

2017

Strategies to Sustain Positive Leader-Employee Relationships to Increase Productivity

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Bont'e N. Twyman-Abrams

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Walden University
2017

Abstract

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by

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MBA, Walden University, 2014

BS, Walden University, 2012

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

July 2017

Abstract

Senior executive leaders face ongoing challenges assessing whether their leadership teams have the competencies to respond to rapidly changing business conditions resulting from negative leader-employee interactions. The purpose of this qualitative single-unit case study was to explore strategies that team leaders at an online, for-profit high school education system located in Delaware, used to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase employee productivity. The population consisted of 5 current team leaders (faculty members and executives) at the study site who had experienced team member losses, yet had implemented effective strategies to sustain positive leader-employee relationships and increased employee productivity. The conceptual frameworks that grounded this doctoral study were path-goal and transformational leadership theories. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data collected through semistructured interviews, note taking, and company documents, with member checking implemented to validate the findings. Four themes emerged from the analysis: leadership styles and strategies, motivation, goal setting, and employee engagement and productivity. The implications for positive social change include the potential for top executives, stakeholders, and team leaders to increase the number of positive leader-employee relationships resulting in increased productivity, a favorable organizational reputation, and lower turnover rates, contributing to the financial stability and prosperity of not only employees but also communities and families.

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Dedication

This is dedicated to my husband, David; my children, E'Quanna, Robert, and Nicholas; and my grandson, Messiah. Thank all of you for your patience, support, love, and encouragement throughout my doctoral journey. I could not have completed this journey without all of you.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my mentor, Dr. Diane Dusick, for supporting me with excellent, solid feedback and mentor guidance. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Jamie Patterson, Dr. James Savard, and Dr. Yvonne Doll for their valued feedback. Thank you to my family, friends, and coworkers for their ever-lasting support. Special thanks to my peers, Diane Marshall and Sherman Arthur for listening to me vent and encouraging me to continue this journey. Finally, thank you Dr. Freda Turner for your encouragement and inspiration. I would not be where I am today without all of you.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Positive leader-employee relationships play an important role in increased productivity (Men & Stacks, 2013). Leaders should be cognizant of their leadership style and behavior in the work environment (Jordan & Troth, 2011). The transformational leadership style may prove useful to leaders desiring to sustain strategies that secure positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity in an online work environment (Jordan & Troth, 2011).

Leaders can achieve increased productivity in an online work environment by applying strategies that contribute to employee influence, motivation, stimulation, and consideration (Jordan & Troth, 2011). Employees who feel more empowered by their leader's competence and decision-making tend to have a more favorable perception of their leaders and the organization, and are more productive (Men & Stacks, 2013). Top executives, stakeholders, employees, and leaders in the online, for-profit high school education system seek to understand the strategies necessary to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity in an online work environment (Men & Stacks, 2013).

Background of the Problem

Some team leaders (faculty members and executives) in the online, for-profit high school education system that served as my study site continually assess whether they have the management structure, leadership skills, and workforce productivity to sustain positive leader-employee relationships (Borup, Graham, & Drysdale, 2014). Because some team leaders in online, for-profit high school education systems employ more

advantageous methods of teaching than traditional ones (Leblon, LaRocque, & de la Luz Gil Docampo, 2014), team leaders should employ comprehensive improvement in their understanding of the influence of positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity. An improvement in leaders' understandings of the influence of positive leader-employee relationships could potentially place employees in a better economic position and ensure employee productivity (Schlueter, 2014). By placing employees in a better economic position, employees are not only more dedicated to their employer but also are more productive (Schlueter, 2014).

Employee productivity is the effectiveness of productive effort, as measured in terms of employee output (Jordan & Troth, 2011). Leaders measure employee productivity by identifying organizational and operational efficiencies and the magnitude of employee effort (Giovannini & Nezu, 2001). Leaders can measure the magnitude of employee effort by monitoring the results of various tasks and employee engagement (Akkas, Chakma, & Hossain, 2015). Positive leader-employee relationships depend on how leaders manage employees, which should include ways that lead to profits, innovation, and increased productivity (Holmes, Clement, & Albright, 2013). Leaders must develop viable strategies that define and structure their approach to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity (Galpin & Whittington, 2012).

