clear that the employee who gives something to the organization will get something in return. Bass and Avolio (1995) explained three dimensions of transactional leadership: (a) contingent rewards, (b) management by exception (active), and (c) management by exception (passive).

Transactional leadership utilizes the leader's power to reward or punish individuals for meeting specific goals and requirements (Kark et al., 2018). Contingent reward is the first dimension of transactional leadership and an exchange process between leaders and followers where followers exchange efforts for reward (Jangsiriwattana, 2019). Management by exception involves corrective criticism, negative feedback, and negative reinforcement (Jangsiriwattana, 2019). Management by exception in the active form requires leaders to watch followers closely for mistakes and take immediate corrective action. In the passive form, management by exception requires leaders to intervene after problems arise (Jangsiriwattana, 2019). Transactional leaders are goal-focused, requiring little input from employees to achieve desired tasks.

Transactional leadership focuses on supervising the employees' work, individual transactions, and encouraging obedience through reward and punishment (Efianda, 2021). Leaders motivate and direct followers by sticking with a defined standard of rules for tasks, allowing the organizational mission, system, rules, and chain of command to become the guiding force (Efianda, 2021). Unlike transformational leaders, transactional leaders do not focus on the future vision but specify each worker's role and responsibilities and reward employees financially or morally when goals are achieved (Samanta & Lamprakis, 2018). Since transactional leadership bases its system on rewards and penalties, it does not offer employee motivation to go beyond the status quo or seek to be creative or innovative (Efianda, 2021).

Transactional leadership focuses on reward and punishment as a form of motivation for employees to perform well and avoid mistakes (Frangieh & Rusu, 2021).

Transactional leaders focus more on short-term goals that stress performance and do not promote long-term overall organizational success (Thomas & Cangemi, 2021). The power of a transactional leader comes from formal authority and organizational responsibility (Frangieh & Rusu, 2021). Transactional leaders focus on a give-and-take management method to ensure all tasks are completed on time and on budget (Frangieh & Rusu, 2021). Transactional leaders lack the quality of relationship building and lack the ability to have human compassion because they solely focus on transacting work for reward (Brown et al., 2020).

Transactional leaders always clearly define expectations and set goals for followers with achievable milestones. Transactional leaders can motivate employees to accomplish tasks by rewarding and recognizing employees for their efforts, providing followers the opportunity to actively engage and developing a strong motivation for completing daily tasks (Li et al., 2018). Transactional leaders focus on extrinsic work motivators to engage, while transformational leaders focus on intrinsic work motivations (Li et al.). Both transformational and transactional leadership styles should be used in unison to create the most engaging work environment (Li et al.).

In the workplace, both transactional and transformational leadership can have a positive effect. Bass (1985) noted that effective leaders often use transactional and transformational leadership styles in different circumstances. Effective leadership requires a mixture of transactional and transformational leadership skills (Hoogeboom & Wilderom, 2019; Kark et al., 2018). While both leadership styles have a place in the organization, there are significant differences in the impact on the organization's people,

processes, and productivity (Hoogeboom & Wilderom; Shkoler & Tziner, 2019). While transactional leaders meet employees' basic needs, transformational leaders focus on the needs of the employee while providing a challenging and meaningful task for each employee (Thomas & Cangemi, 2021). Transformational leadership inspires employee commitment, a necessary component of employee engagement (Mufeed, 2018).

Transformational leaders can inspire others to go beyond the daily expectations to achieve greater success. Transformational leaders encourage followers to be authentic, creative, and innovative (Lin et al., 2018). Conversely, transactional leaders' do not focus on the employees' needs or personal development (Brown et al., 2020). Transactional leaders thrive with setting expectations, driving results, and achieving goals (Brown et al., 2020), making this leadership style effective in goal-driven organizations and not focused on the growth and wellbeing of the employee. When the organization is focused on relationships, being interactive, visionary, passionate, caring, and empowering, transformational leadership is necessary to achieve the collective goals (Yue et al., 2019). Transformational leadership allows leaders to focus on the individual employee to ensure they are motivated and inspired to be the best employee they can be. Transformational leaders create a positive work environment, ensuring employees feel valued, grow, and have personal development opportunities. In contrast, transactional leaders do not engage with employees as they delegate assignments and expect completion. Transactional leadership was not appropriate because this study focused on exploring strategies that improve employee engagement.

Servant Leadership

Greenleaf coined the term servant leadership in 1970, and he defined the term in his publication in 1977 (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leaders put others' needs over their own to serve the greater good within a community or organization. Over the past several decades, servant leadership emerged as a dynamic form of leadership associated with a positive impact on organizations (Heyler & Martin, 2018). Servant leaders stay engaged and have the desire to help others to ensure others can emerge as servant leaders (Heyler & Martin, 2018).

Servant leaders promote a follower first position that provides a foundation for compassion, kindness, and trust (Brown et al., 2020). Servant leadership focuses on the desire to help others while preparing them to serve others, whereas transformational leadership emphasizes the desire to lead while inspiring the followers to perform well in their actions (Heyler & Martin, 2018). Servant leaders view followers as the reason for being in the position and do everything they can to teach others to do the same. Servant leaders are responsible for providing direction and ensuring company tasks are accomplished while offering followers empathy, compassion, ethical behavior, and empowerment (Sfetcu, 2021).

Ehrhart (2004) identified seven dimensions of servant leadership: form relationships with followers, empower followers, help followers grow and succeed, behave ethically, have conceptual skills, put followers first, and create value for those outside the organization (Sfetcu, 2021). Servant leadership comes from the desire to serve others. Bennett (2021) provided an empirical research study that assessed the relationship

between servant leadership characteristics and employee job satisfaction. Bennett used the Reed, Vidaveer-Cohen, and Colwell's (2011) Executive Servant Leadership Scale and Lucas, Babakus, and Ingram's (1990) Job Satisfaction scale to find that there is a strong positive correlation between the interpersonal support and the components of servant leadership and job satisfaction. Servant leaders spark the desire for one to do better and serve others as well (Kiker et al., 2019). While servant leadership shares some common characteristics with transformational leadership, it carries its own identity, with servant leaders inspiring their employees to devote themselves to the organizational aims and aspirations (Sfetcu, 2021). Despite the postive attributes of servant leadership, transformational leadership better predicts followers' affective and normative commitment (Muthia & Krishnan, 2015).

Servant leaders create engagement because they have specific characteristics that build effective communities. The servant leader's authentic and natural form of reciprocity provides a solid framework for leaders to engage employees (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). Servant leaders commit to others' growth, identify individual employee needs, empower employees to be engaged in decision-making, and then drive towards completing organizational goals and objectives (Ghasabeh, 2018). The servant leaders' ability to empathize with employees allows for motivation, engagement, and productivity to climb. Similar to transformational leaders, servant leaders can inspire employees to become more engaged in the organizational process and direct creative strategies to bring innovation into the operation (Ghasabeh, 2018). Many of the positive characteristics of servant leadership can also be attributed to the transformational leader (Sfetcu, 2021).

The servant leader's primary focus is on developing the followers, whereas the transformational leader focuses on the organization's betterment (Kiker et al., 2019). Because this study focused on creating strategies to improve employee engagement to increase productivity and profitability, servant leadership was not appropriate for this study.

Authentic Leadership Theory

Authentic leaders build trust and hope within employees to create a work environment that leads to followers' well-being (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Using an authentic leadership style, leaders can increase employees' psychological capital (Adil & Kamal, 2020). While authentic leadership is easier to recognize than define, scholars have provided frameworks to define an authentic leader. One authentic leader framework states that authentic leaders: (a) have self-awareness; (b) have internalized oral perspective; (c) have balanced processing; and (d) have relational transparency (Pillai & Mikkilineni, 2021). When considered together, the process of identification, positive modeling, emotional contagion, self-determination, and positive social exchanges is critical to explaining the way authentic leaders influence followers (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Authentic leaders try to maintain internal coherence between moral values and behaviors and have transparent and sincere relationships with their employees that promote the well-being of all employees (Sainz et al., 2021).

Authentic leaders strive to positively influence others to create authentic followers by providing transparancy, self-awarenes, and self-regulation (Pillai & Mikkilineni, 2021; Sainz et al., 2021). Previous studies found that authentic leadership creates a transparent

and fair environment, directly affecting employees' attitudes, satisfaction level, commitment, trust, and willingness to go above the expectations of a task or assignment (Adil & Kamal, 2020). Authentic leaders heighten self-awareness and shape followers' self-regulatory processes, allowing those followers to develop greater clarity about their values, identity, and emotions (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Maximo et al. (2019) investigated the influence of authentic leadership on trust in supervisors, psychological safety, and work engagement and found that authentic leadership was a significant predictor of both trust in supervisors and psychological safety. Authentic leadership had a statistically significant indirect effect on work engagement through supervisors' trust (Maximo et al.). Authentic leaders who are driven by their life instances and the psychological characteristics of optimism, hope, resilience, and self-efficacy create positive behaviors which motivate and influence followers toward organizational goals (Pillai & Mikkilineni, 2021). The authentic leadership theory focuses on an in-depth analysis of the leader's and follower's self-awareness/regulation, positive psychological capital, and the moderating role of a positive organizational climate (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Wei et al. (2018) developed a mediating moderation model to test authentic leadership's interactive effect and competency on followers' job performance through work engagement. Authentic leadership positively relates to followers' task performance and organizational citizenship behavior, and leader competency moderates the relationship between authentic leadership and organizational citizenship behavior (Wei et al.).

Authentic leadership is a complementary style to transformational leadership, and both have components that can positively improve employee engagement. Authentic leadership differentiates from transformational leadership in that they anchor in their own deep sense of self, values, and beliefs (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Authentic leaders often blend the components of transformational and ethical leadership styles (Pillai & Mikkilineni, 2021). Bass (1985) and Burns (1978) provided defined terms that a transformational leader would be authentic (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). However, not every authentic leader is transformational (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Kiker et al., 2019). Authentic leaders focus on developing their sense of self, whereas transformational leaders focus on leading others (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Authentic leaders are not always charismatic or inspirational like transformational leaders (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Because this study focused on inspirational leaders and success with organizational change, the authentic leader was not appropriate for this study.

Application to the Applied Problem

Gandolfi and Stone (2018) defined a leader as a person who motivates and inspires others to work willingly to help achieve organizational goals and the mission. Leadership style defines the personal qualities or interpersonal influence that leaders exhibit (Ismail et al., 2021). Ismail et al. (2021) defined leadership as the personal qualities of a person who can set direction and influence followers by their skills and character in a positive manner that contributes to achieving the goals of an organization. Leadership is an intentional act to influence others in a common direction to achieve a common goal (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). Samanta and Lamprakis (2018) defined

leadership as the most strategic component of an organizational system. Leadership style increases employee satisfaction, commitment, and retention (Almas et al., 2020). Leaders play a pivotal role in any organization as they set the direction and guide others to achieve common goals.

Leaders are responsible for creating engaging and inspiring work environments by motivating employees to do more than expected each day. Leaders must be innovative with their solutions to ensure they gain or sustain their competitive advantage. Leaders bring together people and processes, and by using motivation and inclusion, leaders can create a level of innovation within the enterprise environment. Leaders are responsible for creating an innovative culture by promoting innovative thinking in the employees (Gomezel & Rangus, 2019). In order to remain successful, leaders must be open to the innovation process and business changes that meet organizational objectives (Gomezel & Rangus, 2019).

Leaders can use effective leadership strategies to guide the organization toward accomplishing the overall organization vision, mission, and goals (Para-Gonzalez et al., 2018). Transformational leadership style has a positive effect on employees' psychological capital and increasing employee engagement. Leadership style plays an important role in employee engagement as the character and actions of the leader can enhance employee engagement (Ismail et al., 2021). Leaders must realize the importance of leadership style, and the interaction with employee engagement can positively affect organizational productivity and profitability (Farahnak et al., 2020). Effective leaders will

recognize that an engaged employee increases productivity, creativity, and innovation in the workforce, which, in turn, increases profitability for the company.

