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Leadership Strategies to Increase Department Store Employees' Morale

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2024

Abstract

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MS, Belhaven University, 2020

BA, Belhaven University, 2018

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Department store leaders who lack effective strategies to increase employee morale face

an organizational decrease in productivity, thus increasing absenteeism and turnover

rates, which could cost an organization billions of dollars. Grounded in the

transformational leadership theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study

was to explore leadership strategies department store managers use to increase employee

morale and improve productivity in their organizations. The participants were seven

department store leaders who minimized low employee morale. Data were collected

using semistructured interviews and a review of public company documents. Through

thematic analysis, three themes were identified: (a) effective communication, (b)

employee engagement, and (c) employee reward. A key recommendation for business

leaders is to open the lines of communication with employees through face-to-face

meetings, suggestion boxes, and weekly, monthly, and yearly performance reviews. The

implications for positive social change include the potential to increase employees'

morale and improve organizations' productivity, leading to new employment

opportunities within the community and allowing the organizational leaders and

employees to assist individuals with their time, job training, and resources.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

High morale is essential to a company's success. Higher employee morale recapitulates job satisfaction and involvement with the company, consequently generating better achievement and greater productivity (Patil et al., 2018). Maintaining a high level of work morale is essential for promoting voluntary cooperation and enhancing organizational productivity. This is because employee morale is linked to work efficiency. Happy and optimistic employees are known to possess high work morale, while discontented and frustrated employees are considered to have low work morale (Hiean et al., 2018). Low morale can be detrimental to an organization's success. Low employee morale leads to high absenteeism, turnover, and low productivity (Sixpence et al., 2022). Organizational leaders should implement strategies to ensure that their employees possess high morale.

Background of the Problem

Employees are the most beneficial resource of an organization. An employee's performance and efficiency are predicated on the employee's work morale. The work morale of employees is essential to all business operations (Pattinaik & Jena, 2020). Organizational leaders must realize the significance of employee morale as it relates to the organization's success. Improving and cultivating employee morale is a significant element that will impact an organization's success (Vaithyasubramanian et al., 2020). Leaders must comprehend the significance of ensuring that their employees possess high employee morale. High employee morale creates a better working environment and

increases employee involvement (Dağli & Akyol, 2019). Employee morale is so important that it can make or break an organization's success. (Oley et al.,2019).

Organizational leaders must implement and execute strategies regularly to positively impact their employees' morale (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021). Low morale is associated with harmful elements such as high cost, absenteeism, and a decrease in motivation and concern, and it could cause employees to express displeasure about the execution of assignments or initiatives that will impact the organization's productivity (Noor & Ampornstira, 2019). Organizations must recognize the importance of ensuring their employees do not have low morale because it can negatively affect their productivity. Low employee morale in the United States costs the economy $350 billion in lost productivity each year (Loosemore & Bridgeman, 2017). Low employee morale can harm an organization's productivity; therefore, leaders must implement successful strategies to ensure high employee morale.

Problem Statement

Low employee morale can harm an organization's productivity. Employee low morale intensifies absenteeism and inadequate quality of work and reduces productivity (Dhlewayo et al., 2021). A study on work morale in 142 countries by Gallup Business Journal reported that 70% of American employees are not performing their duties to their full potential (Nur et al., 2021). The general business problem is employees' low morale impacts their organization's productivity. The specific business problem is that some department store managers lack leadership strategies to increase employee morale to improve productivity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, pragmatic inquiry study was to explore leadership strategies that some department store managers use to increase employee morale to improve productivity. The targeted population consisted of department store managers in the Southern portion of the United States who have implemented leadership strategies to increase employee morale to improve productivity.

Population and Sampling

The targeted population for this study included seven managers from department stores in the Southern portion of the United States who have implemented leadership strategies to increase employee morale and to improve productivity. My study included using purposive sampling to identify seven participants with the knowledge and expertise to assist me in addressing my research question via a pragmatic inquiry study. The purposive sampling method is one of the standard research methods for choosing participants in a qualitative study (Renjith et al., 2021). The purpose of purposive sampling is to select knowledgeable participants of the phenomenon under investigation, which can provide in-depth and detailed data (Ames et al., 2019). If I could not obtain enough participants, I planned to employ snowball sampling, which is a construct of purposeful sampling to enlist additional participants. Snowball sampling is a chain referral sampling where participants are asked to recommend other individuals appropriate for the study (Kennedy-Shaffer et al., 2021). When researchers employ snowball sampling, the primary participants are requested to recommend alternative participants for the study. Securing a sampling contingency plan is pivotal to effectively

collecting data (Ames et al., 2019). I used email to contact individuals who met the eligibility criteria to gain access to the participants. The data sources chosen for this study included one-on-one interviews using a semistructured interview technique with department store managers and a review of public information documented on the organization's general business website, such as their mission and hiring and training practices.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods are the three common methodological choices for research. Qualitative research methods appertain to approaches of exploration that depend on nonstatistical and nonnumerical methods of data collection, analysis, and evidence generation (Bhangu et al., 2023). The qualitative methodology was suitable for this research because the exploration of nonstatistical and nonnumerical methods was used to collect data from department store managers who used leadership strategies to increase employee morale. The quantitative research method examines the relationships between variables by determining hypotheses and depicting conclusions based on statistical procedures (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). Mixed methods research is commonly described as combining qualitative and quantitative data (Schoonenboom, 2023). The quantitative and mixed method research methodologies were not appropriate for this study because I used a nonstatistical and nonnumerical method to explore rich data from the research participants and did not examine the relationship between variables.

I considered three research designs that one could use for a qualitative study on leadership strategies to increase department store employees' morale: pragmatic inquiry, ethnography, and phenomenology. Researchers must find a design that best fits their research inquiry. I selected a pragmatic inquiry research design for this study. The pragmatic inquiry approach allows researchers to identify and understand the reasons for a phenomenon through interviews, observations, and field notes rich with information from interview participants' views and thoughts while in their natural environment (Taguchi, 2018). The pragmatic inquiry was appropriate for this study because it assisted me in exploring leadership strategies that department store managers use to increase employees' morale to improve productivity using interviews, publicly available material from organizations' public websites, and field notes. Researchers use ethnographic design to examine cultural or social interchanges (Pernille et al., 2020). I did not consider examining cultural or social interactions; thus, the ethnographic design was inappropriate for this study. The phenomenology research design is used to evaluate an individual's lived experience and to explore the interpretation of the encounter (Singh & Strobel, 2023). The phenomenological research design was inappropriate for this study because my aim was not to explore the participants' lived experiences of an encounter.

Research Question

What leadership strategies do department store managers use to increase employee morale to improve productivity?

Interview Questions

1. What effective leadership strategies have you used to increase employee morale?

2. What strategies have you utilized to increase employee morale to improve productivity?

3. How do you assess the effectiveness of the strategies for increasing employee morale to improve productivity?

4. What difficulties did you encounter when executing strategies to increase morale?

5. How did you address the difficulties you encountered executing the strategies?

6. What additional information would you like to share concerning leadership strategies to increase employee morale?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that grounded this study included the transformational leadership theory. The transformational leadership theory was introduced by Burns (1978). Bass (1985) later extended the transformational leadership theory. The transformational leadership theory is centered on building followers and endowing aspects that drive them to perform at outstanding organizational levels (White, 2022). The transformational leadership theory provided a lens through which effective leadership strategies could be explored to increase employee morale. The transformational leadership theory is a leadership style based on an extent relationship between leaders and their followers. The transformational leadership theory can lead to

more extraordinary phenomena, such as changed behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs, thus adhering to organizational objectives (Barbinta & Muresan, 2017). Transformational leaders build relationships with their followers by motivating them to modify their attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs, which can lead them to perform at exceptional levels (Kesari & Verma, 2018). The transformational leadership theory consists of a relational leadership style with four key components that can be used as strategies to increase employee morale.

Idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration are the four critical components of the transformational leadership theory (Zhao et al., 2021). Idealized influence involves a leader's capabilities to build trustworthiness and faithfulness among their followers (Nuel et al., 2021). Inspirational motivation involves the capabilities of a leader to provide the organization's vision to its followers and inspires them to work towards that endeavor (Edirisooriya, 2020). Intellectual stimulation involves leaders stimulating their followers to take risks and perform their duties at innovative levels (Khan et al., 2022). The final component, individualized consideration, consists of the leader being very attentive to the personal needs of their followers (Sahu et al., 2018). The transformational leadership theory applies to this study because the four critical components of this conceptual framework, individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence, can be used as strategies for leaders to increase employees' morale. Transformational leadership positively affects employees' working morale (Sajjad, 2022).

The four key components of transformational leadership should be used as strategies to increase employee morale potentially, thus improving productivity.

Transformational leadership consists of enterprising leaders who serve as change agents, increase followers' awareness by transforming their corporate interests, and aid them in attaining unique goals (Busari et al., 2019). Transformational leaders are individuals who promote change and motivate and inspire their subordinates by exemplifying what exceptional leadership is all about (Asbari, 2020). Leaders who use the key transformational leadership components display outstanding leadership skills. Transformational leaders are role models because they can inspire their followers with charismatic personalities or remarkable individual attributes (Mbindyo et al., 2021). The transformational leadership theory comprises noteworthy leadership attributes and four key components (Al- Husseini & Elbeltagi, 2018). The transformational leadership theory could provide positive results when used to increase employee morale and improve productivity.

Operational Definitions

Employee job satisfaction: Employee job satisfaction is the relationship between the individual with the work and the environment (Razak et al., 2018).

Employee morale: Employee morale is defined as employees' satisfaction and overall commitment during their relationship with an enterprise (Obeng et al., 2021).

High morale: High morale means that an employee is satisfied with their job, exerts themselves, is innovative, employs initiative, is committed to the organization, and

focuses on attaining organizational goals rather than individual goals (Hillary & Balu, 2018).

Job involvement: Job involvement is regarded as delighting in work, job assessment, and work focus (Li et al., 2018).

Job morale: Job morale is the overall performance, a supernatural force, and not being independently measured by the group but being realized from the group members' behavioral performance (Warmiling & Souza, 2018).

Low morale: Low morale can be defined as the degree to which an employee harbors negative feelings about their workplace or dissatisfaction with aspects of the work or workplace (Kendrick, 2019).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are vital issues, ideas, or positions from the beginning of the study design to the final report that are taken for granted and viewed as feasible and commonly accepted (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). There are three assumptions associated with this study. The first assumption for this study was that all participants would answer the interview questions honestly. The second assumption was that the department store managers would be appropriate participants for exploring organizational leadership strategies. The third assumption was that if participants volunteered to participate, I assumed that I would be able to coordinate a time for an interview.

Limitations

Study limitations embody weaknesses within a research design that might impact the outcomes and conclusions of the study (Ross & Zaidi, 2019). There are two limitations associated with this study. The first limitation was that the interviewed participants only consisted of department store leadership team members. The second limitation of this study was that it was limited to a qualitative pragmatic inquiry, which will be limited to qualitative data compared to other methods.

Delimitations

Delimitations of a study are components that emanate from the limitations in the scope of the study, delineating the boundaries (Coker, 2022). This study has three delimitations. The first delimitation was that the study participants included seven department store managers. The second delimitation of the study was that it only included the department store industry, and the third delimitation was the geographical location in the southern portion of the United States.

Significance of the Study

The study may be of value to businesses because the results could provide strategies for managers to increase employee morale, thus improving their productivity. Boosting employee morale can create a thriving and productive work culture. Employers and employees benefit from increased and cultivated work morale, which makes the organization robustness, productivity, and retentiveness of staff members (Weyant et al., 2021). An increase in an organization's employees' morale can generate robustness,

retain staff members, and improve productivity, thus giving the organization a competitive advantage.

The implications for positive social change include the potential to increase employee morale, which could improve productivity. When an employee's morale increases, it provides opportunities for higher income growth and productivity within the organization (Minor et al., 2014). Therefore, improving productivity could lead to new employment opportunities within the community, allowing the organizational leaders and employees to assist individuals with their time, job training, and resources.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

In this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study, the goal was to explore leadership strategies that department store managers use to increase employee morale to improve productivity. Conducting this professional and academic literature review in my study demonstrated knowledge about a specific field of study, such as leadership strategies to increase employee morale. In a literature review, researchers gather extensive information concerning the relevant topic, analyze the critical elements from reputable sources, and generate a report on what is known about the research (Odonnell, 2023). This literature review began with an exhaustive critical analysis and synthesis of the conceptual framework used for this study: the transformational leadership theory. I organized this review by using themes. After discussing the conceptual framework of transformational leadership theory, the following themes are discussed: criticism of the transformational leadership theory and the four key components, additional leadership theories, such as great man theory, trait theory, behavioral theory, contingency theory,

transactional leadership theory, laissez-faire leadership theory, and autocratic leadership theory. I then discuss leadership behaviors, employee morale, employee morale and productivity, job satisfaction, flexibility, team player, employee retention, compensation, and employee recognition.