Problem Statement

Senior executive leaders face ongoing challenges assessing whether their leadership teams have the competencies to respond to rapidly changing business conditions resulting from negative leader-employee interactions (Borup et al., 2014). In

2014, organizations in the online, for-profit high school education system experienced approximately 670,000 voluntary and involuntary employee separations, a 4% increase from the 2012-2013 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). The general business problem is a lack of strategies to sustain a positive work environment to increase employee productivity. The specific business problem is that some team leaders in the online, for-profit high school education system lack strategies to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase employee productivity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative single-unit case study was to explore strategies that team leaders at one online, for-profit high school education system used to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase employee productivity. I collected data from team leaders who had experienced team member losses, yet had improved leader-employee relationships and increased employee productivity. The population consisted of current team leaders at an online, for-profit high school education system located in the Delaware area. This study's implications for positive social change include the potential for team leaders to increase the number of positive leader-employee relationships, resulting in increased productivity, lower turnover rates, and a favorable organizational reputation, which, in turn, may contribute to the financial stability and prosperity of their employees, communities, and families.

Nature of the Study

In this doctoral study, I employed a qualitative methodology because I sought to understand how effective leadership styles affect leader-employee relationships and

productivity. Researchers using a qualitative research approach interpret and accurately explain complex situations that sustain cases and explore phenomena in which no established logic exists (Galloway, Kapasi, & Whittam, 2015). Researchers using a quantitative research approach examine relationships and differences between variables, testing theories as reliable sources of knowledge, and placing more focus on what is solid within the social context (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015).

A mixed-methods research approach was not appropriate because I did not use *both* quantitative and qualitative methods. Mixed-methods analysis includes quantitative inquiry to study objective information (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). I concluded that a qualitative methodology was appropriate because using it would enable me to explore and develop an understanding of the depth and breadth of a subject area through a rigorous case study.

A qualitative case study research design was appropriate for this doctoral study because a qualitative case study allows for a better understanding of the *why* and *how* of a situation based on real-life instances (Merriam, 2014). Phenomenological research was not appropriate for this doctoral study because it was limited to open-ended interviews using a semistructured interview technique that explores lived experiences from the first-person perspective (Tanggaard, 2014). Ethnographic research is appropriate when a researcher wishes to develop a complete description of the culture of a group, and is suitable for studying the constitution of psychological phenomena in social practices across time (Tanggaard, 2014). Case study data are collected from multiple sources and include a detailed analysis; therefore, a case study method was most appropriate for this

doctoral study (Tanggaard, 2014). The purpose of this doctoral study was to develop an understanding of strategies that team leaders in an online, for-profit high school education system employ to develop and sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase employee productivity.

Research Question

I addressed one central question throughout this doctoral study: What strategies do some business team leaders in the online, for-profit high school education system employ to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies do you find useful when successfully managing/implementing positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity?
2. What are key challenges you have experienced when implementing strategies to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity?
3. What strategies have not been helpful for implementing strategies to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity?
4. How do you, as a leader in the organization, embody the values that employees should be learning and internalizing?
5. What procedures do you take to ensure productivity?
6. How do you, as a leader in the organization, motivate employees' thoughts and imaginations, as well as encourage them to express their ability to identify and solve problems, creatively?

7. How do you, as a leader in the organization, coach employees based on their needs and spend time treating each employee in a caring and unique way?
8. How do you, as a leader in the organization, implement strategies that lead employees on a successful path to accomplish not only departmental goals but also organizational goals?
9. What steps have you taken to (a) sustain positive leader-employee relationships, (b) create a positive work environment, and (c) ensure employee productivity?
10. Do you have anything to add to or address the strategies and processes you implemented that improved and sustained positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity?