Employee Engagement

Khan (1990) defined employee engagement as when people employ themselves cognitively, physically, and personally when completing job assignments. Saad et al. (2018) clarified Khan's definition, suggesting that engagement characteristics include an individuals' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral state directed towards the organizational outcomes. Bakker and Albrecht (2018) supported Kahn's definition but added that vigor, dedication, cognitive engagement, and absorption are factors that are vital to obtaining employee engagement. Conversely, Ismail et al. (2021) argued that there could not be a universal definition of engagement offered because engagement hinges on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components. Engaged employees offer high energy levels, enthusiasm, and are fully immersed in their job (Chin et al., 2019). Employee engagement connects employees with the organization's mission and vision and is the fuel that allows ordinary people to attain uncommon results. Employee engagement impacts job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intention to quit, and organizational citizenship behavior (Ferreira, 2019). Engagement can also positively impact performance, customer satisfaction, and increased revenue (Ferreira, 2019). Correspondingly, organizations with engaged employees tend to have better performance, enhanced productivity, less turnover, less absenteeism, and enhanced employee loyalty (Antony, 2018).

Employee engagement reflects identifying and aligning the organizational goals and an employee's personal energy investment into their respective job roles (Borah & Barua, 2018). Integrity, trust, two-way communication, and commitment between the organization and the employee builds employee engagement (Chahar & Hatwal, 2018). Engaged employees can improve employee performance, profitability, customer satisfaction, employee retention, and overall organizational success. Engaged employees are enthusiastic about the work they perform for the benefit of the organization (Chin et al., 2019). Engaged employees absorb themselves into achieving daily goals for the organization (Chin et al., 2019). The level of employee engagement can predict how employees and the overall organization will perform (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). Therefore, leadership strategies and actions must focus on engaging employees.

Employee engagement has emerged as a way for companies to stay competitive in a global and changing marketplace. Engaged employees affect an organization's competitive advantage, help solve organizational problems, and increase productivity and profitability (Chin et al., 2019). Employee engagement increases organizational commitment and individual wellbeing, thus driving up productivity and sustaining the competitive advantage (Bhappu & Schultze, 2018). With the constant change in modern business operations, companies are focusing more on human resource management, including employee engagement (Rozman et al., 2019). Leaders must work hard to engage employees to drive maximum productivity for operational success. Leaders must balance organizational culture, employee commitment, growing employees' skills and competencies, and strengthening organizational performance to strengthen their market

niche and competitiveness (Qadir & Yesiltas, 2020). Highly engaged employees are twice as likely to be better performers for the organization, but the responsibility is with the leaders to ensure the culture nurtures engagement to gain maximum potential from each team member (Chahar & Hatwal, 2018).

Drivers of Employee Engagement. Many scholars and practitioners have studied employee engagement and the key drivers of engagement in the workforce. Researchers have found that the key engagement drivers are meaningfulness, safety at work, psychological availability at work, employee wellbeing, recognition, and opportunies at work (Choudhury & Mohanty, 2019; Khan, 1990). Some of the most recent studies found that organizational communication, recognition of employee voice, organizational culture, and learning are the most important drivers (Choudhury & Mohanty, 2019). Giving employee praise openly, setting goals appropriate to the work, taking employee needs seriously, responding and listening to employees, providing motivation, and making employees part of the decision-making process enhances employee engagement (Molestane et al., 2019). The employees are the backbone of the organization and the soundest asset for the company (Yadav & Morya, 2019).

Engagement focuses on creating opportunities for the employee to connect with other employees, leaders, and the greater organization. Engagement creates positive employee work behaviors, leading to higher organizational effectiveness and productivity (Mulievi & Tsuma, 2021). Employee engagement has a significant impact on employee performance (Ayub & Islam, 2018). Leadership style affects employee engagement, while engagement directly impacts loyalty and intent to stay (Book et al., 2019). Leaders

should approach engagement as an indicator of the employee value proposition to create a positive outcome for both the organization and the individual employee. Engaged employees are better performers, more productive, produce less turnover, and provide enhanced loyalty (Antony, 2018; Bhattacharya & Banerjee, 2018). Engagement is a construct that reflects the ability of people to become passionate about their work. Managers play a critical role in establishing a climate that promotes engagement and fosters an empowering environment for their subordinates (Bwonya et al., 2020).

Leadership and Employee Engagement. Organizational leaders must view employee engagement as a strategic business objective. Engaged employees can lead to increased job retention, higher productivity, and improved work quality (Moletsane et al., 2019). Having an inclusive leadership style positively promotes employee engagement in the workplace (Mansoor et al., 2021). An increasing number of studies have found that leaders play an essential role in employee work engagement by showing transformational leadership characteristics, which increase employees' personal and job resources (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). Engagement comes from leaders promoting an environment and culture of cooperation, a safe place to be innovative, and a chance to be creative (Mansoor et al., 2021). Leaders are responsible for engaging employees on an emotional and behavioral level to absorb employees in the performance of their roles (Yadav & Morya, 2019).

Leaders must provide an inspirational vision of the organizational goals to help employees establish goals, ignite their enthusiasm, and enhance their hope, allowing employees to maintain a positive mindset and optimistic mood (Li et al., 2018). Engaging

employees creates motivation, increases organizational performance, and increases productivity (Bhattacharya & Banerjee, 2018). Leaders must be intentional about finding a meaningful yet practical way to achieve engagement with every team member (Dash & Mohanty, 2019). Engagement is a key priority for leaders because employees who are willing to do more than merely meet job requirements create a competitive advantage (Bhappu & Schultze, 2018). Management must continue to engage employees so that when change is necessary, companies with engaged employees will not experience significant impacts like companies with disengaged employees (Parent & Lovelace, 2018). When leaders at the top engage, it is more likely that they can build engaged teams. Strong leadership and frequent communication are significant ingredients of employee engagement (Antony, 2018).

Leadership style has a significant impact on the employee's motivation to perform, grow, willingness to learn, and engage within the organization. No matter what leadership style a leader portrays, leaders influence the employees' mental state and potential development (Li et al., 2018). Leadership style is an antecedent of employee engagement (Obuobisa-Darko, 2020). Managers account for 70% of employee engagement variance and the leadership style portrayed by each leader creates the relationship between leader and follower, and the quality of this relationship defines the overall level of employee engagement (Book et al., 2019). Leadership satisfaction provides a positive and significant correlation to employee engagement, employee loyalty, and retention, and for every one-point increase in leadership satisfaction results in a 36% increase in engagement (Book et al.; Saad et al., 2018).

Transformational Leadership and Employee Engagement. An essential part of employees' engagement process is leadership (Lemon, 2019). Transformational leadership contains many attributes that make it sustainable and effective when creating an environment for employee engagement. Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) noted that transformational leadership is a process where leaders and followers assist one another to advance to a higher level of motivation and morale. Engagement is a by-product created from high morale (Dash & Mohanty, 2019).

Researchers identified the positive relationship between transformational leadership and employee engagement (Avolio et al., 2004; Lemon, 2019). Transformational leadership emphasizes increasing employees' individual responsibilities to achieve more significant workplace challenges (Chin et al., 2019). Organizations realize the importance of employee engagement and continue to create engagement for organizational success (Book et al., 2019; Li et al., 2018). Leaders affect organizational commitment by inspiring and improving the employees' effectiveness (Qadir & Yesiltas, 2020). Organizational commitment enhances performance and achievement when leaders engage with employees to understand the employees' emotional attachment (Qadir & Yesiltas, 2020). One way to achieve organizational commitment is by using transformational leadership constructs to engage, motivate, and inspire others. Transformational leadership plays an effective role in ensuring the workforce is dedicated, motivated, and committed, helping them engage in their work (Northouse, 2018). Employees are more apt to devote extra effort to their assigned tasks if they reported to a transformational leader (Bass, 1985). Transformational leaders are more

committed to teamwork decisions and inspire creative and innovative organizations, which promote continuous improvement (Para-Gonzalez et al., 2018).

Transformational leaders motivate followers, increase their level of respect, and become role models to their subordinates (Donkor & Dongmei, 2018). Engaged employees play a critical role in the organization's overall success by being highly motivated, enthusiastic, and passonate about their work and strive hard to complete assigned tasks (Pandita & Ray, 2018; Yadav & Morya, 2019). Transformational leadership provides a clear vision, inspires and motivates, offers intellectual challenges, and shows genuine interest in the needs of the employees, thus creating a positive impact on employee engagement (Chin et al., 2019). An organization's success or failure heavily depends on the employees and the level of employee engagement (Ismail et al., 2021). Transformational leaders need to instill a sense of commitment and dedication into the organization to increase employee engagement. Mufeed showed a positive and significant relationship between transformational leadership and employee engagement (Mufeed, 2018).

The leadership attributes that transformational leaders have are effective in encouraging employee engagement (Chin et al., 2019). By providing a clear vision, inspiring, and motivating, leaders can raise the employees' personal status for them to show humility, values, and concern for others. Leaders should focus on training in the area of transformational leadership to enhance engagement, which can ultimately drive increased profitability (Chin et al., 2019). Leaders showing transformational leadership characteristics positively affect their employee's level of motivation, commitment, and

engagement (Mufeed, 2018). Leaders developing a mutual relationship with employees can have reciprocal relationships between the leader and the employee (Paolucci et al., 2018). These relationships can enhance the company's daily productivity and profitability by creating a more engaged workforce (Page et al., 2019).

Leadership connectivity creates an open mind, stronger persistence, and a willingness to perform critical activities. The leader's ability to affect positive change requires employees to feel connected, empowered, motivated, and have a sense of psychological safety (Page et al., 2019). Page et al. (2019) studied organizational culture and the leader's role in fostering a positive and productive work environment and found that leadership connectivity is a critical component to create a leader-follower bond. Organizational culture is a powerful mechanism affecting employee engagement and satisfaction (Page et al.). A lack of leadership and organizational vision can create a devastating effect on employee morale and the organization.Transformational leaders exhibit the qualities of trust, respect, and integrity and these attributes are critical factors that affect organizational culture and performance (Para-Gonzalez et al., 2018). Transformational leadership involves an empowering process that can result in positive organizational outcomes such as task performance, innovative behaviors, organizational commitment, and citizenship behaviors (Kim & Shin, 2019).

Employee Morale and Motivation. Bhasin (2018) defines morale as a state of mind or a positive and upbeat mood. Morale can be high or low in an organization and is often driven by organizational leaders. Transformational leadership is a process where leaders and followers work together to achieve a higher level of motivation and morale

(Burns, 1978). Bass (1985) agreed with Burns finding that followers feel trust, loyalty, and respect for the leader when they exhibit transformational leadership qualities. Effective leaders engage in behaviors that foster an environment where employees feel valued to increase motivation (Alhassan & Greene, 2020). Employees show morale through behaviors; high morale exists when employees have favorable emotions toward a situation, and low morale creates a lack of engagement, disobedience of the leader, and negative feelings about the job (Bhasin, 2018).

Chandan and Singh (2019) sought to understand the impact of mentoring on improving employee morale and for leaders to use this as a tool to engage workers in the hotel industry. Retaining talented staff in the hotel industry is difficult, creating issues with succession planning, talent development, and workforce engagement (Chandan & Singh). Chandan and Singh conducted a quantitative study and found that the mentoring process had a statistically significant impact on improved morale and that relationship building was the key aspect to creating morale improvement. Motivation is a significant variable of the mentoring process and leaders should use the mentoring process to establish human resources development and training plans for employees (Chandan & Singh). The mentoring process creates positive benefits within the organization and provides employees with opportunities to enhance cultural awareness, aesthetic appreciation, and the potential to lead meaningful lives (Jyoti & Rani, 2019). Developing and retaining talent is essential for any organization but especially important in the service industry. Mentoring can enhance established organizational human resource practices and reduce negative workplace outcomes such as conflict, fatigue, and mental

pressure (Jyoti & Rani, 2019). Improved relationships build employee morale and increase retention.

Employee motivation is concerned with the level of energy and dedication that employees bring to their jobs daily. Motivation is vital for leaders to understand, as it can be used to engage employees (Engidaw, 2021). Motivated employees help the organization stay competitive and innovative (Glisovic et al., 2019). Fulfilling the employees' needs creates a positive emotional state that creates energy in how employees behave at work. Green et al. (2017) identified three core characteristics to meet employees' needs: (a) provides a positive emotional state that (b) drives a feeling of energy, and (c) leads to positive work-based behaviors. Previous studies explored work motivation theories and how unmet employee needs can carry motivating potential. Green et al.'s theory added clarity to the role that work engagement and the motivational possibility of creating positive experiences and fulfilling employees' needs at work. Green et al. showed that meeting the employees' needs can create powerfully positive organizational outcomes. Meeting the needs of the employees allows greater energy, which produces higher levels of engagement. Supporting the need for motivation, McKee (2019) found that 61% of employees classify themselves as burned out. McKee offered several leadership strategies that can increase performance and motivation by focusing on the employee's mind and well-being. In contrast, Putra (2019) argued that the lack of work motivation created lower job satisfaction levels. Low employee motivation comes from the lack of appreciation from leaders, and employees feel the work burden is too heavy (Putra, 2019).

