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Exploring Leadership Strategies to Foster Effective Employee Engagement

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Antonwaun Johnson

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2026

Abstract

Exploring Leadership Strategies to Foster Effective Employee Engagement

by

Antonwaun Johnson

MBA, Troy University, 2004

BBA, Augusta University, 1998

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

February 2026

Abstract

Employee disengagement is an organizational disruption that erodes trust, weakens culture, and undermines the performance systems leaders depend on to drive results. Functional leaders are concerned with employee disengagement because it can lead to poor organizational performance and affect organizational success. Grounded in leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore effective strategies functional leaders use to foster employee engagement in a working environment to enhance organizational success. The project participants were six functional leaders working in an e-commerce order fulfillment center in the southeastern United States. Data were collected through semistructured interviews and the review of publicly available organizational documents. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis process to identify patterns, develop themes, and interpret meanings connected to LMX. Key themes included leader visibility and interaction, trust and communication, and empowerment and motivation. A primary recommendation for business leaders is to strengthen relational leadership practices by increasing visibility, modeling transparent communication, removing performance barriers, recognizing contributions, and empowering employees through shared decision-making. The implications for positive social change include the potential to improve employee well-being; strengthen workplace trust; and enhance economic stability for employees, families, and surrounding communities.

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Dedication

This doctoral research project is dedicated to God, whose grace, guidance, and sustaining presence carried me through every phase of this journey. Faith provided clarity in moments of uncertainty, strength in times of challenge, and purpose throughout the pursuit of this degree. When the rigor of scholarship tested endurance and resolve, faith anchored my perseverance and affirmed that this journey was not solely about academic accomplishment, but about growth, calling, and service.

I further dedicate this work to my son, Caiden, whose pride in me gave me meaning to every sacrifice; to my late grandmother, Louise, whose love, wisdom, and prayers guided me; to my mother, Paula, whose steadfast belief, values, and love shaped my character; and to my father, my step-mother, and step-father affectionally known as “Pops,” their love, belief, and perseverance remains a lasting source of inspiration. This dedication also extends to my brothers and sisters, my family, my friends, and my co-workers who believed in me and supported me throughout this journey. This achievement reflects not only individual effort, but the collective faith, encouragement, and commitment of those who stood and continues to stand beside me.

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I also express my heartfelt gratitude to Bishop Dr. Gregory M. Fuller, my spiritual father, and to my church family for their prayers and faithful support throughout this journey. I am deeply thankful to my family, friends, co-workers, and doctoral peers whose encouragement, accountability, and belief in me provided strength during moments of challenge and celebration during moments of progress. A special acknowledgement is reserved for my fiancée, De Neiya, whose love, patience, prayers, and unwavering faith in me sustained me through this demanding process and reminded me daily of the purpose beyond the pages. This accomplishment stands as a testament to the power of community, faith, and collective encouragement in achieving meaningful scholarly and professional goals.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Project

Background of the Problem

Employee disengagement behavior, such as high absenteeism, is a growing business concern due to its critical impact on organizational-level results and success (Meskelis & Whittington, 2020, p. 1457). Tucker (2020) stated that engaged employees are devoted to the organization's goals and are inspired to help the organization achieve these goals. Engaged employees produce 21% greater profitability with 29% to 59% less turnover, whereas disengaged employees cost U.S. organizations \$483,000,000,000 to \$605,000,000,000 annually in lost productivity (Johnson, 2020; Nienaber & Martins, 2020). Disengagement is the result of an employee who distance themselves emotionally, cognitively, and physically from work (Afrahi et al., 2022). The consequences of disengaged employees result in reduced overall performance and profitability, increased turnover rates, and adverse effects on the organization's culture due to the creation of a vicious disengagement cycle and isolation, negatively impacting organizational health (Bilderback, 2025). Leaders directly impact employee engagement or disengagement in an organization. The challenge is fostering leaders who can drive high-engagement environments and encourage employees identified as not fully engaged or actively disengaged to become engaged employees and influence positive organizational outcomes.

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose

The specific business problem is that some functional leaders lack effective strategies to foster effective employee engagement in a working environment that

enhances organizational success. Therefore, in this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project I sought to explore effective strategies that functional leaders use to foster effective employee engagement in a working environment to enhance organizational success. The targeted population sample consisted of six functional leaders who had successfully implemented strategies to foster employee engagement to improve organizational performance. The sampling method was purposive sampling. The desired sample was six to 10 functional leaders. The participant eligibility criteria included being a functional leader with a minimum of 1-year tenure and successfully demonstrating effective employee engagement strategies.

The qualitative research methodology was suitable for this research project, the aim of which was to explore how and why functional leaders lack effective strategies for engaging employees. The pragmatic inquiry can help understand a phenomenon by capturing information about feelings, beliefs, and values that motivate behaviors by eliciting answers to questions asking how, what, and why (Bazen et al., 2021). The data used for the project were from semistructured interviews involving business-related topics, and related artifacts that was collected by interviewing functional leaders who work in an order fulfillment center. I engaged in thematic analysis to become familiar with the captured data, code the data, search for themes, identify relationships with themes, refine the themes, and verify propositions that emerge from the data (see Ayre & McCaffery, 2022). The conceptual framework for this project was the leader–member exchange (LMX) theory. Dansereau et al. (1975) developed the vertical dyad linkage

leadership theory, which assumes that leaders adopt a consistent leadership style with their workgroup, team, or followers; the theory is known today as the LMX.

Research Question

What effective strategies do some functional leaders use to foster effective employee engagement in a working environment to enhance organizational success?

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

A research assumption is a foundational belief or condition accepted as accurate without proof, underpinning a project's design and interpretation (Coates, 2021). The strength or weakness of assumptions will depend upon the observational data received from the participants (Ransom et al., 2023). I had three assumptions in conducting this project. First, I assumed that participants would be authentic and provide reflective information regarding their employee engagement strategies. Second, I assumed that the participants would openly and candidly discuss employee engagement strategies, including failed strategy attempts. Third, authorized documentation was believed to provide accurate, reliable, and valid data to show effective employee engagement strategies.

Limitations

Limitations focus on potential weaknesses, constraints, or factors that are generally outside the researcher's control and may influence the project design, results, generalization, and conclusions (Szulc & King, 2022). The first limitation was that findings would reflect the functional leaders' perspective of an e-commerce organization,

so the findings may not apply to functional leaders in other industries. The second limitation was recruiting functional leaders with consistently proven employee engagement strategies who were willing and available to participate in the project. The third limitation was the need for participant functional leaders to provide reliable and unbiased perspectives, as biased feedback would not be useful in assessing effective employee engagement strategies.

Transition

Collectively, the background of the problem, the business problem focus and purpose, the research question, and the stated assumptions and limitations established a clear foundation for examining employee engagement as a leadership-driven organizational challenge. These elements underscored the critical role functional leaders play in shaping engagement outcomes and justify the need for an in-depth exploration of leadership strategies that foster meaningful leader-employee relationships within complex operational environments. Building on this foundation, Section 2 presented an integrative review of the professional and academic literature to situate the project within existing scholarship, examine theoretical and empirical insights related to leadership and employee engagement, and identify gaps that this project sought out to address through leader-member exchange (LMX) lens.

Section 2: The Literature Review

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

In this section's integrative review, I explore the critical role of leadership in fostering effective employee engagement, synthesizing findings from a range of scholarly articles, seminal theories, and empirical reports to analyze the project comprehensively. Drawing from recent research, such as Gallup's (2025) workforce engagement reports and studies on emotional intelligence (EI; George et al., 2022), I critically evaluated how leadership behavior, leadership styles, EI, and relational quality directly impact employee and organizational outcomes, including engagement, productivity, and revenue.