The literature review sources for this study included searching articles, journals, and dissertations by entering keywords using Walden University Library in the following databases: ProQuest Dissertations, Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, ERIC, and Science Direct. Additionally, Google Scholar was used to execute other relevant searches. The following keywords were used to find pertinent literature such as *job involvement, job satisfaction, employee morale, employee motivation, individualized consideration, high morale, low morale, increase morale, workplace achievement, leadership, transformational leadership theory, transactional leadership, team building, workplace conflict, workplace culture, absenteeism, workplace environment, leadership style, team player, inspirational motivation, leadership theories,* and *morale improvement.*

The literature I reviewed included 123 references, of which 85% were from peer-reviewed sources, and 85% were published within five years of my expected graduation. The total number of references in the literature review is 101, published between 2018 and 2023, of which 85% were from peer-reviewed sources, and 85% were published within 5 years of my expected graduation (see Table 1).

Table 1

Literature Review Content

Reference type	Total	< 5 years	> 5 years	% Total
Peer-reviewed journals	104	101	3	85%
Nonpeer-reviewed journals	19	3	16	15%
Total	123	104	19	100%

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership is a theory universally explored by several researchers. The transformational leadership theory is one of the oldest intellectual and professional approaches to comprehending and interpreting leadership (Saad, 2021). Burns (1978) characterized it as a procedure appertaining to the intrinsic affiliation and values in which a leader influences others and conforms their behavior to meet challenges, enabling them to participate in the organizational change process (Tengi et al., 2017). Within the transformational leadership theory, it is assumed that followers transform through experience with specific leaders, and 40-years after Burns introduced this concept, his ideas still impact how individuals think about and apply this leadership theory (Siangcholyoo et al., 2020). It was an essential and much-needed theory developed by Burns years ago and is still relevant today. The transformational leadership theory comprises characteristics leaders can use to respond effectively to all organizational issues; therefore, it should be used regularly.

Transformational leadership characteristics exemplify change and integrity and uphold moral standards. Tepper et al. (2018) indicated an increased need for transformational leadership because of an upsurge in demanding task stressors, higher unpredictability, and the multiplied intensity of a person's job assignment. Transformational leaders are people who grasp high ethical standard, integrity, compliance, and good personal demeanor (esteemed as an idealized influence), expresses an appealing vision for the future time (admirable as inspirational motivation), challenge the status quo, and inspire creative thinking (esteemed as intellectual stimulation), and consider individual follower's aspiration, abilities, and needs (admirable as individualized consideration; Ohunaken et al., 2019). Transformational leaders have a positive effect on their followers. Transformational leaders can impel followers to achieve more than expected (Alqatawenh, 2018). The four main characteristics of the transformational leadership theory compel leaders to have strong moral values, be positive role models, and inspire their followers to not only do what is expected but much more beyond that. A demonstration of the transformational leadership theory should be displayed within all organizations.

Researchers believe that leaders who demonstrate these primary behaviors of the transformational leadership theory, namely (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration) can transform followers' diverse motivations, and assist in leading them to perform to a great degree, accordingly, transcending their confidence (Al-Harthy & Yusof, 2016). Transformational leaders encourage their followers to be confident, transform, and innovative. Curtis (2018)

posited that the transformational leadership style is the most diligent form. Transformational leaders inspire their followers because they lead by example. Transformational leaders are driven and exemplify optimism. One of the core attributes of transformational leaders is that they value their subordinates for their accomplishments and encourage them to take advantage of their potential (Hai et al., 2022). Transformational leaders are motivators who inspire others and assist their followers in achieving soaring levels. Organizations that motivate and inspire their employees should incorporate a transformational leadership style.

Idealized Influence

Leaders with idealized influence/charisma behaviors exhibit conduct that evokes followers' respect, appreciation, and credence (Puni et al., 2018). Positively influencing one's followers is an essential part of leadership. There are specific attributes coupled with leaders who adopt the transformational style (Khan et al., 2022). Leaders who embrace transformational leadership are mentors, change agents, inspiring, and stimulating. Being mentors, change agents, and inspiring and stimulating others is what idealized influence is all about. In this regard, the leader resorts to specific positive actions concerning followers through idealized influence, which yields higher trust and more outstanding performance (Avolio & Bass, 1991). Idealized influence is a behavior that inspires followers to respect and trust their leaders and perform their organizational duties well. Idealized influence expresses charisma, self-confidence, values, and trust and can positively impact how transformational leaders operate.

Transformational leaders who possess idealized influence are robust role models for their employees (Northouse 2018; Wright & Pandey 2010). Employees need a leader to whom they can look up. Employees need a leader who will talk and walk the walk. Employees need leaders that they can genuinely trust. Employees trust transformational leaders who possess idealized influence behaviors and believe they can be relied upon to do what is appropriate (Northouse 2018). It is so vital that followers can trust their leaders. When followers trust their leaders, they are more inclined to do whatever they are asked to do. The idealized influence element of transformational leadership entails a leader serving as a role model for their followers by displaying honorable and highly ethical principles (Rehman et al., 2017). Idealized influence is a vital part of the transformational leadership style and should be used as a model to ensure that leaders lead by example.

Idealized influence calls for inclined leaders to guide others by their illustration (Afaneh & Al-Alhoub, 2022). Employees need leaders who lead by example and not those who ask their employees to do things they are unwilling to do themselves. Accordingly, employees are encouraged to imitate their leader's attitudes, responsibilities, and ethical standards to achieve better growth. Transformational leaders lead by example, encouraging their followers to imitate them. The transformational leaders' styles are not like other perspectives; transformational leaders must serve as arbitrators, modify initiators, and expediters (Afaneh & Al-Alhoub, 2022). Transformational leaders are not average; they never settle for the existing conditions within an organization and lead by example. Idealized influence emphasizes role model

behaviors such as arbitrators, modifying initiators, and expediters. These leadership behaviors are influential and should be imitated by their followers.

Inspirational Motivation

Motivating employees successfully is a part of effective leadership (Al Khajeh, 2018). Inspirational motivation is the ability of a leader to convey a riveting vision of an improved future for an organization so that the followers can deviate from self-interests to the organization's collective interests (Edirisooriya, 2020). Leaders who use inspirational motivation communicate to their employees what is expected of them and encourage them to focus on the goals and interests of the organization. Inspirational motivation is also when a leader's behavior inspires and galvanizes followers to gain goals that may have previously seemed insurmountable by raising followers' expectations and conveying confidence that followers can achieve ambitious goals (Wu et al., 2010). Therefore, leaders who exhibit inspirational motivation behaviors can inspire their followers to attain organizational goals and accomplish more than they ever imagined they could. Leaders who show motivation and optimism toward their employees' achievement, goals, values, and vision inspire them, thus increasing the organization's productivity and the employee's morale (Gilbert et al., 2017). Inspirational motivation requires that leaders motivate their followers to be organizationally centered, thus striving to meet the company's attempted goals, increasing productivity and employee morale. Leaders use inspirational motivation to encourage, motivate, and inspire their followers to be optimistic about achieving goals (individually & collectively). These leadership

behaviors can increase employee morale and productivity and thus needs to be exhibited by all organizational leaders.

Inspirational motivation assists leaders in exerting exact dominion over the desired corporate culture. With that dominion, they are knowledgeable that leadership approaches are a more remarkable indicator of how individuals act, feel, and perform at their place of employment (Afaneh & Al-Alhoub, 2022). How leaders approach their followers determines how they behave and perform their duties. Inspirational motivation involves stimulating employees to accomplish much more than assumed to achieve organizational goals but their individual goals as well as organizational and organizational goals (Shafi et al., 2020). Leaders use inspirational motivation to inspire their followers to have high expectations and to be visionaries. Inspirational motivation is used when leaders devise a vision that impacts their followers, leading them to play an integral part within the organization (Alqatawenh, 2018). All leaders should desire that their employees play a pivotal role within their organizations; inspirational motivation is a critical part of transformational leadership and must be used to motivate, inspire, and stimulate employees to perform exceptionally.

Intellectual Stimulation

Through intellectual stimulation, leaders can create an environment for questioning assumptions and disparate perspectives, supporting new ways of thinking, and insinuating new ways of seeing problems (Sánchez-Cardona et al., 2018). Leaders who exhibit intellectual stimulation teach their followers to be creative and innovative. Intellectual stimulation involves individuals seeing situations from different viewpoints.

Through intellectual stimulation, leaders also constantly advocate for team members to think and achieve in a new fashion by challenging their individual beliefs and supporting new and creative ways of operating (Sánchez-Cardona et al., 2018). Intellectual stimulation is displayed when leaders seek different viewpoints distinct from others. Leaders who use intellectual stimulation encourage their staff to be creative, use logic, apply intelligence, and see different perspectives to achieve any task (Pasha et al., 2017). Leaders who use intellectual stimulation encourage their followers to be innovative and do things differently when striving to resolve workplace issues.

Leaders use intellectual stimulation behavior to encourage and teach their employees to embark upon present and future problems in diverse ways and reproachfully re-examine beliefs as they train their followers (Afaneh & Ali Al-Alhoub, 2022). Leaders who use intellectual stimulation want their followers to be not only creative but clever as well. In this aspect, a particular way of engaging with employees is used, during which transformational leaders direct the attempts and proficiencies of their employees to be creative and innovative by increasing their knowledge of the degree of challenges and encouraging them to resolve problems in different, more polished ways rather than depending on past methods and practices (Afaneh & Al-Alhoub, 2022). Intellectual stimulation behaviors exemplify creativity, innovativeness, cleverness, and alternative methods for viewing and solving problems. The intellectual stimulation characteristic of transformational leadership leads employees to handle issues in innovative and new ways instead of resorting to previous techniques, boosting their awareness of challenges. All organizational leaders should use intellectual stimulation.

Individual Consideration

Individual consideration alludes to a pleasant environment in which the leader considers the followers' regards to improving their motivation (Khalili, 2017). Employees feel a sense of belonging when a leader exhibits individual consideration behavior. As specified by the researchers, personal consideration increases followers' sense of belonging and achievement (Li et al., 2019). Using individualized care exemplifies the leader's support and acceptance of the divergences among their followers within the organization. Individualized consideration acknowledges individual differences, such as strengths, weaknesses, likes, and dislikes (Kirkbride, 2006). A leader who uses individual consideration conveys to subordinates that they respect them and their differences. Individual consideration is exemplified when leaders discover their work group's unique needs, ambitions, and skills on a personal level and should be used to make them feel like they matter.

Individualized consideration is when leaders focus on employees' personal growth, including training and mentoring, admitting the existence of employees' diverse needs, skills, and ambitions, and assisting in establishing their strengths (Bass & Riggio, 2006). When leaders use individualized concern, they build a connection with their employees and demonstrate their general concern for them. Leaders who employ individualized consideration create an environment that treasures and honors followers and inspires them to take risks (Berraires & El Abidine, 2019). Leaders must make a connection with their followers. When leaders connect with their employees, they feel supported by them. When leaders use individualized consideration, it creates a sense of

top-level organizational support for employees (Suifan et al., 2018). Individualized

consideration allows leaders to connect with their employees, focus on their growth, help

establish their strengths, and display their continued support. Individualized consideration

is necessary to inspire followers and should be integrated into leadership training for all

organizations.

Criticism of Transformational Leadership

Although the transformational leadership theory is a theory that several

researchers universally explore, others are critical of this theory. Mohammed et al. (2020)

posited that the use of this theory by leaders could lead to burnout among their employees

and could lead to exhaustion and stress. Because transformational leaders use a

charismatic method, it can mislead their followers and make it seem like they are abusing

their power (Bass, 1985). Lee (2014) posited that some transformational leaders use their

emotional interests to benefit their followers negatively. A former well-known cult leader

is a perfect example of a transformational leader who abused his power and used his

passionate interest to satisfy his followers negatively. He was self-involved, power-

driven, and exploitatory with corrupted moral values (Cote, 2017). Depending on the

leader's motivation, transformational leaders may not always uplift followers to a high

place but may lead them by adverse and amoral instruction (Parry & Proctor-Thomson,

2002). While some authors share criticisms of transformational leadership theory, as

noted earlier in this study, there are far more who share their support of this leadership

theory.

Additional Theories

Leadership theories have been widely researched throughout history by researchers, scholars, and authors (Ruzgar, 2019). Organizational leaders must conduct leadership theory analysis as well. Corporate leaders need appropriate leadership theories to lead their employees successfully. The transformational leadership theory is the chosen conceptual framework for this study; thus, it has already been discussed, but other leadership theories will be discussed here. The other leadership theories that will be addressed are the great man theory, the Trait theory, the Behavioral theory, the Contingency theory, and the Transactional theory. All these theories, along with the transformational leadership theory, are the six theories that employ successful leadership skills (Kumar & Khiljee, 2016). Although these leadership theories may offer some successful leadership skills, transformational leadership skills will be the best ground for this study. The Great Man Theory is deemed the first result of this leadership theory research (Ruzgar, 2019).

