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Small Business Leaders' Strategies to Improve Organizational Performance

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Abstract

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MBA, University of Phoenix, 2018

BS, University of Phoenix, 2016

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Small business leaders are concerned with leadership that will improve their organizational performance because 20% of new small businesses fail within the first 2 years of operation. Grounded in the transformational leadership theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore leadership strategies small business leaders use to improve organizational performance. The project participants were six small business leaders in the Central Illinois area of the United States who successfully used leadership strategies to improve organizational performance. Data were collected using semistructured interviews and reviewing financial and annual reports. Through thematic analysis, four themes were identified: (a) intellectual stimulation, (b) individualized consideration, (c) inspirational motivation, and (d) idealized influence. A key recommendation is for small business leaders to develop mitigation plans that address resistance to change, limited resources, and cultural barriers that may impede the adoption of transformational strategies. The implications for positive social change include the potential for small business leaders to improve organizational performance, leading to more efficient and effective operations. This improvement can result in higher quality services being offered to the communities they serve.

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Dedication

I want to dedicate my study to my children and my parents, Ramona Joy Harmon, Joseph Lynn Harmon, Gregory Scott Wilson Sr, and Jennifer Wilson. My parents provided me with the blueprint for positive thinking and the love for God to give me the strength needed to believe I can accomplish anything. My mother's parents, the late Mamie Espy and Charles Cannon provided me with my love for family, which has proven to be instrumental in my personal ambition and relationship with my own children. My wife, Kimberly Wilson, for always sticking by my side and giving me the encouragement to continue my academic journey. I hope that this achievement serves as inspiration for my children, showing them that the possibilities are limitless.

Acknowledgments

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Section 1: Foundation of the Project

Effective decision-making and adaptive leadership prevent small businesses from closing within 5 years from the start of operation (Quansah & Hartz, 2021). Small business leaders are always seeking to improve organizational performance and preventing loss of profit. Rafiki et al. (2022) found that poor leadership explains the failure of small businesses. There are numerous factors that contribute to small businesses failing, and leaders who create strategies decide whether they will survive (Engelbrecht & Samuel, 2019; Knezović & Drkić, 2020; Lee & Ding, 2020; Mañas-Rodríguez et al., 2020). The focus of this study was the leadership strategies implemented by small business leaders that improved their organizational performance.

Background of the Problem

An effective leadership style is a critical component to an organization's performance. If the organization's leader lacks leadership abilities, the organization will not function efficiently (Razak et al., 2022). Approximately 20% of new small businesses fail within the first 2 years of operation, 45% do so within the first 5 years, and 65% do so within the first 10 years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Only 25% of small businesses created will continue to be in business after 15 years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Small business performance and sustainability are influenced by leadership styles (Kowo & Akinbola, 2019). Kowo and Akinbola (2019) argued that a small business owner's leadership style affects how people act in order to achieve the goals of the business.

Understanding effective leadership styles is an important area of interest for leaders especially those attempting to comprehend and imitate what makes an individual a "great leader" (Price-Dowd, 2020). Consequently, researchers have conducted studies to examine the many influences of different leadership strategies and their effect on organizational performance (Engelbrecht & Samuel, 2019; Knezović & Drkić, 2020; Lee & Ding, 2020; Mañas-Rodríguez et al., 2020).

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose

The specific business problem was that small business leaders lacked leadership strategies to improve their organizational performance. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore leadership strategies small business leaders use to improve organizational performance. The targeted population was six purposively sampled small business leaders in Central Illinois who had successfully implemented leadership strategies that improved their organizational performance.

I obtained access to the project participants by visiting the area Chamber of Commerce and requesting their small business directory. The small business public directory lists several small businesses in Central Illinois and includes business names, addresses, date of existence, business owner names, and phone numbers. I used the public information from the directory to reach each small business owner via the phone to share brief details regarding this study and check their eligibility for taking part in the study. If they expressed interest and met the inclusion criteria, I obtained their email address to send them an invitation to participate in the study. The data sources were each participant's interview responses as well as a review of each participant's company's

public website and other public documents, such as financial reports, press releases, and figures. The conceptual framework for this pragmatic inquiry was grounded in Burns's (1978) transformational leadership theory.

Research Question

The research question guiding the study was: What leadership strategies do small business leaders use to improve their organizational performance?

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

For this study, I made two assumptions. Assumptions are facts that are assumed to be true, actual, or certain without justification or demonstration (Armstrong & Kepler, 2018). The first assumption was that participants would provide truthful responses. The rationale for this assumption was that I would guarantee their confidentiality. Additionally, I did not ask any socially embarrassing questions or any questions regarding their trade secrets. My second assumption was that the participants would have the knowledge necessary to answer the interview questions. This was a reasonable assumption because the participants had the background and experience necessary to take part in this research study.

Limitations

Limitations are seen by researchers as flaws that are beyond their control and could potentially influence the outcomes of the study (Nelson, 2016). I identified one limitation to this research study. The limitation was that the strategies developed by the

participants of this study would be unique to their businesses and may not be transferrable to other small businesses.

Transition

In Section 1, I described the background of the problem, business problem focus and project purpose, research question, and assumptions and limitations. In Section 2, the literature review and its application to the applied business problem will be discussed. In Section 3, I will describe the ethics that guided the project ethics; nature of the project; population, sampling, and participants; and data collection activities. Additionally, the interview questions, data organization and analysis techniques, and reliability and validity, will be explained before the section is concluded with a transition and summary. In Section 4, I will present the findings, business contributions and recommendations for professional practice, implications for social change, my recommendations for further research, and a conclusion.

Section 2: The Literature Review

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

This literature review contains a critical analysis of professional and academic literature from peer-reviewed journals, seminal books, and a government source, with an emphasis on transformational leadership in the context of increasing organizational performance through effective leadership stratagems. In support of transformational leadership theory is an expansive description of transformational leadership along with current literature, supporting theories, and explanations of how they complement and reinforce transformational leadership theory. The supporting theories include servant leadership, adaptive leadership, entrepreneurial leadership, strategic leadership, evolutionary leadership, benevolent leadership, and spiritual leadership. In contrast to the transformational leadership theory, I provide expansive descriptions of how transactional and autocratic leadership styles differ from transformational leadership. This literature review also comprises research studies that used transformational leadership and other supporting and contrasting theories of transformational leadership to identify their relevancy to organizational performance. I conclude the review with a discussion of studies conducted on the comparative impact of transformational leadership and its impact on organizational performance.

My strategy for searching for academic literature was a cyclical four-step process. The first step was to identify the main concepts of the study, which were leadership strategies, organizational outcomes, and small businesses. The second step was choosing the library to search. I searched the following databases and search engines that were

accessed through the Walden University Library: Google Scholar, Emerald Insight, Academic Search Complete, Business Sources Complete, ABI/Inform Complete, and ProQuest. These databases contained empirical and theoretical research articles from peer-reviewed journals and important concepts from academic books. The third step was conducting the actual search using keywords and phrases. These keywords included *leadership strategy, leadership style, transformational leadership, servant leadership theory, charismatic leadership, emotional leadership, transactional leadership, organizational performance,* and *small business.* The last step was to review and refine the search results by rethinking keyword combinations. In this study, I included references to 112 articles, eight books, and one government literature source. Of the 112 articles, 104 (i.e., 93%) were peer reviewed, and 106 articles (i.e., 95%) were published between 2018 and 2023.

Application to the Applied Business Problem

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore leadership strategies small business leaders use to improve organizational performance. When small business owners implement leadership strategies, they gain access to opportunities for enhancing their organizational performance. All leadership strategies affect employees and the operations of small businesses (Garcia & Russo, 2019). The rates of small business failure are 20% within the first 2 years of operation, 45% within the first 5 years, and 65% within the first 10 years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Only 25% of small businesses will continue to be in business after 15 years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).

Conceptual Framework

In this section, I provide an expansive description of transformational leadership along with current literature. Complementary theories are also described, including an explanation of how they are similar to the transformational leadership theory through a comparison of their key constructs. Additional research studies are discussed to provide empirical evidence and real-world examples demonstrating the effectiveness and impact of transformational leadership in improving organizational performance.

Transformational Leadership and Organizational Performance in Small Businesses

Transformational leadership can directly and indirectly impact the performance of small businesses through mediating and moderating factors. Several studies have investigated its multifaceted influence on organizational outcomes. In an evaluation of a 2-day leadership program meant to determine the impact of improved communication on transformational leadership behaviors, Cohrs et al. (2019) reported several findings, including that (a) transformational leadership influences organizational performance through communication; (b) communication mediated the positive impact of transformational leadership on organizational performance; (c) communication skills improve transformational leadership behaviors, including the clear articulation of a vision for the business, expression of expectation, and individual engagement with employees; (d) employee alignment with the concept, pursuit of expectations, and employment contribute to organizational performance, and (e) communication training enhanced leaders' ability to apply transformational leadership toward improving organizational outcomes.

Manzoor et al. (2019) examined the effect of transformational leadership on the job and organizational performance of employees of small and medium firms in Pakistan, and their results demonstrated a robust positive impact of transformational leadership on organizational performance. They found that a positive mediator is corporate social responsibility or alleviating the quality of life of employees' communities and the organization's commitment to ethical operations among small and medium firms in Pakistan. Corporate social responsibility elevates employees' work satisfaction to enhance the positive impact of transformational leadership on organizational performance.

Idris et al. (2022) examined the effect of transformational leadership, organizational culture, and motivation on employee performance in real estate businesses in Indonesia. They reported the positive and significant impact of transformational leadership on organizational culture, work motivation, and employee performance, finding that organizational culture had an insignificant impact on work motivation and employee performance, and work motivation had an insignificant influence on employee performance. Transformational leadership was shown to have both a direct and indirect impact on employee performance through work motivation.

Transformational leadership also affects organizational performance through motivation. Gilbert and Kelloway (2018) examined the impact of the motivation of a transformational leader on subordinates' perceptions of the leader's behavior through a survey of 179 subordinates in two firms. Gilbert and Kelloway reported that a transformational leader's motivation was associated with subordinates' motivation

through a positive perception of the leader's active-constructive behavior. In examining the impact of transformational leadership on the employee work outcomes of performance and burnout and the workplace behavior of social loafing among telecommunication workers in Pakistan, Khan et al. (2020) found a significant positive association between transformational leadership and work performance through intrinsic motivation. However, they also discovered that transformational leadership had an indirect and insignificant association with work burnout and social loafing.

Impact of Transformational Leadership on Organizational Performance

Leadership Style Synergy and Organizational Performance

Transformational leadership impacts organizational outcomes differently in comparison to other leadership styles. In an investigation of manufacturing firms in the United States that compared the influence of transformational and transactional leadership on innovation, McCann and Sparks (2019) found that internal and external locus of control moderated the positive effect of both transformational and transactional leadership on innovative work behavior. However, Mkheimer (2018) examined the impact of transactional, transformational, and charismatic leadership styles on the organizational outcomes of businesses in Amman, Jordan, and found that none of the three leadership styles significantly influenced business success. The researcher attributed the lack of significant impact of the leadership styles on organizational success to the improper or ineffective implementation of the leadership styles that prevented employee engagement, innovation, and creativity. Proper and practical application of leadership

styles should provide a better determination of the association between leadership styles and business success.

Comparative Analysis of Leadership Styles Across Contexts

In comparison to other leadership styles, transformational leadership has a lesser impact on the organizational outcomes of smaller businesses. Amegayibor (2021) compared the effect of transformational, autocratic, charismatic, paternalistic, and visionary leadership styles on employee performance in small, family-run manufacturing firms in Ghana and found that only authoritarian, charismatic, and paternalistic leadership styles reduced errors to elevate employee performance significantly. In a case study of leadership styles in a Nigerian firm, Olayisade and Awolusi (2021) found that autocratic leadership was the dominant leadership style in small businesses, followed by laissez-faire, bureaucratic, transactional, democratic, and charismatic leadership. The researchers explained the dominance of authoritarian leadership as cultural. Le et al. (2021) investigated the leadership styles of small and medium firms in Vietnam, reporting that most firms adopted autocratic leadership because of the small scale of operations, low employee competence, and a hierarchical set up. Only a small number of managers in their study expressed support for democratic leadership because of the inability of autocratic leadership to accommodate complex work relations and facilitate a more comfortable work atmosphere. Due to cultural norms and practicality, transformational leadership did not significantly impact these cases.

However, transformational leadership can result in better organizational outcomes in small businesses compared to transactional leadership. In examining the link between

leadership style and the varying levels of success of national franchises. Cary (2020) showed that various small franchisees adopted different leadership styles, which had varying impacts on success; however, transformational leadership better predicted franchisee success in the United States. The transformational leadership approach facilitated small business success through leader and employee satisfaction and can also deliver better organizational performance when integrated with other leadership approaches. Mahmood et al. (2020) investigated the impact of various leadership styles on business performance within a Eurasian context and reported several findings. Among firms in Kazakhstan, combining transformational, transactional, and paternalistic leadership has the most significant impact on organizational performance. Due to clan culture's moderating effect, transactional leadership combined with paternalistic leadership was used every day among Kazakhstan firms. Paudel (2020) examined the relationship between leadership styles and business performance with entrepreneurial orientation as a moderating variable among small and medium firms in Nepal and showed several findings. Transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and entrepreneurial direction can profoundly affect organizational performance and small businesses' success. Combining transformational leadership with entrepreneurial orientation leads to better business performance by facilitating improvements in workplace relations and business operations.