The critical analysis and synthesis of the sources articles relevant to my project were retrieved from academic databases, including ProQuest, EBSCOhost, Sage Journals, ResearchGate through the Walden University Library, and Google Scholar. The keywords and phrases used to identify relevant articles include *employee engagement*, *work disengagement*, *emotional intelligence*, *leadership styles*, *leader-member exchange theory*, and *LMX*. The review provided an evidence-based exploration to ensure a coherent, logical flow that demonstrates the breadth and depth of the research while connecting theoretical perspectives to practical leadership strategies for enhancing employee engagement.

Application to the Applied Business Problem

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore strategies that functional leaders use to foster effective employee engagement in a working environment to enhance organizational success.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this project was the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory. Dansereau et al. (1975) developed the vertical dyad linkage leadership theory that assumed leaders adopted a consistent leadership style with their workgroup, team, or followers. Dansereau et al. concluded leaders established leadership exchanges with some followers through leader influence only and supervision exchanges with other followers through influence driven by the leader's authority. Over the years, the vertical dyad linkage leadership theory evolved into the LMX, referring to the quality of relationships between leaders and their immediate subordinates (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The LMX theory centered on various observable leader and employee behaviors, relationship establishment, and the related impacts on performance (Tan et al., 2021).

LMX theory emphasizes the quality of relationships between leaders and their employees, positing that leadership is fundamentally relational rather than positional. According to Almer et al. (2023), LMX operates as a dyadic approach where leaders develop distinct relationships with subordinates, characterized by high-quality exchanges marked by trust and respect or low-quality exchanges restricted to formal job duties. Fernandes et al. (2020) supported this by identifying the existence of “in-group” and “out-group” relationships, where in-group members benefit from open communication, loyalty, and support. Manata (2023) further elaborated that in-group members experience coaching and frequent interaction, whereas out-group members are limited to transactional exchanges, lacking mutual trust and communication. Van et al. (2023) argued that ethical leadership is critical in fostering high-quality LMX relationships by

promoting trust, supporting, prioritizing employee needs, and reinforcing an inclusive and positive work environment. These sources collectively supported the view that the quality of the leader-employee relationship significantly impacts employee experience and organizational outcomes. This understanding of LMX sets the foundation for exploring how these relationships develop and the multidimensional aspects that shape them.

The development of LMX relationships occur in three progressive stages that shape the eventual quality of the exchange. Almer et al. (2023) described these strategies as role-taking, role-making, and role-routinization, where leaders initially evaluate employees' abilities, then build mutual trust through performance and delegation, and finally establish a stable interaction pattern. These evolving phases reflected a process where both parties influence the outcome of the relationship. Robert and Vandenberghe (2020) explained that LMX is a multidimensional concept consisting of affect, loyalty, contribution, and professional respect, each contributing to how leaders and employees perceive and value their interactions. Affect refers to the emotional connection, while loyalty and contribution underscore shared support and effort toward mutual goals. Professional respect acknowledged the expertise both parties bring to the relationship. This multidimensionality demonstrated that LMX is not merely a leadership style but a dynamic process influenced by interpersonal perceptions and organizational context. Understanding these stages and dimensions was essential for analyzing how ethical leadership behaviors might enhance or hinder LMX quality in diverse workplace settings.

A key implication of LMX theory was not all employees experience the same level of engagement or support from their leaders, which could significantly affect job satisfaction and retention. Barreiro and Treglown (2020) asserted that leadership is fundamental to fostering employee engagement, while McCrae (2020) concluded that employees model their engagement based on their leaders' behavior. This highlighted the central role of leadership in shaping the workplace experience. Employees depended on leaders for motivation and guidance, and ineffective leader behavior can contribute to voluntary turnover, which is costly for organizations. Tabak et al. (2024) noted that turnover leads to considerable organizational burdens, including recruitment costs, training time, and potential damage to employer reputation. In contrast, high-quality LMX relationships were linked to improved employee well-being, higher engagement, and stronger team cohesion, as evidenced by Wagner and Koob (2022). Their research demonstrated that these relationships foster a culture of mutual trust, collaboration, and psychological safety. Given these outcomes, it was crucial to investigate how leaders can strategically apply LMX principles to cultivate effective engagement and achieve organizational success.

Business Problem Scholarship Evidence

Employee engagement is a critical contributing component for driving organizational success, influencing factors such as productivity, innovation, and employee retention. Kahn's (1990) initial employee engagement definition stated organization members harness their roles, employing and expressing themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally through role performances; contrarily,

disengagement is the organization members disconnecting from their roles opposite of the engaged members. The organization's leaders drive employee engagement to deliver internal and external business results. Leadership significantly influences employee engagement as the leader's behavior is the source of the employees' motivation, encouragement, inspiration, and satisfaction.

Leaders have the daunting task of identifying the engagement factors among their employees to understand how to improve employee engagement. Harter (2025) revealed that only 31% of American workers feel engaged in their roles, marking the lowest engagement level in a decade, with 17% actively disengaged and the decline attributed to unclear role expectations, insufficient support from colleagues, and limited opportunities for professional development. Nienaber and Martins (2020) stated that disengaged U.S. employees ranked number one in annual productivity losses between \$483,000,000,000 and \$605,000,000,000. Their research underscored the ongoing challenge of employee disengagement and the decline in employee engagement levels, supporting functional leaders' need for effective strategies to foster engaging work environments.

Organizations should prioritize improving the employee-leader relationship to enhance engagement, as a highly engaged workforce can significantly benefit organizational results. Johnson (2020) highlighted that engaged employees are more likely to be excited about their work and invest in the organization's future, yet discovering the best techniques to improve employee engagement is the result of trial and error from trying what works best for the employee base. Hasan et al. (2021) suggested leaders often mistakenly assume that employees have the exact universal needs, beliefs,

and values when, in fact, employee involvement is dependent upon their needs at a given moment, supporting the need to encourage communication and strong relationships to consider the employees' individual needs.

An engaged employee is willing and eager to contribute to their organization's success by increasing their effort to perform beyond role expectations. A workplace with an involved workforce encourages employee commitment, energy, and productivity to improve organizational performance. Engaged employees will own the business and initiate actions to strengthen their performance for the organization's benefit. Henkel and Ade (2025) stated organizations that have an engaged workforce produce improved results, such as higher revenue and profits, low levels of stress-induced absenteeism, increased customer satisfaction, improved quality, and higher process safety. Employee engagement depended on how emotionally an employee is involved with the organization, requiring leaders to establish connections with employees at a human level to encourage productivity through understanding and empathy traits, which are key elements of EI (Oteng et al., 2025). The concept of EI was interesting and encouraging enough to conduct additional research to determine how it can positively impact employee engagement. Leaders with higher EI could enhance employees' productivity, customer satisfaction, and organizational loyalty (Pisnar & Foust, 2024).

With the various leadership styles, it is beneficial for an organization to identify the leadership styles of its leaders to determine a correlation with employee engagement. Ariussanto et al. (2020) defined leadership style as a pattern of managerial behavior intended to align organizational and personal interests in pursuit of specific goals.

Leadership styles are multidimensional to influence employees and organizational culture. Leaders can motivate, inspire, and encourage or discourage employee engagement. Raza et al. (2024) positioned leadership as a critical factor in determining the employees' performance and the organization's success while emphasizing that leadership styles determine the employees' motivation, commitment, and health level. Dartey-Baah et al. (2025) noted that leadership styles influence employees' voluntary work behaviors by fostering a positive environment for tasks. Employees often model their actions based on interactions with their leaders, giving those leaders significant influence in shaping employee behavior and workplace culture. Rodliyah and Gani (2025) suggested that leadership styles can develop and change according to the times and social perspective, requiring communication skills, integrity, clear vision, courage to take risks, and the ability to make the right decisions.