Great Man Theory

The great man theory implies that great leaders exist from birth and are not made. Carlyle founded the great man theory. Carlyle's search for guidance, inspiration, encouragement, and a way to prevent adverse outcomes led to the development of the great man theory (Bossche,1991). In leadership debate, the Great Man theory is authentication that certain people, particularly men, are gifts from God placed on earth to produce the encouragement needed to inspire human existence, which is linked initially with Carlyle (Spector, 2016). In the spring of 1840, Carlyle presented a sequence of six

public lectures on the role played by heroes in shaping the arc of history and the subsequent year. Those lectures were combined into a single volume entitled *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, and the great man theory was born (Spector, 2016). The information in the single volume by Carlyle caused controversy because of the biased comments mentioned. The great man theory was beneficial for Carlyle but may not prove helpful for others.

The volume *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* angers the present-day mind (Spector, 2016). Carlyle's thoughts were offensive to a few people, especially women; he concluded that men could only be part of the great man theory. He exhibited an apparent gender bias in his conceptualization, an interpretation of his reading of history as unraveling through the results of dominant males mingled with the commonplace Victorian certitude that leadership was irrevocably masculine (Grint, 2011). Aside from the biased thoughts of Carlyle, The great man theory characterizes leaders as heroic and allegorical (Ruzgar, 2019). The great man theory describes leaders as individuals who display uniqueness. The great man theory has been defined as one that is comprised of men blessed to be born with specific characteristics that make them influential. The great man theory began to fade away and soon became the trait theory.

Trait Theory

The inquiry into the great man theory veered into examining traits, leading to the trait theory in the mid-1900s. (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). The trait theory is about the personalities that leaders possess. The trait approach emerged as a gradual advancement from the great man theory, where the focus switched from known prominent leaders to

having leadership traits (King, 1990; Yukl, 2013). Trait theory characteristics can be vital

to an organization's success. Trait theory can be delineated as when leaders have

acquired observable models of behavior, physical, personality, feelings, and social skills

that are unteachable and that this person is already appropriate to be a leader (Kumar &

Khiljee, 2016; Morris et al., 2017). Simply put, it is believed that people who possess trait

theories were born with them and are automatically suited to be leaders. Trait theories

can benefit organizations if leaders have the appropriate traits that can lead to a firm's

success.

Consequently, the trait theory is comparable in some ways to the great man

theory; it concludes that people inherit specific qualities or traits that make them more

appropriate to be leaders (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). It is assumed that these leaders

have inheritable traits. The early theorists proposed that these natural leaders were not

only enriched with specific physical traits and personality attributes but that these traits

differentiated them from the non-leaders (Nawaz & Khan, 2016). These theorists

suggested that individuals with certain physical traits and characteristics distinguished

them as leaders, and those without them were the non-leaders. However, the trait theory

was soon replaced with other leadership theories. The trait theory disappeared, and

behavioral and contingency leadership theories materialized (Deshwal et al., 2020). The

behavioral approach replaced the trait theory, which describes what leadership entails. A

leader's behavior is pivotal to an organization's success. The organization must select

leaders with the right behaviors to ensure company success.

Behavioral Theory

In the 1960s, the focus of leadership theory changed from trait theory to behavioral theory, which delineates what leaders do (Kumar & Khiljee, 2016). What a leader does makes an impact on the entire organization. After discontinuing the trait approach, leadership scholars began to identify behaviors that would separate influential leaders from ineffective ones (Hernandez, 2011). Leaders' behaviors are a significant part of an organization's success. Behavioral theory is not predicated on inheritable tendencies but that specific surroundings teach behaviors. Under inference-based procedures, people differentiate leaders from others depending on the leader's behavior rather than anticipated traits (Offermann & Coats, 2018). If an individual interacts in a manner conducive to a leader, they are considered a leader. Leaders are distinguished from non-leaders by their behaviors. Leaders should exhibit behaviors that display what leaders do and should do. Followers will respect leaders who demonstrate the appropriate leadership behaviors; it will benefit leaders to exhibit these behaviors when conducting business endeavors.

Contingency Theory

The contingency leadership theory, called situational leadership theory, highlights the interrelationships between leadership, subordinates, and employment situations (Lianhua et al., 2020). The contingency theory is contingent upon the conditions when organizational changes need to be made. Influential leaders create diverse ways of resolving situations with their followers based on the problem and the needs and characteristics of their followers. For example, when leaders use the contingency theory,

they create unique ways of doing business with their followers' contingent upon these conditions, necessities, and characteristics (Chatterjee et al., 2018). When it comes to leadership, no one-size-fits-all approach can be utilized. In contingency theory, leaders use features that best fit whatever the present situation may be concerning. The contingency theory is based on conditions and problems. The contingency theory proposes that no leadership style is clear-cut as a stand-alone as the leadership style used is conditioned upon elements like the quality, circumstance of the followers, or several other variables (Nawaz & Khan, 2016). Leaders respond according to whatever may be happening at that time. This theory does not submit to any specific leadership style and responds according to the situation. The contingency theory could be helpful to and for organizations dependent upon the case.

Transactional Leadership Theory

The transactional leadership theory implies that managers reward employees for their work, whether successfully or unsuccessfully completed. Transactional leadership uses a reward and punishment method, which means condition remuneration is used to take better performance from followers (Deshwal et al., 2020). In this case, leaders turn to rewards and punishment to encourage their employees to obtain organizational goals. Those employees who perform nicely are rewarded, and those who serve below standard or unsatisfactorily are punished appropriately (Deshwal et al., 2020). Transactional behaviors consist of laissez-faire (hands of leadership), looking at the financial and operational result of any business enterprise (addressing predicaments created by incompetence, negligence, or dereliction), and contingent rewards (finding a satisfactory

compromise) (Barbuto et al., 2014). The transactional leadership theory involves transactions between leaders and their followers. It can be advantageous for employees who complete their tasks, but it can disadvantage unsuccessful employees when performing their duties. The transactional leadership theory can be used to benefit employees who are excelling at their jobs and should be used to encourage employees to continue to perform well. Therefore, transactional leaders support interchanging benefits for employee performance (Abdelmegeed, 2023). Transactional leadership is different from transformational leadership. Transformational leaders are deemed unique, and their charismatic characteristics lead their subordinates to exceed beyond projected anticipation (Peesker et al., 2019). The transformational leadership theory being considered unique does not mean the transactional leadership theory is not a good leadership style.

Conversely, the transformational leadership style and the transactional leadership both display multifaceted attributes; intrinsically, the transformational leadership theory includes relationship-centered demeanors, from which leaders concentrate on the development, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration of followers by accentuating long-duration vision and shared values (Howell & Avolio, 1993). The transformational leader is more focused on the long-term goals of an organization being met by their followers collectively. A primary premise of Bass's 1985 theory is that transformational leadership goes beyond interchanging persuasions for desired achievement by developing, intellectually stimulating, and inspiring followers to rise above their self-interest for a higher collaborative purpose, mission, or vision (Howell &

Avolio, 1993). The transactional theory may work well for employees who only work to get rewards. Still, transformational leadership is an entity that provides employees with opportunities to gain experience as individuals and team members. The transformational leadership style has a positive effect on employee morale. Ratnasari and Sutjahjo (2017) argued that the better the transformational leadership of a leader, the elevated the employee morale, and congenially, the worse the transformational leadership of a leader, the lesser the morale of his employees; so, with that, a leader must be able to boost employee morale with a transformational leadership style to fulfill the company's or organization's goals effectively and efficiently.

Laissez-faire Leadership

Laissez-faire leaders are individuals who encourage their followers to work independently. Compared to the effective leadership behaviors of transformational leaders, laissez-faire leadership is an unreactive and inadequate way to lead (Breevaart & Zacher, 2019). Laissez-faire leaders are individuals who avert their leadership responsibilities and are absent when their followers need them. Laissez-faire leaders are characterized as non-participators, display alienation, are missing when needed, and discount achievements and obstacles (Gemeda & Lee, 2020). Encouraging one's followers to work independently is not a bad thing, but being an absent and nonparticipating leader is. Leaders should not avert their responsibilities to their followers, but it is okay for them to delegate some of their duties to them. Laissez-faire leaders delegate responsibilities to followers (Iqbal et al., 2021). However, they also alienate themselves from their followers, and this behavior could lead to low

productivity. Some researchers contend that the laissez-faire leadership style leads to low

productivity among team members (Anbazhagan & Kotur, 2014).

Nevertheless, this leadership style seems appropriate for employees with self-

restraint and immense responsibility. Still, by contrast, this style will be challenging to

fulfill leadership goals with employees having a low sensibility of discipline (Thanh &

Quang, 2022). A laissez-faire leadership style depends significantly on employees'

ability; their work performance will be poor if they lack knowledge and skills. This

leadership style will not be appropriate if high performance is the primary goal (Thanh &

Quang, 2022). A leadership style that could lead to low productivity would not be wise

for organizational leaders. Even though some followers of laissez-faire leaders agree with

the style, it causes severe challenges for others. It is not the right leadership style to

obtain high achievement levels and improve productivity. I focus on increasing employee

morale to improve productivity; therefore, Laissez-faire leadership is not an appropriate

theory for my conceptual framework.

Autocratic Leadership Theory

The autocratic leadership theory was first introduced by Lewin (1935). The

autocratic leadership style involves the leader being the only determiner of what is

implemented: their central contact with their followers ensues when they offer them

directives (Dolly & Nonyelum, 2018). An autocratic leader is not creative or innovative.

They convey to their subordinates what duties they desire to be done and how they want

them to do them without any input from their associates (Dolly & Nonvelum, 2018). This

type of leadership behavior can lead to dissatisfied employees, which can cause

employees to become frustrated and leave organizations. Individuals either get disgusted and go or develop malice because no creativity and innovation are used (Dolly & Nonvelum, 2018). The autocratic leadership style involves leaders having absolute power over all decisions that must be made within the organization. They are not innovative or creative, thus leaving employees feeling dissatisfied or eventually quitting their jobs. Job satisfaction and retaining employees should be a top priority for leaders, but autocratic leaders exercise absolute control over everyone and do not consider their employees' thoughts, feelings, and needs. The autocratic leadership style is causing more harm than good to and for employees and needs to be deemed obsolete.

Janse (2018) argued that autocratic leadership is an old-fashioned form of management that, notably in recent decades, is sure to create a lot of opposition among followers. The autocratic leader's focus is on obtaining results. The authoritarian leader directs their attention to results and duties instead of the employees who make the results achievable (Dolly & Nonvelum, 2018). Employees like to be recognized for their work and included in organizational decisions. As a result of authoritarian leaders determining everything and administering it in their means of operating, they fail to allow the employees to use or include their opinions and expertise concerning the tasks that must be performed. In such a manner, the innovative ability of the employee is not promoted or recognized, thus can be detrimental to the employees and the organization. Innovativeness stimulates growth and creativity within an organization and ensures increased productivity (Janse, 2018). Because autocratic leaders are not creative or innovative, organizational productivity could be decreased. Autocratic leaders are only

focused on results, have total control, and do not allow their followers to offer any input within the organization, causing them and the organization great detriment. This leadership style has negative connotations for everyone involved and should not be used within organizations.

However, some positive connotations are also associated with the autocratic leadership style. This leadership style can be remarkably effective when the leader possesses extreme emotional intelligence, displays effectiveness during stressful intervals, and when decisions must be resolved expeditiously (Abdullahi et al., 2020). The autocratic leadership style can be advantageous in those aspects. Regardless of the type of industry, autocracy is critical to maintaining deadlines and responsibilities (Costa et al., 2023). Effective leadership should encompass more than meeting deadlines and commitments and retaining absolute power over all subordinates. One of the primary attributes of an autocratic leader is being very controlling, not giving any thought to their followers' opinions, and being very forceful in terms of work instruction (Dyczkowska & Dyczkowski, 2018; Peker et al., 2018). Their lack of creativity, innovativeness, and communication restrictions impact employees' satisfaction and lead to decreased motivational behaviors (Beerbohm, 2015). Therefore, this leadership style is not a good option for a conceptual framework for my research.

Leadership Behaviors

The behaviors of leaders are of the most significant essence as they relate to inspiring their followers. All leaders should endeavor to inspire their followers. Leadership behavior significantly impacts employee performance and well-being

(Inceoglu et al., 2018). Most employees pay close attention to the way their leaders behave. Leadership influences employees' happiness, as ample empirical evidence has shown in recent decades (Montano et al., 2017). How a leader influences their employees should be positive. Leadership roles can be incredibly challenging, but leaders must still perform in a manner that will affect their employees effectively. The tasks and behaviors required for effective leadership are inherently complex and demanding (Byrne et al., 2014). Being an effective leader can be daunting, but it can also be rewarding as a leader's good behaviors motivate followers to work well with others. Leaders' behaviors must be conducive to positively affecting their employees and should be implicated daily.