By cultivating an open and encouraging workforce, leaders can drive a positive psychological experience to motivate employees both personally and professionally (McKee, 2019). When employees feel appreciated and valued, employee engagement is a natural result of these feelings. Leaders valuing new ideas, solutions, and opinions of others can create positive engagement (McKee, 2019). Paek et al. (2015) examined work engagement as a partial mediator of psychological capital's effect on employee morale using two employee morale variables: job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment. Paek et al. found that psychological capital had a more substantial indirect effect on job satisfaction through work engagement than affective organizational commitment. Work engagement seemed to mediate both variables. Paek et al. strengthened the argument that both psychological capital and work engagement are critical factors for leaders to consider when looking at employee morale (Paek et al., 2015). Paek et al. provided leaders with an insightful look at the need to help employees develop positive organizational attitudes by using their psychological resources. Leaders must help workers develop and retain the important psychological capital factors, including self-efficacy, hope, and resilience (Anokye & Asument, 2019). For the business to be successful, the company should focus on different forms of capital, including human, cultural, social, and reputational (Paek et al., 2015). By combining the psychological capital needs with employees' work engagement, leaders can boost employee morale to a higher level (Paek et al.).

Leaders can have a direct impact on an employee's level of motivation and attitude. Completing tasks at work requires employees to have motivation, enthusiasm,

and a passion for the work they perform (Andri & Za, 2020). Employees require motivation, and meeting this desire helps employees have a higher work discipline, enabling them to complete tasks more quickly (Andri & Za). Employee performance results from the quality and quantity of work achieved in carrying out the required duties given to the employee and various factors such as work motivation, work culture, and work discipline can influence performance (Andri & Za). Employee performance can be in the form of a final product, goods or services, or specific behaviors and skills that support the overarching organizational goals (Andri & Za). Work motivation is a condition that comes from within a person who encourages another to carry out desired activities to achieve a set goal and provided a 7.4% effect on employee performance while work discipline affected performance by 31.4% in the study by Andri and Za (Andri & Za).

When employees feel motivated, they have a greater desire to perform better, quicker, and more accurately, producing greater productivity for the company. The motivation of employees has been labeled as one of the few crucial factors that help an organization reach prosperity and success in a fierce and dynamic business environment (Sitthiwarongchai et al., 2020). Managers and leaders need to evaluate and comprehend personnel's expectations to develop an appropriate workplace environment for each employee to motivate them (Sitthiwarongchai et al.). Motivating an employee using the wrong leadership style or tactic negatively affects the motivation and engagement levels (Sitthiwarongchai et al.). Understanding the relationship between employee motivation and employee satisfaction enables leaders to understand the factors that motivate

employees and how this influence affects the quality of work and employee satisfaction with their overall job (Paris et al., 2018). When leaders understand the power of culture, motivation, and discipline, they can create better learning environments, reward systems, and career development plans to keep employees motivated and performing at their best (Paris et al., 2018).

Kark et al. (2018) studied the influence of transformational and transactional leadership styles on employees' motivation to be creative in the workplace. A leader's effectiveness depends on their ability to motivate followers to achieve a shared vision, mission, and goal (Kark et al., 2018). Evidence from prior studies shows that transformational leadership is associated with higher levels of individual and organizational outcomes (Kark et al., 2018). In contrast, transactional leadership clarifies what actions and tasks the employee must achieve (Kark et al., 2018). Transactional leadership motivates employees to achieve expected results to avoid punishment (Kark et al., 2018). Kark et al. used the motivation theory to highlight the importance of a self-regulatory focus that shapes motivation and behaviors and allows employees to behave creatively and innovatively. Kark et al. found that Transactional leadership had a negative effect on employees' creativity and played a significant role in hindering the followers' tendency to be creative (Kark et al.). Conversely, the positive impact of transformational leadership on creativity through situational promotion was not present in the field study, suggesting that it may be easier to harm creativity than to enhance it in followers (Kark et al).

Strategies Leading to Increased Employee Engagement

The level of employee engagement varies with each individual employee, and many factors in the work environment affect the engagement level. Employee engagement is a profitable business strategy, allowing employees to commit to the organization's objectives for maximum productivity (Tirastittam et al., 2020). Low employee engagement is a universal threat to organizations' sustainable growth as it erodes employees' motivation to share innovative ideas and be productive (Saks, 2019). Engagement is not merely making employees happy at work; it is a bi-directional relationship between employee and employer that brings benefits to both parties (Tirastittam et al., 2020). Book et al. (2019) found that only 33% of U.S. employees are engaged. A lack of engagement produces many undesirable effects, including decreased productivity, profitability, and customer satisfaction (Book et al., 2019). To avoid these effects, leaders must focus on strategies to engage employees to commit to the organization to provide successful contributions to the company.

Identifying effective strategies to engage employees is an evolving process for scholars, practitioners, and leaders alike. Research scholars have identified effective communication, honesty, transparency, and employee engagement as effective leadership strategies (Jensen et al., 2018; Wei et al., 2018). Leaders must learn to do more with less while balancing themselves and the team and ensuring operational goals and objectives are met simultaneously (Paolucci et al., 2018). Transformational leaders improve engagement by defining and communicating the vision while empowering the workforce to go beyond expectations for greater success (Prasetio et al., 2019). The three defined

strategies to assist leaders in engaging employees are: (a) senior leaders to be highly engaged with a top to bottom approach; (b) senior leaders encourage transparent, open communication and involvement; and (c) senior leaders focus on employee development (Pandita & Ray, 2018; Reissova & Papay, 2021; Schroeder & Modaff, 2018; Znidarsic & Bernik, 2021).

One strategy that is likely to increase engagement is for senior leaders to be highly engaged and have a top to bottom approach to engaging others. Engagement starts at the top, and without engaged senior leaders, companies find it challenging to engage the employees' hearts and minds (Antony, 2018). Leaders must develop employee trust to enable their followers to engage (Islam et al., 2020). Employees leaving a company typically leave their management, not the company. Leadership strategies and styles strongly affect employees' attitudes and engagement levels (Amah, 2018; Burnett & Lisk, 2019). Leadership plays a pivotal role in developing employee engagement, motivation, and commitment (Prasetio et al., 2019). Leaders create an organizational climate where the development of employee relationships occurs (Amah, 2018).

The effects of leadership satisfaction have a tremendous impact on the level of engagement an employee is willing to have with the organization. Leaders account for 70% of the variance in employee engagement (Book et al., 2019). Higher employee engagement levels cause employees to devote more effort and commitment to accomplishing organizational goals and provide more productivity than disengaged employees (Tirastittam et al., 2020). Highly engaged employees produce 21% greater profitability, better customer engagement, and fewer accidents (Harter, 2018). Engaged

employees impact the organization's overall performance, profit, and sustainability (Ghani et al., 2018). Employees who feel empowered, find trust in their leaders and support clear direction from leaders have higher levels of engagement and leader satisfaction (Book et al., 2019; Gautam & Kothari, 2021). Leaders can engage employees by creating training and development programs, rewards and recognition, and successful communication plans that encourage employee communication (Molestane et al., 2019). When leaders engage employees, the organization benefits with increased productivity and profitability and higher morale and motivation levels in the workforce (Schroeder & Modaff, 2018; Tirastittam et al., 2020).

Another strategy that leaders can utilize to increase employee engagement is to encourage open communication and promote employee involvement. The operational environments in which corporations function are rapidly becoming more complex, strategic, and challenging for companies to sustain their competitive advantage (Ghimire et al., 2021). Employees use engagement as a way to repay their organization, while Schroeder and Modaff (2018) expanded Saks' argument, finding that the social exchange theory provides a lens that analyzes engagement from a communicative perspective (Saks, 2006). Part of overcoming these challenges is adapting to change and strategically managing the change management process. Transformational leadership has a significant stake in change management procedures, as transformational leaders are visionary and gain trust and compliance from followers (Yue et al., 2019). Transformational leaders can create and communicate a strong vision while encouraging employees to think beyond their self-interests (Yue et al., 2019). Transformational leaders can openly communicate

to generate engagement with employees, building a solid foundation to direct operational and organizational change (Chaudhry & Joshi, 2018).

Transformational leaders rely on their ability to communicate as a strength. Being able to choose effective communication behaviors and adapt to the changing environment allows transformational leaders to communicate the mission and vision of the organization clearly and effectively. Employees who get support and clear direction from leaders are more likely to be engaged (Gautam & Kothari, 2021). A transformational leader's ability to convey values and increase employees' mission valence by using their ability to communicate the organizational vision (Jensen et al., 2018). Jensen et al. used a media richness framework to discuss communication behaviors that are crucial for the leader to facilitate the transfer of the transformational leadership aspects that are positive to the receiver of the communicated message. Transformational leaders are most effective when using face-to-face dialogue as it allows the sender to amplify the positive effects of transformational leadership on the receiver (Jensen et al.). Cultivating trust in an organization requires leaders to be transparent, especially with communication. Open communication allows leaders to develop a genuine interest in building relationships with employees (Yue et al., 2019). Open and honest communication fosters trust, job satisfaction, and builds employee engagement within the company. While a transactional leader relies on punishment and rewards, and the servant leaders visibly support followers, the transformational leader engages in exceptional change by communicating the organizational aspirations (Jensen et al., 2018). Transformational leadership rests on the leader's communication skills and often provides the most benefit when choosing a

face-to-face communication medium. A change in employees' perception of transformational leadership was positively related to the perception of the attractiveness of the mission, and this relationship was strengthened when leaders used face-to-face dialogue to communicate the vision (Jensen et al., 2018). Jensen et al. noted that other communication methods did not amplify the positive effects of transformational leadership. Lemon (2019), in conjunction with Markos and Gossaye (2021), found that dialogue and communication are the roots of employee engagement. Creating an environment that includes engaged employees requires leaders to disseminate information through communication channels to employees (Jensen et al., 2018). The communication medium can affect the outcome and provide positive and negative engagement approaches (Jensen et al., 2018). Leaders must balance the co-creational and functionalistic approaches to employee engagement (Lemon, 2019). The relationship between leader and follower is important to build to foster open communication and active listening between both parties (Lemon, 2019).

Focusing on employee development is another strategy that can help build successful employee engagement. Human capital is a set of processes, policies, and applications that affect employees' behavior and performance (Witasari & Gustomo, 2020). The development of employees through human capital and personal development is a critical component of employee engagement (Fletcher, 2019; Witasari & Gustomo, 2020). Employee engagement significantly impacted performance, with training and development having the highest Pearson correlation score (Ayub & Islam, 2018). Leaders who do not recognize others' desire to continue developing and growing create

disengagement and can lead to employees finding new jobs or becoming less effective in their current roles (Ayub & Islam). When leaders focus on the psychological capital of the employee, the employee feels more connected and has a higher desire to engage with the company (Tan et al., 2020). Tan et al. provided insight that leaders must understand the importance of the employees' psychological capital as it is an essential ingredient to provide a positive view of their work, which is necessary for engagement and creating a vision of a stronger workforce. Synchronization of talent management practices and employee engagement is crucial to increasing employee retention (Pandita & Ray, 2018).

Human resource management systems create an outline for leaders and employees to engage in the workplace. An engaging environment creates the company's ability to gain and sustain its competitive advantages (Phong et al., 2018; Saad et al., 2018). The business's human capital side is vital to be successful in current roles and find the ability to grow and develop the right talent (Pandita & Ray, 2018). Investing in employees for personal development is critical for leaders to inspire and motivate others to go above stated job duties to benefit the company (Sahir et al., 2018). Fletcher (2019) provided input for leaders to understand the impact that personal development has on engagement. Fletcher found that for personal development to be perceived as positive, the relationship between leader and follower must be strong. This strategy is important for leaders to create engagement, especially in the small business environment. Creating and sustaining a positive relationship helps build an engaging environment that benefits the human capital and builds the company's success (Fletcher, 2019).