Organizational Citizenship and Leadership Styles

Al-Ahmadi et al. (2020b) examined the relationship between leadership style and organizational citizenship with the moderating role of emotional intelligence among

employees of small and medium firms in Ghana. Abdullahi et al. (2020) found that democratic and transformational leadership styles positively predicted organizational citizenship; however, transformational leadership had a more substantial impact on the two leadership styles. Integrating democratic and transformational leadership meant reaping the benefits of result- and people-focused leadership practices that supported more robust organizational citizenship among employees.

Jiatong et al. (2022) compared the impact of transformational leadership and other leadership styles on organizational performance. They showed that transformational leadership can have a similar result, a weaker effect, a better influence, or a more substantial impact when combined with other leadership styles depending on culture, country, and industry contexts. There was a gap in the research gap regarding the effects of transformational leadership, on its own or together with other leadership strategies and styles, on business performance in different cultural, country, or industry contexts, especially in the United States. I contributed to filling this research gap by examining the role of transformational leadership and other leadership strategies on organizational performance in small businesses in Central Illinois.

Efficiency and Sustainability Through Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership plays a crucial role in driving efficiency in businesses. Burawat (2019) examined the nexus between transformational leadership and sustainability performance among Thailand's small and medium manufacturing firms, revealing that such leadership promotes efficiency through lean manufacturing strategies. Jain and Duggal (2018) highlighted how transformational leadership, job autonomy, and

emotional intelligence affect organizational commitment among technology firms in India. Several studies, including those by Al-Ahmadi and Kasztelnik (2021a, 2021b), have emphasized the relationship between transformational leadership and job satisfaction in small businesses. These studies have consistently shown that transformational leadership fosters teamwork and a positive work environment, improving job satisfaction and organizational performance.

In a qualitative multicase study to examine the leadership strategies employed by three owners of successful small and medium businesses or firms that have been operating for at least 5 years in Georgia, Jackson (2021) found that transformational leadership ensures the alignment of employee and business goals, thus ensuring sustainability in small business. Transformational leaders of small firms focus on employee training to enhance performance, strategic planning to improve efficiency, and making the business relatable to the industry to ensure sustainability. Transformational leadership lets owners gain the information, experience, and resources to make sound judgments about business changes and opportunities, and this leadership style also helped align employee goals with the business goals of small business owners.

Transformational Leadership and Innovation

Transformational leadership's impact on innovation and performance has been a focal point in many studies. Garhy et al. (2019) found that while transformational leadership does not directly influence creation, it indirectly impacts performance through fostering an innovative culture. Transformational leadership propels innovative efficiency methods. Through examining Thailand's small and medium manufacturing firms,

Burawat (2019) found that transformational leadership steered adopting a lean manufacturing strategy. This innovative strategy aimed at quality products with minimal waste, notably among automotive firms. Although lean manufacturing advanced sustainability leadership for automotive businesses, there's a need to adopt this innovative approach for nonautomotive sectors**.** Transformational leadership also embraces innovation and thus adjusts to job roles with the moderating role of emotional intelligence. Jain and Duggal (2018) investigated the mediating effect of job autonomy in the link between transformational leadership and organizational commitment. According to their findings, transformational leadership positively affects organizational commitment through innovative job roles, thus enhancing the organizational performance of the small businesses technology sector.

Transformational leadership indirectly influences performance by moderating the role of an innovative culture among small and medium firms. In examining the influence of transformational leadership on innovation and creative performance among small and medium firms in Egypt, Garhy et al. (2019) showed no significant direct impact of transformational leadership on innovation and innovative performance. Transformational leadership indirectly impacts innovation and performance through the moderating effect of a creative culture. It strongly influences innovativeness and creativity in marketing strategy redesign to enhance performance among small and medium firms. Freihat (2020) examined the role of transformational leadership in redesigning marketing strategies in healthcare firms in Jordan and showed the significant impact of this leadership style in redesigning marketing strategies. Specifically, individualized consideration, one of the

four components of transformational leadership, exerted the most substantial influence on marketing strategy redesign. Individualized care involves nurturing the innovativeness and creativity of employees to hone their talents, skills, and experiences. Individualized consideration also facilitates employee acceptance of and participation in change.

Transformational Leadership and Job Satisfaction

Transformational leadership affects organizational performance through job satisfaction. Al-Ahmadi and Kasztelnik (2021a) investigated the link between transformational leadership and job satisfaction in small businesses in Virginia in the United States and reported several findings. One finding is that small companies with leaders trained to employ transformational leadership have reported higher levels of employee satisfaction, which is associated with positive business outcomes. Al-Ahmadi and Kasztelnik also found that transformational leadership affects job satisfaction by fostering teamwork and a positive work environment. Lastly, the relationship stands across different small businesses. The researchers recommended adopting transformational Leadership in Virginia's struggling small businesses in a similar study on the association between transformational leadership and employee satisfaction in small firms in Virginia. Al-Ahmadi and Kasztelnik showed a correlation between a positive work environment and employee performance. A positive work environment led to employee satisfaction that improved performance.

In a meta-analysis on leadership, organizational behavior, and performance, Olutoye and Asikhia (2022) showed that transformational leadership affected job satisfaction by fostering teamwork and a positive work environment. Job satisfaction

improved performance. Transformational leadership positively influences trust toward leaders, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction, which determine organizational performance. Transformational leadership had a significant impact on corporate citizenship. Leadership style has a direct effect on organizational performance. Transformational leadership positively influences trust toward leaders, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction, which determine organizational performance.

Enhancing the Physical Work Environment

Transformational leadership enhances the physical work environment to boost employee creativity and creative self-efficacy, which improves performance among small and medium companies. Chaubey et al. (2019) examined the mediating and moderating impact of creative self-efficacy and physical work environment on the association between transformational leadership and employee creativity and organizational innovation among automotive manufacturing firms in India. Chaubey et al. found that transformational leadership enhances employee creativity, and creative self-efficacy mediated the link between transformational leadership and physical work environment moderated the impact of transformational leadership on employee creativity. A contingent or reward based on goal achievement strengthened the positive influence of components of transformational leadership on job satisfaction in small businesses. Puni et al. (2018) investigated the moderating effect of contingent reward on the connection between transformational leadership and job satisfaction among bank employees. Puni et al. found that contingent compensation strengthens the positive influence of components

of transformational leadership on job satisfaction. Contingent reward moderated the impact of idealized influence and intellectual stimulation on job satisfaction.

Researchers have investigated the indirect impact of transformational leadership on organizational performance via mediating and moderating factors. Transformational leadership indirectly influences organizational performance through diverse pathways. However, despite the research, there still needs to be a gap in the mediating and moderating factors that facilitate small business organizational performance improvements. Researchers have also examined the influence of transformational leadership on organizational performance in various industry and country contexts, solely or in combination with other leadership strategies and styles (Khan et al., 2020). Another research gap is the use of more in-depth research methods. Quantitative studies established the significance and direction of the impact of transformational leadership on the mediating and moderating factors, but a deeper understanding of the association is warranted.

Leadership Strategies in Small Businesses

Several leadership strategies, which were primarily developed for big companies, can also be utilized by leaders in small businesses (Alfarsi, 2021; Howard et al., 2019). However, while every leadership approach influences both the workforce and the functional aspects of small businesses, only some strategies can be effectively implemented in all small business contexts (Garcia & Russo, 2019; Putra & Cho, 2019). Despite this, small businesses across different countries and industries have adopted diverse leadership styles.

Leadership Strategies in the Early Stages of Small Businesses

Specific leadership strategies matter more in the early stages of small businesses. Leaders must be adept at business planning at the start of a small business (Howard et al., 2019). A clear vision is a key part of business planning. Effective leaders bolster the performance of new small businesses by inspiring employees to accept and commit to a meaningful vision for employees, customers, and the community. Engagement with every aspect of the business, communicating effectively, promoting a positive work environment, having a positive attitude, and leading by example also support new small business performance (David Pillai, 2022). These characteristics are crucial in the early stages of small businesses and have a significant impact on organizational performance. Successful small business leaders engage in trial and error to determine the best strategies for the new small business, practice these strategies to maximize outcomes, and are ready to adopt new strategies when circumstances change (David Pillai, 2022).

An evolutionary mindset enables the resolution of conflicts through coordinated efforts, ensuring the survival of emerging small businesses (Van Vugt & von Rueden, 2020). Employees who are unhappy with their company's leadership can have reduced satisfaction and motivation, which often results in poor job performance (Fulmer & Ostroff, 2017; Pittino et al., 2016; Yalabik et al., 2017). Good leadership is vital to the success of new small businesses. Investing in leadership training and development can improve small business performance, especially among small firms at the early stages of operation (Subramony et al., 2018). By allocating resources towards enhancing

leadership skills within the organization, small firms can unlock their full potential and achieve higher levels of success.

Subramony et al. (2018) highlighted the transformative power of leadership training in small businesses. It equips leaders with the necessary tools and knowledge to effectively manage their teams but also fosters a culture of innovation, adaptability, and growth. Strong leadership is crucial in navigating the challenges that arise during the early stages of a small business, and investing in training and development can greatly enhance a leader's ability to make informed decisions, motivate employees, and foster a positive work environment.

Leadership Strategies Common to Small Businesses

Though small businesses may vary in nature, some specific leadership qualities are consistently effective across all small businesses. Some of these consistent leadership qualities include effective use of resources, positivity, risk-taking flexibility, and adaptability in a dynamic business environment (Kocherbaeva et al., 2019). While positivity fosters healthy interactions and positive attitudes between stakeholders, thus enhancing the overall organizational morale, flexibility and adaptability often lead to the business achieving its desired outcomes (Chumphong & Potipiroon, 2019). Lastly, small business leaders need to be risk-takers. However, it is also important to distinguish between calculated risks and threats to ensure that the business and its customers remain safeguarded against the detrimental impacts of uncalculated risks (Kocherbaeva et al., 2019).

Leadership Styles Applied in Small Businesses

Multiple leadership styles have been applied in small businesses in various countries and industries. This indicates that no single leadership style fits the needs of all small businesses, and that the applicability of certain leadership styles is specific to the context of small businesses. The most frequently applied leadership styles in small businesses include transformational, transactional, autocratic, entrepreneurial, strategic, adaptive, evolutionary, benevolent, and spiritual leadership approaches. These leadership styles find broader applicability across various industries and geographic locations.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Chester Burns (1978) founded transformational leadership theory, and through the years, Bernard Bass (1985, 1999) extended Burn's theory by contrasting transformational leadership with transactional leadership across sectors and genders. Bass found that transformational leadership supported better organizational outcomes when compared to transactional leadership, and women tended to adopt transformational leadership more than men.

Transformational leaders are highly proactive in organizations, as they engage in decision-making, participate in various organizational activities, and influences followers to enhance performance (Cho et al., 2019; Jimenez, 2018). Transformational leadership involves robust values and idealized influence to build good relations with and inspire subordinates (Chukwu, 2021). Transformational leaders foster a positive workplace culture by establishing norms and motivating subordinates to embrace the organization's values and strive towards achieving its overall business goals (Jones et al., 2019).

Transformational leadership highlights altruism and self-sacrifice for the follower's or organization's betterment (Manzoor et al., 2019).

Currently, researchers used the transformational leadership theory as the lens for their work on small and medium firms in various sectors (Al-Ahmadi & Kasztelnik, 2021a; Burawat, 2019; Chaubey et al., 2019; Chukwu, 2021; Freihat, 2020; Garhy et al., 2019; Idris et al., 2022; Jackson, 2021; Jain & Duggal, 2018; Manzoor et al., 2019; Puni et al., 2018). Al-Ahmadi and Kasztelnik (2021b) showed how small business leaders in Virginia applied transformational leadership characteristics. Al-Ahmadi and Kasztelnik also found that small business leaders implemented the idealized influence component through charisma, confidence, consistency, consideration for others, and ethical values. They inspired motivation by promoting commitment by example, encouraging employees to become enthusiastic and confident in their abilities, sharing expectations, and involving employees to give them a sense of ownership for their work. Al-Ahmadi and Kasztelnik emphasized that small business leaders facilitated intellectual stimulation by providing employees with opportunities to handle problems to stimulate critical thinking and generate new ideas for the business. Al-Ahmadi and Kasztelnik also discovered individualized consideration among their small business leaders in Virginia meant the leader nurtured employees through encouragement, mentoring, active listening, and individualized recognition. Authors of empirical studies suggested a correlation between transformational leadership, the behavior of others, and the performance of the organization (Siangchokyoo et al., 2019).

Complementary Theories

The complementary theories include servant leadership, adaptive leadership, entrepreneurial leadership, strategic leadership, evolutionary leadership, benevolent leadership, and spiritual leadership. Although each theory is not exact, there are similarities. Through the comparison of their key constructs to those of transformational leadership, I emphasize each theory that complements the transformational leadership theory.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is a leadership style that emphasizes the need to serve others before oneself (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). Greenleaf coined the term servant leadership theory in 1970 but prior, he recognized servant leadership when he read the works of Hermann Hesse's short novel titled Journey to the East (Bennis et al., 2002). It was when he was 60 years of age that Greenleaf published the book titled, The servant as leader (Bennis et al., 2002). Greenleaf defined servant leadership as one is a servant first (Greenleaf, 1970). He is renown in his works concerning servant leadership. From that point, his books and essays have been central to many discourses. Spears (2010) considered the works of Greenleaf and identified ten key constructs of servant leadership to include (a) listening, (b) empathy, (c) healing, (d) awareness, (e) persuasion, (f) conceptualization, (g) foresight, (h) stewardship, (i) commitment, and (j) building community.