Organizational leaders must face the challenge of bridging the gap between actively engaged, not fully engaged, and actively disengaged employees. McCrae (2020) acknowledged that employee disengagement can harm organizational success, negatively impact employee morale, and produce counterproductive workplace behavior. An engaged employee is enthusiastic about involvement with initiatives that contribute to the organization's achievements. A disengaged employee is not so passionate about their role or output; hence, they become a threat to achieving organizational goals. Meskelis and Whittington (2020) stated the differences between engaged and disengaged employees make it critical to identify and effectively address the problem of low levels recognizing engaged employees are involved, enthusiastic about their work, and contribute to the

organization while disengaged employees are not happy nor actively involved in their work.

Disengaged behavior could adversely affect employees' health and the organization's bottom line. Martinez et al. (2025) determined employee disengagement, overextension, ineffectiveness, and burnout over a year cost an employer an average of \$3,999 (95% range=\$3,958–\$4,299) for an average U.S. nonmanagerial hourly employee an average of \$4,257 (95% range=\$4,215–\$4,299) for an average nonmanagerial salaried employee; \$10,824 (95% range=\$10,700–\$10,948) for an average manager; and \$20,683 (95% range=\$20,451–\$20,915) for an average executive. The monetary loss due to employee disengagement was insurmountable and encouraged organizations to engage heavily with employee engagement to maintain a competitive advantage in their respective industry. Various dynamics influence engagement, and it is the leaders' task to foster a highly engaged culture while identifying obstacles that negatively impact engagement. It is imperative for organizations to clearly define employee engagement and nurture leaders who encourage a lively engagement atmosphere.

Business Topic Scholarship

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is a foundational element of organizational success, fostering productivity, commitment, and innovation. Ali et al. (2024) defined employee engagement as employees' physical, cognitive, and emotional investment in their roles, driven by a desire for meaningful work. When employees are engaged, they tend to exhibit improved job performance, stronger customer service, and increased loyalty to

their organizations (Sinha et al., 2024). These outcomes, in turn, reduce recruitment and training costs by minimizing turnover. Sinha et al. also emphasized that management plays a critical role in cultivating a culture of engagement, framing it as a key determinant of organizational performance. Moreover, Meskelis and Whittington (2020) found that engaged employees contribute positively through trust, discretionary effort, and organizational commitment, while disengaged individuals display absenteeism, low involvement, and higher turnover intentions. These findings underscored the strategic importance of employee engagement and invite further consideration of how organizations could respond to disengagement as both a challenge and an opportunity.

Though typically viewed as detrimental, disengagement can sometimes serve as a mechanism for employee resilience and reflection. McCrae (2020) reported that employee disengagement leads to decreased morale and organizational inefficiency, costing the global economy approximately \$438,000,000,000 annually. However, Gallup, Inc. (2025) estimated that a fully engaged global workforce could generate \$9,600,000,000,000 in productivity gains, suggesting the vast potential of effective engagement strategies. Afrahi et al. (2022) posited that disengagement is not inherently negative and may be self-directed by employees as a coping strategy. This temporary disengagement enabled individuals to manage stress or adverse circumstances and reengage meaningfully later. Davis and Van der Heijden (2024) further supported this interpretation, emphasizing that not all disengagement is harmful and that some forms can promote personal growth and organizational insight. These perspectives indicated the need for leadership approaches that accommodate nuanced understandings of

engagement and disengagement. Leadership style, in particular, plays a crucial role in this dynamic.

Leadership Styles

Leadership is pivotal in shaping employee engagement by establishing workplace values, guiding behavior, and cultivating commitment. Farooq et al. (2023) asserted that leadership is culturally embedded and essential in aligning employee efforts with organizational goals. Effective leaders who managed engagement realized several benefits, including increased productivity, reduced absenteeism, and enhanced customer satisfaction. Meskelis and Whittington (2020) also found that leadership behavior significantly influences employee retention, often determining whether employees remain with or leave an organization. Leadership style has been the primary driver of employee engagement, influencing factors such as leaders' communication approaches, career development opportunities, and overall employee well-being (Rabiul et al., 2023). Leadership styles refer to how leaders guide and influence their employees to accomplish organizational goals (Nanjundeswaraswamy et al., 2025). Rahal and Farmanesh (2022) further noted that positive leadership practices contribute to environments where employees feel valued and supported, thus promoting engagement. These findings reinforced that leadership style is a competitive advantage and a central determinant of employee behavior and organizational outcomes. Among the leadership models examined, transformational, transactional, and servant leadership have distinct effects on engagement.

Transformational leadership is strongly associated with high levels of employee engagement due to its emphasis on inspiration, motivation, and personalized support. Nanjundeswaraswamy et al. (2025) and Southgate et al. (2023) identified transformational leaders as those who communicate a compelling vision, encourage innovation, and attend to the unique needs of each employee. Agazu et al. (2025) outlined four critical components of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. These components collectively fostered trust, emotional commitment, and a strong sense of purpose among employees. Transformational leaders created work environments that encourage long-term engagement and growth by investing in employee development and modeling ethical behavior. This contrasts with transactional leadership, which focused more narrowly on task completion and external incentives.

While effective in achieving short-term objectives, transactional leadership often fell short of cultivating sustained employee engagement. As Southgate et al. (2023) described, this leadership style operates through a system of rewards and punishments, promoting compliance in exchange for performance. Farooq et al. (2023) emphasized that while transactional leaders can drive immediate results, the approach lacks emotional resonance and may fail to inspire long-term commitment. The limitations of transactional leadership were particularly evident in dynamic or innovation-driven environments where creativity and emotional investment are necessary. Consequently, organizations seeking deeper and more sustainable engagement may benefit from adopting more holistic leadership styles, such as servant leadership.

Servant leadership prioritizes the needs and development of employees, creating a supportive culture that encourages trust, collaboration, and meaningful work. Rooted in ethical behavior and a desire to serve, servant leadership was particularly effective during organizational uncertainty (Rahal & Farmanesh, 2022; Southgate et al., 2023). Rahal and Farmanesh (2022) emphasized that servant leaders form authentic relationships with their employees, fostering loyalty, job satisfaction, and engagement. By focusing on personal growth and community, servant leaders created psychologically safe workspaces where employees feel valued and empowered. This approach complemented foundational theories of engagement, such as Kahn's (1990) conceptualization of personal engagement and disengagement, which highlighted the emotional dimensions of workplace involvement. EI emerged as another critical capability to reinforce these leadership behaviors.

Emotional Intelligence

EI significantly enhances leadership effectiveness and strengthens employee engagement by fostering empathy, self-awareness, and interpersonal communication. George et al. (2022) defined EI as recognizing, understanding, and managing emotions in oneself and others. Korakis and Poulaki (2025) expanded on this definition, identifying five core dimensions of EI: self-awareness, emotional regulation, emotional development, emotional application, and communication. These skills enable leaders to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics and build trust-based relationships. Milhem et al. (2024) observed that leaders with high EI are more adept at resolving conflicts, encouraging collaboration, and creating emotionally supportive environments. Waglay et al. (2020)

similarly noted that EI enhances leadership effectiveness by promoting engagement, while low EI may lead to hostility, turnover, and reduced productivity. As a learnable skill, EI offers leaders a strategic advantage in cultivating thriving workplaces. When integrated with relational leadership theories such as LMX, the impact of EI on engagement is amplified.