Conceptual Framework

I used both the path-goal and transformational leadership theories as conceptual frameworks for this doctoral study. Evans (1970) first introduced path-goal theory, and House (1971) subsequently refined the theory. According to Korzynski (2013), leaders support and motivate employees to help employees achieve their goals. Leaders who display a path-goal leadership style see a path for the employee that needs to be followed (Talal-Ratyan, Khalaf, & Rasli, 2013). The leader attempts to clear the path and get employees to follow it, which often leads to the accomplishment of a set goal (Talal-Ratyan et al., 2013). A leader might demand, reward, punish, or get suggestions from employees to achieve certain goals (Talal-Ratyan et al., 2013).

Transformational leadership is a process in which leaders and followers help each other advance to a higher level of morale and motivation (Bass & Bass, 2008).

Transformational leadership theory offers an explanation for leadership based upon the premise that leaders are able to inspire followers to change expectations, perceptions, and motivations to work toward common goals (Bass & Bass, 2008). In 1985, Bass and Bass expanded on the concept of transformational leadership to highlight four underlying key constructs/propositions: (a) idealized influence, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individualized consideration. Team leaders employ comprehensive improvement as a construct for understanding strategies that ensure positive leader-employee relationships for increasing productivity, and potentially placing employees in better economic positions (Schlueter, 2014). Using these theories enabled me to craft interview questions that allowed participants to highlight strategies that sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity.

Operational Definitions

I used the following terms throughout this doctoral study:

Employee empowerment: Employee empowerment is the concept of power, which means collaborating to increase the power of everyone in the organization, to the benefit of everyone in the organization (Men & Stacks, 2013).

Increased productivity: Increased productivity is the combination of intuitive planning, commitment to organization, and focused efforts (Rana, Malik, & Hussain, 2016).

Idealized influence: Idealized influence is leading by example, showing a strong commitment to goals, and creating trust and confidence in employees (Rana et al., 2016).

Individualized consideration: Individualized consideration enables leaders to attend to employee needs, act as a mentor or coach to employees, and listen to employee concerns (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009).

Inspirational motivation: Inspirational motivation is a leader's ability to inspire employees to improve their outcomes, communicate change initiatives, and foster a strong sense of purpose (Avolio et al., 2009).

Intellectual stimulation: Intellectual stimulation enables leaders to challenge the status quo, aim for consistent innovation, and encourage employees' creativity (Avolio et al., 2009).

Path-goal theory: Path-goal theory is the behavior of leaderships exercised in different situations and times by the same leader (Talal-Ratyan et al., 2013).

Team leader: Team leaders are faculty members and executives.

Transactional leadership: Leaders display transactional leadership by employing passive behaviors, using time negotiating rather than on productivity, and utilizing rewards to gain the desired rewards, outcome, or behavior (Vito, Higgins, & Denney, 2014).

Transformational leadership: Transformational leadership is the process in which leaders and followers help each other advance to a higher level of morale and motivation (Men & Stacks, 2013).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

An assumption is a fact not verified in a study (Zivkovic, 2012). An underlying assumption was that team leaders at the participating high school understood the importance of sustaining a positive leader-employee relationship. Another assumption was that participants were willing to share their knowledge by answering open-ended interview questions using semistructured interview techniques.

I assumed participants were knowledgeable regarding (a) the impact of positive leader-employee relationships and productivity, (b) the importance of maintaining positive leader-employee relationships, (c) the impact of employee retention, and (d) the importance of being honest when answering each research question. I assumed I had sufficient time to collect data, and that participants would be honest and thorough. Centering this doctoral study on team leaders who exercise positive leader-employee relationships provided information on the benefits of sustaining positive relationships in a work environment.

Limitations

A limitation is a potential weakness that may affect the external validity of a research study (Ruzzene, 2012). A descriptive single-unit case study poses the limitation of external validity, which is often questioned, and is, therefore, a major source of criticism within case study research (Singh, 2014). Another limitation was time. A case study conducted over a certain period of time is dependent on conditions occurring during that time (Ibrahim & Mussarat, 2014). I addressed this limitation by creating an

intense, strategic timeline to include dates and times of interviews to ensure alignment with the time needed to complete the dissertation.