It supports transformational leadership in a business context by emphasizing the importance of serving and developing the team members. It focuses on the overall well-

being of the people within the business organization. According to Gandolfi and Stone (2018), servant leader first ensures that the need of the people within the business is served, which often translates to an enhanced service of the overall organization along with its goals. Transformational leaders inspire and motivate their team members through vision and change, while servant leaders prioritize the team members' needs and growth (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). Transformational and servant leaders work together to create an environment that values and inspires employees, resulting in innovation, commitment, and increased performance.

Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership involves continuously assessing priorities, changing targets, anticipating issues, implementing preventive measures, and evaluating and taking worth-it risks (Quansah & Hartz, 2021). Quansah and Hartz (2021) observed 15 small businesses with leaders who successfully exhibited adaptive leadership as they applied foresight and flexibility while dealing with changing business conditions. Bor (2020) found that effective small business leaders avoid organizational complacency by being lifelong learners who are quick to adapt and adaptable in choosing the best management techniques. Adaptive leadership can support transformational leadership. Transformational leadership can be the dominant leadership style, and adaptive leadership can augment transformational leadership during organizational change and be applied in an environment conducive to innovation (Yaghi, 2017). The research study on leadership styles affecting small business leaders' organizational performance is pertinent to adaptive leadership and its potential impact on enhancing the effectiveness of

transformational leadership in managing organizational change, fostering innovation, and preventing organizational complacency among small businesses.

Entrepreneurial Leadership

Entrepreneurial leadership has been widely implemented in small businesses. Entrepreneurial leadership involves a leader who is confident in their ability to think, behave, and act in pursuit of actualizing business vision and plans to benefit all stakeholders; a proactive leader who engages with all people involved in the business; a leader assuming responsibility for facilitating conditions that usher systematic coordination and reactiveness to changes in the business environment; and a leader who fosters productivity by exercising innovativeness and creativity and encouraging the same from employees (Sandybayev, 2019). Entrepreneurial leadership has been applied in small and medium firms in the United Arab Emirates (Sandybayev, 2019), small and medium firms in Kuwait (Sawaean & Ali, 2020), microfirms in West Java, Indonesia (Rusliati et al., 2020), small and medium enterprises in Indonesia (Purwati et al., 2021), small and medium firms in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Alfarsi, 2021), and small businesses in the United Kingdom (Henley, 2022).

Entrepreneurial leadership aligns with transformational leadership through a clear vision, inspirational motivation, effective communication, and empowerment to facilitate creativity and innovation in the organization (Britchenko et al., 2018). Transformational leadership and strategic leadership are closely related. Strategic leadership can be performed in day-to-day duties in a transformational manner.

Strategic Leadership

Strategic leadership involves leaders continuously making decisions on changes or adjustments to ensure short-term financial stability and long-term viability (Taj et al., 2020). Strategic leadership has yet to be applied effectively, but this leadership style is suggested for use in small and medium pharmaceutical firms in Pakistan that experienced operational and financial challenges (Taj et al., 2020). Strategic leadership can complement transformational leadership. Transformational leadership can be the core management style, and strategic leadership can be used to direct new product teams in achieving their innovative targets (Kazmi et al., 2016). The combination of transformational and strategic leadership styles can potentially enhance the effectiveness of management and improve organizational performance.

Evolutionary Leadership

Evolutionary leadership involves the exertion of a conscious effort to understand leadership, particularly the evolution of leadership and its role in the group setting (Van Vugt & von Rueden, 2020). Evolutionary leadership is more of a contemplative exercise for leaders than a practical approach. Evolutionary leadership has been discussed in small groups, which encompass small businesses (Van Vugt & von Rueden, 2020). Evolutionary leadership can support transformational leadership. Evolutionary leadership may allow leaders to identify and confront cognitive biases, reconcile old and new ways of thinking, and consciously prevent themselves from the innate desire to exploit subordinates (Gorecki et al., 2022). Additionally, evolutionary leadership may enable leaders to develop better values, influence subordinates, inspire subordinates,

intellectually stimulate subordinates, and accommodate the individuality of subordinates enhancing organizational performance (Gorecki et al., 2022).

Benevolent Leadership

Benevolent leadership involves a leader concerned with the performance and well-being of employees and the situation of the communities served by the business (Chumphong & Potipiroon, 2019). Benevolent leadership has been applied in small and medium firms in Thailand through leaders who built a supportive work environment to empower employees to perform their tasks (Chumphong & Potipiroon, 2019). Benevolent leadership can support transformational leadership through the alignment of benevolent leadership components. The components include moral actions, creating a sense of meaning, inspiring hope, demonstrating courage for positive action, and positively impacting the community (Grego-Planer, 2022). These attributes, coupled with transformational leadership aspects of consideration for others, ethical values, and encouraging employees may facilitate better organizational outcomes (Al-Ahmadi & Kasztelnik, 2021a).

Spiritual Leadership

Spiritual leadership involves the motivation of employees through the promotion of virtues such as hope, integrity, and connectedness (Rafiki et al., 2022). Spiritual leadership has been applied in small and medium firms in Thailand by leaders who created a purpose that inspired employees through an altruistic organizational culture that facilitated care, respect, appreciation, and belongingness (Rafiki et al., 2022). Motivation essentially refers to an inner or external drive that propels an individuals' enthusiasm and

capacity to persevere through and complete a task (Meng, 2016). This is also the area in which it is most like transformational leadership. Spiritual leadership can support transformational leadership through the infusion of spiritual virtues exhibited in a vision, role modeling, and the actions of follower empowerment to enhance outcomes, especially in firms or business environments where spiritual virtues are admired (Smith et al., 2018).

In contrast to the transformational leadership theory, there are expansive descriptions of how transactional and autocratic leadership styles differ from transformational leadership. The discussion concerning these theories is intended to highlight their distinction.

Transactional Leadership

The main objective of the transactional leadership style is to address the leadership practices of political leaders (Northouse, 2019). Transactional leadership involves offering rewards in exchange for productivity and loyalty and having a penalty system to deter underperformance (Al-Ahmadi & Kasztelnik, 2021b). Transactional leadership has been used in various small businesses in the United States (Al-Ahmadi & Kasztelnik, 2021b; McCann & Sparks, 2019) and small and medium firms in Nepal (Paudel, 2020) through a system or process for providing incentives for productivity or performance and deterrents for sub-par performance or misconduct.

Transactional leadership contrasts with transformational leadership in the underlying management and motivation concepts. Transactional leadership involves offering rewards for productivity (Al-Ahmadi & Kasztelnik, 2021b), while transformational leadership inspires productivity through leadership values (Chukwu,

2021). The two leadership styles contrast (Burns, 1978; Paudel, 2020). However, combining both leadership styles at certain times may benefit an organization, such as relying on transactional leadership during time-sensitive activities requiring risk mitigation and safety and transformational leadership for long-term activities and during times of uncertainty (Baskarada et al., 2017). Different from transformational, autocratic leaders exhibit characteristics that may not be as collaborative with the workers.

Autocratic Leadership

Autocratic leadership involves the leader taking full control over all business decisions (Olayisade & Awolusi, 2021). Autocratic leadership has been applied in small and medium firms in Vietnam (Le et al., 2021), an oil firm in Nigeria (Olayisade & Awolusi, 2021), and a family-run manufacturing business in Ghana (Amegayibor, 2021) by leaders who solely made all business decisions without consulting employees and communicated their decisions to employees for implementation or compliance.

Autocratic leadership contrasts with transformational leadership in terms of the involvement of subordinates, as shown by the preferred adoption of autocratic leadership over transformational leadership in a family firm in Ghana (Amegayibor, 2021). Autocratic leadership is an entirely top-down strategy (Olayisade & Awolusi, 2021), while transformational leadership involves subordinates to foster ownership of their work (Al-Ahmadi & Kasztelnik, 2021a). While autocratic leadership has been viewed and applied in contrast with transformational leadership, autocratic leadership can be combined with transformational leadership given various situations and by using

autocratic leadership in the short term for specific projects such as those with strict deadlines and transformational leadership in the long term (Puni et al., 2018).

This literature review comprises research studies that used transformational leadership and other supporting and contrasting theories of transformational leadership to identify their relevancy to organizational performance.

Organizational Performance of Small Businesses

Organizational performance can be determined by financial and nonfinancial measures of the extent of accomplishment of business goals through the totality of efforts exerted by leaders and employees (Nikpour, 2017; Singh et al., 2016). Generally, organizational performance reflects the achievement of survival, endurance, efficiency, effectiveness, competitiveness, product and service quality, product and service diversification, market growth, and profitability targets within a particular time frame (Ahmed & Shafiq, 2018). Certain determinants of organizational performance discussed below are specific to small businesses.

Survival

Surviving beyond the first or fifth year is a key indicator of small business performance (Sandybayev, 2019). Small businesses face various challenges, such as limited funds, insufficient workers, inexperience, and limited managerial and leadership knowledge, which could cause failure (Rafiki et al., 2022). About 1 million new small businesses are established annually in the United States (Cary, 2020). Approximately 40% of these new businesses fail within the first year of operation, and 50% to 80% fail within 5 years (Quansah & Hartz, 2021). About 90% of online small businesses close

within the first year (Smith, 2020). Approximately 30% of new small business restaurants close within the first year of operation, representing $5.2 billion (i.e., about $16 per person in the United States) in lost revenue (Putra & Cho, 2019). Successful businesses are those that have survived the first year of operation and those that have lasted for more than 5 years.

Job Creation and Retention

Hiring and retention of employees are essential determinants of small business performance (Manzoor et al., 2019; Rafiki et al., 2022). Small businesses have been commended for creating jobs in a wide range of industries and geographic areas for skilled and low-skilled workers, engaging in innovations, promoting sustainable operations, and lessening income inequality (Manzoor et al., 2019). In the restaurant industry, small businesses hire about 14.7 million workers, or around 10% of the total labor force of the United States (Putra & Cho, 2019). Retaining millions of workers reflects the success of small restaurant businesses.

Legal, Regulatory, and Policy Navigation

Since many small businesses have limited capital, they are vulnerable to changes in local tax burden or policies that affect the cost of capital, labor, raw materials, and day-to-day operations. In Florida, local taxes and fiscal spending significantly impact small business operations within and outside the locality (Guo & Cheng, 2018). Small businesses that responded well to changes in Florida's local policies could grow and thrive.

Leadership Effectiveness

Effective leadership determines small business success (Rafiki et al., 2022). Small business leadership is a competitive advantage (Howard et al., 2019). Effective decision-making and adaptive leadership prevent small businesses from closing within 5 years of operation (Quansah & Hartz, 2021). Leaders of small businesses work with limited resources and perform various jobs simultaneously (Putra & Cho, 2019). Many small business leaders need to gain prior managerial experience and tend to make decisions quickly without consulting employees, which could contribute to employee turnover and business failure. Poor leadership explains the failure of small businesses (Rafiki et al., 2022). Poor leadership is one of the reasons for the failure of small restaurants in Indonesia (Putra & Cho, 2019). The failures of 13 small businesses in Turkey's trade, manufacturing, and services sectors within 3 years of operation were primarily due to the leaders' failure to recognize business opportunities, exploit promising opportunities, and build interpersonal relations (Atsan, 2018). Limited business-specific knowledge of leaders explained the struggles and failures of online small businesses (Smith, 2020).

Leadership Strategies and Organizational Performance in Small Businesses

Small businesses are vital components of the global economy, and their success is largely associated with their leadership strategies. These businesses often adopt various leadership strategies and styles to facilitate their operations and thus enhance their organizational outcomes. Leadership strategies tend to impact the organization's performance and overall health significantly. However, the impact of leadership strategies is only sometimes direct, as sometimes they influence organizational

performance based on various intervening factors such as employee motivation, team collaboration, and organizational culture.

Moreover, the leadership style chosen can either enhance or hinder the organizational performance. Various factors often determine the relationship between leadership strategies and organizational performance. For example, a transformational leadership style might inspire employees to go above and beyond their usual tasks, boosting productivity. On the other hand, an autocratic style might stifle creativity but can be effective in situations requiring decisive actions. In addition to that, some external and internal factors can moderate the relationship between leadership and performance, making the connection even more multifaceted. Fundamentally, the relationship between leadership strategies and organizational performance in small businesses is often complex, as both the direct and indirect factors play vital roles in shaping its dynamics.

Impact of Leadership on Organizational Performance

Leadership stands as a guiding light for organizations to achieve their goal in this ever-changing business world. Leadership involves much more than decision-making or just giving out strategic directions, as it influences all the aspects of an organization, including how employees operate, how the business adapts to changes, and how it grows over time. Effective leadership is important to all types of business, both large, medium, and small, but most especially those that struggle to deal with the globalization challenges, digital transformation, and changing markets. The impacts of leadership are mirrored in many different aspects of the organization, starting from employee

satisfaction and performance to long-term business sustainability and ethical considerations.