Talent management is a risk management strategy that many firms pay more attention to now than in prior decades. The cost of employee turnover causes both tangible and intangible costs to rise, which creates market and productivity losses when an employee leaves the company (Sahir et al., 2018). Organizations must focus on the existing talent pool to keep the nurtured, developed, and committed to the organization to create an environment conducive for them to grow and sustain within the organization (Pandita & Ray, 2018). Assessing the organization's talent management processes is crucial for leaders to consider to develop best practice strategies to engage employees, reduce attrition, and build job satisfaction. O'Connor and Henry (2019) found that Employees classified as talented had a positive perception of the organization's value and fairness and perceived greater organizational support, recognition, and development, leading to greater organizational commitment, higher engagement, and lower turnover intention (O'Connor & Henry, 2019). Employees who were recognized as non-talented but considered themselves talented were likely to react negatively to the perceived injustice of non-recognition, producing lower commitment, poorer performance, disengaging, and negative organizational outcomes (O'Connor & Henry). Leaders must understand talent management practices as it affects engagement through the mediating and moderating role of perceived organizational justice. Talent management practices should include all employees to create transparent, fair, and open opportunities for development and promotion for all employees (O'Connor & Henry).

While many studies discuss the benefit of transformational leadership and employee engagement, small business leaders have difficulty creating and implementing

effective strategies to improve employee engagement. By improving the level of employee engagement, small business owners may increase the productivity and profitability of the organization.

Transition

Employee engagement is a current topic of discussion by scholars in today's competitive global business environment. Creating an engaged workforce is vital for businesses to remain successful. Prior research studies contained significant support and information discussing the need to create engaged employees with a discussion of various strategies for leaders to use to increase employee engagement. The academic literature included an extensive discussion on leadership styles and how leadership style dynamics can affect the overall level of employee engagement. In Section 1, I discussed the problem and purpose statements, central research question, and nature of the study of this qualitative, multiple case study. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore leadership strategies that small business leaders use to improve employee engagement. The research question was: What leadership strategies do small business leaders use to improve employee engagement? This study's significance was small business leaders may use this study to develop effective leadership strategies to increase employee engagement, which can reduce employee turnover, increase retention, performance, and increase profitability. Section 1 also contained the review of the professional and academic literature about leadership styles and theories, employee engagement, transformational leadership and engagement, motivation, and morale.

In Section 2, I provide the project purpose, role of the researcher, participants, research method, and research design. I explain the research design I used to collect and analyze data to understand what leadership strategies small business leaders use to improve employee engagement. I discuss my role in conducting a qualitative multiple case study using population and sampling, the code of research ethics, reliability, and validity, and conclude with a transition and summary of the study. In Section 3, I include a summary of findings, application to professional practice, and implications for social change. In Section 3, I also provide a narrative of my doctoral case study, recommendations, personal reflections, and conclusion.

Section 2: The Project

In Section 1, I provided the conceptual framework, leadership theories, and background on transformational leadership and employee engagement. In Section 2, I include the purpose of the study, role of the researcher, study method, and design, as well as a discussion on ethical research. I used a qualitative multiple case study to identify strategies that small business owners used to improve employee engagement.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore leadership strategies that small business leaders use to improve employee engagement. The study population included three small business owners in North Texas with at least one but no more than 250 employees who have successfully used leadership strategies to improve employee engagement. The implications of this study for positive social change include the potential to improve employee engagement, which might increase employee satisfaction as well as employee self-confidence that can create prosperity for their communities through positive services they carry out in their communities.

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative researchers are responsible for selecting appropriate interview participants, collecting and analyzing data, coding, and providing written analysis of the findings (Lester et al., 2020). The researcher's role is to try to reveal the perspectives of the subjects based on the research question (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). Qualitative researchers collect data from various sources, including interviews, observation, fieldwork, written data sources, and visual data sources (Lester et al., 2020). In a case

study, the researcher is significantly involved in the data collection process (Yin, 2018). In the data collection process for this study, I served as the primary data collector by collecting data by conducting interviews with small business leaders and reviewing organizational documents, including policies and procedures used to engage employees. I performed the data collection, analysis, and synthesis of the findings.

I have a connection with this study with both experience and location. My experience-based connection is that I have over 12 years of leadership experience working for the same large corporation. I also have substantial experience in understanding the impact employees have on organizational productivity and profitability and developing strategies to engage employees. My location-based connection is that I have lived in the North Texas area my entire life and am familiar with the region. I did not use any participants whom I had a personal or business relationship with to help mitigate any impact of a personal perspective.

I also ensured ethical conduct for this study by following all of Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines and the *Belmont Report* protocol. The *Belmont Report* protocol outlines specific guidelines for researchers that outlines the distinction between researchers and participants (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Three essential principles of the *Belmont Report* are respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (Romm, 2020). Participants were provided with verbal explanations of the study, explanations of rights, and signed consent forms prior to participation.

Researchers are also responsible for mitigating bias at any stage of the research process (Squires & Dorsen, 2018). As the researcher, I mitigated bias through conducting triangulation, performing member checking, and ensuring I followed the interview protocol when collecting, analyzing, and reporting the data collected for the study. Interview participants were carefully selected and did not include any person I may have had a business or personal connection to mitigate bias. To improve the interview data quality, researchers can utilize member checking and triangulation as an evidence-based strategy to enhance trustworthiness (Yeong et al., 2018) as well as mitigate bias and reach data saturation (Fusch et al., 2018). During the interview process, I used two recording devices to capture audio that I used to transcribe the entire interview. After the transcription process, participants engaged in the member-checking process. Member checking allows the participant to verify the accuracy of the researcher's understanding of the participants' answers to interview questions (Candela, 2019). Member checking is another way for researchers to help mitigate bias.

As the primary research instrument, I conducted semistructured interviews as the primary data collection method and reviewed company documents, including policies and procedures, as secondary data for this study. Research interviewers ask concise and unambiguous, open-ended questions that a participant is willing to respond to with a comprehensive answer while the researcher listens attentively to gain information (Saunders et al., 2019). I conducted semistructured interviews using a predefined set of interview questions and an interview protocol. A reliable interview protocol is necessary to systematically obtain good qualitative data and facilitate the interview process (Yeong

et al., 2018). I treated each participant with respect, listened attentively, and avoided interfering with any responses. Adhering to the interview protocol, each participant was asked the same questions, in the same order, during the interview process.

Participants

Participants should have the knowledge and experience to address the study's phenomenon and research question (Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Yin, 2018). Participants of this multiple case study included three small business owners in North Texas with at least one, but no more than 250 employees, who had implemented leadership strategies to improve employee engagement. Participants included leaders who had at least 5 years of experience as a small business owner, had access to documentation regarding strategies to improve employee engagement, and were located in North Texas. Participants of this study agreed to participate in a recorded interview and provided comprehensive responses to the list of interview questions to explain their experience with strategies to improve employee engagement. Qualitative researchers know that some people can provide greater insight than others (Johnson et al., 2020). I used the local Chamber of Commerce professional association and Internet searches for small businesses in the North Texas area to gain access to a list of small business owners to discuss the potential for completing an interview. Participants were screened according to the listed criteria and met the minimum qualifications before being considered as a candidate for an interview. Researchers can make initial contact with interview participants through phone or email to provide them with study details so that the individual can make an informed decision about participation (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Initial contact with

potential participants allowed me to introduce myself to begin building a relationship, explain the purpose of the study, as well as describe what the participants could expect throughout the process if they agreed to participate.

I used multiple strategies to establish a working relationship with the participants of this study. With the researcher's data collection, it is imperative that the researcher be trustworthy and hold high ethical and moral principles and values as part of the research process (Johnson et al., 2020). Building a good rapport with participants is essential for qualitative researchers and done in advance and during an interview process (McGrath et al., 2019). Establishing a rapport with participants is essential to gain trust and allow open communication during interviews (Heath et al., 2018). Researchers need to have continuous contact with study participants to establish rapport (Heath et al., 2018). I established a good rapport with all participants through emails and phone conversations during participant selection, during the research process, and after the conclusion of the data gathering to sustain the trusting relationship.

The time and location of an interview could also affect data collection (McGrath et al., 2019). To avoid potential disruptions and noise, researchers should allow participants to choose the time and place that works best for the participant (McGrath et al., 2019). The participants were allowed to select the time and day of the Zoom interview that was most convenient for them. I suggested they set up the Zoom call in a private office or small conference room to eliminate disruptions or background noise. Other strategies I used included allowing participants to perform member checking for the interview data they provided and allowing them access to a copy of the study's

findings upon their request. Allowing participants the ability to member check enhances the credibility of the study (Candela, 2019).

Research Method and Design

Researchers must select the type of research method and design that will best answer the research question. After considering the available research methods and designs, I selected the qualitative research method and a multiple case study design to collect, explain, and analyze my study's data. I chose the research method and design based on the nature of the topic I studied. Qualitative researchers use data as the language to reveal the subject's perspectives that the research question regards (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). The qualitative method allowed me to explore leadership strategies to improve engagement by asking in-depth questions and expanding the conversation as necessary during interviews to gain further insight into the study.

Research Method

Researchers have three methods from which they can choose when studying a phenomenon: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed (Daniel, 2018). I used the qualitative method for this study. Qualitative researchers seek to understand experiences lived in real-time and the significance of those experiences (Candela, 2019). The qualitative method allowed me to ask open-ended questions about participants' real-world experiences with employee engagement and leadership strategies. Qualitative research also allows the researcher the ability to provide a holistic perspective on a complex phenomenon and allows the researcher to become entrenched in the investigation (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). Qualitative research focuses on making sense of a lived,

observed phenomenon with chosen individuals rather than generalizing findings from a sample to a population (Johnson et al., 2020). Qualitative research was the most appropriate method for this study, as it allowed me to identify the strategies that small business owners used to improve employee engagement in their business model and operations and how these strategies improved productivity and profitability.

In contrast, a quantitative researcher seeks to examine variables' characteristics or the relationships among variables by using statistical analysis to examine phenomena (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). Quantitative analysis gathers numerical form data to carry out a statistical analysis of the gathered data (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). The quantitative research method does not include thematic analysis or open-ended questions to explore a phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Because the focus of this study was to explore employee engagement and transformational leadership through leaders' personal experiences by asking open-ended questions and performing thematic analysis and not capturing numerical data for analysis, the quantitative method was not appropriate.

Researchers using the mixed method can produce more comprehensive results by combining the qualitative participant engagement with the quantitative statistical data outcomes (Ivankova & Wingo, 2018). The mixed method is time-consuming and complex, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods of study (Kansteiner & Konig, 2020). Because my study did not use any quantitative methods, including numerical data for testing a statistical hypothesis, the mixed method was not appropriate for the study. I used the qualitative method in this study.

Research Design

Qualitative researchers consider four primary qualitative designs when conducting research: case study, narrative, phenomenology, and ethnography (Saunders et al., 2019). I selected the multiple case study design as the most appropriate design for this study. Using a case study approach enables the researcher to focus on a single phenomenon in a subject (Astroth & Chung, 2018), obtaining data from real-life scenarios and understand a phenomenon (Yin, 2018). In a case study, researchers ask *how* and *why* questions to identify and explore the findings of their specific case-study topic (Ebneyamini & Moghadam, 2018). The multiple case study design allows for replication to independently confirm emerging constructs within a study (Yin, 2018). Multiple case studies include commonality among the cases, enabling researchers to analyze and find specific differences that can be replicated or transferable to a similar context (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Using the multiple case study approach, I explored and compared the strategies that small business leaders used to engage employees and increase productivity and profitability for the enterprise. I used interviews as my primary research tool and company documentation as secondary data for this multiple case study, which is one of the most common data collection tools for a qualitative researcher (Yin, 2018).

A narrative design focuses on life stories and embodied experiences spoken through personal accounts in a story format (Haradhan, 2018). The narrative design was not appropriate, as I did not collect personal stories to address the study's purpose. A phenomenological researcher explores participants' lived experiences with phenomena to

uncover the meanings of these experiences (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). Phenomenology illuminates an event or occurrence of interest or a phenomenon that is a reflection of a person's lived experiences and studies the essence of what is when studying the particular phenomenon (Errasti-Ibarrondo & Arantzamendi, 2018). An ethnographical researcher thoroughly explores and understands the culture of the groups and organizations (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). Ethnography focuses on a cultural group where researchers conduct a systemic study of shared and learned beliefs or ideas within the culture (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). This study's purpose was not intended to understand the culture or meanings of lived experiences of the small business; therefore, the phenomenological and ethnographical designs were not appropriate methods for addressing this study's purpose.