Good leadership behaviors stimulate the organizations' motivation, thus improving morale, increasing productivity, and promoting teamwork with fellow employees (Havold & Havold, 2019). Leadership behaviors affect their employees' morale; therefore, they should always behave in ways that inspire their followers. Leaders must influence specific tasks, goals, broad strategies, employee commitment and compliance, and a thriving organizational culture (Yukl, 2000). Leaders are not just automatically successful; they must possess the attributes and vitality and obtain a support system to be effective. Consequently, leaders require an array of tools (e.g., personal characteristics, energies, and various supports) or, in other words, enough resources to be successful (Byrne et al., 2014). Leaders are responsible for their employee's well-being and should act accordingly.

This becomes evident when considering both positive and negative forms of leadership, namely transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006) and abusive

supervision (Tepper, 2007). Every leader is not a good leader. Some leaders exhibit poor leadership skills. Leaders engage in a variety of behaviors, ranging from ones that are routine and task-oriented to those that are relational and change-oriented (Rosen et al., 2019). The behaviors that leaders portray are crucial as their behaviors impact their employees. A leader who displays exemplary leadership qualities is needed within all organizations. All organizations aspire to be successful; thus, outstanding leaders are necessary. Great leaders must be chosen to lead organizations to successful business practices because poor leadership can harm an employee's morale.

Poor leadership contributes to the low morale of employees (Schuler, 2004). Poor leadership traits can lead to low employee morale, affecting every part of an organization, especially productivity. Employee morale is a vital component of organizational operations. Robbins (2003) stressed that change and poor leadership are the main reasons for the low morale of employees. A leader's behavior should not be a cause of low employee morale. The negative factors that cause low employee morale include leadership not acting or serving as a role model, little accountability, and ignoring succession plans; organizational culture also affects employee morale (Stevens, 2009). Leadership is a significant part of corporate success, which includes inspiring employees, being their role models, and helping them have high employee morale. Leaders must exhibit good leadership skills to increase employees' morale and enhance an organization's culture.

The leader inspires employees and gives instructions and guidance to lead them to achieve the desired goals and outcomes; he initiates and motivates employees to strive

hard to accomplish the goal (Noor, 2019). The leaders of an organization cannot be lazy individuals; everyone depends on them to make the appropriate choices and behave appropriately. The leaders of an organization play a critical part in building an organizational culture of innovation, and comprehending leadership behavior is vital for the organizations and the stakeholders (Thuy et al., 2022). Leaders are supposed to be effective motivators. Motivation continues to be one of the significant challenges that corporations encounter today, particularly since it must be combined with the efficiency and effectiveness of the firm (Mehmet & Chowdhury, 2020). Leaders who perform below the firm's expectations find it challenging to motivate others, and it can be detrimental to the firm. Firms must hire leaders who are not lazy and who can motivate their followers or any of the stakeholders involved. Leaders should always be diligent, hardworking, and able to inspire their followers.

Furthermore, the best leader has a good and professional personality, and their role impacts the employees' work behavior (Mugira, 2022). No leader is perfect, but their character should always exemplify professionalism. To continue work performance and productivity, the company must establish a comfortable work environment and atmosphere, which is the obligation of a leader (Azizaha et al., 2020). If the work environment is uncomfortable, it can prove detrimental to the employees and the entire organization. Leaders' behaviors will impact every organizational component and affect employee morale. Leadership behavior is the first component that impacts employee morale (Larasati & Martono, 2020). Leadership behavior is critical and should not be

taken lightly. Organizations must select the right leaders to lead their organizations to ensure success.

Employee Morale

The morale of employees is a critical component within all organizations. Whether viewed from an individual or group perspective, employee morale is the spirit and strength of organizational members' enthusiasm, vitality, and cheerful imperativeness to achieve specific common goals (Akar, 2018). Employee morale should not be taken lightly. Employee morale is the main factor of productivity, as contented employees are sure to perform highly (Pattnaik & Jena, 2021). Employee morale may vary in its degree of presence, ranging from extremely high to exceptionally low. High morale is evident from the employee's positive feelings, such as enthusiasm and willingness to cooperate. Similarly, low morale portrays employees' negative feelings, such as dissatisfaction, discouragement, and dislike for the job, resulting in increased employee attrition (Kanimozhi & Vinothkumar, 2018). All leaders should endeavor to ensure that their employees have high employee morale.

Employees who are content with their jobs and exhibit an optimistic demeanor at work are said to have favorable or high employee morale (Nur et al., 2021). High employee morale is displayed when employees exemplify positive attributes. Exemplification of high employee morale usually consists of amenable cooperation, directorial and leadership allegiance, corrective compliance, compliance to high degrees of initiative and job concern proportionately, and organizational dignity (Bhasin, 2018). High employee morale can be a great asset to organizations. However, employees who

are discontented and display negative sentiments at work are said to possess negative or low employee morale (Nur et al., 2018). Low employee morale can harm organizational success; therefore, leaders must take the steps necessary to ensure high employee morale.

Low employee morale will significantly affect how employees perform their jobs, thus impacting the company's productivity. Low morale will impact employees' job experience (Ferguson & Clark, 2018). Maintaining high employee morale should be a top priority for all corporate leaders. High job morale will make employees highly willing to participate in job engagement and more apt to work for the company to achieve organizational objectives (Tolukan & Akyel, 2019). Therefore, leaders must ensure that their employees have high morale. Employees with low morale can harm the company's productivity (Wahab & Anwar, 2023). Leaders must explore and execute strategies to increase employee morale to ensure productivity improvement.

Employee Morale and Productivity

The morale of employees affects their work productivity. Work productivity is the ability of individuals to produce goods/services by utilizing various sources of production comparatively with the quality and the amount of time established by the organization to attain high productivity; organizational leaders must pay close attention to their employees' morale (Jamaluddin et al., 2019). Employees with high employee morale tend to be more productive at work. High employee morale will impact the efficiency and effectiveness of one's work ethic (Jamaluddin et al., 2019). Organizational leaders must be attentive to their employees' morale level so that productivity is ensured. Human resource management plays a pivotal role in maintaining and increasing the productivity

of an organization, as it relates to striving for employees to be willing and able to provide the best possible job achievement (Pribadu et al., 2021). Organizational leaders should continue to look for and implement ways to improve productivity.

One way that organizational leaders can improve productivity is through employee motivation. Motivation is the total process of encouraging subordinates to work in such a manner so that they desire to perform with sincerity and the effort to achieve efficient and cost-effective organizational goals can be accomplished (Kuswati, 2019). Motivation is important because it can increase employee morale, thus leading to improved productivity. Work motivation stimulates an organization or company's practices to boost employee morale (Neher & Maley, 2020). Employees' morale is boosted through motivation, and their work productivity improves. Employee achievement is improved when employees are highly motivated; they will be more active in completing every assignment given to them because they will feel cherished, are inspired to move forward, and are experiencing support from the organization (Frastika & Franksiska, 2021). Organizational leaders must implement motivational strategies to increase morale because it can improve productivity.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction exemplifies how much people like their jobs (Ali & Anwar, 2021). Employees must be satisfied with their jobs to perform at top levels. Job dissatisfaction creates absenteeism, decreased performance, decreased morale, and all negative results. They could impact the firm's capacity to compete in the exceptionally competitive business environment (Varma, 2017). It is essential that employees are

satisfied with their employment assignment because if they are satisfied employees, they will be committed to the organization's objectives and mission. A committed employee support system assists every successful organization, and commitment is based on motivation and job satisfaction (Varma, 2017). Employees who are satisfied with their work will be motivated to achieve organizational objectives. A leader is responsible for ensuring that their employees are happy with their duties, and everything directly and indirectly affected by them.

It is the belief that the behavior that helps the firm succeed is most likely to happen when the employees are well-motivated and feel committed to the organization and when the job gives them an elevated level of satisfaction (Paais & Pattiruhu, 2020). Job satisfaction will generate a boost in employee morale. Job satisfaction and employee morale go hand in hand. Occurrences in a corresponding work environment support the achievement of work morale, which is preceded by increased job satisfaction (Soetjipto et al. 2021). Job satisfaction leads to high employee morale, thus enhancing their productivity. Bonner (2013) suggested that employee job satisfaction is positively associated with productivity and morale. Leaders must ensure employees are satisfied with their employment because it positively impacts workplace morale and productivity.

Flexibility

Flexible working arrangements (FWAs) have become an increasingly popular supervisory method within business environments (Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2020). Executing flexible work arrangements for employees can make all the difference globally. Work flexibility offers employees a balance between their professional and

personal lives, leading to job contentment, high achievement, and general improvement of the entire organization (Davidescu et al., 2020). Providing workplace flexibility can be beneficial for employees and employers as well. Workplace flexibility has recently gained relevance among law makers and employers as a strategic tool to improve the quality work life of employees (Young & Schieman, 2018). Using workplace flexibility as a strategy to improve the quality of work life for employees benefits the employers because it could increase employee morale. Improving the quality of work life for employees leads to high employee morale (Dhamija et al., 2019). High employee morale is critical to an organization's success. Providing employees with the opportunity to work in a flexible environment can make all the difference in the world, benefit the employees and employers alike, improve the quality of work life of employees, and could be used to increase employee morale.

Team Player

The degree of teamwork and collaboration within the labor force has progressed over the years, and the use of teams is projected to continue increasing; with the rise of cooperation comes the need for interventions designed to enhance teamwork effectiveness (Lacerenza et al., 2018). When employees work as a team, it benefits the entire organization. Today, business organizations across the globe have acknowledged that the key to successfully achieving proposed plans is through team development (Tripathy, 2018). Developing teams is a pivotal part of an organization meeting its goals. When an organization takes the time to establish teams, they are not just creating groups; it is so much more than that. While the group is only an assembling of people, a team is

much more than a group; it comprises talented individuals with diverse approaches to embodying their abilities as they congregate under a shared roof and with a universal goal (Tripathy, 2018). Teamwork can benefit all organizations and should be included in every organization's routine operation.

One benefit of developing teams within organizations is it increases employee morale. Teamwork boosts the morale of employees (Kandavel1 & Sakthivel, 2018). Employee morale is an essential part of any organization. High employee morale inspires employees to report to work on time, improves communication skills, and retains the recruitment and originality of employees (Mazin, 2010). When individuals collaborate with a team, they feel encouraged and supported. Teamwork boosts morale, improves productivity, and establishes colleague support (Galleta-Williams et al., 2020). Developing teams among employees can be a great asset to an organization. All leaders should require their employees to collaborate and frequently work as a team.

The development of teams provides better participation, challenges, and feelings of achievement and captivates and retains the finest individuals (Conti & Kleiner, 2003). Teamwork is all about when employees freely participate within their work groups. Teamwork is the view of individuals working together collaboratively, as in sales, sports teams, etc. (Adeleke, 2008). When employees work as a team, they can voice their opinions about the company's overall operations and start to feel a form of partnership. Working as a team has become a fundamental goal in most organizations, and the belief is that teamwork gives employees a perception of proprietorship and inspires cooperation

(Kandavel1 & Sakthivel, 2018). Developing teams within organizations can be an asset for that company and thus should be an organizational requirement.

Teams can work efficiently and effectively if they are managed appropriately. Effective team management comprises many qualities; for instance, a true leader constantly communicates his thoughts and ideas, not dictating them (Soni, 2020). It is a leader's job to establish and manage teams at the workplace. The work done in any group can be done smoothly if the team leader has excellent leadership skills. A person with exceptional leadership skills encourages cohesiveness among all team members. Mutual cohesion among team leaders and decision-makers is vital (Soni, 2020). Good leaders must manage teams to ensure organizational success. Good team management assists organizations in creating ways of improving employee performance and building up business productivity, acceptable quality, and quick response to consumers' demand and satisfaction (Adegoke, 2009). Leaders must effectively manage the concept of working in teams to ensure that organizational goals are met.

The leader must also function as a team member instead of only ordering different tasks from other teammates (Soni, 2020). The leader should serve as a team member as well. They must give equal responsibility to all team members rather than doing all the work individually, such as offering team-building ideas, enhancing trust, communication, people skills, initiative, teamwork, and flexibility (Soni, 2020). When individuals collaborate with a team, it builds trust within the group. It can be called team building when employees work together, creating trust among the team. Team building techniques and continued support from management can benefit an organization's success.

Implementing team building and management support can lead to an organization reaching its goals and should be a regular part of its training process.