Employee Performance

Leadership, as the backbone of any organization, plays a pivotal role in driving performance both directly and indirectly. Research by Niken et al. (2022) delved deep into the dynamics between leadership style, organizational culture, and their resultant effects on employee performance, with work motivation as an intervening variable among public sector employees in Indonesia. Niken et al. not only found leadership style to be a significant determinant of employee performance but also illuminated the intricate relationship between leadership and motivation. Similarly, they offered further evidence that suggested that work motivation could mediate both the impact of leadership style on employee performance and the impact of organizational culture on employee performance (Niken et al., 2022). Prayogi and Lesmana (2021) also reported a partial but significant effect of leadership style on employee performance through motivation. A leadership style that facilitates motivation can directly, albeit partially, and indirectly positively impact employee performance (Prayogi & Lesmana, 2021). Leadership indirectly influences organizational performance through motivation as the sole mediating factor or in combination with other factors.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction has risen to become one of the major indicators of organizational health in the evolving world of business. Jonsa and Pasaribu (2021) provided insights into the multifaceted influences of leadership style and the work environment on job

satisfaction. Their findings revealed that the right blend of leadership style and conducive work environment can significantly elevate job satisfaction, which subsequently impacts job performance. Likewise, a study by Chukwu (2021) highlighted the strategies employed by leaders in small businesses, emphasizing the use of financial incentives and job training. These strategies not only motivated employees but also played a pivotal role in enhancing job satisfaction, leading to the successful retention of sales staff and, consequently, increased profit levels. Paais and Pattiruhu (2020) enriched this narrative by pointing out the indirect influence of leadership on performance, bridged by employee satisfaction.

Organizational Culture

The role of leadership goes way past immediate tasks and plays a vital role in structuring the organizational culture. Razak et al. (2022) largely explored the relationship between leadership style and organizational culture and how they influence organizational performance. Their findings brought out a clear picture of how interconnected and interdependent these elements are, with each one playing a role in shaping the broader organizational culture, ultimately driving performance. Visionary leadership fosters a strong organizational culture that can attract top talents and ensure their alignment with the organizational goals. It is also important for leaders to be vigilant enough to the ever-evolving external environment and always be ready to adapt their organizational culture to meet new challenges and opportunities, ensuring long-term relevance and resilience.

Business Sustainability

Business sustainability and long-term growth are largely associated with the type of leadership in an organization. Chukwu's (2021) investigation into the practices of leaders in small businesses in Texas underscores this sentiment. The researcher discovered that leaders who can access the business environment and leverage financial incentives and strategic job training to the advantage of their business usually succeed in retaining crucial sales staff and also enhance their employees' sense of job satisfaction. This largely increases their profit levels and maintains employees, thus ensuring business sustainability.

Employee Welfare and Ethical Considerations

Ethical leadership and employee welfare are both indispensable in the modern business world. Sumlin et al. (2021) threw light on this changing dimension of leadership, emphasizing the profound influence that an ethical environment, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction have on organizational performance outcomes. According to their suggestion, a business that embraces ethics in its leadership style is pivotal in fostering commitment and satisfaction among employees, thus increasing their performance and the overall performance of the organization (Sumlin et al., 2021). Thompson et al. (2018) revealed how small business leaders perceive and prioritize employee health, safety, and well-being depending on the type of leadership they have.

Innovation and Digital Transformation

Leadership is pivotal in navigating the many challenges and opportunities that the digital realm presents to business. Hang (2022) presented a thorough analysis of the leadership capacities vital for small medium enterprises to thrive in the digital economy. In his research, he highlights the importance of vision-building, initiating change, and fostering team development. He also identifies the gaps in leaders' understanding of strategy, change management, and organizational culture, emphasizing the need for continuous leadership evolution in the face of rapid technological advancements. With the rapid evolution in the business world and the surge of Industry 4.0, leaders are forced to embrace a culture of continuous learning, making sure that their businesses remain competitive amidst emerging market trends and technologies.

Small Business Impact of Leadership Styles on Organizational Performance

As previously shown, various leadership styles can be applied in small businesses in different industries and countries. Leadership styles can influence organizational performance directly and indirectly through mediating and moderating factors. Small businesses often face unique challenges in their dynamic ecosystem, and the leadership styles determine their failure or success. Various leadership styles can exist within a small business setting, each affecting the business in different ways. The leadership style applied in a small business affects the operation of all other aspects of the business.

Transactional Leadership and Organizational Performance in Small Businesses

Transactional leadership, characterized by its structured, reward-based approach, has a mixed impact on the performance of small businesses. Al-Ahmadi and Kasztelnik's

meta-analysis (2021b) found transactional leadership to have a negative association with job satisfaction and a positive association with employee attrition in small organizations. McCann and Sparks (2019) examined the influence of locus of control, leadership style, and innovative work behavior among manufacturing firms in the United States. They found out that internal and external locus of control moderated the influence of leadership style. Innovative work behavior and transactional leadership have a positive link to innovative work behavior, especially in small businesses. In an investigation of the relationship between leadership and entrepreneurship with business performance among small and medium firms in Nepal, Paudel (2020) showed that transactional leadership style and entrepreneurship orientation have significant positive effects on organizational performance.

Autocratic Leadership and Organizational Performance in Small Businesses

Autocratic leadership is preferred in many small businesses in different countries, as it facilitates acceptable outcomes. Olayisade and Awolusi (2021) conducted a case study of an oil firm in Nigeria to investigate the impact of Autocratic leadership style on productivity. Although they found out that autocratic leadership is the most dominant leadership style in most small businesses, they also realized that it coexists with other leadership styles, such as laissez-faire, bureaucratic, transactional, democratic, and charismatic leadership (Olayisade & Awolusi, 2021). In their examination of the influence of leadership styles on the organizational outcomes of small and medium firms in Vietnam, Le et al. (2021) found that most small firms adopt autocratic leadership because of their small scale of operations, low employee competence, and hierarchical

set-up. However, some managers expressed support for democratic leadership, claiming that the autocratic leadership style is too simple for complex operations to create a more comfortable work environment (Le et al., 2021). Firm size is an important factor in choosing a leadership style, as many small firms also choose autocratic leadership due to their need to exert control over employees. However, this objective to control employees is often hard to achieve as family and other personal relations influence most small businesses (Le et al., 2021).

Autocratic leadership is also appropriate in small businesses, especially when the employees exhibit passivity and obedience, poor self-discipline, and a desire for encouragement. Autocratic leadership is generational and geographical, with small businesses owned by the older generation and those in rural areas preferring this leadership style more than firms owned by the younger generation and those operating in urban areas (Amegayibor, 2021). Due to the contextual upsides and downsides of autocratic leadership, the researchers recommended balancing between autocratic and democratic leadership to nurture a caring and family-oriented work environment. Amegayibor (2021) investigated the link between different leadership styles and employee performance through a survey of the employees of family-run manufacturing firms in Ghana and reported that autocratic, charismatic, and paternalistic leadership styles affected employee performance. Autocratic, charismatic, and visionary leadership reduced errors. The leadership styles considered were transformational leadership, autocratic leadership, charismatic leadership, paternalistic leadership, and visionary leadership (Le et al., 2021).

Entrepreneurial Leadership and Organizational Performance in Small Businesses

Entrepreneurial leadership has an overwhelmingly positive impact on small businesses. Sandybayev (2019) researched the effect of entrepreneurial leadership on the performance of small and medium firms in the United Arab Emirates, according to owners and management, and reported a positive correlation between entrepreneurial leadership and organizational performance, with entrepreneurial leadership operating as a predictor of organizational performance. Most respondents reported entrepreneurial leadership qualities of creativity, passion, vision, and risk-taking. Based on their investigation of the impact of entrepreneurial leadership, learning orientation, and innovation capacity on the organizational performance of 384 small and medium business owners in Kuwait. Sawaean and Ali (2020) found that entrepreneurial leadership and learning orientation were positively and significantly associated with organizational performance. They also found that the business owners' innovation capacity mediated this positive relationship (Sawaean & Ali, 2020).

Rusliati et al. (2020) examined the impact of entrepreneurial leadership on the emergence and survival of microfirms in West Java, Indonesia. They realized that the adoption of technological information was crucial to the growth of microfirms. Microfirm owners were mostly millennials who found it easier to creatively apply technological information to their business when compared to older owners. Microfirm owners who failed to apply technological information to their businesses eventually lost customers or closed (Rusliati et al., 2020). Entrepreneurial leaders could drive business development, raise revenue, diversify products, grow capital, and hire more workers. An entrepreneur

group also allowed microfirm owners to share information, coordinate training, and gain insights into leadership and business development. Entrepreneurial leaders positively influence business development through effective management, recognition, and capturing of opportunities, confidence, resolve, personal integrity, good communication, and social and technological skills. Purwati et al. (2021) investigated the role of innovativeness on the performance of small and medium firms in Indonesia and found that entrepreneurial leadership strongly influenced firms. Innovativeness served as a mediating factor for social capital to have a substantial positive effect on business performance.

Similarly, Alfarsi (2021) examined the impact of entrepreneurial leadership competencies on the survival of small and medium firms in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and showed that the competencies of innovation, leadership, networking, and risk-taking had a significant positive influence on firm survival. Innovation and leadership competencies substantially affected the performance and survival of small and medium firms. Networking supported competitive advantage and market growth. Risk-taking enabled the calculated assumption of risk and the implementation of proper risk management strategies. Henley (2022) surveyed the managers of small businesses in the United Kingdom to determine the leadership practices that differentiated the frontier and laggard firms and found several results. Leadership quality determined the performance gap between the frontier and laggard firms. Leadership skills in promoting entrepreneurial cognition and motivation can support small business performance. Cognition translates into adaptability and the effective deployment of resources.

However, limited evidence indicates the effect of improvements in leadership and management skills on productivity.

Servant Leadership and Organizational Performance in Small Businesses

In a meta-analysis, Gandolfi and Stone (2018) considered the effectiveness of servant leadership in small businesses and reported several findings. Effective leadership involves modeling, inspiring a shared mission, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. Servant leadership meets the elements of effective leadership. Servant leadership involves listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and community building. The proper application of servant leadership can elevate workforce engagement and improve organizational performance in small businesses.

Strategic Leadership and Organizational Performance in Small Businesses

In an investigation of the influence of strategic leadership on organizational performance in Pakistan's small and medium pharmaceutical firms, Taj et al. (2020) showed the role of strategic leadership in addressing challenges firms face. Leadership is lacking among small and medium pharmaceutical firms in terms of having a long-term vision, appropriate human resource management, appropriate policies and procedures, effective monitoring and assessment, and technological competence. Strategic leadership can address these issues by developing an assessment of tools and standards for measuring and controlling organizational outcomes and preparing for changes in the business environment.

Adaptive Leadership and Organizational Performance in Small Businesses

Quansah and Hartz (2021) explored the impact of adaptive leadership on decision-making by interviewing 32 leaders of 15 thriving small businesses and found the importance of decision-making and adaptive leadership. Given that about 50% of new small businesses close within 5 years, leaders of successful small businesses prevent firm complacency by continuing to learn, being agile and flexible, managing time well, building strong relations and networks, and creating a family-oriented work culture to elevate business survival.

Evolutionary Leadership and Organizational Performance in Small Businesses

In a meta-analysis on evolutionary leadership in small businesses, Van Vugt and von Rueden (2020) identified several benefits of evolutionary leadership on small business performance. Evolutionary leadership involves using tools and exercises to better understand leadership and help leaders overcome subjective biases and blind spots. It also involves recognizing the human potential for resolving conflicts through the coordination of leaders and subordinates. Engagement in collaboration indicates good leadership. It also involves understanding the barriers to effective leadership: the mismatch between modern and traditional environments, cognitive biases in leader decision-making, and the innate human propensity to command and take advantage of others. By understanding these barriers, leaders can self-evaluate and rectify them in their leadership to better impact organizational outcomes.

Benevolent Leadership and Organizational Performance in Small Businesses

Chumphong and Potipiroon (2019) explored the role of benevolent leadership and the mediating effect of employee psychological empowerment and customer service behaviors on business performance among small and medium firms in Thailand. Chumphong and Potipiroon explained that benevolent leadership was a determinant of high performance, with employees' psychological empowerment and customer service behaviors having a full mediating impact. To achieve superior performance, leaders of small and medium firms should create a supportive work environment to enable employees to deliver top-notch customer service.

Spiritual Leadership and Organizational Performance in Small Businesses

Rafiki et al. (2022) explored the application of spirituality leadership to small and medium firms and reported that its core principle is vital in managing small and medium firms effectively and efficiently. Spirituality affects the motivation and performance of employees. Spiritual values motivate and inspire employees to commit to their work and the organization, which elevates job satisfaction and employee performance. Spiritual leaders create a purpose that inspires employees and develops an altruistic organizational culture based on humility, compassion, honesty, care, and respect for each other to foster appreciation and a sense of belongingness.