Leader–Member Exchange Theory and Employee Engagement

The LMX theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how relationship quality between leaders and employees affects engagement. According to Evers et al. (2023), high-quality LMX relationships helped to satisfy employees' basic psychological needs, including autonomy, showing that leaders' relational support and provision of autonomy are central to LMX theory's explanation of how leaders meet job-related and supplemental employee needs. The development of LMX relationships occurred in three stages: role-taking, role-making, and role routinization (Y. Ye et al., 2021). Liu et al. (2022) argued that high-quality leader-member exchange relationships, rooted in supportive communication and trust, significantly increased employee engagement and work performance, highlighting the critical role of trust and supportive interactions in engagement processes. He et al. (2021) found that high-quality LMX relationships are characterized by mutual respect, strengthening organizational commitment. Santalla-Banderali and Alvarado (2022) and Tabak et al. (2024) confirmed that LMX quality directly predicts engagement and mediates overall performance outcomes. Therefore, cultivating strong leader–member relationships was essential for fostering a culture of engagement and achieving organizational objectives.

Transition

Employee engagement is a multifaceted construct influenced by leadership style, EI, and relationship quality. Strategies embedded in transformational and servant leadership, combined with high EI and intense LMXs, foster engagement by addressing employees' emotional and development needs. These elements build a resilient, committed workforce that drives innovation, satisfaction, and organizational success. Future leadership development efforts should integrate these concepts to design environments where employee engagement is sustained and optimized.

Section 3: Research Project Methodology

Project Ethics

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is critical to the research process, protecting the rights and welfare of project participants by ensuring that the research is ethical and that research project procedures are conducted respectfully to the participants (Capili & Anastasi, 2024). As the researcher, I assume the sole responsibility for the entire research process, ensuring it is procedurally thorough and exemplifies ethical accountability. My role as the researcher involves identifying the research topic, recruiting participants, conducting semistructured interviews, setting up data collection methods, analyzing data, and generating results and conclusions based on findings. Appendix A includes the interview questions for this project.

According to Hicks et al. (2021), the *Belmont Report* promoted respect for persons, beneficence, and justice as the primary principles for ethical conduct and human subject research. As the primary researcher, I adhered to these principles throughout the research process. Dutka and Astroth (2022) described informed consent as a process that begins with subject recruitment, continues through the entire research and uses the proper IRB template to guide the development of the consent document. The IRB ensures that adequate informed consent forms outline methods to include determining a person's capacity to provide consent, options to identify legal representatives who can give consent on behalf of an individual, and descriptions of additional procedures for protecting such individuals (Capili & Anastasi, 2024). Adhering to IRB protocols, I obtained informed consent, which is the ethical foundation for this research project.

Informed consent involved providing clear and comprehensive information to the participants about their roles, responsibilities, and expectations. To promote transparency and voluntary participation, I minimized potential misunderstandings by providing precise and concise guidance on withdrawing the right to consent at any time, identifying associated risks and benefits, and determining the mechanisms that will be implemented to maintain the confidentiality of their information. The participation incentive for the research was a monetary gift card not to exceed \$25.

The participants' confidentiality and privacy protection are essential to the research. I utilized several actions to safeguard the participants' identities. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure their true identity's confidentiality in any documentation or discussion. I used an interview protocol (see Appendix B) to guide data-gathering activities. All data will be stored using encryption and restricted protocols and securely stored for 5 years following the completion of my research, thus guaranteeing the ongoing protection of participant confidentiality. The IRB approval number for this project is 03-10-25-1041052.

Nature of the Project

I selected a qualitative research method to explore leadership strategies to foster effective employee engagement. Qualitative inquiry was particularly suited for investigating complex social phenomena through participants' lived experiences, enabling a rich understanding of leadership dynamics (Bazen et al., 2021; Moser & Korstjens, 2023). The method emphasized context, subjectivity, and meaning, which aligned with the project's aim to uncover how functional leaders influence engagement

practices. As a design, pragmatic inquiry emphasized practical solutions and real-world applications, allowing researchers to investigate problems by integrating flexible strategies rooted in participants' actions and perspectives (Ayre & McCaffery, 2022). The pragmatic inquiry design enhanced the qualitative method by focusing on actionable strategies leaders have used, ensuring that findings contribute to theory and offer practical solutions for businesses (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). The combination of semistructured interviews and document analysis supports methodological triangulation and allows for a nuanced exploration of both individual experiences and organizational context (Farquhar et al., 2020). Farquhar et al. (2020) stated that interviews offer depth and adaptability, whereas document artifacts complement narrative data and confirm reported engagement efforts. Together, the qualitative method and pragmatic design provided a robust framework for exploring leadership strategies with both theoretical depth and practical application.

In this qualitative-pragmatic project, data saturation, member checking, and triangulation was employed to confirm the credibility and trustworthiness of themes emerging from leadership experiences to ensure the reliability of the findings. Data saturation was reached when no new themes or insights emerge from additional interviews, indicating comprehensive thematic coverage (Christou, 2025). Recent scholarship underscored that saturation is not about arbitrary sample size but about conceptual completeness and the depth of meaning derived from the data (Ahmed, 2024). Member checking invited participants to review their transcribed interviews and the researcher's interpretations to ensure accuracy and authenticity (Urry et al., 2024).

Triangulation strengthened reliability by comparing multiple data sources, such as interview transcripts, organizational documents, and field notes, to validate consistency across perspectives (Mazzetti & Schaufeli, 2022). Applying these strategies in my project enhanced the rigor on employee engagement. For instance, data saturation ensured that recurring patterns in leadership strategies were fully explored. Member checking ensured the participants' lived experiences were represented accurately, maintaining the integrity of the data. Triangulation reinforced the credibility of findings by confirming alignment between participants' verbal accounts and documented engagement practices within the organization. Collectively, these strategies fortified the reliability of my project by confirming that leadership strategies were not only repeatedly observed but were accurately represented and validated through multiple data sources to uphold qualitative standards and align with the pragmatic goal of producing actionable, trustworthy insights into leadership strategies for employee engagement.

Population, Sampling, and Participants

The project population consisted of functional leaders employed in an e-commerce order fulfillment center. Eligibility criteria required participants to have at least 1 year of tenure and demonstrable success in implementing employee engagement strategies. The eligibility criteria aligned with purposive sampling practices to ensure participants possessed firsthand strategic experience (Memon et al., 2024). Participants were chosen to ensure relevance to the project's aim of identifying leadership strategies that improve engagement. This criterion ensured the selection of participants with practical leadership experience directly aligned with the project's objective of identifying

effective engagement strategies (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2024). The project targeted functional leaders at an e-commerce fulfillment center who could provide insight into effective engagement strategies. Participants were required to have at least 1 year in their role and success in fostering employee engagement—selection criteria consistent with purposive sampling to align with the research objectives (Campbell et al., 2020).

Selected participants were leaders with proven employee engagement results, occupying roles with organizational influence. This reflected a targeted approach, ensuring data richness from experienced individuals. These leaders were selected based on their proven ability to foster engagement, which enhanced the project's validity by capturing rich, experiential insights, and their professional insights directly contribute to the research question, enhancing data reliability and the applicability of findings (Moser & Korstjens, 2023).

Access strategies included personalized invitations and leveraging professional networks to establish initial contact, supported by ethical protocols through the informed consent process. IRB-approved informed consent procedures, including confidentiality assurances, promoted trust and transparency (Yourell et al., 2025). Building trust during recruitment ensured participants understood the voluntary nature of the project and its contribution to scholarly knowledge (Moe et al., 2024).