Potential limitations of the results of this case study included the honesty and thoroughness of the participants' responses. I thoroughly explained the data collection process to participants. I was aware of, and prepared to address, these limitations and therefore, they did not affect the outcome of this doctoral study.

Delimitations

A delimitation is a boundary that outlines the scope of a research study (Ruzzene, 2012). The participating high school was a single online, for-profit education system in the state of Delaware. I included team leaders currently employed at the chosen high school who are responsible for the success of the organization.

I collected and analyzed data from the organization's employee retention reports, performance guidelines as outlined in the employee handbook, employee reward and recognition programs, and employee turnover reports. This doctoral study did not extend outside of Delaware and did not include nonprofit organizations. I conducted participant interviews over a 3-week timeframe. Prequalifying interview questions confirmed team leaders (a) were a current team leader at the participating high school, (b) were in the online, for-profit high school education system, (c) employed strategies to sustain positive leader-employee relationships, (d) experienced team member losses, yet improved positive leader-employee relationships, and (e) were willing to grant permission to be audio-recorded (see Appendix A).

Significance of the Study

Value of the Study

Team leaders in the online, for-profit high school education system strive to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity (see Borup et al., 2014). An organization's success depends on the perceptions of its employees (Chiara, Laura, Cristina Di, & Wilmar, 2016). The key to sustaining positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity depends on how leaders manage employees, which should include ways that accelerate profits, innovation, organizational learning, and productivity (Holmes et al., 2013). Online, for-profit high school education leaders continue to struggle with creating quality leader-employee relationships to effect employee reactions and performance (Hooper & Martin, 2010). Negative leader-employee relationships create a stressful work environment, generate a poor corporate image, and decrease employee motivation and productivity (Skakon, Nielsen, Borg, & Guzman, 2010). My identification and exploration of strategies, processes, and major success factors in this qualitative single-unit case study may lead to the replication of effective interventions for improving and sustaining positive leader-employee relationships, thereby increasing employee productivity.

Contribution to Business Practices

The purpose of this qualitative single-unit case study was to explore strategies that some team leaders at an online, for-profit high school education system used to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity. Employees may rely on positive leader-employee relationships as a contributing factor to their job-longevity and

financial stability (V. Heath, 2006). Leaders ensure the success of the company by creating and sustaining a positive work environment, thereby increasing employee productivity (Skakon et al., 2010).

Several methods can enhance team leaders' understandings of different variations of strategic processes and best practices (Vaara & Lamberg, 2016). The findings of this doctoral study provided effective strategies and processes for team leaders to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to improve business practices, and to increase employee productivity. An in-depth understanding of sustainable strategies that team leaders employ to ensure positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity may contribute to effective business practices for improved decision-making processes in the online, for-profit high school education system. The results of this doctoral study may contribute to implementing and sustaining strategies that lead to positive leader-employee relationships to increase employee productivity.

Implications for Social Change

Organizational leaders have realized they benefit from positive leader-employee relationships in the form of increased productivity. Men and Stacks (2013) stated that transformational leadership positively influences employees' perceptions of organizational reputation not only directly but also indirectly through empowering employees, families, and communities. Sustaining strategies that lead to positive leader-employee relationships and an increase in employee productivity benefit the organization, employees, families, and communities (Men & Stacks, 2013).

Positive leader-employee relationships are a topic of interest and contribute to societal factors that may provide financial stability for employees and, in turn, reduce poverty rates in the community (Glinska-Newes & Winska, 2013). The findings, conclusions, and recommendations from this doctoral study may provide team leaders with an understanding of how to better connect with and relate to the needs of employees, families, and the community. Through sustained positive leader-employee relationships, employees achieve job-longevity and gain the ability to better support their financial needs; in turn, people and communities experience a decrease in poverty rates (Glinska-Newes & Winska, 2013).