Employee Retention

Retaining one's employees is an essential part of operating a successful business. Employee retention is the ability of an organization to retain its employees. Awesome companies appreciate devoted workers and understand the importance of retaining them (Rakhra, 2018). Great organizations are grateful for their faithful employees and will make the necessary modifications to keep them as part of their team. Every organization must retain talented and diligent employees, and the best way to do so is to ensure they are happy (Enamala & Redd, 2022). Appropriate strategies should be implemented to retain employees and ensure their happiness. The retention strategy chosen needs to consist of initiatives that inspire employees to stay longer in the company by boosting their satisfaction (Gelencsér et al., 2023). Suppose employees feel appreciated and are satisfied at their workplace. In that case, it is more than likely they will remain there, so leaders must initiate strategies to make sure that they stay happy employees.

One way to ensure employees are happy and remain satisfied within an organization is to boost employee morale. Employee morale is directly affiliated with employee retention because employees who feel great job satisfaction are inclined to stay employed by the company (Rohini & Alur, 2018). So, if an employee is satisfied with their work environment, it will boost their morale, and their employers will successfully retain them as employees. Employers must exhibit continuous effort to ensure job satisfaction and increase employee morale to retain the employees. Once an employee's

morale is boosted, it does not automatically remain increased; the organizational leaders should continually use strategies to keep the employees satisfied to ensure that they are retained as employees.

Compensation

Compensation and reward are essential features of Human Resources Management. The compensation system that an organization offers to its employees plays an imperative role in determining employees' commitment levels and retention (Ali & Anwar, 2021). Compensation is what inspires an employee to apply for employment within an organization. Receiving the appropriate compensation package is vital for potential employees. Employees will stay in organizations where they believe their capabilities, contributions, and efforts are appreciated (Febrianti & Se, 2020). The appropriate compensation package and the proper appreciation can boost an employee's morale. In today's world, many compensations and stable growth encourage employee morale across industry organizations (Sembiring, 2019). Employers must ensure their employees receive the appropriate compensation and verbal rewards to benefit the organization.

Roles that motivate employees to explore their inner potential, create innovative challenges, drive their regular work differently, and continue their learning process are much needed (Sembiring, 2019). One of the benefits of organizations motivating their employees to explore their inner potential is it can lead them to reach their career goals. Organizations look for critical factors for high employee morale, and loyalty is recognized for excellent work, flexibility, and employee-friendly orientation to help

associates progress toward their aspirational career plans (Sembiring, 2019). Employees

will work hard when they feel appreciated and thus satisfied. Satisfaction with

compensation can influence employee behavior to work more passionately and spur high

performance (Sembiring, 2019). All employers desire that their employees perform at an

elevated level; therefore, ensuring they receive fair pay and appreciation for their skills is

necessary.

Compensation is connected to many things, such as job satisfaction, employee

commitment, and performance. Any form of Compensation, financial and non-financial,

is provided by the company to employees as a form of the working relationship between

the company and the employee (Gary, 2017). The working relationship between a

company and its employees is so meaningful. Employees work more efficiently when

they are satisfied with their compensation. Extensive evidence shows that wages affect

worker behavior (Lazear, 2018). To most employees, a decent salary is the most crucial

part of their working relationship. The appropriate compensation promotes morale,

increases motivation, and fosters team cohesion (Ogedegbe & Bashiru, 2014). Boosting

morale, increasing motivation, and fostering cohesion are vast parts of a successful

organization; thus, leaders must regularly provide their employees with salary and

appreciation methods.

Employee Recognition

The appropriate compensation is a great asset for employees and will increase

their morale, but employees also want to feel valued by their leaders (Hussain et al.,

2019). Employees desire to be officially recognized by their leaders. When employees are

formally recognized by their leaders, they feel they matter and are essential to the company. An illustration of a supervisor showing employee recognition consists of including their names in the organization's newsletter, executing letters of commendation, allotting extra time off, and orally expressing gratitude (Hussain et al., 2019). Being acknowledged is so important to employees. They want to be recognized when they work hard to complete their duties effectively. Leaders who recognize their employees boost their morale and enhance the work culture (Dash & Mohanty, 2019). All organizations should take the time to acknowledge their good and faithful employees.

Employee recognition boosts their morale and enhances the culture. It is also a favorable form of assessment that features the attainment of organizational goals or a particular assignment (Mone et al., 2011). When an employee is not recognized by their leaders, it can cause low employee morale. The absence of recognition of their work from supervisors can decrease an employee's morale (Willott et al., 2020). The last thing an employee wants to do is to allow their employee's morale to be decreased. The concept of employee recognition is essential. When an employee is recognized for their work, it changes their whole demeanor. It allows employees to become more outgoing, self-aware, and motivated. Organizations recognize their employees to preserve their self-confidence and inspiration (Ali & Anwar, 2021). Recognizing one's employees can benefit organizations and should be done regularly.

Transition

In Section 1 of this proposal, I introduced the foundation of the study, discussed the background of the problem, which focused on the importance of increasing employee

morale, discussed the problem and purpose statement, population and sampling, the nature of the study, including the use of the qualitative research method with a pragmatic inquiry as the research design, the research question, and interview questions. Next, I discussed the conceptual framework: the transformational leadership theory, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, the significance of the study, which consisted of the contribution to the business practice, and the implications for social change. Lastly, I discussed topics relevant to employee morale through a review of professional and academic literature,

In Section 2, I begin with a restatement of the purpose of the study, discuss my role as the researcher, delineate the eligibility criterion for the study participants, discuss the utilization and justification of the research method, identify and justify the research design, described and explained the population and sampling, I discuss the need for ethical research, identified the data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization technique, discussed the data analysis, discussed the reliability and validity of the study and finally the transition and a summary of key points. Section 3 begins with an introduction, presentation of my findings, application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further research, reflections, and conclusion.

Section 2: The Project

In this section, I begin with a restatement of the purpose of the study, discuss my role as the researcher, delineate the eligibility criterion for the study participants, discuss the utilization and justification of the research method, identify and justify the research design, described and explained the population and sampling, discussed the need for ethical research, identified the data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization technique, discuss the data analysis, discuss the reliability and validity of the study and finally the transition statement and a summary of key points.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore leadership strategies that some department store managers use to increase employee morale to improve productivity. The targeted population was department store managers in the Southern portion of the United States who implemented leadership strategies to increase employee morale and improve productivity.

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher consisted of collecting data from research participants. The role of the qualitative researcher is to provide an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon, ask pertinent questions, be an exceptional listener, be flexible, and be aware of how the researcher's role may affect the conversation with the participant (McGrath et al., 2019). In this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study, I explored leadership strategies that some department store managers use to increase employee morale to improve productivity. Data were collected using a semistructured interview

technique with the research participants who agreed to audio-recorded conference

settings and a review of available public material from organizations' websites.

Communication between researcher and participant is sacred and, in its ideal form, can be

a selfless act of allegiance (Saldana, 2018). I had no relationship with the topic; however,

I was interested in knowing how increasing employee morale to improve productivity

impacts this population.

Ethical behavior must be exhibited with participants and followed throughout the

research process (Mpofu, 2017; Yin, 2018). My role in ethics, as defined within the

National Commission (1979) for protecting human subjects when conducting research,

included ensuring that the research participants' anonymity and confidentiality were

safeguarded and that the directives defined within the National Commission for

protecting human subjects when I conducted research were complied with in this study.

The researcher's primary responsibility is to protect the participants and their information,

regardless of how they collect the data (Kelly et al., 2021). I completed the Collaborative

Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Program related to ethics and the Belmont Report

as part of the preparation for this study. I earned a certificate (See Appendix A). The

Belmont Report acknowledges that the principal obligation of a researcher is to ensure

that ethical directives are defined while conducting research with human subjects (U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). The Belmont Report is a statement of

fundamental ethical principles created to help resolve issues when conducting research

with human subjects (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of

Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The Belmont Report was developed when

the National Research Act was signed into law, generating the National Commission for

protecting the human rights of biomedical and behavioral research: the report is centered

on three key areas: the principles of respect of persons, beneficence, and justice (National

Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral

Research, 1979). Researchers use the three fundamental principles of the Belmont report

as a system to confront any ethical issues that may surface.

      Researchers should provide ways to mitigate research bias and avoid perceiving

data through a personal viewpoint. Mitigating bias ensures research rigor, as bias is an

essential factor for qualitative research as it pertains to the chief consideration concerning

the potential influence of the conceptions and opinions of the researchers governing the

research study (Squires & Dorsen, 2018). To lessen bias within this study, I used

reflexivity. Reflexivity is an assortment of constant, collective, and comprehensive

procedures; consequently, researchers self-consciously examine, assess, and discern how

their subjectivity and relation impact the research processes (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). I

needed to diminish any personal bias within the interview process. Qualitative

researchers must understand that their biases may impact the study's outcomes (Blessing

& Forister, 2016). Researchers should employ systems to mitigate bias within their

research study, as it negatively affects the findings.

      I ensured an interview protocol (See Appendix B) was followed during the data

collection process. Using an interview protocol is critical because it helps the researcher

follow the questionnaire and convey the questions unbiasedly (Yin, 2018). Researchers

use an interview protocol to ensure consistency and establish standard interview

questions to address the research question for the study (Levitan et al., 2018).

Researchers should follow these specific guidelines when conducting a research study.

The researcher should maintain congruity by using an interview protocol, asking each

participant identical questions during the interview, and allowing them to review the

analysis of their replies through member checking (Lanka et al., 2021).

Participants

The eligibility criteria for study participants were department store managers in

the Southern portion of the United States who have used leadership strategies to increase

employee morale, resulting in improved productivity. It is essential to choose participants

who will provide the best information for the research because they have experienced the

phenomenon of interest (Dyar, 2022). I used social media sites to get contact information

for the participants. I emailed seven department managers to ask if they would be willing

to participate in the study. I provided them with information about the research and the

consent form so they could make an informed decision about participating in the study. I

answered any questions that they may have had about the study. The participants were

free to accept or decline the invitation to participate in the research project. The seven

department managers agreed to participate in the study.

Emailing the participants is how I built a working relationship with them. I also

spoke with them over the phone to discuss available times to conduct their interviews.

Participants contribute to a research project based on their interest in the issue, the

availability of effective management tools, and social interaction (Ferguson et al., 2017).

I targeted department store managers who implemented leadership strategies to increase employee morale.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

For this study, I chose the qualitative research method to understand which leadership strategies department store managers use to increase employee morale to improve productivity. I selected the qualitative methodology for this research study because I aimed to explore and better define the experiences of department store managers related to implementing leadership strategies to increase employee morale. Researchers use the qualitative research method to determine better, explore, and observe lived experiences to comprehend a phenomenon (Yin, 2018). The quantitative research method consists of standardized scientific research, which describes the researched facts using variables that can be expressed by numbers (Kolková et al., 2022). Mixed methods research is commonly described as combining qualitative and quantitative data (Schoonenboom, 2023). The quantitative and mixed method research methodologies were not appropriate for this study because I aimed to explore rich data from the research participants and not to examine the relationship between variables.

Research Design

As the researcher, I used the pragmatic inquiry design for this study. Pragmatic inquiry studies are the preferred strategy researchers employ when asking how or what questions to understand the leaders' experience with a phenomenon (Morgan, 2014; Ramanadhan et al., 2021; Savin-Baden et al.,2013) and when the focus is not on the

organization itself. For that reason, I determined that a pragmatic approach was an appropriate research design because this research aimed to understand and explore leadership strategies that department store managers use to increase employees' morale and improve productivity. Researchers must find a design that best fits their research inquiry. Other research designs that were considered but not chosen were the ethnography and phenomenology designs. Researchers use ethnographic design to examine cultural or social interchanges (Pernille et al., 2020). I did not consider social phenomena; thus, the ethnographic design was inappropriate for this study. The phenomenology research design is used to evaluate an individual's lived experience and to explore the interpretation of the encounter (Singh & Strobel, 2023). The phenomenological research design was inappropriate for this study because my aim was not to explore the participants' lived experiences and the interpretation of the encounter.

Data saturation enriches the study's validity. Failure to reach data saturation could influence the quality of research conducted and hinder content validity (Fusch et al., 2015). Researchers must ensure that data saturation is reached. Data saturation must be achieved to ensure validity within a study (Constantinou et al., 2017). Data saturation is achieved when there is adequate information to depict the study, the ability to obtain additional information has been completed, and further coding is no longer applicable (Fusch et al., 2015). I knew I had reached data saturation after noticing recurring themes among all participants, and they provided no new information.