Rapport was developed through consistent communication, confidentiality guarantees, and flexible scheduling of interviews. The use of semi structured interviews allowed participants to share personal experiences freely, building trust and enriching data quality (LaDonna et al., 2021). Trust was fostered through clear communication and

participant-centered protocols (Schmid et al., 2024). This encouraged open, honest dialogue and strengthened data authenticity.

Purposive sampling was intentionally used to select participants with relevant expertise in employee engagement. This method was ideal for qualitative research, requiring in-depth understanding from informed perspectives and enhancing thematic richness (Flemming & Noyes, 2021). It ensured that only data-rich cases contribute to theory development. Purposive sampling was selected to reflect expert insight rather than statistical representation. This non-probability method ensured the selection of participants with specific engagement-related knowledge (Campbell et al., 2020).

I chose a sample size of six to 10 participants to balance depth and feasibility. This range aligned with qualitative research standards where smaller samples yield sufficient depth for thematic analysis, especially when participant roles are homogenous (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The sample size of six to 10 participants reflected qualitative guidelines prioritizing depth over breadth. The smaller samples allowed for detailed, context-rich analysis, especially when participants hold similar roles and backgrounds (Sharma et al., 2024). This sample size also supported feasibility and data manageability within doctoral timelines.

Data saturation was determined when no new interview themes emerged, indicating sufficient thematic coverage. According to Naeem et al. (2024), data saturation is achieved when no new data or themes materializes which confirms the data has been completely explored. This approach ensured comprehensive insight into the phenomena under investigation and adhered to conceptual completeness standards (Jennings &

Yeager, 2025). Data triangulation and member checking ensured saturation was not prematurely assumed, a means of validating and verifying data and recognizing inconsistencies in the data set (Donkoh, 2023). Saturation was not a numeric threshold but a marker of thematic completeness and depth, validated through iterative analysis (Guest et al., 2020).

Data Collection Activities

As the researcher, I was the primary data collection instrument. I utilized semistructured interviews, supported by a structured interview protocol, to collect and analyze data exploring leadership strategies for fostering employee engagement. Semistructured interviews were well-suited for qualitative research because they enable researchers to maintain consistency while allowing participants to share their unique experiences and encourage in-depth exploration, enabling the interviewer to probe for clarification and elaboration as needed (Striepe, 2021). Developing and applying a formal interview protocol enhanced the project's methodological rigor, ensuring interviews were conducted systematically while minimizing bias (Wutich et al., 2021). The rationale for an interview protocol stemmed from its function in guiding the researcher to ask core questions while allowing room for adaptive probing based on participant response, ensuring both structure and depth (LaDonna et al., 2021). The protocol served as a framework for standardizing introductions, core questioning, and closings, and reinforced ethical commitments by explicitly addressing confidentiality and informed consent. This combination of structure and flexibility was essential in qualitative inquiry to generate

reliable and authentic data while protecting participant rights (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023).

The semistructured interview protocol provided a systematic process for data collection that prioritized ethical integrity, participant comfort, and transparency. The protocol was utilized as a guide through critical stages, including consent confirmation, the delivery of core questions, adaptive probing, and member-checking integration post interview to validate transcript accuracy and researcher interpretation (see Urry et al., 2024). This structure ensured consistency across interviews while permitting responsive follow-up, enhancing the richness of the data collected. The process also integrated best practices such as audio recording with participant permission and member-checking, which allowed participants to validate transcript accuracy and ensure their views were authentically represented (Motulsky, 2021). Combining procedural rigor with flexibility, the protocol upheld the ethical and methodological standards for high-quality qualitative research.

The functional leaders interviewed for this project were identified in my professional network, met the participant criteria of the project, and consented to a scheduled interview. The data collection followed a detailed, multistep process to ensure methodological rigor and ethical compliance. The steps included sending personalized invitations, securing informed consent, conducting semistructured interviews informed by the protocol (see Appendix B), recording interviews, transcribing verbatim, and inviting participants to review their transcripts for accuracy (see Schafer & Phillippi, 2025). The protocol facilitated a precise flow: greeting and consent confirmation, delivery of core

questions, probing for depth, and a structured closing with explanation of member checking. Secure data storage using encryption further safeguarded participant confidentiality, aligned with qualitative ethical standards (Lim, 2025). Member-checking, in particular, enhanced trustworthiness by engaging participants in verifying interpretations (Hays & McKibben, 2021). These practices collectively enhanced the trustworthiness of my project, ensuring findings were ethically sound and reflective of participants' authentic experiences.

I have included the interview questions and protocol in the appendices to promote transparency and auditability. Appendix A contains the interview questions and Appendix B, the interview protocol. This clear documentation aligns with qualitative research reporting standards, supporting external review and replication, and allows external reviewers to assess methodological rigor (see Braun & Clarke, 2025). Proper organization of materials ensured that the project's methods can be scrutinized or replicated in future research, further reinforcing its credibility.

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

Thematic analysis was the most appropriate data analysis process for this qualitative pragmatic inquiry because it provided a flexible yet structured approach for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within narrative data. Thematic analysis aligned with my project's goal of uncovering functional leaders' strategies by interpreting their lived experiences and generating actionable themes relevant to employee engagement practices. O'Kane et al. (2021) emphasized that thematic analysis is a theoretically flexible approach that supports both inductive and deductive analysis,

making it ideal for pragmatic research where theory and practice intersect. Janis (2022) noted that thematic analysis enables researchers to systematically code and theme large volumes of qualitative data, allowing researchers to maintain transparency and rigor in the interpretation of complex narratives. Thematic analysis is frequently applied to uncover meaning-making processes and behavioral patterns across similar participant roles (Ahmed et al., 2025).

For the semistructured interviews with functional leaders, I used a six-phase reflexive thematic analysis process:

1. Familiarization with data by reading transcripts and noting initial ideas.
2. Generation of initial codes using qualitative software (e.g., NVivo, MAXQDA).
3. Search for themes by collating codes into potential categories.
4. Review of themes to ensure coherence and relevance to the research question.
5. Definition and naming of themes for conceptual clarity.
6. Production of a report that connects themes to the broader literature and theoretical framework (e.g., LMX; Kushnir, 2025).

The use of reflexive journaling during the coding process supported analytic transparency and enhanced trustworthiness (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The MAXQDA software was utilized to analyze the data, improve efficiency and accuracy in coding, and visualizing theme relationships. The tool supported mind-mapping, query development, and cluster analysis to deepen insight into leadership strategy patterns (Moncada, 2025). Further, digital coding facilitated audit trails and enhanced replicability.

Thematic analysis offered a logical and rigorous approach for analyzing data from functional leaders in a pragmatic framework. Its flexibility, compatibility with qualitative software, and transparency-enhancing features made it an ideal choice to uncover meaningful themes that inform effective employee engagement strategies. Using MAXQDA in conjunction with a reflexive coding process ensured that the analysis captured both theoretical alignment and practical relevance, supporting the project's aim of producing actionable leadership insights.

For this project, I compiled the audio recordings, interview transcripts, and all documents into a directory with pseudonyms for each participant. I utilized multiple systems such as research logs, reflective journal entries, and software-enabled cataloging to support the reflexive thematic analysis aligned with the research design and conceptual framework.

I employed thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Kushnir (2025), which includes familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Reflexive journaling was maintained to document positionality and analytic decision-making, enhance transparency, and dependability (Cena et al., 2024). The themes that emerged from the data were leader visibility and interaction, trust and communication, organizational impact, empowerment and motivation, disengagement identification, and leadership development. To track emerging understanding, I used a codebook, visual coding map, and an audit trail to reinforce the data structure and interpretability (see Reyes et al., 2021). The coding process was supported by MAXQDA, which facilitated mind-mapping, visualizing theme

relationships, and conducting cluster analysis for deeper interpretive insight (Kalpokas & Radivojevic, 2022).