Summary and Transition

Within Section 2, I provided the literature review opening narrative, and an application to the applied business problem. Several themes emerged from the review of academic qualitative, quantitative, and mixed studies. Leadership is crucial to the

performance of small businesses. Certain determinants of organizational performance are specific to small businesses. Leadership can directly or indirectly affect small business performance and can indirectly affect performance through mediating and moderating factors. Various leadership styles have been observed in small businesses. Transformational leadership indirectly affects performance through mediating and moderating factors. Communication, motivation, efficiency, job autonomy, job satisfaction, and corporate social responsibility mediated the positive impact of transformational leadership on organizational performance. Emotional intelligence, innovation, and contingent reward moderated the positive influence of transformational leadership on organizational performance. Transformational leadership can have a similar effect, weaker impact, stronger influence, or elevated effect in combination with other leadership strategies and styles on organizational performance relative to other leadership styles. A context-specific investigation of the direct and indirect impact of leadership on performance, leadership strategies that small business leaders use to improve organizational performance, and the impact of transformational leadership, on its own or in combination with other styles, in small businesses in the United States were the research gaps.

Concerning methodology, most of the studies were quantitative or mixed method, which examined the association between leadership style, organizational outcomes, and moderating or mediating variables in small businesses. The qualitative studies offered explanations of the influence of leadership style on organizational outcomes in small businesses based on the accounts of leader managers or employees. A small number of

single or multiple case studies covered the impact of leadership style on organizational performance in a specific industry or geographic context.

In Section 3, I will describe project ethics; the nature of the project; population, sampling and participants; and data collection activities. Additionally, I will describe the interview questions, data collection activities, interview questions, data organization and analysis techniques, reliability and validity and transition and summary. I will conclude with Section 4, presentation of findings, business contributions and recommendations for professional practice, implication for social change, recommendations for further research, and conclusion.

Section 3: Research Project Methodology

Project Ethics

As an instrument for data collection, I was responsible for ensuring that the information presented and discussed in the study was reliable, authentic, and accurate. I was also accountable to participants for any errors that may arise. A researcher in a qualitative investigation is an active instrument for gathering data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Collecting rich data from participants occurs through the facilitative role of the researcher in creating a comfortable and open atmosphere and using cues to ensure the smooth flow of information sharing (Anderson, 2010). As a business owner, I had minimal knowledge of the topic and had no prior relationships with the participants I interviewed.

I conducted the qualitative pragmatic inquiry honestly and ethically. According to the *Belmont Report*, researchers must address three elements of ethical research when conducting research using human subjects: (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). As a data-gathering instrument, I ascertained my personal beliefs, experiences, judgments, and expectations and followed the ethical principles emphasized in the *Belmont Report.* Several measures were useful in limiting the influence of researcher biases and subjectivity during data gathering, along with receiving consent from the participants.

Informed consent ensures ethical research. Informed consent refers to the voluntary communication of agreement to participate in a study after receiving adequate

information about the study and the circumstances surrounding the study to support a sound decision on participation (Burkhardt et al., 2022). I made a phone call and then sent a letter of invitation to each potential participant. The letter contained an introduction of myself as the researcher and a brief explanation of the purpose of the study. Once the potential participants agreed to take part in the study, I emailed them the informed consent form. The informed consent form contained details about the interview procedures, voluntary nature of the study, risks and benefits of being in the study, privacy, and my contact information for questions. I began collected data for the study upon receiving the Walden University Institutional Review Board's approval (Approval Number 01-30-24-1018232).

I protected the privacy or confidentiality of the participants throughout the study. Ensuring privacy or confidentiality involves setting limits on information to be collected and revealed (Pearlson et al., 2019). I only used the information provided by participants for the purpose of my exploration and did not include individuals' names, business names, or identifying information of the participants and their organizations in the final research report. Furthermore, I protected the names of participants by assigning them the participant codes of P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6 and C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, and C6 to identify their respective companies. I did not offer incentives for participation in the study, which ensured transparency and ethical considerations in the research practices.

I safeguarded accessibility to the data throughout the study. Accessibility pertains to the protection of information and conditions of access (Pearlson et al., 2019). I will keep the recordings; transcriptions; and digital storage devices, such as USB drives, in a

locked drawer in my home office for 5 years to protect the rights of the participants. After 5 years, I will shred my transcriptions and interpretation notes and permanently erase or delete the recordings and electronic data.

I shared a summary of the results with the participants. Participants were allowed withdraw from the study at any time by sending me an email; however, there were no withdrawals.

Nature of the Project

I selected the qualitative method for this study because I wanted to answer what, how, and why questions (see Saunders et al., 2015). I sought to answer who, what, and how questions as I explored the leadership strategies small business leaders use to improve their organizational performance.

I chose a pragmatic qualitative research design for this study because it is appropriate for exploratory research. The aim of pragmatic qualitative research is to connect theoretical concepts with practical application (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Given that I focused on a phenomenon within small businesses, the pragmatic inquiry design was the most appropriate to use.

Population, Sampling, and Participants

To be eligible to participate in this study, individuals had over 18 years old and be leaders of small businesses in Central Illinois who had implemented leadership strategies that improved their organizational performance. Qualified small businesses were those with less than 500 employees. Using eligibility criteria ensures that the participants can provide sufficient data to address the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I gained access to the participants by visiting the area Chamber of Commerce and requesting their small business public directory. The small business directory listed several small businesses in Central Illinois and included the business name, addresses, date of existence, business owner names, and phone numbers.

The researcher developing a connection with the participant is commonly seen as a critical skill when it comes to conducting interviews with effectiveness (Bell et al., 2014). I established a working relationship with the participants by sending them an email introducing myself, my role in the community, and the purpose of the study. I sent an invitation to the small business leaders asking them for their participation in the study and explaining the study's purpose, impact, and relevancy to small business success. Once they confirmed their interest, I sent the informed consent form.

Purposive sampling and snowballing are helpful procedures for collecting rich and relevant research data. According to Cash et al. (2022), seeking and selecting participants from a specific population is defined as purposive sampling. Knott et al. (2022) suggested using purposeful sampling to ensure participants can provide rich data when answering research questions. Cash et al. described snowballing as a process where the researcher asks individuals for other potential participants that meet the research criteria. I used purposive sampling and did not find the need to use snowballing.

Lenth (2001) suggested researchers ask themselves the question concerning whether a too small or too large population size has ethical implications. Vasileiou et al. (2018) argued that sample sizes vary given their methodological and practical requirements. For this pragmatic inquiry, I used six participants to help me answer the

research question of: What leadership strategies do small business leaders use to improve their organizational performance? Yin (2018) highlighted that the sample size is contingent upon the complexity and nuance of the research subject as well as the depth and scope of the data gathered. Gentles et al. (2015) asserted that in a qualitative study, achieving data saturation may require a sample size ranging from four to 15 participants.

Data saturation is achieved when data collected from the participants contains no new information. Determining the moment of data saturation occurs when further analysis of additional data yields no new information, themes, or coding categories (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Tran et al., 2016). Data saturation is reached when the data collected from a specific sample size is enough to address the research question and gathering data from more participants may not be necessary to comprise a thorough investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2016). I employed methodological triangulation with data gathered from each participant in semistructured interviews as well as a review of each participant's company's public website and other public documents, such as financial reports, press releases, and figures. I interpreted the participants' responses and then analyzed their companies' public websites and other public documents shared to corroborate their interview responses. Summaries of my interpretations of their interview responses were emailed to each participant for validation of accuracy. When participants confirmed my interpretations and no new information was shared during this step, data saturation was obtained.

Data Collection Activities

In my role as the researcher, I served as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis in this qualitative pragmatic inquiry. Moser and Korstjens (2018) identified participant observations, interviews, and focus group discussions as the most commonly employed methods for data collection in qualitative research. To answer the research question, I collected data from semistructured interviews using voice communications. Semistructured interviews allow a researcher to be flexible when asking the interview questions while still aligning the data collected with the study's focus (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). According to DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), gathering unstructured data in the form of research participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs regarding a specific subject, will allow the researcher to delve deeply into delicate and sometimes sensitive matters (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

I followed my interview protocol (Appendix) to ensure the same process was used during each interview to collect the participants' responses to the interview questions. Fusch et al. (2018) emphasized the use of an interview protocol guide as being beneficial in reducing biases and misunderstandings between the researcher and participants. I gained permission to audio record each interview to ensure I captured the participants' exact words for later interpretation. I also analyzed their companies' public websites to examine documents that shared and corroborated the data points from the interviews to validate my interpretation of the participants' responses. The disadvantages of semistructured interviews are researchers' prejudices and incorrect data interpretations (Buys et al., 2022).

I conducted a single interview session with each participant. While doing more than one interview session for each participant may support the collection of more details (Ruslin et al., 2022), the participants in the current study were busy because they were directly involved in the daily management of their business. It would have been difficult to schedule more than one interview with the participants. I targeted an interview session of 1 hour because an hour is enough time to extract detailed information from the respondents while preventing fatigue on the part of the researcher and participants (see McGrath et al., 2019). I used an iPhone voice recorder application to capture the participants' responses and also took notes regarding my observations. Each interview session was held in a comfortable setting with minimal distractions (i.e., their secluded office location), where no one could see who was participating in the study.

I informed the participants when the last interview question was reached. Afterwards, I informed them that the interview was at an end and asked them if they had anything more to add; no one had anything more to add. By actively listening and valuing their input beyond the structured interview questions, the research process was comprehensive, inclusive, and respectful of the participants' perspectives.

I described the process of member checking with the participants at the end of the interviews. Member checking, alternatively referred to as participant or respondent validation, is a method used to examine the credibility and reliability of the findings (Birt et al., 2016). Welch et al. (2014) highlighted the use of member checking by researchers to ensure the validity and correctness of their interpretation of their participants' responses as well as to ascertain the intended meaning, thereby serving as an accuracy

assessment tool. At the conclusion of the interview session, I summarized the interviews based on the audio recorded through Microsoft Word. I identified and organized each participant's information in Microsoft Excel. When member checking, each participant was given 14 days to review my interpretation of their responses. This gave the participants the opportunity to check for any errors or mistakes. Participants were urged to make sure their intended comments were accurately reflected in my interpretations. There were no discrepancies reported, thus I did not make any changes because my interpretations were accurate and confirmed by each participant, allowing me to reach data saturation.

Interview Questions

1. What leadership strategies have you applied that have positively impacted your organization's performance?
2. What strategies do you use to ensure employees responded positively to your leadership style?
3. How did you ensure your strategies would provide tangible outcomes?
4. What tangible outcomes have you identified that were not included in your strategy?
5. How did you use your strategic outcomes to evaluate your leadership style?
6. What strategies did you use to ensure you minimize challenges to improving organizational performance?

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

The methodologies that researchers employ to organize data play a pivotal role in the analysis of information and the presentation of research discoveries (Yin, 2018). After completing the interviews, I input and organized the data into Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel using NVivo 12 computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. Qualitative researchers utilize NVivo software to support them in gathering, arranging, examining, visualizing, and presenting data (Allsop et al., 2022). All electronic data were saved into a portable electronic storage device. I kept the interview recordings, the storage device containing electronic data, and my notes in a locked drawer inside my home office. Data on my computer are protected by a password. I will keep the data safe for 5 years, after which, I will permanently delete the recordings, clear the storage device, and shred my notes.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Reliability refers to the dependability of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). This is achieved by showing that the research procedures are logical, described in detail, congruous, and repeatable (Patton, 2015). I enhanced the dependability of my study through data saturation, an interview protocol (Appendix), interpretation of interview responses, and member checking of data interpretation. I conducted member checking until I reached data saturation. In qualitative research, data saturation is reached when the researcher is satisfied with the quality of interview responses or the responses fully reflect the perspective of participants and certain responses start repeating (Sim et al.,

2018). I also followed the interview protocol (Appendix) for the interview session with every project participant to ensure that the process was consistent with each project participant. All data collected were voluntarily given.

After transcribing the interview audio recording, interpreting each project participant's response, analyzing other data using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (i.e. NVivo) and generating themes, I provided the participants with a copy of my interpretations for member checking. Member checking serves as a benchmark for validity assessment (Madill & Sullivan, 2018). The participants confirmed my interpretations were accurate and no changes were needed. If there were changes, the interpretations would have been updated and shared again to ensure accuracy. The member checking process also supported the achievement of data saturation.

Validity

Validity in qualitative research covers credibility, transferability, and confirmability of the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). I used several measures to achieve a reasonable level of credibility, transferability, and confirmability for my study. By employing these measures, I increased the rigor and validity of the research study.

Credible research findings are based on the perspective of participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Credibility is attained through the researcher's skills throughout the research process and by gathering rich data (Patton, 2015). I aimed for credible research findings by employing an interview protocol (Appendix), member checking, and triangulation. An interview protocol ensured I followed the same process with each participant. Interpretation of each participant's response, use of methodological

triangulation to corroborate participants' public websites and archival documents to their responses to the interview questions, and member checking ensured credibility of the data collected.

As an active instrument for data collection, I aimed to collect rich data by using probing and follow-up questions when necessary; I ensured prolonged contact by conducting an interview for about an hour to capture in-depth responses; I applied intuiting, listened actively, and didn't interfere unless the responses were veering off topic.

Transferability refers to the applicability of the findings to other situations or contexts by others, particularly future researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). I enabled others to determine the transferability of my research findings by describing and abiding by the data gathering and analysis methods and strategies that aligned with my research design, such as by uniformly applying the interview protocol and collecting data until data saturation was reached. I also presented and discussed the findings in detail. Descriptive detailed data allow others to comprehend the findings and decide the transferability of the findings for themselves (Patton, 2015).