Population and Sampling

I used the purposive sampling method to select seven department store managers who had implemented leadership strategies to increase employee morale. The purposive sampling method is a standard research method for choosing participants in a qualitative study (Renjith et al., 2021). The right individuals must be selected for this study to answer the research question. Purposive sampling involves identifying and choosing willing individuals or groups with experience or awareness of the problem (Palinkas et al., 2015). Choosing purposive sampling for this small sample size was sufficient to support data collection for this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study. The reason for purposive sampling is the better matching of the sample to the aims and objectives of the research, thus improving the study's rigor and the trustworthiness of the data and results (Campbell et al., 2020). If I could not obtain enough participants, I planned to employ snowball sampling, which is a construct of purposive sampling to enlist additional participants. Snowball sampling is a chain referral sampling, where participants are asked to recommend other individuals appropriate for the study (Kennedy-Shaffer et al., 2021). When researchers employ snowball sampling, the primary participants are requested to recommend alternative participants for the study. Securing a sampling contingency plan is pivotal to effectively collecting data (Ames et al., 2019). This qualitative pragmatic inquiry study's population consisted of department store managers in the Southern United States who had implemented leadership strategies to increase employee morale and improve productivity. Qualitative research uses a smaller sample size to sustain the depth

of a research analysis (Vasileiou et al., 2018). This study included seven participants and maintained the deepness of the research inquiry.

I ensured that data saturation was achieved within the research process. To ensure data saturation within the research process, I continued to collect data until no new information, ideas, or codes were manifested. Researchers attain data saturation when the collection of data is sufficient, duplicated, and there is no new data or when appropriating additional coding is no longer necessary (Fusch et al., 2017). I ensured that data saturation was reached when participants provided no new information to me during the interview process.

The criteria for selecting participants for this study consisted of department store managers in the Southern portion of the United States. They were knowledgeable of leadership strategies used to increase employee morale. I contacted department store managers in the Southern portion of the United States via LinkedIn, Facebook, fishbowl, and Instagram as part of my recruiting process. Once the participants were chosen, they were asked to consent to participate in writing by conveying," I consent." Once consent was obtained, the interview setting was discussed and scheduled. Zoom interviews were scheduled using a semistructured interview technique. Virtual communication tools like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts, Facebook, and WhatsApp have offered good options for researchers to accelerate and evolve the data collection development to support their fieldwork (Sah et al., 2020). The participants chose a date and time that was appropriate for them. It was imperative that the participants feel safe and secure during the interview process. Therefore, they selected a convenient time and date. Researchers

can help diminish interferences when choosing a private location and strongly suggest that the participants do likewise; it also helps to ensure privacy and confidentiality for the participants (Gray et al., 2020). It is vital that participants feel secure before and during the interview process. When researchers encourage their participants to select a quiet setting, it will benefit them as it provides safety and security for them.

<div align="center">**Ethical Research**</div>

Walden University requires that each student conducting research use ethical considerations. Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) has implemented ethical research requirements that must be adhered to. The IRB's main objective is to protect research participants' privacy (Brown et al., 2020). I ensured that ethical considerations were in place by receiving IRB approval and then having the participants sign a consent form. Participants must sign a consent form before the interview begins (Dorsten & Hotchkiss, 2019). The participants for this study received an email asking them to sign the informed consent form**.** The interview consent form included specifics concerning the study, such as the procedures I used to protect the participants' privacy, the voluntary nature of the study, and the fact that the participants could withdraw from the study at any time. Participants may cancel any time before or during an interview, verbally or in writing, without explanation (Efunshile et al., 2018). Walden University's representative contact information is listed on the consent form; if they wanted to talk privately about their rights as a participant, they were free to do so. No incentives were provided to participants for participating in the study.

The ethical protection of the participants of this study was adhered to throughout the interview process to ensure that the ethical protection of the participants was adequate. After Walden University (IRB) approved the study, I obtained contact information for store managers from LinkedIn, Facebook, Fishbowl, and Instagram. The department store managers were invited by email to participate in my study. Once they agreed to participate in the study, I emailed the informed consent form to obtain their consent to interview them. I asked the participants if they would confirm that they consented by replying to the email, "I consent." Signing a consent form is crucial to the research process. A consent form is not optional; all participants must sign it before participating in a research study.

I ensured the confidentiality of each participant's data by assigning a unique code to each participant, such as Participant 1 (P1). The findings will be stored in a confidential, password-protected, secure external hard drive for 5- years to protect the confidentiality of the participants and then shredded. My IRB approval number for this study is 10-25-23-0981971. The labels P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, and P7 were used to protect the names of each participant and will ensure confidentiality for all parties involved.

Data Collection Instruments

The researcher is the primary data collection instrument in qualitative studies (Linnenluecke et al., 2020). Therefore, I was the primary data collection instrument for this study. Conducting semistructured interviews organized by open-ended questions is another data collection instrument source that was used for this study. Pertinent data may

be collected through documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, and physical remnants (Yin, 2009). When using the semistructured interview technique, a virtual setting was used to complete the directed open-ended questions. A semi-structured interview technique customarily includes a dialogue between researcher and participant, managed by a flexible interview protocol and broadened by follow-up questions, examination, and remarks (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Using a semistructured interview technique allowed the researcher to redirect the questions, prepare for new information, and ask follow-up questions.

Member checking enhanced the reliability and validity of the collected data. Member checking is when data, investigative classifications, perceptions, and conclusions are verified with members of participant groups from where the data was initially collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checks, or respondent or participant validation, include the project participants evaluating the trustworthiness of research regarding validating the credibility of qualitative data and results (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Member checking strengthened the validity and reliability of the data collection instrument process, including a semistructured interview technique. In member checks, validation is frequently accomplished by returning the data and outcomes to the research participant and asking them to give their opinion on whether the data are correct and whether the results mirror their experiences (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Conducting member checking includes researchers communicating with the participants after the interview to ensure the researcher interprets the participants' responses accurately. Once the data was transcribed, a second interview or meeting was conducted to allow the

participants to confirm whether the researcher's interpretation was accurate. If the participant affirms the accuracy of the data and results, the findings can be considered credible, and the research is valid (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This study used a semistructured interview format consisting of open-ended questions by following an interview protocol (See Appendix B) and reviewing the organization's publicly available materials on the company's website.

Data Collection Technique

Collecting data through participant interviews is an aspect of many qualitative studies (Barret & Twycross, 2018). This study's primary data collection technique was using Zoom conferencing to interview participants. Interviews are a straightforward and uncomplicated technique for collecting comprehensive and rich data concerning a specific phenomenon; additionally, the kind of interview used to gather data can be hand-crafted to the research question, the participants' attributes, and the researcher's preferred technique (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). I aimed to collect rich data about leadership strategies to increase employee morale via audio conferencing. The semistructured interview technique consisted of open-ended questions that aligned with the interview protocol (See Appendix B). The seven participants were contacted via email. Once electronic consent to interview them was granted, the participants were contacted to schedule a date and a time for the interviews. A private and safe place was chosen for the audio-conferencing interviews. The participants selected a private and secure place to participate in the audio-conferencing interviews that was appropriate for them. Researchers can help limit distractions by choosing a secluded location other than the

participants' place of work and encouraging participants to do the same, which also

assists in ensuring the participants' privacy and discretion (Gray et al., 2020). It was

essential that the participant and I both felt comfortable, relaxed, and safe during the

interview process.

The semistructured interview technique consisted of six open-ended questions.

When research participants supply open-ended replies during the interview process,

researchers can capture insight into the data collected through the participants'

perspective (Prasad, 2017). Before beginning the interviews, I reminded the participants

that their identities would remain confidential and that the interview would be recorded. I

gained their permission to do so and reminded them that they were free to withdraw from

the study at any time and that I would answer any questions that they had concerning the

interviewing process.

There are advantages and disadvantages to using semistructured interview

techniques to conduct qualitative studies. The semistructured interview technique allows

the researcher to add or exclude any element of the predetermined questions (Alamr,

2019). The data and information for this study were collected from the seven research

participants via Zoom conferencing using semistructured interview questions. The

semistructured interview includes several essential questions that help determine the

areas being explored in the research; additionally, one primary advantage of conducting a

semistructured interview is flexibility (Alamr, 2019). The researcher can adjust and

modify the focus of the questions, particularly in a semistructured interview; also,

utilizing flexibility is one of the main reasons qualitative researchers should choose the

semistructured data collection technique. It allows the researcher to obtain rich and in-depth information. Flexibility within interviews also helps the participants to disclose more about themselves, which, in turn, serves to improve the qualitative data (Alamr, 2019). Flexibility can benefit qualitative researchers by allowing them to adjust and modify the questions and making the participants feel relaxed and willing to convey more vital information.

The semistructured interview technique allows the interviewer to explore the interviewee's thoughts, feelings, and opinions (Alamr, 2019). The interviewer can follow up on the views, perceptions, and ideas behind the responses in a manner that other techniques refuse to allow (Alamr, 2019). The subjective nature of interviewing is emulated as the interviewee expounds through opinions and experiences; however, one disadvantage of conducting and fully transcribing interviews is that it can be very time-consuming (Alamr, 2019). A qualitative researcher must be prepared to spend much time completing the interview process because the semistructured interview technique aims to identify themes. When the interview process is completed, including transcribing the interviews, the researcher should ensure the interpretation of the data collected is correct.

One way to ensure their data interpretation is correct is through member checking. Member checking was used within this study to ensure that the data interpretation was correct, which led to the trustworthiness of the data. Overall, member checking is a technique that is used to boost the reliability and, more categorically, the credibility of research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The trustworthiness of qualitative research is essential, and member checking is a great technique to ensure it. Member checking can also be

used to increase participants' opportunities to participate in the research procedures (Doyle, 2007) and to improve the research fidelity (Moss, 2004), which indicates the faithfulness and integrity of the researcher in preserving the participants' worth and integrity. Member checking was used within this study after all the data were collected by submitting a summarized copy of the transcribed interviews to the study participants to verify whether my interpretation of their responses was accurate. All the participants confirmed that the transcribed summary of the interview information was correct; therefore, my interpretation of the data can be considered valid and trustworthy. I also reviewed the available materials on companies' public websites, adding richness to the data.

Data Organization Techniques

The systems used to keep track of the data collected were research logs, reflective journals, and the Zoom recording feature on my Lenovo desktop computer. Researchers use various techniques to organize data, but computer software is the most generally known method (Pokorny et al., 2018). Computer software was used to keep track of the data collected in this study. A labeling system was employed to protect the participants' identities. For instance, the data collected was labeled P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, and P7, instead of providing anyone's name. To ensure data confidentiality, researchers must remove all possible individual identifiers (Lobe et al., 2020). All possible personal identifiers were removed to ensure data confidentiality and ethical practices.

After researchers collect data, they organize and interpret it into common themes (Yin, 2018). After the recorded data were transcribed, it was saved on a Lenovo desktop

computer. The documents will be protected with passwords and stored in a safe location; the only person who can access the computer and the documents will be me. The hard drive will be kept for 5-years, but after 5-years, all the papers will be demolished, and the computer files obtained from this study will be destroyed.

Data Analysis

I used methodological triangulation for my pragmatic inquiry study research. I gathered data from semistructured interviews and information from organizational public websites. Triangulation is one of the numerous types of data analysis researchers use to examine using questions during data collection procedures (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). Triangulation is the appropriate data analysis process for this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study. Triangulation could increase the study's validity, minimize researcher bias, and provide numerous viewpoints on the phenomenon under investigation (Denzin, 1970). Triangulation can be beneficial for qualitative research studies. The paramount aim of triangulation used in social sciences research has been to utilize multiple data sources, researchers, theories, and methods (Renz et al., 2018). Triangulation is separated into four sorts and can be used for different purposes.

Denzin (1970) put forward the four types of triangulation, namely, (1) data triangulation, which consists of matters such as periods, space, and people; (2) investigator triangulation, which includes the use of many researchers in a study; (3) theory triangulation, which reinforces several theoretical schemes to permit interpretation of a phenomenon and (4) methodological triangulation, which supports the use of several data collection methods like interviews and observations. Methodological triangulation is

the method that was chosen to cross-check data from multiple sources and establish a complete understanding of the problem within this study. Methodological triangulation is a popular research strategy for connecting interviews with documents to apprehend different dimensions of the topic and increase the findings' validity and credibility (Natow, 2019). Methodological triangulation was used to cross-check data collected from several sources to comprehend the research problem thoroughly.

Methodological triangulation is the most suitable data analysis procedure for this study's research design because it allows the researcher to use multiple methods to study the phenomenon. Methodological triangulation also authenticates the findings, provides more complete data, intensifies validity, and refines comprehension of the studied problem. Once the interviews were completed, the notes and transcriptions from the semistructured interviews were reviewed to complete the study's evaluation. The transcription of the data starts after the data has been collected; data transcription can be delineated as the procedure of duplicating written words, like data that has been recorded from an interview and transformed into a written form so that the data can then be analyzed (McGrath et al., 2018). The field notes were reviewed once the data were collected, and all the interviews were transcribed. The recordings were listened to and relistened during the data transcription process to identify recurring patterns among all participants. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data, including reading the transcripts to gain familiarity with them, creating codes, creating categories, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally, writing them up.