The use of these systems enabled a rigorous process of translating interview data into actionable leadership themes. The codebook provided consistency across responses, while the reflexive journal captured interpretive reasoning and mitigated bias, especially given the potential alignment of participant responses with LMX theory. MAXQDA supported structured exploration and visual representation of connections between codes, themes, and the conceptual framework. Within this analytic structure, codes related to psychological safety, leader visibility, and employee engagement aligned closely with core LMX dimensions of trust, mutual respect, and support, reinforcing evidence that high-quality leader-member exchanges cultivated supportive and empowering environments that enhanced employee engagement and well-being (Bennouna et al., 2024).

Reliability and Validity

To enhance reliability and validity, I used strategies that included transcript review, member checking, triangulation of interview and survey data, and saturation determination based on thematic redundancy. These strategies supported credibility and dependability of the findings. The reflexive thematic analysis aligned with the project's pragmatic orientation by integrating both inductive and deductive reasoning, allowing themes to emerge from participant experiences while remaining aligned with the conceptual framework and research questions. This iterative and reflexive process

enhanced analytical transparency and strengthened the overall trustworthiness and actionable relevance of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

Summary

I leveraged a rigorous data tracking system incorporating reflexive journaling, audit trails, and coding tools to ensure organized and transparent analysis. Thematic analysis, facilitated through MAXQDA and aligned with LMX theory, enabled the systematic emergence of key leadership engagement themes. The coding process followed a clear sequence grounded in a six-phase model, ensuring both theoretical alignment and practical relevance. Trustworthiness was reinforced through member checking, triangulation, and saturation strategies. These methods collectively established a dependable foundation for drawing meaningful insights into leadership practices that foster effective employee engagement.

Section 4: Findings and Conclusions

Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore strategies that functional leaders use to foster effective employee engagement in a working environment to enhance organizational success. The overarching research question was, What effective strategies do some functional leaders use to foster effective employee engagement in a working environment to enhance organizational success? The primary themes emerging from the data were (a) leader visibility and interaction, (b) challenges to engagement, (c) trust and communication, (d) identification of disengagement, (e) organizational impact, (f) empowerment and motivation, (g) measurement and feedback, and (h) leadership development.

Theme 1: Leader Visibility and Interaction

Leader visibility through daily check-ins, open-door policies, and walk-throughs emerged as the leading factor for fostering employee engagement by building trust and psychological safety, with performance records showing links to higher morale and performance. Participants stressed that being “seen” made employees more open, while performance dashboards reinforced the connection between visible leadership and improved outcomes. These practices confirm and extend LMX theory, which emphasizes that frequent, authentic leader interactions promote high-quality exchanges. Authentic and humble leadership enhanced psychological safety and reduced turnover intention, demonstrating why visibility strengthens organizational outcomes (Mrayyan & Al-Rjoub, 2024; Park et al., 2025). Leaders who remain consistently visible not only inspire trust

but also accelerate role-making in LMX, driving morale and performance to higher levels.

Theme 2: Challenges to Engagement

Engagement was weakened by time pressure, limited senior support, and resistance to change, further exacerbated by inconsistent messaging and misaligned directives. Leaders reported that pressure from senior leadership to meet weekly engagement completion metrics prioritized compliance over authenticity, causing employees to feel like numbers rather than respected and valued contributors. Participant 2 stated they were in the bottom 25% for 2 consecutive months because their employees felt they were being treated more like a number than a person. These findings confirmed and extended scholarship indicating that cultural misalignment and technostress undermine engagement unless buffered by authentic leadership and psychological safety (Artinger et al., 2025; Ertiö et al., 2024). Overcoming these barriers requires leaders to set unambiguous expectations, communicate consistently, and model resilience under pressure—actions that protect psychological safety and preserve the strength of LMX relationships.

Theme 3: Trust and Communication

Trust and psychological safety were reinforced through clear, consistent communication, timely leader follow-up, and demonstrated vulnerability. Leaders explained decisions, provided updates, and ensured accountability through documented feedback logs and communication cascades. The leaders' monthly engagement surveys showed employees valued the trust and communication with an average 93% favorable

rating. The results aligned with research showing that transparent internal communication strengthens employee–organization relationships and reduces uncertainty (Thelen et al., 2022). Embedding structured, transparent communication practices ensures stronger LMX relationships and creates a foundation of trust that anchors organizational stability.

Theme 4: Identification of Disengagement

Leaders recognized disengagement through behavioral cues, observation, and emotionally intelligent dialogue, supplemented by survey data to guide interventions. The project outcomes extended knowledge by showing how cue recognition intersects with EI. Participant 3 utilized daily interactions and awareness of body language and action to identify disengaged employees. Participant 3 discussed how a disengaged employee productivity fell in the bottom 5%, extra attention was given to the employee, and the employee showed a 3% improvement for 4 consecutive months based monthly metric dashboard. Research highlighted engagement spans physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions, with EI-based leadership fostering employee flourishing while buffering stressors (A'yuninnisa et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024). By institutionalizing EI training and behavioral tracking tools, leaders detected disengagement early and intervene decisively to reenergize employees before performance declines.

Theme 5: Organizational Impact

Employee engagement improved morale, retention, and performance, whereas disengagement spread quickly and correlated with attrition. The project confirmed the strong link between engagement and positive organizational outcomes. Participant 4 disclosed the attrition rate decreased from 8% in 2024 to 3% in 2025 due to their

engagement. Participant 4 shared being intentional as their engagement strategy, “if I take care of my employees, then my employees will take care of the business.” This aligned with evidence that high-quality LMX relationships reduced turnover and exhaustion (Petrilli et al., 2024). Leaders who prioritized engagement strategies not only strengthen retention and performance but also transformed engagement into a measurable driver of competitive advantage.

Theme 6: Empowerment and Motivation

Shared goals, recognition, and peer accountability emerged as critical drivers of morale and intrinsic motivation. These engagement levers were confirmed by recognition logs and aligned with empowerment literature. The participants’ 2024 monthly survey showed an average 93% favorable rating for employee recognition. Participant 2 explained recognition is a valued engagement strategy by stating “employees want to be recognized for their hard work and it motivates them to do more.” Evidence indicated recognition and fairness increase engagement and reduce burnout, while empowerment mediates leadership’s impact on engagement, with EI moderating the pathway (Jo & Shin, 2025; Li et al., 2024). Harnessing recognition and shared accountability systematically elevate motivation, closes LMX gaps, and equips teams to thrive even in high-pressure environments.

Theme 7: Measurement and Feedback

Leaders combined qualitative insights with quantitative data—through conversations, surveys, and dashboards—to refine engagement strategies. Using both quantitative and qualitative approaches strengthened confirmability. Participant 1 used

quantitative data “to monitor productivity, quality, safety, attrition” and used qualitative data such as “sentiment in team meetings and upward feedback” to define and refine their engagement strategies. This observation aligned with validation of engagement measures recommending a mixed-methods approach for actionable insights (Coetzee et al., 2025). Establishing dual feedback systems with validated tools and continuous qualitative sense-making ensures engagement strategies remain adaptive, credible, and powerfully aligned to organizational needs.

Theme 8: Leadership Development

Structured leadership development in EI and cultural competence was viewed as essential for sustaining trust-based leadership capacity. Participants emphasized the importance of intentional training to build relational and cultural skills. This aligned with research showing that EI development enhanced leadership effectiveness and workplace culture (Atobatele & Okonkwo, 2024). Building leadership pipelines that prioritize relational capacity and cultural intelligence ensured organizations sustain high-quality LMX and mitigate risks of disengagement across diverse teams.

Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice

The findings of this doctoral project provided critical insight into leadership practices that elevate employee engagement—an organizational asset directly linked to innovation, retention, and productivity. For business and organizational leaders, the results emphasized that engagement is not a peripheral initiative but a strategic system embedded within leadership behavior and organizational design. When leaders practice authentic visibility, transparent communication, and empowerment, they cultivated a

climate of psychological safety and trust—the foundation for high performance and resilience (Wang et al., 2023). A psychologically safe workforce is more likely to take risks, share ideas, and sustain innovation even during disruption (S. Kim et al., 2020).

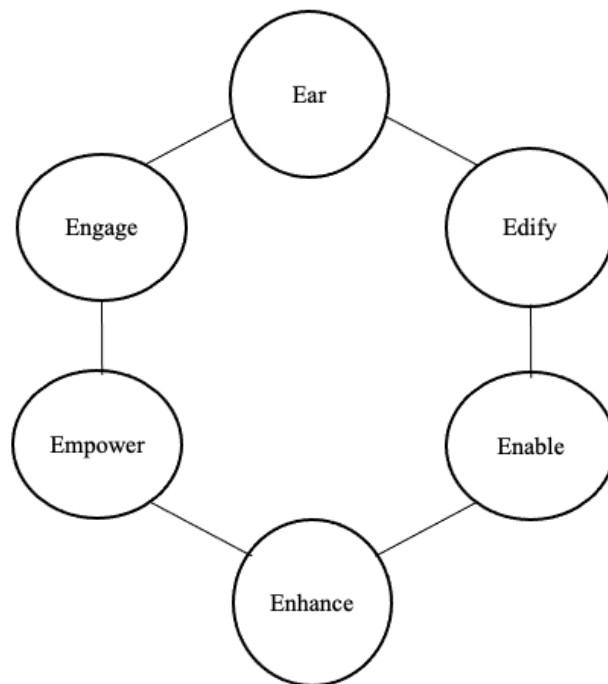
The project's outcomes underscored that leader visibility and intentional interaction drive stronger LMX relationships, which are the relational engines of engagement. These findings extended the LMX framework by showing that engagement operates as a feedback system: leaders' behaviors influence employee perceptions, which, in turn, reinforce leader credibility and collective performance (Rass et al., 2023). For the research-scholar community, this project advanced systems thinking in organizational leadership by integrating engagement, communication, and empowerment into an adaptive leadership ecosystem capable of evolving with workforce and environmental complexity, consistent with research demonstrating that empowering leadership enhances adaptive performance through interconnected engagement and mechanisms (S. Kim & Yoon, 2025).

From a business perspective, the implications were profound. Modern organizations navigating digital transformation and post pandemic restructuring faced high turnover, disengagement, and burnout (Virmani et al., 2025). This project provides evidence that systemic engagement practices—anchored in trust, ethical conduct, and shared purpose—strengthen organizational readiness and innovation capacity. Leaders who approach engagement as an organizational system rather than a human resources metric can leverage it as a competitive advantage that aligns culture, performance, and strategy (Ben-Hador & Yitshaki, 2025).

To operationalize these insights, business leaders should adopt a new engagement system thinking paradigm, 6 Es of engagement, a relational and systemic model that embeds engagement as a continuous feedback loop rather than a linear process. The model is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

6 Es of Engagement System Thinking Paradigm—Continuous Cycle Model



Each “E” provides a pragmatic pathway to sustained engagement:

- Ear—Listen and Build Trust: Implement formal listening systems such as pulse surveys, town-hall sessions, and open-door policies to detect early signs of disengagement. Authentic listening fostered trust and transparency enhanced psychological safety (Qin & Men, 2021).

- **Edify—Teach and Mentor:** Develop mentorship and knowledge-sharing frameworks that edify employee capability. Structured development reinforced confidence, professional identity, and retention (Vu et al., 2025).
- **Enable—Provide Tools and Autonomy:** Equip employees with digital resources, cross-functional authority, and decision-making latitude. Empowered employees demonstrated higher innovation and self-efficacy (M. Kim & Beehr, 2023).
- **Enhance—Recognize and Develop Strengths:** Create data-driven recognition systems that link individual performance to strategic goals. Personalized feedback and coaching enhanced engagement and reduce burnout (Van Tuin et al., 2021).
- **Empower—Entrust and Inspire Ownership:** Delegate meaningful responsibility and reinforce ownership through participatory decision-making. Empowerment built organizational commitment and resilience (P. Ye et al., 2022).
- **Engage—Sustain Dialogue and Innovation:** Establish continuous engagement loops through collaboration platforms and peer-learning groups. Such dynamic systems reinforced inclusion, creativity, and collective problem-solving (Iddrisu, 2025).

The 6 Es of engagement paradigm aligned with the project’s core finding that engagement is both relational and systemic. Each “E” function as a node within an interdependent leadership network where actions, perceptions, and feedback loops

reinforce or weaken engagement outcomes. This mirrored principles of complex adaptive systems, in which leaders function as facilitators of learning, knowledge exchange, and connectivity that enable adaptive responses rather than as controllers of linear processes (S. Kim & Yoon, 2025). Viewing engagement through a systems lens allows organizations to diagnose disengagement as a system dysfunction, enabling targeted, data-informed interventions.

Research supports this integrative view. Studies by Mohammad et al. (2024) and Virmani et al. (2025) found that organizations employing systemic engagement approaches recover faster from disruptions, demonstrating higher innovation and resilience. By linking leadership visibility, empowerment, and feedback within the 6 Es framework, organizations can build self-sustaining engagement ecosystems that align with business objectives and evolving workforce expectations. This project contributes to both scholarship and practice by offering a replicable leadership model that merges human dynamics with organizational systems—providing a sustainable pathway to foster effective employee engagement.

Implications for Social Change

The findings from this qualitative pragmatic inquiry revealed that leadership strategies fostering effective employee engagement carry transformative power extending far beyond organizational walls. When cultivated with authenticity, engagement becomes more than an operational objective—it becomes a movement that reshapes how people experience work, how leaders influence culture, and how organizations strengthen society.

Engaged leadership reimagined the leader–employee relationship, transforming individuals from task performers into purpose-driven contributors. When leaders listened with intent, mentored with compassion, and trusted their teams with autonomy, they ignited belonging, resilience, and confidence. These qualities rippled outward, shaping families, communities, and civic life. Engagement becomes more than motivation—it becomes a moral force that humanizes work and elevates character.

Within organizations, the 6 Es of engagement—*ear, edify, enable, enhance, empower, and engage*—form a living system of ethical renewal that embeds trust, inclusion, and accountability into daily practice. When listening, mentorship, and empowerment become cultural norms rather than programs, engagement evolves from a checklist to a mindset that drives innovation, retention, and shared purpose. Empirical research supported this shift, demonstrating that psychological empowerment strengthened employee engagement and was significantly associated with reduced turnover intentions and enhanced innovative work behavior, indicating that sustained engagement emerged most effectively when empowerment is embedded in everyday leadership practice rather than treated as a standalone initiative (Chompukum & Vanichbuncha, 2025; Elamin et al., 2024). Its influence extends beyond the organization—employees who feel valued mirror those same principles in their families and communities, fostering compassion, cooperation, and collective strength. Thus, engaged leadership transforms workplaces into incubators of civic virtue where empathy and integrity restore social trust and fuel both personal and societal progress.