Data saturation is the most used concept for estimating sample sizes in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2020; Saunders et al., 2019; Yin, 2018). Data saturation is an essential component of research rigor. Data saturation refers to the point when no further observations and analysis reveal any new information or themes (Guest et al., 2020; Lowe et al., 2018). To achieve data saturation, I interviewed and analyzed the collected data until no new information was discovered. I used member checking to have participants review the analysis for accuracy. I also compared responses from the interviews with observations and company documents to identify common themes to validate that no new themes had emerged to ensure data saturation.

Population and Sampling

The population for this study included three small business owners in North Texas with successful experience in implementing strategies to improve employee engagement.

I used the local Chamber of Commerce professional association and Internet searches for small businesses in the North Texas area to find suitable small business owners who met the study's qualifications. Participants were located in the North Texas area, had been a leader for 5 years, had access to company policies and procedures for engagement, and successfully implemented engagement strategies in their operation.

Researchers must recruit a sample size that allows them to reach data saturation (Squires & Dorsen, 2018). A small sample size is necessary in a case study when the conceptual framework is well defined (Yin, 2018). In qualitative research, sample selection profoundly affects the quality of the research (Farrugia, 2019). In qualitative research, the sampling approach is typically guided by the conceptual framework and the study's research questions (Farrugia, 2019). The study included a sample of three small business owners with successful experience in implementing strategies to improve employee engagement. For this study, I used purposive sampling to select participants that met the defined criteria. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to identify and select data from the best match to meet the objectives of the research phenomenon (Campbell et al., 2020). Purposive sampling is a conceptually-driven approach that allows the researcher to decisively select the participants that can be the most productive in answering the research question (Farrugia, 2019).

In qualitative research, a researcher should sample only until data saturation has been reached (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Once approved by the IRB, I conducted interviews, member checking, and data analysis until no new themes or evidence were presented. Member checking is a means to maintain validity and create trustworthiness in

the qualitative research process by allowing the participant the opportunity to confirm or deny the interpretation of the data by the researcher (Candela, 2019). Once the interview data were collected, I analyzed each interview and the company documents to develop themes that emerged from the case study. When no new themes were identified in the research, the researcher had likely reached data saturation (Lowe et al., 2018). Once data saturation was achieved, I thoroughly answered the research question, what leadership strategies do small business leaders use to improve employee engagement?

Interviews provide qualitative researchers with the opportunity to explore matters in an in-depth manner that are unique to the experiences of the interviewee (McGrath et al., 2019). Interview locations should be neutral, safe, and convenient for both the participant and the researcher (Cypress, 2018). All interviews were conducted according to the participants' preferred time for the Zoom call, with the participants ensuring they had a secluded and protected environment for the interview. Interviews were scheduled by email, and I ensured all participants' questions were answered before the interview session. Each participant was asked 10 open-ended interview questions with a leading inquiry to create a discussion on the participant's experience with each question. Each interview was recorded with two devices to ensure all data was captured and transcribed accurately. To maintain confidentiality, I was the only one with access to review and transcribe the data. My committee members could have gained access to this study's data upon request.

Ethical Research

Most qualitative research involves ethics (Roth & Unger, 2018). As the primary qualitative researcher, I followed the Walden University IRB guidelines and the *Belmont Report's* ethical standards. Participants in a qualitative study must provide written consent before participation (Roth & Unger, 2018; Yin, 2018). Informed consent is a critical ethical and legal component of research involving human subjects, providing particpants with the study objectives and procedures, while informing the subject of their choice to decide whether to participate or not (Ibrahim et al., 2019). I provided all participants with a consent form through email that described the background of the study, study procedures, voluntary nature of the study, privacy, payment, contact information, and culminated with a statement of consent. The informed consent should also clearly identify compensation for study participants (Ibrahim et al., 2019). Qualitative research participants are not typically compensated for their voluntary participation (Xu et al., 2020). Participants of this study were not compensated or rewarded for voluntary participation. I requested email verification of the consent forms once I was ready to conduct interviews after receiving IRB approval. Informed consent should include information about a participant's right to withdraw along with the researcher's contact information (Ibrahim et al., 2019). Informed consent must state that participation is voluntary, and participants can withdraw at any time, for any reason (Xu et al., 2020). Participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time by calling, text messaging, or emailing the researcher without consequence. If a withdrawal request

had been received, I would have validated the request and removed the participant from this study.

Before conducting any research, I obtained approval from the Walden University's IRB, and the approval number is 04-29-21-0992738. I ensured ethical conduct for this study by following all Walden University's IRB guidelines and the *Belmont Report* protocol. A qualitative researcher must protect each participant's confidentiality that agrees to participate in the study (Roth & Unger, 2018). Confidentiality is a crucial part of the researcher's ethical considerations during data collection and reporting (Roth & Unger, 2018; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). Qualitative researchers must protect each participant's confidentiality by using a coding method that removes identifying information and is an ongoing process to ensure the data is kept confidential (Kyngas et al., 2020). During the research process, I ensured the proper use of data coding to protect all research participants' identification. The research data were labeled according to coding parameters, such as P1 for Participant 1 and D1 for the data source from the organization of P1.

I will store the data collected for this study for a period of 5 years as required by Walden University. The document files were saved to both my password-protected computer's external hard drive and a USB drive to maintain the confidentiality of the participant's identity and information provided for this study. After 5 years, all hard copy data will be physically destroyed, and electronic data sources will be deleted from all stored locations.

Data Collection Instruments

For this qualitative, multiple case study, I was the primary data collection instrument. The researcher is the primary data collection instrument in a qualitative study (Fusch et al., 2018; Yin, 2018). Researchers use various data collection techniques to have quality, reliability, and validity in their study (Wiseman et al., 2019). Yin (2018) asserted that there are six data collection resources for case studies, including: (a) archival records, (b) observation, (c) documentation, (d) interviews, (e) participant observations, and (f) physical artifacts. A reliable interview protocol facilitates the interview process systematically, consistently, and comprehensively and increases the interview process's effectiveness by ensuring comprehensive data is obtained during the allotted interview time (Yeong et al., 2018). Interview protocols help safeguard consistency based on the interview questions and provide structure to help facilitate data organization (Azungah, 2018). For my study, I scheduled one-hour semistructured Zoom interviews with each participant that strictly followed the interview protocol (see Appendix), where I asked a series of 10 open-ended questions to gain information about each participant's experience with leadership strategies that improve employee engagement. Researchers regard documents as critical sources of data in qualitative studies as documents are created independently without a researcher's intervention and are stable data sources (Azungah, 2018). In addition to the interview data, I also reviewed organization data, including policies and procedures. Researchers should have multiple sources of data as a means of triangulation and to reduce the impact of potential bias in the study (Mackieson et al., 2018). Having a secondary data source was necessary to

triangulate the data. Triangulation of data improves the study findings' accuracy, credibility, and validity (Greyson, 2018).

I used member checking and triangulation to enhance the reliability and validity of the research study. Member checking is a common standard of rigor in qualitative research studies that enhances credibility and confirmability by asking the participant to verify the researcher's interpretation and synthesis of the interview responses (Johnson et al., 2020). Member checking is a means to maintain validity and create trustworthiness in the qualitative research process by allowing the participant the opportunity to confirm or deny the interpretation of the data by the researcher (Candela, 2019). I conducted member checking by providing each participant with a detailed interpretation of their responses to interview questions. Each participant was asked to validate my interpretations through an email response within 5 days of the interview. Participants' initial responses, along with any changes, were documented in the study. Triangulation compares data across multiple sources to strengthen conclusions and reduce bias (Greyson, 2018; Johnson et al., 2020; Yin, 2018). Triangulation is a tool that allows researchers to cross-check information to improve the accuracy, credibility, and validity of the findings (Greyson, 2018). Researchers use organizational documents as a way to supplement and corroborate findings across different data sets to reduce the impact of potential bias (Mackieson et al., 2018). I asked participants to provide company documents that are publicly available or that they have the authority to share with me related to strategies to improve employee engagement. Policies, procedures, and other helpful documentation were used to triangulate the data from the interviews.

Data Collection Technique

The study's data collection techniques included conducting semistructured interviews and reviewing company documents. Interviews are the most common methodological tool for a qualitative researcher (Cypress, 2018). Document analysis refers to any systematic procedure for reviewing documents and involves an iterative process of examination and interpretation (Mackieson et al., 2018). Qualitative researchers use interviews to collect detailed accounts of a participant's experience with a specific phenomenon to gain rich and detailed information to specific interview questions (McGrath et al., 2019). Semistructured interviews allow effective data collection to explore participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs on a subject and delve deeply into their personal feelings (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). In this study, I used semistructured Zoom interviews to gather information from three small business leaders with 5 years of experience successfully using strategies to improve employee engagement. Once I identified the qualified participants, I emailed a copy of the consent form to each participant for review. Once I received the email response from each participant with the words "I consent" indicating their willingness to participate, I coordinated with the participant to schedule time for their Zoom interview through email. Each interview was conducted according to the interview protocol (see Appendix), asking open-ended questions to gain rich and thoughtful data from each participant. I used Zoom to conduct the interviews to ensure I adhered to the guidelines established due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the start of each interview, I informed each participant that the interviews would be recorded with two devices to ensure all data were captured and assist

in each interview's transcribing process. At the scheduling of each interview, I requested company documents via email from each participant. Company documents included company policies and procedures on employee engagement and strategy, employee handbook, and other relevant company documents used for creating or implementing strategies to improve employee engagement.

There are advantages and disadvantages to conducting semistructured interviews. Semistructured interviews allow qualitative researchers to quickly capture rich and detailed data about a phenomenon (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). One significant advantage of semistructured interviews is that they allow for key data to be collected while still allowing flexibility for participants to bring their own personability and perspective to the discussion (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). Semistructured interviews allow for immediate access to interpretation, allowing the researcher to ask further questions to gain a complete understanding before proceeding with the next question (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Semistructured interviews also allow the researcher to observe the participants, allowing both verbal and nonverbal communication between the two parties (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). The disadvantages of interviews include: (a) preparing thoroughly for each interview, (b) consuming substantial time for both the researcher and participant, and (c) understanding that interviews may be vulnerable to bias (MayaJariego & Cachia, 2019). Semistructured interviews lend themselves to formal training, while providing the application of intelligent creativity and thoughtful reflexivity in relation to the broader element of research (Brown & Danaher, 2019).

In this study, I experienced several advantages and disadvantages in the research process. With the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were restricted to virtual or telephone conferences to avoid face-to-face interactions. For my interviews, I chose Zoom as the platform for the interviews. One advantage of using the online platform was the ease of ability to connect via a video conference with each participant to simulate face-to-face interaction. Scheduling the interview calls was easier to do virtually rather than scheduling a convenient place or time for both the researcher and participant. One disadvantage to the virtual option was the reliability of a stable Internet connection. During one Zoom call, the participants' Internet connection failed twice, causing a minor disruption in the flow of information.

The organizational documentation review has both advantages and disadvantages. Document analysis provides a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating materials related to a specific phenomenon and allows the researcher to gain a rich breadth of the content contained within the documents (Linton et al., 2019). Secondary data sources can provide researchers with supplementary information that enhances the findings from semistructured interviews (Yin, 2018). Using semistructured interviews and document analysis allows the researcher to conduct methodological triangulation to compare the data collected to see if there is alignment between the data sources (Fusch et al., 2018). Some disadvantages to document analysis include that the documentation could be outdated, incomplete, or difficult to obtain from participants (Linton et al., 2019). Documents may also provide a limited amount of valuable data that supports the semistructured interview for data triangulation (Linton et al., 2019).

During the research process, I was able to easily access company-provided documentation by requesting it via email. The participants willingly provided several organizational documents, including handbooks, award templates, goals templates, benefits packages, and leader notes from a staff meeting on engagement. One disadvantage experienced during the interview process was one participant's delay in providing requested materials. I had to make the request several times via email to get the company documentation.

Following the completion of the interviews, I transcribed the data collected. After the transcription process was complete, I drafted my interpretation of each response to the interview questions and asked the participant to verify the accuracy of my interpretations. Member checking allows the participants to verify the accurate portrayal of their voice in the research study by having the opportunity to confirm or deny the interpretation of interview data by the researcher, which adds credibility to the study (Candela, 2019). My interpretations of participants' answers to interview questions were provided to the participants with a desired response of 5 days. Member checking provides the ability to achieve data saturation and verify accuracy in qualitative research studies (DeCino & Waalkes, 2019). I began the member checking process by providing a digital copy of my initial interpretations of the responses to interview questions to each participant for them to verify the accuracy of the interpretation. I asked participants to provide their feedback on whether the interpretations accurately reflected their responses. The member-checked data were then used in the data analysis process. Once each participant completed the member-checking process, I used member-checked data and company documents to

triangulate the data to identify themes. Both member checking and triangulation will help enhance this research study's reliability and validity (Candela, 2019; Greyson, 2018; Johnson et al., 2020; Yin, 2018).