Thematic analysis is best characterized as an umbrella term, identifying from time to time entirely distinctive approaches seeking to identify patterns over qualitative datasets (Braun et al., 2019). Thematic analysis is a frequently used form of analysis and was used to analyze the data collected in this study. NVivo software was used for thematic analysis. NVivo software is used in qualitative studies to navigate a thematic analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The NVivo software helps to sort, organize, and analyze the collected data. NVivo software is used to import and support many formats and data types because it is a beneficial instrument for sorting, organizing, and analyzing qualitative data (Dhakai, 2022). The findings and study results were based on the transformational leadership theory, which is the conceptual framework for this study.

<div align="center">**Reliability and Validity**</div>

Reliability

Reliability refers to the wisdom of the research, specifically about the correct methods selected and how those methods were used and executed in a qualitative research study (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Research findings must be dependable. In qualitative research, dependability is the backup for reliability and relates to the consistency of a study's conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability and consistency go hand-in-hand. Dependability is the capability to deliver endeavors that can accurately be relied upon (Avizienis et al., 2004). I used member checking to address dependability within this study. Dependability can be confirmed when the researcher uses member checking. Qualitative researchers must provide evidence that their findings are dependable.

Validity

Trustworthiness in qualitative research appertains to the methodical severity of the research design, the researcher's credibility, the trustworthiness of the findings, and the appropriateness of the research methods and is usually the goal for most qualitative investigation (Johnson & Parry, 2015a, Johnson & Parry 2015b, Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness is a pivotal component when one is conducting qualitative research. Trustworthiness is the main factor in preserving the place of qualitative research in the academic world, and qualitative researchers must demonstrate that their studies are credible (Harrison et al., 2001). One way that a qualitative researcher can exemplify credibility during the research process is through member checking. Member checking is the most salable way of building trustworthiness as it consists of frequently sharing (anonymous) collected data in the form of a sketch report with research contributors and receiving their evaluation of that procedure (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Member checking was used to ensure credibility within this study.

Transferability is the level at which the outcome of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts or environments with other participants (Korsten & Moser, 2018). When transferability is displayed, research findings can be transferred and applied to other studies. Transferability considers the aspect of relevancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The content of the research findings must be relevant to other studies. A researcher's responsibility is to offer detailed interpretations about the participants and the research procedure to allow the reader to determine if your findings are transferable to

their setting (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The person reading the research findings determines whether the work is transferable.

The reader makes the transferability judgment call because the researcher does not know the reader's particular contexts or settings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). A thick description of the data was used to address transferability. While the literature is harmonious in comprehending that the questions asked during the interview are vital in attaining a thick description, it also highlights the significance of the correlative relationships between the interviewer and interviewee and their ramifications for the interview outcomes (Morse, 2020). As the researcher in this study, detailed documents and a memorable description of the research procedures were provided to ensure that future researchers may consider the data priceless and pertinent to various environments.

Confirmability considers the aspect of lack of bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability was addressed within this study using a semistructured interview technique and member checking. Confirmability involves the researcher's ability to demonstrate neutrality by representing the participant's responses and not the biases or perspectives of the researcher (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Confirmability is addressed when the data that researchers collect are examined and reexamined to ensure that others will duplicate the results. Thus, the researcher addressed confirmability within this study similarly.

An essential aspect of qualitative research is reaching data saturation. An element prevalent in evaluating qualitative research quality is assessing the saturation of a data set, indicating that the data includes all information necessary to answer the research

questions. (Lowe et al., 2018). Data saturation is reached when adequate data have been collected and no new data are generated. Data saturation suggests that no added information materializes during the sampling and analysis, and theoretical views are fully developed (Morse, 2015). To ensure data saturation, I interviewed participants until no new themes, data, codes, or perspectives manifested themselves.

Transition and Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, pragmatic inquiry study was to explore leadership strategies used by some department store managers in the Southern portion of the United States to increase employee morale to improve productivity. The research population included seven department store managers who implemented leadership strategies to increase employee morale.

In Section 1, I introduced the foundation of the study, discussed the background of the problem, which focused on the importance of increasing employee morale, discussed the problem and purpose statement, population and sampling, the nature of the study, including the use of the qualitative research method with a pragmatic inquiry as the research design, the research question, and interview questions. Next, I discussed the conceptual framework: the transformational leadership theory, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, the significance of the study, which consisted of the contribution to the business practice, and the implications for social change. Lastly, I reviewed professional and academic literature relevant to employee morale.

 In Section 2, I reiterated the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study. I assessed my role as the researcher, the selection criteria for participants', the research

method, the research design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization techniques, data analysis, reliability, and validity.

Section 3 includes an introduction comprised of the purpose of the study and a summary of the study's findings, the presentation of the results, an application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further research, reflections, and the conclusion.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study was to explore leadership strategies to increase employee morale and improve productivity. This section presents the findings derived from a series of semistructured interviews conducted with seven department store industry leaders in the United States's southern region. Based on the findings, a set of measures employed by leaders in the department store industry to increase employee morale and improve productivity were identified. These strategies include the establishment of (a) effective communication, (b) employee engagement, and (c) employee reward. The implications of these findings have the potential to enhance the capacity of department store leaders to increase employee morale and attain productivity while contributing to societal progress by improving higher income growth and outcomes.

Presentation of Findings

To answer the research question, "What leadership strategies do department store managers use to increase employee morale to improve productivity?" I conducted semistructured interviews with open-ended questions with seven department store managers from the Southern portion of the United States who implemented strategies to increase employee morale. I used in-depth semistructured interviews as the primary data source in this study. In addition, I gathered supplemental data from organizations' publicly available materials to validate the findings obtained from the interviews. I followed a protocol for conducting all the interviews to ensure consistency. Before performing the interviews, I distributed a copy of the consent form to all participants.

I safeguarded the identity and confidentiality of the participants by refraining from disclosing their names or the names of the organizations where they were employed. I assigned codes to the participants (P1-P7). While analyzing data with the NVivo tool, special attention was paid to identifying and investigating themes that related to the research topic and were consistent with the conceptual framework. Analysis of the data collected from seven leaders revealed three major themes: (a) effective communication, (b) employee engagement, and (c) employee reward.

Theme 1: Employee Morale Increased with Effective Communication

Effective communication emerged from a thorough analysis of participants' responses and a review of available public materials. Effective business communication is imperative in enhancing the general performance of various business entities because it influences proper collaboration between the employees and the employer or between the entity and its customers (Kalogiannidis, 2020). Communication was a continuous theme in response to the interview questions. Each participant acknowledged that effective communication was vital to successfully implementing leadership strategies for increasing organizational morale. Human performance relies on team communication to be successful (John et al., 2019). I obtained supportive public documents from the organizations' public websites congruent with the participants' responses.

P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, and P7 explained that effective communication increased employee morale throughout every aspect of their teams' role. Participants often discussed having an open-door policy to ensure their team knew they cared about them. P5 stated, "I have an open-door policy, and having open communication with the

employees is very effective in increasing employee morale." P6 indicated that "an open-door policy lets employees know they can trust who supervises them." Adopting such a policy builds trust towards Upper management and the organization and makes the employees feel they are being heard and valued (Singh & Vanka, 2019). When leaders ensure their employees that they can trust them, they are exhibiting idealized influence, which is one of the key constructs of transformational leadership theory. Findings confirm that idealized influence is defined as the charisma of the transformational leadership theory that can make followers trust their leaders (Mi et al., 2019).

All seven participants emphasized that leaders should use open communication as a leadership strategy to promote an environment conducive to high employee morale. P2 stated, "Managers must talk to their personnel to get to know them, to find out what they are bringing to the table, what drives them, what ticks them off, and what motivates them." P7 stated, "Listening to employees finding out what is important to them and what motivates them is imperative as it relates to increasing employee morale." The principle of one of the key constructs of transformational leadership, inspirational motivation, requires the leader to possess skillful communication abilities, as they are entrusted with the succinct and authoritative dissemination of information (Zhang et al., 2020). Table 2 displays the subthemes of effective communication for strategies to increase the morale of the employees. Participants indicated the importance of using open communication through various platforms to increase employee morale and productivity.

Table 2

Subthemes of Effective Communication

Subthemes	Number of Participants
Communicating face-to-face	7
Evaluating job performance	6
Communication tone	7
Precise communication	7

It is beneficial for leaders to communicate with their team from a high-quality

perspective on all organizational levels (Do & Nuth, 2019). P1 noted, "I talk to my

associates and get feedback about what they would like to see implemented, and based on

their feedback and the capability to implement it, it is executed." P1 also stated, "When I

include them in the decision making, it makes them feel like they have a voice and are

encouraged to work toward excellence, thus increasing productivity." P4 concurred,

stating, "I ask the employees what you are interested in; what would you like to have

started, stopped, or continued within the organization?" P4 also stated, "I let the

employees know that we care about them by including them in the decision making

process." Effective communication and considering what the employees would like to see

implemented are congruent with the transformational leadership theory, thus confirming

that the first theme aligned with the conceptual framework of transformational leadership

theory. Leaders can use transformational leadership theory to comprehend leadership

strategies to boost morale by effectively communicating with employees within their

organizations (Cohrs et al., 2019). P1, P3, P4, and P7 spoke about effectively

communicating with their employees by evaluating their job performance.

P1 stated, "We take surveys of each of the associates as a company whole, and depending on the feedback, we try to figure out what needs to be improved." P1 also stated, "With the survey responses, we encourage the associates to respond as they were management, or if it was their building, it helps us adjust if needed, and it has been successful." P3 and P4 both acknowledged that they use a warehouse management system to evaluate their employee's work performance as it relates to productivity and that using this system has been successful, as it measures their performances weekly, monthly, and yearly. P7 stated, "I evaluate the employees on their work performance by starting with three positive points and then discuss the area that needs some correction and seems to work well." Taking surveys and performing employee evaluations are effective ways for organizations to communicate with their employees. Organizational leaders must use the feedback from the surveys and evaluations to collaborate with the employees about what strategies they are willing to implement to foster harmonious relationships, thus improving their work performance. In a continually changing business world, organizations must frequently update their methods for organizational accomplishment and its relationship to employee achievement, such as performance evaluations, which can decrease impediments that can disrupt organizational accomplishment with employee performance (Tompo & Majid, 2023). Using surveys and evaluations to communicate with employees effectively can be beneficial and should be used by all organizational leaders.

Theme 2: Employee Engagement

Employee engagement was the second theme to emerge from analyzing the data collected. It emerged from thoroughly analyzing participants' responses and reviewing the organization's publicly available materials. Participants expressed the significance of employee engagement. Employee engagement is a physical and psychological condition related to performing duties consciously and emotionally and exhibiting behavior that will attain the organization's goals (Satata, 2021). Three participants conveyed that when they engaged their employees, including motivating them, asking their opinions, and meeting with employees, it led them to want to buy into the strategies implemented because they were included in the implementation process. P1 stated, "I have a high rate of having people say, 'I love this, I want to buy in because this was my idea,' thus leading us to reach our organizational objectives." P 4 stated, "Team productivity is getting everybody on the same page about teamwork, spending some extra effort engaging employees to ensure that every team member is operating correctly and that they buy into the team concept, and it has been successful." P7 stated,

> After positively speaking with them, I watch their interactions and how they perform their duties, and when they say, "Did you see I did this?" or "I did that," I know that they are buying in to achieve our organizational goals.

Table 3 represents subthemes of the theme of employee engagement. The participants indicated that employee engagement was beneficial to increasing morale and productivity.

Table 3

Subthemes of Employee Engagement

Subthemes	Number of Participants
Leaders leading by example	5
Employee motivation	6
Employee meetings	7
Valuing employee opinions	5
Team meetings	6

The theme of employee engagement is congruent with the transformational leadership theory. Organizational leaders can use the transformational leadership theory to understand strategies to increase morale by engaging employees in their companies 'goals (Mahmood et al., 2019). P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6 agreed that engaging employees by leading by example was a crucial strategy to increase employee morale. Moments of engagement give an individual a sense of meaningfulness to engage in work-related tasks (Francis & Keegan, 2020). P1 stated, "Although I am the manager, I am no more important than they are; we all must fulfill our task to meet our organizational goals, which makes them feel a sense of ownership." P2 stated,

> People do not quit companies; they quit bosses; when engaging my team, I pride myself on leading as a person of integrity; they are watching to see if my words and actions line up; it has built trust between us, thus increasing morale.

An essential part of an organization's strategy is achieving a sustainable competitive advantage by executing employee engagement (Barreiro & Treglown, 2020). Engaging employees is a critical strategy for leaders to use to increase employee morale, ultimately leading to a competitive advantage for the organization.

P3 stated, "Employee morale is deeply rooted in the culture of the leadership team; leaders must approach and engage their associates from an optimistic perspective so that you can get the morale where you'd like it to be." P4 stated, "Increasing employee morale includes engaging your employees; they don't care how much you know; they want to know how much you care when they know you care, they don't mind doing something extra or participating in whatever you suggest." P5 stated,

> I believe the team is only as strong as their leader, so as a leader, when engaging them, I express that we all have a voice, I am the manager, but we are a team, and it takes the entire team to meet organizational goals and that has been successful.