At the societal level, engagement-centered leadership drives both ethical progress and sustainable economic growth. Leaders who model fairness, transparency, and EI disrupt cycles of disengagement, burnout, and inequity. Engagement, therefore, is not merely a management concept—it is a moral and economic imperative. By empowering people to contribute meaningfully, organizations generate innovation, equity, and shared prosperity. Research indicated that empowering leadership strengthened employees' sense of purpose, voice, and autonomy, which subsequently enhanced innovative contributions and supported more inclusive and socially sustainable organizational outcomes (P. Ye et al., 2022). A truly engaged workforce does not just meet goals; it advances humanity.

For scholars and practitioners, this project bridged theory and transformation. By integrating systems thinking, EI, and relational leadership, it presented engagement as a living, evolving process rather than a static construct. The 6 Es framework offered a platform for future research exploring how relational leadership cultivated inclusion, resilience, and sustainable success. It advanced a growing body of evidence proving that when leaders valued connection as much as control, engagement becomes measurable social impact.

Ultimately, engagement transcends morale—it is a catalyst for human and societal evolution. When leaders embody authenticity, empathy, and empowerment, they inspire excellence that reverberates beyond the organization. Through the continual rhythm of listening, edifying, enabling, enhancing, empowering, and engaging, workplaces become

engines of transformation—where business success fuels social progress, and leadership becomes a force for a more equitable, innovative, and flourishing world.

Recommendation for Further Research

Future researchers should continue expanding understanding of leadership strategies that foster employee engagement across broader contexts and industries. This project, centered on functional leaders in an e-commerce environment, offered valuable insights into relational and behavioral factors influencing engagement. However, comparative research across sectors such as health care, logistics, and manufacturing could reveal how culture, demographics, and leadership hierarchies shape engagement differently.

Future researchers may want to consider incorporating multistakeholder perspectives—including associates, human resources professionals, and executives—to capture engagement as an organizational, not solely a leadership, responsibility. Mixed-method approaches combining qualitative interviews with quantitative indicators such as engagement scores, turnover rates, and productivity metrics could strengthen causal insights and enhance generalizability. This integration is important because mixed-method designs allowed researchers to link contextual and experiential data with measurable outcomes, thereby strengthening causal explanations and improving the transferability of findings across organizational settings (Green et al., 2022; Younas & Durante, 2023).

To address this project's limitations of sample size, participant bias, and scope, researchers should consider larger, multisite, and longitudinal designs that trace

engagement trends over time. Leveraging AI-driven sentiment analytics could also capture real-time employee perceptions and validate leadership practices.

Finally, future researchers should empirically test the 6 Es of engagement system thinking paradigm—ear, edify, enable, enhance, empower, and engage—as a practical framework for leadership development. Peer-reviewed scholarship similarly emphasized that leadership frameworks should be empirically tested and refined across diverse organizational contexts to establish broader applicability and practical value, as integrative analyses underscore the need for systematic, context-sensitive empirical research to strengthen leadership theory and practice (Alan & Onur, 2025). Evaluating its effectiveness across industries could establish a scalable, evidence-based model for cultivating engagement-centered leadership and advancing organizational performance.

Conclusion

In this qualitative pragmatic inquiry, I explored how functional leaders foster effective employee engagement through intentional leadership practices, communication, and relational trust. Grounded in LMX theory, the project emphasized the relational quality between leaders and employees as a central driver of engagement and organizational success. Data collected through semistructured interviews and supported by document analysis produced eight interrelated themes: (a) leader visibility and interaction, (b) challenges to engagement, (c) trust and communication, (d) identification of disengagement, (e) organizational impact, (f) empowerment and motivation, (g) measurement and feedback, and (h) leadership development.

The findings demonstrated that leaders who model authenticity, transparency, and empathy cultivate climates of trust, empowerment, and belonging conditions that sustain engagement even amid organizational challenges. Engagement emerged not as a singular event but as a continuous relational process shaped by visibility, feedback, and development. Participants consistently emphasized that engagement flourishes when leaders actively listen, support employee growth, and align team purpose with organizational mission.

This project contributes to business practice by offering evidence-based leadership strategies that translate theory into actionable systems for engagement. It reinforces that engagement is both a human and systemic outcome, dependent on consistent leadership behaviors and organizational structures that reinforce accountability, communication, and recognition. Leaders could operationalize engagement by embedding the 6 Es of engagement model into leadership development programs, performance reviews, and team coaching structures to transform engagement from a periodic initiative into a sustained cultural competency.

The findings of this project affirm that engaged leadership serves as a catalyst of organizational transformation and sustained performance. When participating leaders cultivated authentic connections, communicate with transparency, and intentionally developed their employees, they established a reinforcing cycle of trust, motivation, and productivity that extended beyond immediate results. Engagement is not simply a metric to be measured—It is the heartbeat of organizational vitality, the driving force behind innovation, and a strategy for sustainable success. Through engaged leadership,

organizations transform from functioning entities into thriving ecosystems where people feel valued, empowered, inspired to perform at their highest potential.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What leadership strategies do you use to engage your employees?
2. What challenges have you encountered using leadership strategies to engage employees?
3. What are some common employee reactions to leadership strategies?
4. What approach do you use to identify disengaged employees?
5. What leadership strategies do you implement to encourage disengaged employees to be highly engaged employees?
6. In your experience, what negative organizational results have you seen from decreased employee engagement?
7. In your experience, what positive organizational results have you seen from increased employee engagement?
8. How do you measure the effectiveness of the leadership strategies used to engage employees?
9. What additional information or feedback would you like to provide to this project about leadership strategies to foster effective employee engagement in the working environment?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Action	Script
<p>Introduce the interview and set the stage—often over a meal or coffee.</p>	<p>"Hello, thank you for taking the time to participate in this research project. I appreciate the criticality you attach to the expected findings, and I hope to add to the literature that develops strategies to XXX. I have been working on a degree for a Doctor of Business Administration for the past few years. In this project, I am exploring leadership strategies to foster effective employee engagement."</p> <p>"A few weeks ago, you agreed to sign an informed consent form. Do you have any questions for me or any matter that requires my attention? This interview is confidential, and your identity and that of your organization shall remain anonymous and represented by codes."</p> <p>"I will collect data using semistructured interview questions. The idea is to allow you to explain any strategies, events, and memories that answer the interview questions. During your narration, I may prompt you for further explanation and details."</p> <p>"I will need to record your responses so that I do not miss anything."</p> <p>"Note that you may rescind your decision to participate in the research anytime."</p>
<p>Ask interview questions to get in-depth responses. Listen for nonverbal cues. Paraphrase as needed.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "What leadership strategies do you use to engage your employees?" 2. "What challenges have you encountered using leadership strategies to engage employees?" 3. "What are some common employee reactions to leadership strategies?" 4. "What approach do you use to identify disengaged employees?" 5. "What leadership strategies do you implement to encourage disengaged employees to be highly engaged employees?" 6. "In your experience, what negative organizational results have you seen from decreased employee engagement?" 7. "In your experience, what positive organizational results have you seen from increased employee engagement?"

Action	Script
	<p>8. "How do you measure the effectiveness of the leadership strategies used to engage employees?"</p> <p>9. "What additional information or feedback would you like to provide to this project about leadership strategies to foster effective employee engagement in the working environment?"</p>
Schedule transcript review either by phone or email.	"In a few days, I will need your assistance in authenticating my understanding of your responses to the interview questions as part of the research process. You may adjust the script or add to your initial responses if needed. I will send the transcript by email, and we can discuss it by phone if you agree."
Introduce a member checking review and set the stage.	"Thank you for agreeing to meet me today to finalize what I heard from you during the interview and the meaning I have provided for each response."
Wrap up the interview by thanking participants.	"Your contribution to this doctoral research has been most impressive, and I thank you very much for helping me to achieve the doctoral degree. I hope you will find the research findings beneficial to your organization and professional development."