Data Organization Technique

The data for the study were organized by participant and company. Research data sources included interviews, company documentation, and reflective journaling notes taken during an interview process. I was the primary collector of data for each participant in this research study. The use of data organization enhances the readers' understanding of the researcher's findings and conclusion (Yin, 2018). Data collection, organization, and analysis are essential to the qualitative research process (Cypress, 2018). The data organization process included techniques to manage the research data, including bringing the audio files to one location, converting observational notes to electronic format, scanning paper documents, and providing a structured naming protocol for each file (Lester et al., 2020).

For the study, I used a letter-number coding method to protect the privacy of the interviewees and their companies. Researchers are obligated to protect the confidentiality of the participant and safeguard entrusted information (Turcotte-Tremblay et al., 2018). For the interview process, I used two recording devices to collect interview data and handwritten research notes. Researchers use reflective journaling to document participants' conduct, attitude, and nonverbal cues during the interview (Eaton et al., 2019). I used Microsoft Excel to organize the data by categorizing and labeling all data. The Microsoft Excel document allowed me to identify themes and familiar responses

from each participant. I assigned an alphanumeric code to each participant and document source provided to safeguard the participants' confidentiality. The coding process included labels, such as P1 for Participant 1 and D1 for Document 1 from Participant 1's organization. Researchers should safeguard and retain collected data for up to 5 years (Todorov et al., 2019; Yuan et al., 2018). To avoid unauthorized access to the participants' data, I was the only person with access to the information. All documents, recordings, and other corresponding files are password protected and stored on an external hard drive in my home office and will be kept for a period of 5 years. At the end of the required 5-year period, the data will be destroyed using a shredder for paper documents, a burning method for digital recording devices, and a deletion method for all digital files.

Data Analysis

The data analysis phase began with collecting data through interviews and secondary data collection from the organizations. Researchers use qualitative data analysis to provide an in-depth, detailed description to identify and interpret patterns or meanings (Mackieson et al., 2018). Researchers conduct data analysis to identify themes that address the research question and can be applied across a range of theoretical perspectives (Mackieson et al., 2018). Qualitative researchers can use triangulation to combine methods and collection sources such as interviews, observations, and company documents to improve data quality and increase trustworthiness in the study (Abdalla et al., 2018). After gathering the data, the analysis phase began with the use of methodological triangulation and thematic analysis. Methodological triangulation allows

the researcher to look at the same phenomenon through more than one data source, combine different methods and collection sources, and contribute deeper dimensions to the data (Abdalla et al., 2018). Methodological triangulation was appropriate for this study because I used interviews as a primary data source and company documents as a secondary data source to triangulate the interview data. This study's data analysis consisted of obtaining, reviewing, and analyzing relevant company documents, conducting semistructured interviews with qualified participants, and compiling and analyzing the multiple data sources.

Yin (2018) noted a five-step process for qualitative data analysis, including (a) gathering data, (b) evaluating data, (c) understanding data, (d) identifying data for use, and (e) concluding the data. Qualitative researchers start with organizing both interview and documentary data to begin data analysis (Azungah, 2018). For my study, I followed all five steps Yin (2018) outlined. I obtained the relevant company documents, compiled and transcribed the interview data, examined data across multiple sources, and analyzed the findings. To satisfy Step 1 of Yin's (2018) process, my analysis began with scheduling semistructured Zoom interviews with each participant and obtaining access to company documents. For Step 2, I evaluated the information obtained from each participant after conducting interviews and gathering relevant company documentation. Researchers typically gather study files into one location, converting them to an electronic format using software such as Microsoft Excel or software packages such as NVivo (Lester et al., 2020). Using the Excel file and the NVivo software package allowed me to understand the data to satisfy Step 3 of Yin's (2018) five-step process. I

exported all data from the company documents, interviews, and member checking process into a Microsoft Excel file for initial analysis. I used the Microsoft Excel file to begin evaluating themes. To help me understand the similarities and differences in the interview data from the four participants, I used NVivo, which is a qualitative data analysis tool. Using the data analysis tool, I was able to understand the data collected from the multiple data sources to satisfy Yin's Step 4. Researchers use thematic analysis to identify, analyze, organize, describe, and report themes in a data set (Lester et al., 2020). Lester et al. (2020) defined seven phases of thematic analysis: (a) preparing and organizing the data set, (b) transcribing the data, (c) familiarization with the data, (d) journaling the data, (e) coding the data, (f) moving from codes to themes, and (g) making the analytic process transparent. In Section 3 of this study, I discuss each of these phases to establish trustworthiness in my data and results. I used the Excel file to authenticate the themes and patterns uncovered during my research study through the manual analysis of the data and information depicted in the literature review. I also used NVivo's software analysis tool to substantiate the manual themes that answer the overarching research question for this multiple case study.

The final phase of a qualitative research study is to produce the final report that provides a thematic analysis that is a concise, logical, nonrepetitive, and interesting discussion of the data from all themes that emerged during the study (Nowell et al., 2017). The final study should articulate what each theme means and what they reveal about the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using relevant and current literature helps the researcher build a valid argument that stands with merit (Nowell et al., 2017).

After identifying the themes in my study, I wrote a detailed analysis of the findings, supported by current and relevant literature provided in the literature review. Identifying the themes and patterns was the content of the data analysis process for my research study. The final report includes Yin's five-step process for my study.

The conceptual framework for this study was the transformational leadership theory. Researchers use the transformational leadership theory as a critical mediating mechanism that values the follower and allows the leader to achieve a wide range of positive effects in the organization (Groves, 2020). The transformational leadership theory is applicable when researchers explore strategies to improve employee engagement. I aligned the results of my study with the transformational leadership theory to explore strategies small business leaders used to improve employee engagement.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are essential constructs of a qualitative research study as both elements provide trustworthiness in a research study. Trustworthiness in a research study refers to the rigor of the research design, credibility of the researcher, believability of the findings, and applicability of the research methods to the overall study (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Validity and reliability increase transparency and decrease the inclusion of researcher bias (McDonald et al., 2019). The validity and reliability measurements provided significant importance to the findings of the study.

Reliability

Reliability is a measurement that provides the degree to which results are reproducible (McDonald et al., 2019). Replicating the study's findings increases

confidence in the accuracy and, when repeated with the same results, shows the lack of bias (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). Member checking is a common standard of rigor in qualitative research studies that enhances credibility and confirmability by asking the participant to verify the researcher's interpretation and synthesis of the interview responses (Johnson et al., 2020). Member checking allows the participant to verify the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations of the participants' answers to interview questions and enhances the study's dependability (Candela, 2019). To ensure dependability in this study, I used member checking. I engaged participants in member checking of their interview responses to validate my interpretation of their interview responses. To eliminate bias, I used the interview protocol to establish stability and consistency of each interview.

Validity

Validity refers to ensuring the instruments used for measurement are appropriate, the results are accurate, and the study's findings can be generalized to other situations (Rose & Johnson, 2020). A qualitative researcher must address validity to determine credibility, transferability, and authenticity of the data (Saunders et al., 2019). Validity in qualitative research is about selecting the appropriate method to measure what the researcher sets out to measure (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). The use of triangulation and member checking strengthens both the reliability and validity of a qualitative research study (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Member checking allows the participant to review, comment, and correct the researcher's interpretation of the participant's responses to interview questions, enhancing the credibility of data analysis and participant

involvement (Candela, 2019). Triangulation combines multiple data sources of a specific phenomenon that helps researchers create inventive methods and possibly make new and deeper dimensions of understanding possible with the specific phenomenon (Abdalla et al., 2018). To ensure credibility, I used both triangulation and member checking for this qualitative study. I used company documents and the participating organizations' semistructured interviews to triangulate the data and explore employee engagement from multiple viewpoints. I provided each participant with a copy of my interpretation of the interview questions' responses and asked them to review for accuracy. I also asked each participant to clarify, add any additional insight, or make any necessary changes to the interpretation.

Transferability is the outcome of different participants through different studies in a qualitative research process (Rose & Johnson, 2020). To ensure transferability, the researcher should be able to conduct the same study in a different location with different participants and achieve the same results (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). Transferability implies that the study's findings will accurately reflect the participants' views (Daniel, 2018). To ensure the transferability of my study, I provided documentation on the participants' criteria, the research design and method, and the study procedures used in this research study.

Confirmability shows a clear relationship between the data and the study's findings (Stenfors et al., 2020). Confirmability requires the researcher to eliminate all personal viewpoints and ensure the study contains neutral and direct data collected (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The use of accurate and verifiable data from the participants

showed the confirmability of this research study. Using the NVivo data software provided an audit trail of all data used for this study to mitigate bias and enhance both credibility and confirmability. I used the participant's interviews and company documents to explore strategies that leaders use to improve employee engagement.

Data saturation is reached when observing new data would not lead to the discovery of any new information related to the research questions (Lowe et al., 2018). When no new themes are identified in the research, the researcher has likely reached data saturation (Lowe et al., 2018). Researchers should ask the same open-ended questions to each participant and ensure a stable interview structure to ensure data saturation (Weller et al., 2018). I conducted semistructured interviews until no new themes, codes, or new information were obtained to reach data saturation.

Transition and Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore the strategies small business leaders use to improve employee engagement. In Section 2, I addressed the purpose of the study, role of the researcher, participants, research method, and design selection. In Section 2, I also included the study's methodology; the justification for choosing a qualitative, multiple case study design; the study population; the sampling process; interviews and company documents as data collection instruments; the interview technique; and the discussion on reliability and validity. In Section 3, I include a discussion of the findings of the study, applications to professional practice, the implications for social change, recommendations for action and future research, reflections on the process, and a conclusion.

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 small business leaders use to improve employee engagement. The population included three business leaders from the North Texas area. I collected data by conducting three semistructured Zoom interviews, journaling, making observations, and reviewing company-provided documentation. Each participant answered 10 open-ended questions regarding the strategies they used to engage employees. I used member checking and methodological triangulation to strengthen the reliability and validity of the research study. Participants agreed that successful employee engagement strategies are critical to increasing productivity and profitability in a small business environment. Compiling data and applying thematic coding resulted in three themes: (a) supportive leadership behaviors cultivated employee engagement, (b) open and honest communication promoted employee engagement, and (c) recognition and compensation increased employee engagement. The findings of this study were aligned with Burns' (1978) transformational leadership theory that I explored in the literature review. In the next section, I will discuss my detailed analysis and study findings.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question for this multiple case study was "What leadership strategies do small business leaders use to improve employee engagement?" I conducted semistructured interviews via Zoom to meet COVID-19 protocols at a time that was convenient for each participant. I journaled observations during each interview

and received company documents the participants provided, including company handbook, written team meeting notes on engagement, and engagement training materials. I anticipated the study population to include four industries, but after three completed interviews, I reached data saturation, with no new themes emerging from the interviews and company-provided documentation. I assigned each participant a code (P1, P2, and P3) to maintain their confidentiality. The data coding process identified keywords and phrases derived from the interview transcripts and secondary data sources. The three themes that emerged from the data analysis process were (a) supportive leadership behaviors cultivated employee engagement, (b) open and honest communication promoted employee engagement, and (c) recognition and compensation improved employee engagement. Table 1 includes the number of mentions for each theme supporting this doctoral study.

Table 1

Themes

Theme	Number of Participants	Mentions
Supportive Leadership Behaviors	3	94
Open and Honest Communication	3	55
Recognition and Compensation	3	37

Data analysis revealed that small business leaders' primary focus was to increase employee work-related self-efficacy. Small business leaders have seen success with employee engagement by increasing their belief that they can be better, do more, and increase productivity. This aligns with Winasis et al. (2021), who found that the

components of transformational leadership may positively affect employees' work engagement by enhancing their work-related self-efficacy. By using transformational leadership, leaders can build successful organizations by influencing positive changes within the employees and the organization (Warrick, 2018).