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

I used a variety of both professional and academic resources to examine strategies that sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity. I investigated research exploring the perception of employees regarding leadership behavior and style. Several factors influence sustaining positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity. A comprehensive literature review was critical because literature in the field of leader-employee relationships is (a) vast, (b) comprised of hundreds of papers, (c) comprised of monographs and innumerable books, and several academic journals, and (d) shows a broad understanding of the research topic (Tumer, Lewis, Oddsson, & Ladeby, 2014).

The purpose of this literature review was to identify strategies that could help team leaders sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity in a work environment. The literature I reviewed came from several areas of research:

employees' perceptions and expectations of leaders and organizations, leadership behavior, leadership style, employee retention, employee motivation, and contributing factors to increased productivity. Collectively, the literature I reviewed shows the effectiveness of transformational leadership and how it shapes participants' perceptions.

I used several databases to gather a total of 154 references consisting of scholarly peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, papers and reports, and seminal books. A total of 141 (91%) of the references were published in the past 5 years (2013 and beyond), of which 139 (90%) were peer-reviewed articles. I used nine databases: (a) ProQuest Central, (b) Academic Search Complete, (c) Business Source Complete, (d) Education Source Complete, (e) Research Information Center, (f) CrossRef, (g) Sage, (h) Emerald Management, and (i) Google Scholar. I used the following key search words alone and in combination: *leadership, productivity, positive leadership traits, motivation, leadership behavior and style, employee retention strategies, employee turnover, employee morale, influence, organizational reputation, sustainability, and rewards system.*

This literature review section contains six main topics: (a) transformational leadership theory, (b) path-goal theory, (c) transactional leadership theory, (d) work environment, (e) leader-employee relationships, and (f) motivating factors to increase productivity. The work environment section contains two subsections: one on the traditional education work environment, and the other on the online education work environment. The Motivating Factors to Increase Productivity section contains four subsections on: rewards systems, employee engagement, positive work environments, and employee empowerment.

Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this doctoral study was to explore strategies that team leaders at an online, for-profit high school education system employed to create and sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity. Positive leader-employee relationships create an environment of positive affirmation, sharing, and open communication (Weijden, Belder, Arensbergen, & Besselaar, 2015). Employees within a positive environment are more engaged and more productive in their work than those in a negative work environment (Byham & Wellins, 2015). Leaders who strengthen leader-employee relationships create learning and growth opportunities for employees (Sturm, Vera, & Crossan, 2016). Leaders who create a positive work environment enable employees to grasp a stronger sense of belonging and commitment, which, in turn, could lead to increased productivity (Weijden et al., 2015).

Path-goal theory. A concept framing positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity is path-goal theory. Evans (1970) introduced path-goal theory, and House (1971) subsequently refined the theory by identifying work facilitation, decision making process, and networking as behaviors that leaders must adopt to ensure goal achievement. Leaders who want employees to achieve their goals help, support, and motivate their employees (Korzynski, 2013). When leaders use strategies to sustain positive leader-employee relationships, top executives and stakeholders obtain an even higher level of commitment and accomplishment of goals (Pucher, Candel, Boot, & de Vries, 2017).

Leaders and employees work together to achieve personal, team, and organizational goals. Leaders who display a path-goal leadership style see a path for employees who want to be successful (Talal-Ratyan et al., 2013). Path-goal leadership style enables leaders to assess employees' needs and goals (Erenel, 2015). Leaders who use a path-goal leadership style gain the ability to lead employees on a desired path and increase employee productivity. By using path-goal leadership style, leaders help employees set goals, support other employees, and incorporate a positive attitude in the work environment when generating a pathway to overcome obstacles (Hansen, Trujillo, Boland, & MacKinnon, 2014).

Constructs of the expectancy theory allow employees to base their behavior on the outcome of expectations in the workplace. Leaders who employ expectancy theory will act in a certain way based on the expectation that their actions will produce a certain outcome and that the outcome will encourage employees to be productive (D. Clark, 2013). Gorges, Schwinger, and Kandler (2013) found that leaders who used expectancy theory could better explain employee work behavior and motivation in the work environment. When leaders clearly defined expectations in the workplace, employees were more productive. Although expectancy theory highlights the expectancy of the outcome of employee behavior, the theory fails to identify behaviors resulting from a specific situation (Ernst, 2014).