Confirmability ensures that the findings can be validated by others (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). I addressed confirmability through probing questions during the interview, transcript review, member checking, and methodological triangulation. I made sure to apply a uniform process for each interview. I also fully documented the research process. Describing the strategies, I used during data collection and analysis ensured that others could verify the findings of my study. Confirmability of research findings can be

achieved by discussing reflexivity or the acknowledgement of the researcher's role in the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). I also reflected on my frame of mind and actions throughout the research process to curb biases to allow me to accurately obtain participant perspectives and experiences.

Data saturation is reached when the data collected from a specific sample size is enough to address the research question and gathering data from more participants may not be necessary to compromise a thorough investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2016). I interpreted the project participants' responses, analyzed their public websites, and other documents shared to corroborate their interview responses. The interpretation of their interview responses was emailed to each project participant for validation that my interpretations were correct. When project participants confirm or correct my interpretations and no new information is shared during this step, data saturation was obtained.

Transition and Summary

In Section 3, I described project ethics; the nature of the project; population, sampling, and participants; and data collection activities. Additionally, I proposed the data organization and analysis techniques, reliability and validity and ended Section 3 with a summary of key points. I will conclude with Section 4, presentation of findings, business contributions and recommendations for professional practice, implication for social change, recommendations for further research, and conclusion.

Section 4: Findings and Conclusions

Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore leadership strategies small business leaders use to improve organizational performance. Grounding the qualitative pragmatic inquiry with the transformational leadership theory, I interviewed six project participants using six open-ended questions (Appendix) aimed at answering the overarching research question: What leadership strategies do small business leaders use to improve organizational performance? Each participant's demographic information is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1

Project Participants' Demographic Information

Participant ID	Years of experience	Business type	Business title	Age
P1	6	Cosmetology	Owner	37
P2	4	Commercial radio	Program Director	37
P3	1	Entertainment company	President/CEO	41
P4	6	Architectural company	Associate managing director	42
P5	19	Attorney	Owner	48
P6	6	Restaurant	Owner	39

P1 was a small business owner who was the overseer of a local barbershop and salon. They are an avid traveler who enjoys spending time with family in Florida. They have operated their own company for 6 years and have a bachelor's degree in communication and a barber license issued by the State of Illinois.

P2 was a college admissions representative before going into their current career in commercial radio. They were the program director for a local radio station, servicing over four counties. They were also a co-owner of an event planning management company. P2 has a bachelor's degree in journalism.

P3 was the president and chief executive officer of an entertainment company. They had 12 full-time employees. P3 provides consulting services and produces local media segments aimed at providing exposure to local entertainers and models. P3 has a bachelor's degree in business administration and also attended a local university to receive their master's in business administration.

P4 was the associate managing principal for a growing architectural firm. P4 has a bachelor's degree in applied science. They were previously a real estate agent for 6 years before transitioning into their new profession. P4 enjoys spending time with their family and coaching local area youth sports.

P5 was a criminal defense attorney specializing in family worker's compensation, family law, and criminal cases. P5 has owned and operated their law firm for the 19 years and has several other local businesses, including a restaurant and a grocery store.

P6 was the owner of two restaurants in the local area. P6 had over 6 years of experience in the restaurant industry and enjoys providing services to the community through their restaurants by encouraging community groups to host activities and other sessions at the restaurants.

I thematically analyzed the data using the NVivo software, Version 13, an application that helped structure and organize the codes into four general themes. I coded

participants as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6. The main goal of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to identify and explore the leadership strategies the small business leaders used to improve their organizational performance. The emergent themes from the thematic data analysis are depicted in Table 2. The table is organized to show the frequency of the attributes shared by the participants that aligned with the key constructs of transformational leadership. Individualized consideration was the most frequently described attribute by the participants. Within the following subsections, I discuss the four emergent themes in detail.

Table 2

Emergent Themes From Data Analysis

	Intellectual stimulation	Individualized consideration	Inspirational motivation	Idealized influence
Number of times the participant mentioned this theme	23	26	25	24

Within the following subsections, I discuss the four emergent themes in detail. I also include an explanation of how the findings from the current study confirms or disconfirms the literature review findings and I provide relevant literature found since the initial review related to the topics of intellectual stimulation and organizational performance, individual consideration and organizational performance, inspirational motivation and organizational performance, and idealized influence and organizational performance.

Theme 1: Intellectual Stimulation

Intellectual stimulation refers to the ability of leaders to encourage followers to challenge their beliefs and values as well as those of the leader and the organization (Bass, 1985). According to Bass (1985), intellectual stimulation has to do with the leaders stimulating their employees to be innovative and creative using their problem-solving skills to view challenges from different vantage points. In this construct, emphasis is placed on fostering an environment where creativity and innovation are encouraged and celebrated. Leaders who excel in intellectual stimulation provoke followers to question assumptions, reframe problems, and approach old situations in new ways (Bass, 1999).

The conceptual framework of transformational leadership has a correlation to the importance of aligning leadership styles with organizational culture and individual ambitions. During the initial literature review, I found the work of Iris et al. (2022) and Jiatong et al. (2022) who emphasized how transformational leadership had a positive impact on the work culture. Since the initial literature review, I found the study conducted by Razak et al. (2022) who reported a relationship between leadership and culture but with greater emphasis on motivation and organizational performance. In the current study, P1 illustrated how fostering a culture of responsibility, mentorship, and goal-oriented feedback helps develop a sense of identity and is useful for motivating team members. An example of aligning leadership styles with organizational culture was evident in the following statement from P1:

> I value having someone to ensure I am on track and meeting my goals. So I try and treat others the way I want to be treated. I want an organizational culture that

> understands the importance of assisting others. I hold staff meetings that are focused solely on the benefits of assisting their coworkers. This has continued to define our work culture and employees began to treat each other like family. When employees view their coworkers like family, I have seen more open communication and intellectual exchange, which can lead to new ideas and approaches.

In the initial literature review, I also discovered Garhy et al. (2019) who found that transformational leadership indirectly impacted culture but not in an innovative manner. This finding may warrant additional research because of the geographic location and the participants of the study. Garhy et al.'s findings do not disconfirm the findings of the current study but rather require additional research to confirm or disconfirm.

P2 noted the importance of meticulous planning, strategic organization, and effective delegation as cornerstones for achieving operational efficiency, optimal resource utilization, and overall success. Leaders who identify issues early on, prioritize key focus areas, and align resources, maximize their chances of fostering effective organizational performance. Similar to the initial literature review findings of Idris et al. (2022), P2's insights highlight the pivotal role of strategic foresight and decisiveness in navigating the complexities of the business landscape. P2 shared their insight by stating,

> Communication, organization, and preplanning are the pillars of my leadership style. As soon as an event or promotion is over, I start putting the basic planning pieces together for the same event next year. This helps alleviate any potential issues and completes many of the minor steps needed in the project. I teach this

> process of planning with my employees, and it has increased our overall bottom line and allowed us to operate more efficiently.

P3 explained the pivotal role of communication and the assignment of challenging roles, ensuring employees feel directly responsible for the outcomes. Leadership provides inspiration and gives teams the resources to be productive and have high morale (Garcia & Russo, 2019). Encouraging a culture of responsibility empowers employees to take ownership of their tasks and decisions, and this autonomy challenges them to think critically and independently, stimulating intellectual development. P3 indicated,

> I am always available to my employees and make sure they have the tools and resources to be successful. I enjoy trusting them and giving them responsibilities that develop their skills. I love seeing their faces when they finally figured out a difficult task. However, before giving them a difficult task, I am sure to communicate all aspects of the tasks and how to get it done.

P6 emphasized the importance of hands-on experience and by-example leadership. According to Sandybayev (2019), leading by example and building the capability of the staff is an essential element of transformational leadership. Hands-on leaders are directly involved in problem solving, allowing them to model critical thinking and innovative problem-solving strategies to their team. By demonstrating these skills in action, leaders solve immediate issues and teach their team members valuable intellectual skills, encouraging them to think critically and creatively. Gilbert and Kelloway (2018) reported that a transformational leader's motivation is associated with subordinates' positive perception of the leader as active-constructive. P6 stated,

> Being a hands-on owner and operator is essential to the business's success and central to organizational performance and employee engagement. I want to inspire and motivate my employees to complete tasks that I have given them. By being hands on, I am not just showing them how to do it or providing instructions. I will do the task with them to hopefully get them feeling confident to do it.

Theme 2: Individualized Consideration

Individualized consideration is a form of leadership that is evident when the leader's attention is given to the needs of their employees on a one-on-one basis (Bass, 1985). Individualized consideration involves fostering a work environment that is both diverse and supportive, one in which the unique qualities of everyone are acknowledged and valued (Bass, 1985). Leaders that practice individualized consideration encourage two-way communication, listen actively, and consider the followers' feelings and perspective in decision-making processes (Steinmann et al., 2018). Communication is linked to individualized consideration, a cornerstone of successful leadership, provided employees respond effectively to different leadership styles (Bass, 1985).

The semistructured interviews revealed diverse participant perspectives, offering a variety of the participants' practices for empowering their employees to ensure employees felt acknowledged; valued; and as a result, became actively engaged. Leaders develop an environment conducive to personal growth, team cohesion, and enhanced organizational outcomes by prioritizing communication, accountability, empathy, and inclusivity, and these practices align with the individualized consideration construct of transformational leadership.

Jiatong et al. (2022) found that when an employer acknowledges employees' contributions, it makes employees feel cared for and responsible, creating a caring culture at work where workers feel valued and respected, which can often increase engagement. Team bonding activities are designed to bring employees together, fostering a sense of unity and collaboration (Bass, 1985). When these activities are planned to acknowledge and incorporate individual team members' diverse preferences, strengths, and development needs, they reflect individualized consideration. These approaches enhance team cohesion while also acknowledging each member's unique contribution to the organization, boosting overall engagement. P1 stated,

> Anytime I see them doing something or they are staying as long as I am, or they are moving like [sic] how I move; I make sure I let them know I see that. We have regular social outings where they bring their spouses and children. We enjoy being around each other, we laugh, we have a good time. I realized soon that this was having a direct impact on my organizational culture. We began to look at ourselves as family and not just another coworker.

P1 disclosed the importance of selecting influential team members by focusing on the inclusion and appreciation of each employee. This leadership strategy motivates employees to excel and contributes to the team's collective success, embodying the essence of individualized consideration, a key construct of transformational leadership.

P3 ensured that the organization's leadership was aligned with the organization's culture by monitoring employees' attitudes and moods to realize the cultural dynamics and how they impact organizational performance. According to Greenleaf (1970),

transformational leadership takes place when a leader prioritizes the needs and development of the followers above anything they need themselves. This strategy displays a leader's commitment to continuous improvement and inclusivity. P3 stated,

> I look at the company culture and compare that to the overall goals of the company; we see a detailed approach to leadership evaluation that looks at organizational success because of individuals' behaviors being aligned with our collective goals. I want to make sure we have a company that values the needs of others, both employees and our clients.

P2 discussed the issue of accountability and autonomy, which are two factors for employee individualized consideration: employee engagement and the ownership of tasks. According to Howard et al. (2019), employees who are allowed to set their own deadlines and work at their own pace tend to be more responsible because they feel empowered through the ownership of their tasks, which, in turn, brings autonomy and responsibility. P2 stated that, "Instead of me saying, 'I need this by April 15th,' I say, 'when can you get this to me by?' That changes the dynamics and makes them take responsibility for the outcome." Again, this provides an example of individualized consideration along with intellectual stimulation, which are two key constructs of transformational leadership. Henley (2022) found the practice of leadership creates a framework based on the goals and deadlines of individuals to promote self-accountability and individual growth.

P5 discussed developing a workplace where team members interact with trust and respect. According to Prayogi and Lesmana (2021), leaders involved in various duties

and keeping a good attitude tend to act professionally and demonstrate commitment. Through this, an organizational culture is developed and characterized by mutual respect and accountability where employees are appreciated after a job well done and, therefore, contribute to the organization's success (Mkheimer, 2018). P5 declared,

> I help take out the garbage, I help wipe down toilets, I help answer the phone. Moreover, if I am the boss doing it, there is no excuse for you not doing what your work obligations are. Regardless of what happened at home or in my personal life, I make sure that this is a safe environment here for them and that I do not bring my problems to work. I had an employee detail [sic] that she was having a rough day due to some personal family issues they were having. She let me know that words couldn't describe the feeling she had when I came over and helped them out. This creates respect and is something that I want my employees to have with one another.

The practice of appreciating employees and having mutual respect directly aligns with the construct of individualized consideration. According to Siangchokyoo et al. (2019), when leaders take part in routine tasks, it makes employees feel valuable and motivates them to do an excellent job. Recognizing and celebrating individual achievements motivates employees and helps them understand how their work contributes to the organization's performance. During the initial literature, the works of Siangchokyoo et al. showed a correlation between transformational leadership, the behavior of others, and the performance of the organization.

P6 was adamant that communication was a critical leadership tool that was clear, respectful, and all-inclusive. Using cohesive communication, team members would act as a team and show respect to each other. As discussed in the literature review, Cohrs et al. (2019) found that a group can easily align itself through regular organizational communication. Thus, each member of the team can feel essential and valuable. By implementing cohesive communication and inspiring mutual respect, the leader creates a favorable environment for individuals who strive to succeed while contributing to the organizational goals (Cohrs et al., 2019). P6 stated:

> I set up staff meetings. I make sure that all my employees are in a group chat where I express my wants and expectations, and I execute it in a way where I make sure everybody is on the same page. Oftentimes, I use the word overcommunicate. I will overcommunicate my goals and specific tasks I need done. This form of communication has somewhat spread throughout the organization. My employees now use this form of communication among each other and even me.