Theme 1: Supportive Leadership Behaviors Cultivated Employee Engagement

Providing employees with a supportive leadership style was a common strategy that the participants mentioned during the interviews. All three participants (P1, P2, and P3) confirmed that being supportive of employees as individuals was important to cultivating engagement. P1 and P3 specifically discussed the attributes of transformational leadership, including being able to motivate and inspire others, which were successful traits leaders require to engage employees in a small business. P1 noted that motivating employees relied on the leader's ability to connect with employees both personally and professionally, creating an environment that goes beyond just work. When employees perceive a supportive leadership behavior, they develop an obligation to perform better and have more positive work attitudes (Khan et al., 2020). Transformational leaders engage team members in a shared vision, allow them to challenge processes, and encourage employees to yield performance beyond expectations (Ajanaku & Lubbe, 2021).

All three participants indicated that being a leader in a small business provided more opportunity to engage with all employees, and building that relationship was critical to the business success. The leader's ability to develop a mutual relationship with employees can build reciprocal relationships (Paolucci et al., 2018). P3 asserted that the

business experienced substantial growth, increased engagement, and greater employee retention by creating a family environment. P2 noted more employee engagement within the company once the leadership team interacted more with employees on the production floor rather than staying in the offices all day. Engagement reflects the level of organization–employee relationships (Tsareva & Boldyhanova, 2020). Transformational leadership behaviors are the key behavior of leaders that causes employees to be engaged (Obuobisa-Darko, 2020). P1 stated,

> Every employee at the agency operates at different levels. Some people want more every day, and others are content with minimal. It is important for me as their leader to realize their differences and lead them from where they are, not expect them to be at the same level as all other agents.

All three participants stated that being present in their operations allowed them to motivate and inspire employees, understand the level of employee engagement in various areas, and make changes routinely to better support employees. Transformational leaders can motivate, inspire, and create value with confidence and charisma (Bass, 1995; Burns, 1978). P3 specifically stated that "being present allowed the ability to take a 'temperature' at any time to know where adjustments need to be made." P1 noted that being present in the organization allows leaders to give positive affirmations to employees to build them up for success. Another specific part of supporting leadership behaviors that all three participants noted was the success of creating a "family environment" within the organization. P1 stated that "building a family environment inspired strategies that kept people engaged by creating a feeling that they belong and

have a sense of community." P2 noted, "the environment is not about just a paycheck or 8-5 job, but rather you were an important part of the bigger family, and that was the most positive outcome of our engagement strategies." P3 also stated, "having a balanced approach to work helps to create engagement, and fostering a family environment has been successful for many years." Employees are often more committed to an organization when there is a family-friendly policy, and leaders support this policy in daily operations (Znidarsic & Bernik, 2021). Employees who felt valued, empowered, and supported by the leader regarding their personal well-being were highly engaged and better performers than those who did not feel that same relationship (Obuobisa-Darko, 2020).

I also analyzed participants' organizational documents to support the findings of the semistructured interviews. All three participants provided documentation, including notes from staff meetings on engagement, company handbooks, award templates, goals templates, benefits packages, and employee applications. A review of the provided documentation corroborated the findings gathered during the participant interviews. P3's documents included the organization's mission statement along with language that the company works to provide an atmosphere of harmony to provide the best environment for the company, employees, and customers. P2's provided documentation supported the use of awards and company-sponsored meals to create an engaging environment for both the leader and employee. P2 also provided written notes used during a staff meeting where P2 discussed using awards, recognition, and daily talks to encourage and engage employees in the daily operations. P2 noted the importance of helping workers feel appreciated, noticed, and recognized for their contributions daily, not only when

something extraordinary occurs. P1 provided a goals template that gives each employee the ability to state what the individual goals are with a management response, treating each employee independently. The organizational data I reviewed supported the theme of supportive leadership behaviors are necessary to cultivate engagement.

The results of this study also aligned with past and present research on employee engagement. When employees feel appreciated and valued, employee engagement becomes a natural result of these feelings. Transformational leaders exhibit the qualities of trust, respect, and integrity, which are critical factors that affect organizational culture and performance (Obuobia-Darko, 2020). The leadership behaviors that relate to the four key constructs of transformational leadership include (a) individualized consideration, (b) intellectual stimulation, (c) idealized influence, and (d) inspirational motivation (Bass, 1985). Employees are more likely to be engaged when they are inspired and motivated by senior leadership. Creating a sense of community, or family environment, allows employees to feel valued, appreciated, and connected to the organization's larger purpose. Ethical and credible leaders positively affect employee engagement by acting as role models that followers can emulate and ask for guidance, creating a bond that empowers a positive work environment with increased morale and motivation (Ashfaq et al., 2021).

Leaders create an organizational climate where the development of employee relationships occurs (Khan et al., 2020). This relationship is critical to increasing engagement. Senior leaders play a vital role in increasing employee engagement and must create policies and procedures that build relationships, increase job satisfaction, and

inspire employees to perform at the highest level (Reissova & Papay, 2021; Znidarsic & Bernik, 2021). Mulievi and Tsuma (2021) reported that leaders engaging their workforce saw 6.5 fewer days of absenteeism, 41% lower retention risk, and three times higher operating margins. Transformational leadership theory serves as the framework through which leaders must inspire workers to improve performance, and that transformational leaders' leadership attributes effectively encourage employee engagement (Chin et al., 2019). Leaders should strive to be motivational, inspirational, and approachable in the organization to encourage employee engagement.

Theme 2: Open and Honest Communication Promoted Employee Engagement

The second theme that emerged from data analysis was that open and honest communication promoted employee engagement. The literature review and transformational leadership theory support this theme. All three participants of this study mentioned that having an effective line of open and honest communication was critical for business success. P1 noted that the communication tool used varies on the day in order to engage all employees in the organization. P2 referenced the use of email, personal meetings, networking events, and personal conversations to create bonding relationships with employees. P3 noted the use of three levels of employee communication to employees, including email, monthly breakfasts, and posted messages around the facility. Internal communication supports company effectiveness because it allows for the development of positive internal relationships by creating lines of communication between leaders and employees (Prasetya & Kartikawangi, 2021). Strong internal communication also affects employee engagement (Lee, 2020; Markos &

Gossaye, 2021), which P1 and P3 supported. Open and honest communication allows employees to connect with leadership and feel involved in the business, not just performing a routine task every day. Effective leaders cannot achieve the greatest potential within the organization without communication (Yue et al., 2019), letting employees understand their roles in an organization (Tao et al., 2022). P3 stated "communication is an effective tool for all employees but must be used in the right way. Leaders must understand the employees and find the best way to communicate to them." All three participants indicated that they use various methods to communicate that are effective, but all agreed that email communication is the primary method for communicating within the organization. P1 noted that because the employees are located within three different offices, email communication and Facebook live videos are the most effective form of communication. P2 and P3 also noted that email was their primary method for communicating with the employees, but both agreed that face-to-face communication was most effective in clearly communicating expectations to the workforce. P3 stated "email is a primary method for communication because it is fast and easy to send at any time." However, other research has noted that small business owners are closer to their employees, and face-to-face communication is more effective than digital (Gupta, 2021).

All three participants also stated that their formal communication methods included documented policies within the employee handbooks and written policies that can be accessed through intranet websites for the company or human resource partners. P3 also noted the use of a more informal communication method by holding monthly

breakfast meetings where they can provide recognition and discuss company values and objectives as a team. Leaders can increase employee engagement by developing and executing an effective internal communication strategy that fosters relationships, contains quality information, provides an opportunity for upward communication, and eliminates communication barriers (Markos & Gossaye, 2021). These strategies align with the work of Bass (1985) and Burns (1978) that transformational leaders provide a clear and concise vision, inspire and motivate, offer intellectual challenges, and show a genuine interest in the employees' needs. P3 stated that being present in the organization and on the production floors allowed employees to feel like they had a direct line of communication to top leadership. P1 noted that engaging with employees via various channels provided multiple ways to approach agency leadership for help and guidance. P1 added that using various virtual communication tools have provided the most success to be able to have both verbal and nonverbal communication with employees, rather than relying only on email communication where nonverbal communication does not exist.

Through the documentation review, I observed policies and procedures that supported the theme of honest and effective communication. P2 provided documentation emphasizing that communication is important, as evidenced in the employee handbook. P3 provided written notes that corroborated an effective communication strategy to engage all agents in the company. P1 provided a goals analysis that shows the need for manager and employee communication on a quarterly basis to evaluate progress and success toward year-end goals. The analyzed documentation aligned with the theme of open and honest communication between company leaders and employees. Small

business owners should communicate with employees often as it builds confidence between leaders and employees (Yue et al., 2019). A leader's ability to implement an actively participatory management style that prioritizes good quality communication is an effective strategy for building better employee relationships as fuel for increasing its effectiveness (Nienaber & Martins, 2020). One of the most important drivers of employee engagement involves organizational communication, recognition of employee voice, organizational culture, and learning (Choudhury & Mohanty, 2019). The relationship between communication and employee engagement is evident in the leaders' small business strategies to improve employee engagement.

Theme 3: Recognition and Compensation Improved Employee Engagement

The third theme that emerged from data collection analysis was that recognition and compensation improved employee engagement. While this theme more closely aligned with Bass's transactional leadership theory, it reflected the positive nature of a transformational leader. All three participants noted that rewarding employees provided a motivational driver, which resulted in improved engagement, increased productivity, and achieved company goals. P2 stated that the company often uses monetary rewards to engage employees and reward them for successful behavior or over and above efforts on a specific project. P2 noted that the company had seen success with this program by offering a small incentive that allows employees to feel valued above the typical paycheck distribution cycle. P3 noted that they award small gift cards at their monthly luncheons, which have also sparked a positive impact on employee engagement. P3 noted they give these awards to deserving employees during their monthly breakfasts to be

recognized among their peers. P3 stated that "when you communicate the value of a person with recognition, that really means something to the employees like they have a purpose for the company and not just a job." Transactional leaders can motivate employees to accomplish tasks by rewarding and recognizing employees for their efforts (Li et al., 2018). P1 noted that engaging the employees with the company "allows for natural growth among the employees and often feeds to others in the group to strive to do more and be the next one to receive their yearly award and bonus".

Employee recognition goes beyond the use of monetary awards. P2 noted that recognizing the individual employee's ability and putting them on a growth path towards success improves engagement and retention efforts within the company. P2 noted that they offer many networking sessions, team building workshops, individual awards, as well as monetary valued awards to recognize and engage employees. P2 noted that it is important to show employees that they matter and recognize individual efforts to keep them happy and engaged. P2 noted that their industry is tough to retain talent, and these programs have helped in the short term, but when evaluated over the long-term in the COVID era, it has not been as productive. P1 noted that using team building workshops and networking events allows employees to build closer bonds, develop relationships, and create opportunities for competitive challenges among employees.

Employee recognition can be handled in many different ways for an organization. P3 noted that supervisors and leaders take notes from employees on how they want to be recognized. P3 stated that some employees do not mind public recognition while others want recognition in private. P3's company upholds the employees' wishes and recognizes

employees based on their expectations. During the quarterly breakfasts, employees who do not mind public recognition are awarded personal awards to celebrate their success among their peers. P2 noted that they offer recognition in a one-on-one setting when awarding achievements from specific customers. P2 also stated that they give out annual awards at a gala to recognize achievements and commitments from employees in a peer-centered event as well. P1 noted that they also have two tiers of awards, with the biggest award ceremony being held at their annual gala, where one employee is awarded the "top-employee" award for the year based on the volume of sales. Rewards and recognition are tools that improve employee performance, which is tied to employee engagement (Baqir et al., 2020).

Employee rewards can influence employee performance by enhancing employee abilities, knowledge, skills, and keeping them motivated (Hussain et al., 2019). Human resource practices that engage, empower, and recognize employees are directly linked with the overall development and success of the organization (Hussain et al., 2019). It is important for leaders to continue rewards and recognition programs within the company. P3 noted that the company is constantly evolving its rewards and recognition system to ensure they are implementing the correct number and types of rewards to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of the workforce. P2 stated,

> We continue to use the monetary rewards to improve engagement and review our reward system annually to ensure we have the right policies to recognize success. Doing what is right for our employees has to be our top priority and when things

> around us change, our policies and procedures must be updated to ensure we are competitive in the market and fair to the employee.

P1 did not specifically indicate how often they update their reward system but acknowledged the need to adapt to changing times to reward success. Overall, all three participants noted the need for a rewards and recognition program to engage employees and increase productivity. Rewards and recognition are important human resource policies that employers must evolve in order to engage employees (Hussain et al., 2019).