P6 stated," Employee morale is about being there for your employees and engaging them from an optimistic perspective because it makes them feel comfortable and more apt to do whatever you suggest." Regarding decision making, employee engagement affects organizational performance positively (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2019). Organizational leaders must be available to engage their employees; it will increase morale, thus benefiting the entire organization.

Theme 3: Employee Reward

The third theme that emerged from a thorough analysis of participants' responses and a review of the organization's publicly available materials was employee reward. Giving rewards is a significant element as it motivates employees to work with full energy and causes them to pay attention to what is required (Siswanto et al., 2021). P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, and P7 agreed that giving their employees rewards for their exceptional work is critical. P1 stated, "I did a company-wide recognition to let them know we

appreciate them." P2 said," I use incentives, which sometimes means just going out of my way to thank you for helping that customer or showing up today." P3 stated, "I use a rewards and recognition program and use group settings to publicly acknowledge associates for their positive work behavior." P4 said, "We've implemented a monthly appreciation category that we do, and we express our appreciation for hard-working employees by giving pizza parties, monetary gifts, and gift cards." P6 stated, "One strategy I have used to increase employee morale is a reward program; last year, the reward included swag items, but this year, they received monetary gifts." P7 stated, "I give them compliments when I see them putting the work in, and every day, I speak about at least three things positive things that are doing and that have been successful in increasing employee morale." Table 4 represents the subthemes of employee rewards that the participants use to increase employee morale.

Table 4

Subthemes of Employee Rewards

Subthemes	Number of participants
Acknowledge effort	6
Providing incentives	6
Display appreciation	6
Encourage employees	7

The transformational leadership style promotes the concept of rewards and punishments (Alrubaysh et al., 2022). Rewards are critical for improving employee job achievement and productivity (Chi et al., 2023). P3 indicated," On one occasion, we did what we call a token program, and we were intentional at catching employees exhibiting positive behaviors; therefore, they were rewarded with tokens to get a snack or soda from

a special vending machine." Leadership, communication, and motivation are the results of management focused on developing happy employees and showing concern for their well-being (Buil et al., 2019) based on the rewards and benefits, whether monetary or non-monetary. P1 stated, "Employee morale is when your employees are happy at work, which is the root of everything." P2 said, "When you have happy associates, they will have happy minds, generating happy customers and leading to improved productivity." P4 stated,

> We pride ourselves on ensuring that our employees know that we want them well, not just physically, but emotionally. All the participants have used the subthemes of acknowledging employees' efforts, providing incentives, displaying appreciation, and encouraging their employees as forms of rewarding their employees.

The theme of rewarding employees for their dedicated work is congruent with the transformational leadership theory. Transformational leaders inspire their employees to perform at elevated levels, corroborating the effect of rewards (Podsakoff et al., 1996; Weiß & Süß, 2016). Some participants used kind and positive words to reward their employees, some used incentives such as tokens, gift cards, and monetary gifts, and some just used encouraging words, letting them know that they noticed the incredible job they were doing.

Compensation rewards are awards, promotions, and other job opportunities to promote and boost employee morale and the company's success (Oteshova et al., 2021). Implementing the leadership strategies of effective communication, employee

engagement, and employee reward to increase employee morale will improve productivity. All three of the themes are congruent with the transformational leadership theory. Transformational leadership is a vital technique that impacts organizational and individual results to attain competitive advantage (Alqatawenh, 2018). It would be beneficial for organizational leaders to implement the characteristics of the transformational leadership theory to increase employees, improve productivity, and result in a competitive advantage.

<div align="center">**Application to Professional Practice**</div>

Since employee morale can impact productivity, leaders must implement leadership strategies to increase morale. Organizations are less productive when employees lack increased morale, but with a boost in morale, employees' productivity, achievement, motivation, allegiance, and engagement increase (Noor & Ampornstira, 2019). This study's findings are crucial to business leaders because the findings demonstrate that effective communication, employee engagement, and rewards are leadership strategies to increase morale to improve productivity. Employees' morale at all degrees is critical to individual productivity and, consecutively, the whole organization (Mandal & Mudgal, 2023).

The findings in this study revealed that effective communication is vital in establishing a close relationship with employees. Effective communication can positively impact job satisfaction and strengthen the relationship between leadership and employees within their organizations (Stater & Stater, 2018). Communication is significant for robust relationships with employees, customers, and stakeholders. Business leaders can

use several successful forms of communication, such as emails, face-to-face interactions, and telephone calls, to establish a good rapport with their employees, customers, and stakeholders. Also, as the world recently encountered the COVID-19 Pandemic, Zoom and other social platforms have become excellent ways to communicate with employees. Systems like Zoom have been implemented to maintain communication in various areas, including businesses, education, health care, different private realms, legislation, and judiciary (e.g., Fouda, 2020; Puddister & Small, 2020; Toney et al., 2021). Finding effective ways to communicate with employees is an excellent way for business leaders to engage their employees.

When business leaders engage their employees, they become motivated, vehemently involved in their work, vastly enthusiastic, and submersed in performing their tasks (Hidayah Ibrahim et al., 2019). When employees interconnect with organizational leaders, it creates opportunities for them to see and buyin to the vision and goals, leading to organizational success. Organizational leaders engage their employees by collaborating, empowering them, and leading by example (Jha et al., 2019). Business leaders who focus on engaging their employees build relationships through activities that capitalize on the emergence of new connections to replace negative feelings such as lost trust and lack of integrity and provide opportunities to reward them for their dedicated work.

The findings of this study also demonstrated that employee reward can be a strategic technique to increase employee morale. Rewards and recognition increase motivation, engagement, and productivity (Crome et al., 2019). Business leaders can

reward their employees for their dedicated work in several ways, such as a simple thank you for doing a good job, gift cards, swag items, positive affirmations, telephone calls, a plaque for years of service, monetary gifts, and an increase in their salary. When leaders take the time to recognize and reward their employees, they are demonstrating that they value them. However, organizational leaders decide to reward their employees, whether it is through praise, bonuses, or a salary increase; it makes them happy and motivated and drives them to improve their work performance (Lipuku et al., 2022). Happy and motivated employees are productive employees.

Implications for Social Change

This qualitative pragmatic inquiry study is meaningful to social change because leaders in the department store industry can use the findings to implement effective leadership strategies that could increase employee morale and improve productivity. Productivity and employee morale are critical to any organization's success, and employees are likely to be engaged and motivated when they feel appreciated, leading to improved productivity (Singh, 2023). Employees who feel valued and knowledgeable about the organization's culture, products, and services could promote the organization's mission, leading to improved productivity. Employee productivity can improve if there is considerable motivation and appreciation for expected work experience from the organization (Muttaqien et al., 2023). Improved productivity could lead to new employment opportunities within the community, allowing the organizational leaders and employees to assist individuals by investing their time in offering job training and available resources.

Recommendations for Action

The three identified themes resulted from implementing leadership strategies to increase employee morale and thus improve productivity; I recommend that leaders use these themes, namely effective communication, employee engagement, and employee rewards, as leadership strategies to improve employee morale within their organizations. I recommend that organizational leaders treat their employees like they are important, include them in decision making, speak positively, reward them for their excellent work ethic, and always have an open-door policy. All those strategies have yielded success in increasing employee morale. A boost in morale can improve productivity (Alozie, 2020).

I recommend that organizational leaders ensure effective employee communication, such as one-on-one meetings, corporate meetings, emails, and weekly, monthly, and yearly performance evaluations. Effective communication plays a vital role in shaping employees' satisfaction at work, as it serves as a crucial procedure for transmitting information, fostering collaboration, and building relationships within organizations (Enyan et al., 2023). The way, the tone, and the frequency of communication between a manager and their employees matters.

I recommend organizational leaders recognize and reward their employees for their continued dedication. When employees meet the attempted deadlines and go beyond the call of duty, organizational leaders should show appreciation for them by rewarding them with intrinsic and extrinsic gifts. The results of a recent study examining the relationship between employee performance and the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards their employers provide them indicated that intrinsic and extrinsic rewards play a pivotal role

in motivating employees to exercise their best effort when performing tasks (Mazher, 2022). Implementing a reward program within organizations can allow leaders to find ways to boost employee morale and reduce the decrease in organizational productivity by taking time to learn about the effective and efficient results derived from implementing a company recognition program.

The focus of this study is to help organizations increase employee morale to improve productivity. I will submit the findings of this study in part or in whole for publication through journal websites such as ProQuest for future researchers to consider.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study was to explore the leadership strategies department store managers use in the Southern portion of the United States to promote an environment conducive to increased employee morale. The findings of this study are based on reasons employees exhibit low morale and how department store managers adjust leadership strategies to meet the needs of their employees. This study had limitations that future researchers can address. The participants who were interviewed only consisted of department store leadership team members. I recommend using organizational leaders from multiple industries to answer research questions in other parts of the United States, not just the Southern portion. The study was limited to a qualitative pragmatic inquiry, which was limited to qualitative data compared to other methods. I recommend that future researchers conduct a quantitative or mixed-method analysis to embody numerical and statistical data concerning this research topic. A quantitative or mixed method research method could be used as an alternative way to

answer the research (Maxwell, 2019). Future research surrounding department store leadership strategies could add to the limited scholarly knowledge and understanding of leaders' leadership strategies within the department store industry.

Reflections

My doctoral journey has allowed me to reach several milestones that brought me great, humbling joy. I reached a milestone as I completed my prospectus, proposal, and now my final study. Although pursuing this doctoral journey has been challenging, it was also rewarding. Honestly, there were times I was not sure if I would be able to complete this endeavor. Still, I persevered through many obstacles, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which included the sudden deaths of several close relatives, the death of someone who was like a sister to me, my health challenges, and a myriad of challenges to achieve my academic endeavors. Throughout my journey, I have been blessed to obtain the necessary skills to cultivate learning independently, think critically, establish appropriate writing capabilities, participate in scholarly research, and personify the characteristics of an independent scholar. I have also been blessed with a caring chair and cohort who encouraged me when they did not even know I needed encouragement.

During my research, I interviewed experienced leaders who have implemented strategies to increase employee morale and improve productivity. I collected a cluster of imperative information during the interviews with the participants. I was this study's primary data collection instrument, so I had to contend with the challenge of not allowing my personal biases to influence the research results. I ensured that I followed the interview protocol and did not go away from the script so that I would not potentially

persuade the participants one way or another that it would not impact the results of my study. I kept an open mind and learned much about leadership, morale, and productivity. I appreciate all the participants who, despite busy schedules, agreed to participate in the study. The interviews could play a significant role in assisting someone searching for strategies to increase employee morale to improve productivity.

I built a wholesome relationship with the participants during the data collection process. The participants were attentive and enthusiastic about sharing their good and not-so-good experiences, which exhibited the need to research this business problem. I uncovered that qualitative interviews allowed me to understand the research problem better. Since there are so many variables to employee morale, I can see why leaders must continue to learn and modify what their employees need to remain interested in the work environment. I have expanded my knowledge of the importance of leadership strategies to increase morale and improve productivity.

Conclusion

The findings from this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study uncovered that leaders in the department store industry could influence employee morale by using effective communication, employee engagement, and employee rewards. Based on the participants' experiences, department store leaders should implement these strategies into their leadership style. Organizations with low employee morale within their work role must adjust their leadership strategies to promote an environment conducive to high employee morale. Sustaining an atmosphere with high morale is required to create motivated and productive employees in a positive working environment (Muhammed &

Soumyaja, 2019). I recommend that department store managers and independent scholars

use these findings and recommendations of this study to gain awareness of new

leadership strategies.

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Appendix A: CITI Training Certificate

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

1. Introduce yourself to the participant.

2. Present and go over the consent form and answer any questions from the
    participants as it relates to the consent form.

3. Provide the participants with a copy of the consent form.

4. Turn on the recording device and note the date and time of the interview.

5. Begin the semistructured interview with question one and continue through to
    question six.

6. Follow up with any additional probing questions or clarifying questions.

7. End interview process.

8. Turn on the recording device.

9. Discuss the following steps: transcript interview and member checking with the
    participant.

10. Thank the participant for being a part of the study.

11. End protocol.

Date: _____

Time of interview: _____

Interviewee Alphanumeric Code: _____

Script:

Hello, thank you for participating in my study. Your participation is voluntary. You can withdraw from this interview without any consequences. You are free to refuse to answer any questions during this interview session. Are there any concerns you have regarding the consent form? Do you have any questions that you would like to ask me?

I am requesting your permission to record this interview to transcribe our conversation and use your response to better understand the methods you employ to increase employee morale at your organization. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

I will now start the recording.

Conduct the interview; thank you again for participating in the study; there will be a follow-up for you to review our discussion and ensure that the transcript of our discussion has been annotated and transcribed correctly. I will contact you to schedule a good time to complete this process.