P3 confirmed the importance of communication and availability as essential leadership qualities. By implementing an open-door policy and inviting suggestions from the team, the project participant provides the platform for discussion and interaction. On this basis, an atmosphere of openness, trust, and mutual respect is established in the workplace, meaning employees can speak their minds and express their thoughts (Fulmer & Ostroff, 2017). P3's employees have access to their leader because they "did not limit them to times when they could reach out to them." Similar to Burawat's (2019) study,

this practice shows the owner's commitment to the uniqueness of the employee and the care for their welfare. This aligns with the key construct of individualized consideration.

P1 discussed client relations and the importance of effective communication. This insight illustrates the necessity of open lines of communication, not only as a courtesy but as a cornerstone of maintaining and enhancing client trust and loyalty. Establishing positive business traits that correlate with each individual client by offering positive client feedback increases organizational performance. P1 explained,

> Clients do not appreciate being kept waiting. It is essential to proactively inform clients if there are any delays of appointments. I emphasize the value of transparency and effective communication to ensure client satisfaction. This has increased our overall organizational performance by increasing our number of clients.

P2 placed emphasis on the importance of accountability and independence as critical elements that engage employees in their work. As demonstrated by Al-Ahmadi and Kasztelnik (2016), employees can feel empowered by developing their deadlines and taking control of the work, which is often the first step towards autonomy and coresponsibility. This parallels the principles of self-determination theory, where the premise is that people feel internally motivated when they view what they do as having nothing constraining them from the outside (Yalabik et al., 2017). This leadership strategy allows employees to set their own goals and challenges, facilitating learning and development opportunities that cater to their individual goals and capabilities. This aligns

with individualized consideration because each employee will likely have different goals and challenges.

P4 revealed the idea of interactive leadership in developing skills and engaging employees. As found in the literature review, Knezović and Drkić (2020) used a similar strategy and found it increased the task speed and encouraged a positive and cohesive atmosphere of collaboration and comradery between team members. This approach fostered a collaborative environment where employees felt supported and valued, which is a central concept to idealized influence. P4 stated,

> I try to make work and daily tasks more of an interactive process where I work with any staff member to execute any task, I have given them. By that pattern, the employee will pass skills and techniques and encourage staff members' professional growth by being collaborative and a role model. It also allows me to work one-on-one with each employee. Allows me to gain an understanding of each employees' strengths and weaknesses.

P2 discussed the necessity of task clarity for efficient execution. This small business leader empowers employees to make informed decisions and aligns their efforts toward achieving common organizational goals by providing detailed instructions and narrowing down broad objectives. Thereby stressing the consequences of ambiguity and the significance of clear, concise directions in task delegation. This leadership strategy aligns with individualized consideration by acknowledging that each employee has unique capabilities and providing them with the resources and information needed to perform their roles effectively. This way empowers employees to contribute to

organizational performance, enhancing their sense of value and engagement. P2 discussed,

> Lack of clear direction can lead to tasks being started but completed with disappointing results. This is where effective communication is important. How can I expect to receive the results I want if I fail to communicate. This has led to a more efficient culture and makes the organizational goals easier to obtain.

P3 employs evaluation and delegation tools to minimize hurdles and promote the organization's progress. Delegating tasks and responsibilities to the best expertise will help leaders develop a culture of making decisions independently (Razak et al., 2022). The continuous monitoring and resolution of issues convey a sense of willingness to pursue change and the desire to modify an approach that changes over time. P3 said, "Being able to see people for their strengths and delegating certain jobs to the correct people. I believe that is a strong key point behind it, detailing how important it is to put the tasks into the hands of individuals who are best capable of doing them."

Theme 3: Inspirational Motivation

Inspirational motivation is a leader's ability to inspire and motivate followers. Bass (1985) described it this way and added that inspirational motivation can help the followers achieve higher performance levels and commit to a shared vision for the future. An example of this is from P2's perspective that revealed the critical role of openness to feedback and self-reflection in leadership. P2 found that through introspection, small business leaders can give themselves suggestions for improvement being open to

feedback and self-reflection. This is evidence that leaders can develop their personal and organizational leadership skills while working towards the organization's vision.

P3's perspective highlights the synergistic relationship between leadership and mentorship, underscoring leaders' influential role as guides for their employees. This approach allows business leaders to demonstrate positive behaviors and extend empathy and warmth (Baskarada et al., 2017). P3's strategy aligns with inspirational motivation, as leaders who lead by example effectively inspire their followers by showing what is possible through dedication and hard work. P3 stated,

> I was able to lead by example, and the employees responded to that. I became more of a mentor to certain employees. They wanted to reach the level of success that I have and asked me how to do it. I make sure to let them know that it is a process, and it will not happen overnight. I have seen this make employees more receptive to advice and have watched it transform them from employees with specific roles to employees that has numerous roles that involve leadership. They become inspired and motivated to take on new tasks and responsibilities.

P5's provided their insights concerning the importance of adaptability in leadership, especially the challenges and disruptions that aroused during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar to the initial literature review findings of Bor (2020), who found that effective small business leaders avoid organizational complacency by being lifelong learners who are quick to adapt and adaptable in choosing the best management techniques. This adaptability underscored the essence of agility and resilience as foundational elements for sustaining organizational robustness and adaptiveness

(Sawaean & Ali, 2020). This adaptability was closely related to transformational leadership, which empowers leaders to cultivate and elevate their team's ability to navigate and thrive amidst volatile environments (Puni et al., 2018). P5 mentions, "Adjustments were needed, such as when COVID-19 came. That was not in anyone's strategy as a law firm."

P1 discussed practical leadership qualities that can significantly influence employee behavior and transform organizational performance. As a small business leader, P1's leadership skills have individuals eager to work for him despite the lack of available positions. P1 acknowledges the essential role of being a community leader and how it relates to employee satisfaction. P1 shared how they initially see things with this description of their experience,

> I see firsthand that my leadership is paying off because they all want to come and work for me, even though I do not have any space for them. They mention the work that I do in the community and want to get involved. We are one of the few businesses that provide their services for free to the underprivileged and underserved. The problem is, I don't have enough space to hire everyone.

Leaders that exhibit inspirational motivation another key construct of transformation embodies certain characteristics that are motivating to employees. This key construct of transformational leadership when practiced by leaders highlights the importance of flexibility, adaptability, and the capacity to respond promptly to external shifts or challenges (Manzoor et al., 2019). This perspective reinforces that

transformational leadership is about directing and enabling an organization to pivot and prosper through uncertain and unexpected times.

Theme 4: Idealized Influence

Idealized influence is another key construct of transformational leadership and the participants' responses to the interview questions align with it. This key construct is an example of how leaders act as exemplary role models for their followers and tend to have positive influence on them (Bass, 1985).

P4 discussed how one can go beyond the intended advantages of relationship-building in the business environment. Organizations can build on their investment in developing critical relationships by learning more about their client's interests and needs. Consequently, they can better meet their requirements more efficiently and accurately (Niken et al., 2022). This is consistent with literature emphasizing the importance of customer-centric and customer relationships to succeed (Cary, 2020). This leadership strategy aligns with idealized influence by showcasing how leaders can inspire trust and respect through genuine interest in and commitment to client welfare beyond transactional interactions. P4 stated,

> For instance, I stated earlier that by implementing the leadership strategy of client relationships, we have learned that we get greater returns when we have that relationship with a client due to repeat business, as well as opportunities to do more profitable, more lucrative business with clients who we have a relationship with because they trust you more.

Evaluating P2's leadership style reveals that clear communication, organizational skills, and effective delegation are advantageous. P2 actively seeks employee feedback, using their responses to refine and improve their leadership approach. This practice aligns with the principles of transformational leadership, a concept where leaders empower their followers to take initiative and assume responsibilities (Bass, 1985). This behavior exemplifies idealized influence by showing that effective leadership is responsive and considers the perspectives and needs of followers. P5 mentioned, "It allows me to take an inner look at my leadership style and adjust what needs to be adjusted."

P5 discusses the transformative potential of acknowledging and learning from failures within the leadership journey. This introspective approach is related to the value of self-assessment in leadership, where recognizing and addressing one's shortcomings becomes a pivotal learning moment. According to Amegayibor (2021), such a practice emulates authentic leadership characterized by vulnerability and humility. P5 mentioned, "I concentrate on the failures," suggesting a proactive stance toward leadership development. Leaders who embrace and learn from their failures motivate their followers to do the same, thereby creating an environment where innovation, risk-taking, and creativity are encouraged.

P6 characterizes the evolution of leadership as an interactive process of experimentation, where implementing solutions and learning from mistakes are integral to their development. This journey of trial and error, as described by P6, is about navigating challenges and the critical ability to adapt and recover from setbacks. This approach underscores leaders' need for agility and flexibility, which are increasingly vital

in rapidly changing and uncertain business landscapes (Siangchokyoo et al., 2019). P6's reflection, "I would just feel like it has been trial and error," emphasizes the ongoing cycle of action, feedback, and adaptation that characterizes effective leadership. This process allows small business leaders to continuously refine their strategies and approaches, leveraging real-world experiences as invaluable lessons for improvement and growth.

The study's findings confirm the existing literature on transformational leadership and effective business practices for enhancing organizational performance in small businesses. The emergent themes of intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence reflect all the essential aspects of the transformational leadership theory. However, the findings shed light on the role of contingent environmental factors and the interventions that should be in place to adopt the transformational leadership approach successfully.

Intellectual Stimulation and Organizational Performance

The project participants' responses confirm that environments conducive to learning consistently offer the chance for innovation, critical thinking, and effective problem-solving (Ahmed & Shafiq, 2018; Kowo & Akinbola, 2019). For example, the emphasis on intercultural relations to build a culture aimed at achieving goals, which includes mentorship and taking responsibility, mirrors the essential principles for empowering individuals (Kowo & Akinbola, 2019).

In addition, these findings broaden the body of knowledge by identifying specific situational variables that facilitate the utilization of intellectual stimulation strategies by

small businesses. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of the challenges P2 overcame in their small business, such as situational variables related to thorough planning, innovative organization, and proper delegation, was evidence that small business owners face unique resource scarcity and operational complexity in their day-to-day interactions. Similarly, Idris et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of making decisions that are both forward-looking and definitive in the context of the fast-paced business world, highlighting the essential reasoning behind such choices.

The study findings also bring to the forefront the necessity of communication and teamwork as key factors in intellectual stimulation, as happened to P3, who engaged people with challenging responsibilities and elevated employee ownership. This matches with the assertion made by Garcia and Russo (2019) that effective leadership involves equipping team leaders with the necessary resources and motivation to enable their team to work efficiently and stay motivated.

Individualized Consideration and Organizational Performance

The theme of individualized consideration resonates with the transformational leadership literature's emphasis on acknowledging and attending to individual followers' needs, abilities, and aspirations. The strategies of the participants included but were not limited to the P1's preference for group bonding activities that embrace diversity and P2's promotion of autonomy and accountability agreed with some of the works found during the initial literature review (Jiatong et al., 2022; Siangchokyoo et al., 2019). According to Jiatong et al. (2022), individualized consideration is identified as the driver and manager of employee performance and engagement. Nevertheless, the findings

reinforce the existing literature on this topic by demonstrating the significant opportunities that small business leaders encounter while executing individualized consideration. P5 emphasizes the importance of creating an atmosphere of mutual respect and accountability, and P6 emphasizes the necessity of having effective communication in the same tone. In short, this shows the importance of fostering a culture where everyone feels his or her part is valued to express. This is in congruence with the belief of Siangchokyoo et al. (2019) that leaders who practice effective communication in their daily work and show appreciation to the workers can motivate them and results in organizational accomplishments.

The study's findings are consistent with the existing literature in that leaders who focus on giving personal attention and care to their employees can enhance organizational outcomes. However, the study findings are evidence that small business leaders' approach to individualizing consideration is more complex than previously thought. For instance, P3's stance toward open communication and welcoming team members to express their ideas goes with more democratic leadership than the authoritative styles commonly associated with large companies. This points out the necessity for leaders of small businesses to adopt a supportive and collaborative manner of leadership to fit the needs of both the employees and the organizational system.

Inspirational Motivation and Organizational Performance

The theme of inspirational motivation aligns with the transformational leadership literature. The researchers I found during the initial literature review placed emphasis on leaders' ability to inspire and motivate followers to achieve higher performance levels

and commit to a shared vision (Chukwu, 2021; Gilbert & Kelloway, 2018; Khan et al., 2020; Meng, 2016). The project participants' strategies, such as those used by P3, leading by example, and serving as a mentor, and P5, who used adaptability as a guide during the difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic, are some of the ways that the findings confirm additional literature researchers' work and how they recognized leadership as an inspirational motivation for moving people's engagement, resilience, and adaptability for organizational performance success (Al-Ahmad & Kasztelnik, 2021b; Chumphony & Pitipiroon, 2019; David Pillai, 2022; Kocherbaeva et. al., 2019). This compatibility is evidence that motivational inspiration is among the essential key elements in building a resilient, motivated, and high-level performing workforce, irrespective of the type of organization or the work context. Small business leaders personify the organizational values and behaviors they hope to foster in their teams and simultaneously show they can adapt and change in challenging circumstances. Such leaders effectively inspire and motivate their teams, resulting in organizational success.