All participants concluded their interviews with statements that affirmations, recognition, and compensation were key strategies that leaders can use to engage employees. Rewards that the study participants used included both extrinsic (monetary) and intrinsic (recognition/acknowledgment) rewards. P3 noted that recognition had been the most effective at improving employee engagement because "the recognition is personal and individualized." P2 stated they "used small monetary rewards such as gift cards or cash for client relations bonuses when a client compliments an employee." P1 awarded their "employee of the year" with a bonus and plaque recognition at their annual gala. P3 stated they use "small monetary incentives, gift cards, service awards, and Going the Extra Mile (GEM) awards" for employees doing great things.

These findings are consistent with the literature in this research study. Well-composed reward systems are a useful approach to building employee work motivation (Halilbegovic et al., 2018; Hussain et al., 2019). When leaders understand the power of culture, motivation, and discipline, they can create better learning environments, reward systems, and career development plans to keep employees motivated and performing at

their best (Paris et al., 2018). Employees want to be recognized for their achievements and appreciated (Halilbegovic et al., 2018). Reward systems within the participants' small businesses included monetary bonuses, increased salary, extra time off, and ceremonial recognition opportunities. A reward system provides the opportunity to reward employees according to the value they create, harmonizes the reward tools to align with business objectives, helps attract and retain high-quality employees that the organization needs, and also develops a performance-driven culture (Brutu, 2019). The reward systems must be designed to meet organizational objectives, both in performance-based decisions and monetary, to ensure they are sustainable and profitable. The significant relationship between improved engagement and a successful reward system is evident between the literature and the data provided by the study participants.

Applications to Professional Practice

In this study, I explored effective strategies that small business leaders used to improve employee engagement to increase productivity and profitability. I found that supportive leadership behaviors, open and honest communication, and recognition and compensation are the top strategies that small business leaders use to improve employee engagement. The results and recommendations may serve as a guide for small business leaders to improve employee engagement in their organizations. The leadership strategies presented in this study could provide optimal ways to engage employees, increasing organizational productivity and profitability. Small business leaders could use the strategies identified in this study to implement effective strategies to create an engaged workforce in underperforming areas of the operation, creating a solution to improve

business practices. Disengaged employees have poor well-being, are less productive, and have higher absenteeism than engaged workers (Bhana & Suknunan, 2021).

It is vital for small business leaders to apply strategies that foster employee engagement and improve productivity and profitability with the resources available to their organization (Asencio & Sun, 2020). Small business leaders must clearly define the company expectations and promote personal development of the employees to keep them engaged and performing their best every day. Leaders must maintain a positive climate of transformational leadership to demonstrate behaviors that are positive, causing their followers to engage in a positive manner for the organization (Winasis et al., 2021). Engaged employees create a positive relationship with performance management, are more productive, have higher employee satisfaction, and provide better organizational outcomes (Tate et al., 2021). Leaders may increase productivity and profitability by investing in employee well-being through rewards, recognition, feedback, communication, and relationships (Tate et al., 2021).

This study's results may help fill in the gap of knowledge regarding strategies that small business leaders can use to improve employee engagement. From these findings, small business leaders can learn some of the best leadership strategies they can use to break down barriers, overcome limitations, and synchronize their talent management practices with employee engagement. By finding the right strategies that work for their organization, small business leaders may be able to improve employee engagement, increase productivity, and decrease turnover and disengagement. The themes presented in

this study are cost-effective, practical, and easy-to-implement strategies that can create profitable and sustainable solutions for improving employee engagement.

Implications for Social Change

The implications for social change include the potential for small business owners to use the results of this study to provide strategies that may promote improved employee engagement, which may lead to increased productivity and profitability, reduced turnover, and greater financial stability within the community. Leaders have the potential to use effective strategies to improve employee engagement in organizations. Employee engagement may create a cumulative effect for the employee by empowering and enabling the employee to meet goals, creating happiness, and allowing this positive energy to carry into employees' home lives and communities. In this study, the implications for positive social change involve many strategies that leaders can use to improve employee engagement. Leaders who do not focus on implementing strategies that engage employees face a decrease in employee determination and motivation that directly impact productivity (Mulievi & Tsuma, 2021). Employee engagement is an essential driver of business and organizational success (McAuliffe et al., 2019). Social change is incremental, and those that respond to social problems can bring a process that promotes and eventually leads to social change (Yang et al., 2022). Keeping employees happy reduces turnover, typically reducing unemployment in the community and providing more financial benefits for the families within the local areas.

Successful small business owners have the motivation and ability to turn local challenges into opportunities and create social change by focusing on financial, human,

and community development (Lumpkin et al., 2018). Leadership is an important component that can help create employee engagement, and visionary leaders help create a culture of engagement that can increase overall satisfaction, improve retention, and drive optimal levels of profit and productivity (Ismail et al., 2021). Transformational leaders provide a clear vision, inspires and motivates, offers intellectual challenges, and shows genuine interest in the needs of the employees, thus creating a positive impact on employee engagement (Chin et al., 2019). By creating a culture to improve employee engagement, leaders may be able to increase employee satisfaction, which can resonate in the employee's home life and create prosperity for the community by providing a positive increase in employee's self-confidence and determination levels to carry out positive services in their communities.

Recommendations for Action

Small business leaders may be able to use the data collected from participant interviews and organizational documentation presented in this study to implement these strategies into their existing leadership model to improve employee engagement. Small business leaders must realize the importance of effective leadership strategies to engage the workforce and create higher levels of organizational productivity. Based on the results of this study, I offer three recommendations for small business leaders to consider when implementing strategies to improve employee engagement My recommendations include exhibiting supportive leadership behaviors cultivate employee engagement, fostering open and honest communication promote employee engagement, and establishing a recognition and compensation program improves employee engagement.

These recommendations might provide small businesses with cost-effective and practical strategies that may improve employee engagement.

Creating lines of open and honest communication allows leaders to deliver messages clearly and concisely to all employees of the organization. Small business leaders can create monthly meetings to bring employees together in a forum that encourages communication between the leaders and employees. Leaders must also offer encouragement to employees through open communication, which aligns with creating employee engagement practices in the business structure. Encouraging a positive leader-employee relationship fosters a culture of support and trust, which aligns with the need for supportive leadership behavior. By creating a reward and recognition program, leaders can show their support for employees' positive behaviors and actions, thus creating a culture that strives to do more while enhancing the human capital in the organization. Creating a relationship between leader and employee lets employees know that the company and leaders care, aligning with the supportive leadership behaviors and being used as a rewards/recognition system.

Implementing effective leadership strategies allows small business leaders to create a positive organizational culture, more productivity, and greater profitability. The findings of this study allowed me to add valuable insight to the scholarly research on leadership strategies to improve employee engagement. Small business leaders may use the data collected in this multiple case study during company training sessions, goals reviews, personal development meetings or assigned training, or specific departments that need better strategies for improved employee engagement. The study participants will

receive a summary of this study's findings. Business leaders who need to improve employee engagement should also consider the findings of this study. Future scholars will be able to access this study through ProQuest or ScholarWorks through Walden University. I will also circulate these findings through training sessions with my peers to provide ways they can create improved employee engagement.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that small business leaders use to improve employee engagement. I chose three small business leaders in the North Texas area for this study who had 5 years of experience as a small business owner, successfully implemented leadership strategies to improve employee engagement, and had access to documentation regarding strategies to improve employee engagement. The small business leaders shared successful leadership strategies implemented in their companies. The strategies that these leaders shared aligned with the study's literature review and conceptual framework, which was transformational leadership. The results of this research include three themes with successful strategies that have increased employee engagement. Future scholars could use these themes in various geographical locations to further develop them, compare different leadership strategies, or conduct a quantitative study to test the correlation between leadership strategies and increased levels of employee engagement.

One limitation of this study was the limited geographical region in which the study was conducted. Another limitation included the number of years of experience the leaders had to have to qualify for participation. One criterion of this study was that

leaders had to have 5 years of experience. Future researchers should also include additional criteria or include leaders from similar backgrounds or experiences. Finally, expanding this study to a larger geographical region may provide more in-depth data from a more diverse population of small business leaders.

Reflections

I am thankful to have the opportunity to complete my doctoral study on employee engagement. This journey was difficult and challenging from the beginning to the end, but I appreciate every element of this challenge. This difficult process taught me to be a better scholar and to gain a deeper understanding of employee engagement through critical research and data evaluation. This opportunity allowed me to explore employee engagement strategies that small business leaders use to engage employees. I met and interviewed three participants that added significant value to my study and provided me the opportunity to understand various leadership strategies used for employee engagement. Gaining study participants during the COVID-19 pandemic proved very challenging, but I was able to find participants to complete my study with perseverance.

My knowledge of employee engagement expanded greatly with the knowledge provided in the research study and interviews. I set aside any personal biases about leadership strategies and employee engagement and kept an open mind throughout the process. While I had limited expectations on what themes would emerge from the study, the overall understanding of employee engagement was relevant to my prior knowledge of employee engagement. The results of this study increased my appreciation and

understanding of employee engagement and what leaders must do to keep employees engaged.

Conclusion

Leaders are responsible for imparting knowledge and skills to their followers in order to achieve organizational success and meet operational goals (Mulievi & Tsuma, 2021). Employee engagement promotes employees' positive work behaviors, which in turn produces higher organizational effectiveness and productivity (Mulievi & Tsuma, 2021). Engaged employees are happier at work, take more ownership of the organization, and focus on the value they can add to the operation (da Costa & Loureiro, 2019). Engaging employees is a critical component of business operations because a business cannot function without its employees (Tate et al., 2021). Managerial behaviors are critical to achieving a high level of employee engagement, as they must gain trust and focus on the team to create policies and practices that generate the highest performance in productivity (Winasis et al., 2021). Small business leaders may develop and deploy new strategies to improve employee engagement and thereby increase their organizations' performance. Leaders creating successful strategies to engage employees can build stronger leader-employee relationships that can develop trust, loyalty, and increase the organization's open and honest communication flow. With a higher level of engagement, leaders can create higher levels of productivity that provide a competitive advantage for the organization.

I explored leadership strategies by analyzing the academic literature and the data collected from conducting semistructured interviews and reviewing company

documentation. The findings of this study may help small business leaders implement more effective leadership strategies in their organization that are practical and cost-effective solutions that encourage open and honest communication, create supportive leadership behaviors, and provide for a reward and recognition system for employees. By implementing these strategies, small business leaders may be able to improve employee engagement which can lead to increased productivity and maintain organizational success. I used the transformational leadership theory as the conceptual framework for this multiple case study. Small business leaders that use effective employee engagement strategies to provide the best work culture for their employees can create a positive environment that encourages employees to be engaged and more productive.

Small business leaders from three small businesses in the North Texas area provided information from semistructured interviews and company documents that aligned with the academic literature and conceptual framework. This study's participants also completed the member checking process. After collecting and analyzing the data, three themes emerged from the data: supportive leadership behaviors cultivated employee engagement, open and honest communication promoted employee engagement, and recognition and compensation improved employee engagement. I found specific strategies that can improve employee engagement. Small business leaders must understand the strategies that are best to implement in their businesses to maximize employee engagement. I found that employees respond best to recognition, rewards, and clear and concise communication, which are all characteristics that a transformational

leader exhibit. Leaders must constantly review, revise, and reevaluate the strategy to ensure continued success with any strategy.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Date:_____ Location:_____

Interviewee:_____ Interviewer:_____

Protocol:

- Thank each person for their time and participation in the study
- Obtain signed consent form
- Gain verbal approval for participation and recording of interview
- Collect requested company documents, policies, and procedures
- State the Purpose of the Study to the Interviewee:
  Purpose of Study: The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore leadership strategies that small business leaders use to improve employee engagement.
- Interview will be 45-60 minutes
- Interview responses will be recorded, transcribed, and notes taken during interview (look for nonverbal cues)
- All identifying information will be coded to ensure privacy and confidentiality
- All interview questions will be asked in the same order
- Let interviewee know that once the interview has been transcribed, I will contact them to participate in member checking
- Data obtained will only be used for the purpose of this study

Interview Questions:

1. What strategies have you used to engage your employees?
2. How do you communicate these strategies to employees?
3. How did the employees react to those strategies?
4. How did you evaluate the success of those strategies?
5. Which strategies were the most effective in improving employee engagement?
6. How did you implement these strategies?
7. What were the key challenges you faced when implementing strategies to improve engagement?
8. How did you address these key challenges?
9. What positive changes have you seen with improved levels of employee engagement?
10. What else could you add to this discussion about strategies to engage your employees?