This qualitative pragmatic inquiry findings have further increased knowledge and provided a deeper understanding of transformational leadership by highlighting the various types of small business leaders who employed inspirational motivation within their business. For example, the mention of openness to feedback and self-reflection by P2 stressed the importance of lifelong learning and self-enhancement to appeal to the hearts and minds of their employees. A connection is made here with the research literature on learning and training (Bor, 2020; Chukwu, 2021; Gorecki, 2021; Hung, 2022) and with authentic leadership. According to Amegayibor (2021), authentic leaders

consider vulnerability and humility the main qualities of trust creation and positive culture development.

One of the study's findings differed from the existing researchers' studies (Chukwu, 2021; Gilbert & Kelloway, 2018; Khan et al. 2020; Meng, 2016) concerning motivation because the participant described the surrounding context determining the small-scale inspirational motivation level. P6 expressed how they viewed leadership as experimentation and adaptation with no hierarchical order. This reinforces the importance of small business leaders embracing agility and flexibility to maneuver through the uncertainties associated with their business, with the understanding that this conforms with the organizational resilience theory. Small businesses exist in a dynamic and resource-scarce environment, which calls for leaders' readiness to assess and recreate their strategies constantly.

A strategic plan for success is a blend of an experimental mindset, continuous learning, and unlearning. This way of being able to respond, will not only protect leaders from failing in the face of upcoming challenges, but is known to be the source of inspiration for their employees, which is an indicator of resilience, adaptability, and commitment to continuous learning.

Idealized Influence and Organizational Performance

Idealized influence the final construct of transformation leaderships is also critical for the success of organizational performance. The researchers from my initial literature review emphasized how leaders serve as role models who earn followers' admiration, trust, and respect through their actions, ethics, and dedication to shared goals and values

as found by Bass (1985). This is substantiated by the methodologies of the participants: P4, whose strategy comprises interactional leadership and mastery of essential abilities, and P1, who focused on community involvement and employee satisfaction. This aligns the literature (Al-Ahmadi & Kasztelnik 2021a; Chukwu, 2021; Puni, 2018) on idealized influence as a method for developing commitment, trust, and organizational effectiveness. Idealized influence impacts corporate culture and the desire among followers to hold a high degree of respect and pride.

When a small business leader embodies the values, they wish to instill in their team and demonstrates a sincere dedication to the growth of team member, both personally and professionally, they can foster a workplace characterized by cooperation and a strong team-oriented ethos. Nevertheless, the study's findings might augment existing researchers' literature (Al-Ahmadi & Kasztelnik, 2021a; Chukwu, 2021; Puni et al., 2018) and or fill the gap in literature related to idealized influence because the participants revealed the signature strategic patterns of small business leaders while exerting empowering influence on employees.

P2's effort at actively listening to the employees' feedback to perfect their leadership style showcases the need for humility and betterment throughout the realization of idealized influence. Indeed, this is in line with the work on servant leadership. According to Bennis et al. (2002), servant leadership occurs when one does not see the leader's interest ahead, but instead, one sees the leader's desire to help others develop.

An additional finding of this study differs from other aspects of existing researchers' literature (Al-Ahmadi & Kasztelnik, 2021a; Chukwu, 2021; Puni et al., 2018) about the contextual factors that serve as the basis for idealized influence strategies for small businesses. P3 put forward the concept of leadership, which involves congruence in organizational culture and employee attitudes and differs from the classic, top-down model often associated with larger organizations. This helps small business leaders develop a more coherent and participatory leadership style as they embrace the different organizational dynamics and perspectives, thus aligning with the similar implications in the literature on organizational culture and climate (Ahmed & Shafiq, 2018). Small businesses value the tight-knit and collaborative nature of the workplace. Thus, it is crucial to lead by example and anticipate the diverse thoughts as well as attitudes of individuals (Anderson, 2010). The approach should align with the organization's culture, with a desirable form of leadership in mind.

Implications for Transformational Leadership Theory and Business Practice

This qualitative pragmatic inquiry study findings align with premise and key constructs of the transformational leadership theory, demonstrating through semistructured interviews that the theory is applicable and relevant in the context of small businesses. The strategies reported by project participants across the four constructs confirm that transformational leadership can improve organizational performance.

Additionally, the findings emphasize the need to adapt and refine the theory of transformational leadership to better address the unique challenges and benefits faced by small business leaders. Enhancing the emphasis on creativity, flexibility, and ongoing

improvement, which are essential elements of transformative leadership in small businesses, calls for a more dynamic and iterative approach to understanding the processes of transformational leadership.

These findings suggest that be acknowledging specific contextual details and necessary situational adjustments, small business leaders can tailor their leadership approaches. This customization helps leaders effectively address unique challenges and seize opportunities that typically affect small businesses, such as limited resources, operational complexities, and the need for agility and flexibility to manage uncertainty and change. By adopting the strategies of a transformational leader identified in this research, small business leaders can set their organizations on a path to long-term success. This involves fostering a culture that leads by example, motivating employees to commit to their roles, and encouraging innovation aimed at achieving excellence and high performance.

The key findings from this qualitative pragmatic inquiry enhances the understanding of how effective leadership strategies improve organizational performance in small businesses. By applying transformational leadership theory to real-life situations faced by small business leaders, this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study has in its content empirical support for the transformational leadership conceptual framework across various organizational contexts. The identified themes of intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence are pivotal in boosting employee engagement, innovation, and overall organizational performance. Additionally, the findings contribute to the existing literature by exploring the specific

challenges, opportunities, and contexts that shape leadership strategy development in small businesses, thereby expanding knowledge in this area.

Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice

The findings of this research study contribute to the existing body of knowledge on transformational leadership and its application to small businesses. The research findings emphasize the fact that the four leadership constructs of transformational leadership – intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence – can be applied to any small business to achieve high organizational performance.

Small business leaders use these approaches to build a culture that can foster innovation, employee engagement, and high performance within the organization. Through intellectual stimulation, leaders can generate an environment in which employees engage in critical thinking, problem-solving, and developing novel ideas (Elfeky et al., 2022). A person-centered approach allows leaders to recognize and address employees' unique needs, enhancing their engagement and satisfaction. Inspirational motivations help leaders articulate their vision and energize their employees to achieve peak performance. Beyond motivating their team, leaders who display idealized influence also become role models. Employees admire and respect leaders who demonstrate ethical behavior and commitment to common goals.

Implications for Social Change

Implications for social change from this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study emphasizes the importance of effective leadership in creating successful and sustainable

small businesses, which are essential to local economies. Small businesses contribute significantly by creating jobs and stimulating economic growth. This study has shown the importance of skilled leadership for positive social change. By utilizing the key constructs of transformational leadership, small business leaders can influence organizational performance that is cooperative and healthy, which in turn influences workers' well-being and job satisfaction (Liyanage, 2020).

A workplace that fosters morale and support is essential to employee happiness and can enhance the quality of their lives. Employees who feel valued and respected often experience greater job satisfaction and achieve a better work-life balance, which contributes to their overall well-being, both mental and physical. These positive effects can extend beyond individual employees, positively influencing their families and the wider community.

The capital generated by small businesses can be reinvested locally, boosting community initiatives, and fostering societal improvement. A thriving business community can support programs, charities, and educational institutions with resources (Atnafu & Balda, 2018). This investment creates vital employment opportunities, helping to stabilize and grow local economies. Local businesses can significantly impact society by supporting socio-economic and environmental sustainability efforts to alleviate poverty, increase access to education, and conserve the environment. This qualitative pragmatic inquiry study gives small business leaders insights into how effective leadership can drive organizational success and facilitate further social change. By adopting transformational leadership approaches, leadership in small businesses can

foster a culture of empowered employees, creativity, and social awareness, which contributes to the overall betterment of the communities they serve.

Recommendations for Further Research

The limitation indicated in Section 1 remained the same toward the end of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry. The study of leadership strategies across different industry sectors shows their effectiveness varies significantly. This variability is because of their unique situational factors such as market dynamics, cultural contexts, and legislative environments that can influence the performance of these strategies. The insights from this study could be incorporated into business leadership training, enabling small business leaders to adapt their leadership styles according to their specific operational circumstances.

Studying how organizational culture and workplace demographics (including age, gender, and educational level) influence the adoption of transformational leadership in small businesses could yield critical insights. By understanding the various factors that affect how employees respond to and engage with transformational leadership practices, leaders can tailor their approaches to better align with their team's needs. This alignment could significantly enhance the impact of their leadership on organizational performance.

Researching the long-term performance and sustainability of small businesses that adopt a transformational leadership approach, with a focus on organizational outcomes would provide valuable strategic insights. This research could measure the impacts of such strategies, accounting for external factors such as organizational growth, market

changes, and shifts in employee demographics. As a result, this research could offer actionable recommendations to small business leaders aiming for sustained success.

Emphasizing the potential challenges and obstacles in adopting transformational leadership traits and seeking solutions for these issues will assist leaders in effectively implementing these strategies. Concerns such as resistance to change, limited resources, and cultural barriers can impede the adoption of transformational leadership strategies. However, small business leaders can develop mitigation plans that allow them to proactively address these challenges and enhance the success of transformational leadership within their organizations.

Conclusion

This qualitative pragmatic inquiry explored small business leaders' strategies to enhance organizational performance. The findings confirm the effectiveness of transformational leadership in increasing employee engagement, fostering innovative thinking, and improving overall organizational success in small businesses. Small-scale business leaders can create a positive and supportive environment by encouraging intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence, small-scale business leaders can create a positive and supportive environment. This environment allows employees to grow, innovate, and commit to achieving common goals.

The findings of this research are essential for expanding our understanding of transformational leadership practices within small businesses. Additionally, this study provides valuable recommendations on leadership strategies for small business leaders

aiming to enhance their business success. While these findings are significant, further research is strongly encouraged to address potential limitations and build upon the current results. There are still areas for more profound research of how leadership techniques influence organizational performance, especially considering the factors specific to small businesses. Such research can equip leaders with the tools to manage challenges and capitalize on opportunities promoting sustainable growth and positive social change.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

On the day of the interview, I will arrive an hour before the scheduled time for the first interview to complete:

- Make sure the room is free of clutter and properly arranged.
- Ensure the iPhone 13 phone is fully charged, and the Voice Recorder application is downloaded. My iPhone 11 will be my back-up device should the iPhone 13 stop functioning during the interview.
- Lay out juice, water, and light refreshments.
- Place a DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door that leads to the interview.
- Have a pen and notepad available for taking notes.
- Have copies of the informed consent form for review.
- Make sure to start the interview on time.

Before starting the interview:

- Begin introduction and greeting.
- Follow with interview questions.

Introduction

Good afternoon, my name is Gregory Wilson, and I am a doctoral candidate with the Doctor of Business Administration program at Walden University. I am conducting a doctoral case study entitled Small Business Leaders' Strategies to Improve Organizational Performance to explore leadership strategies implemented by small business leaders that improved their organizational performance. Please feel free to have a refreshment or snack that can be found on the table. I would like to thank you for taking

time out of your day to participate in the interview. Before starting the interview, I want to make sure I have your permission to voice record the interview on my iPhone 13. Could you please confirm this by saying either yes, or no?

[Bring up voice recorder application and press record]

I would like to now provide you with the date, time, and your participant alphanumeric code [provide the date, time, and unique alphanumeric code to the interviewee]. I will create my interpretation of your responses to the research questions and review your documents and public website. I will provide you with a copy for you to review and ensure your intent and meanings come across the way you wanted them to.

The information that you share today during our interview will be kept confidential. Information such as your name, and business will not be used in the study findings. Your responses will be used in explaining themes and strategies used to explore leadership strategies small business leaders use to improve organizational performance. You have the option to conclude this interview at any time and your participation is voluntarily. If a break is needed, please let me know. Do you have any questions before we continue? If not, we will start the interview at this time.

Interview Questions

Ice Breaker: How long have you owned your own business? What is one thing you enjoy about being a small business owner?

1. What leadership strategies have you applied that have positively impacted your organization's performance?

2. What strategies do you use to ensure employees responded positively to your leadership style?
3. How did you ensure your strategies would provide tangible outcomes?
4. What tangible outcomes have you identified that were not included in your strategy?
5. How did you use your strategic outcomes to evaluate your leadership style?
6. What strategies did you use to ensure you minimize challenges to improving organizational performance?

Conclusion of the interview

- Conclude interview with closure script.

Interview Closure Script

I really appreciate you for taking time out of your busy day and allowing me to conduct this interview. As stated in the beginning, I will be transcribing and interpreting our interview and will have that interpretation available for your review in 2-3 days. If there are any misinterpretations, please contact me immediately with corrections and I will make them and send them back to you. This process is called member checking. Do you have any additional questions for me that I can answer?

[Stop the voice recorder app]

Interviewee Has Exited the Room

- Complete any additional notes as needed.
- Ensure the recording is stored in a folder on the iPhone and ensure it is secure.

Restock snacks and get prepared for the next interviewee.

Contacts and Questions:

If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call the Walden University Research Participant advocate via 612-312-1210. Walden University's ethics approval number for this study is 01-30-24-1018232.

Please share any questions or concerns you might have at this time. If you agree to be interviewed as described above, please reply to this email with the words, "I consent."