Some leaders chose to use a variety of leadership styles in the workplace. Path-goal theory relates to situations that leaders often find themselves in and how they react to that specific situation (MacDonald & de Luque, 2013). For example, when a leader is

in a compromising situation with an employee, the leader should assess and maximize the situation with the goal in mind of providing positive employee outcomes such as satisfaction, motivation, and increased productivity (MacDonald & de Luque, 2013). By using path-goal theory, leaders help employees achieve effective outcomes. Leaders focus on positive leadership strategies to ensure job satisfaction, employee engagement, and employee productivity (Van Elst & Meurs, 2016).

Assessment strategies help leaders to better highlight employee needs. Ernst (2014) stated that employees might interpret their leader's behavior based on their individual needs (e.g., those related to organizational structure, level of ability, and aspiration for control). For example, employees become less motivated when a leader gives them more or less of what they actually need (Ernst, 2014). By clearly communicating employee goals, leaders set a path for employees to not only achieve their goals but also remain motivated. Path-goal theory focuses on three constructs: (a) characteristics of the employee, task, and work environment; (b) leadership styles, and (c) motivation (MacDonald & de Luque, 2013).

A good leader executes strategies to remove obstacles from the work environment. Employee, task, and work environment issues arise when obstacles become unbearable for employees, and the leader should intervene when these issues emerge (D. Clark, 2013). Poor task design, lack of leadership, and a nonsupportive team characteristics that may cause conflict and obstacles in the work environment (D. Clark, 2013). Task and environment characteristics are important for leaders to consider because path-goal theory pays special attention to overcoming obstacles (Öqvist &

Malmström, 2016). Leaders who practice effective communication sustain a positive work environment. Leaders must set a path for employees to achieve their goals by ensuring goals are valuable to employees, stakeholders, and the organization (Rogelberg, 2016).

Employee motivation is a key to sustaining a successful and productive workforce. A leader might adjust their leadership style to align with the employee and task characteristics to ensure employee motivation (House, 1971). Motivational leadership behaviors are based on two factors: consideration, and structure initiation (Judge, Piccoli, & Ilies, 2015). These factors help leaders to better address employees' needs and to sustain a positive work environment. Leaders base consideration and structure initiation mostly on respect, trust, organization, scheduling, and completion of work, thereby posing more of a directive leadership style (D. Clark, 2013).

Leaders may implement a leadership style that sustains employee motivation by gaining an understanding of the constructs of path-goal theory. Leaders across organizations attempt to implement strategies to sustain employee satisfaction, motivation, and increased productivity by using one or more leadership styles (Weijden et al., 2015). Leaders cultivate positive leader-employee relationships by devoting more time to interactions that lead to value-enhanced goal setting, thus increasing employee effectiveness and productivity (Roberts, 2014). Öqvist and Malmström (2016) stated that in order for leaders to be successful, those leadership styles should align with employee behavior and the work environment. Leaders employ path-goal leadership to better connect variables of situational work performances and productivity.

Several leaders in the online, for-profit high school education system began using the path-goal leadership style in the workplace. Leaders use path-goal theory to direct employees and to ensure employees focus on specific tasks (Polston-Murdoch, 2013). Path-goal theory does not necessarily highlight organizational goals, but focuses mainly on employee goals (Polston-Murdoch, 2013). A path-goal leadership style enables leaders to increase employee motivation and empowerment, thereby sustaining a positive-leader employee relationship and increasing employee productivity. Leaders using path-goal leadership style pay special attention to overcoming obstacles, ensuring employees achieve their goals (Öqvist & Malmström, 2016).

Leaders identify, communicate, and implement employee objectives to ensure goal achievement. Leaders who use path-goal theory can influence employees to achieve goals in the work environment and increase employee productivity (Malik, Aziz, & Hassan, 2014). When leaders ensure employees set reasonable goals and meet those goals (Lazaroiu, 2015), leaders are more likely to improve employee motivation. Employee motivation and support contribute to positive work performance (Sukoco, 2017). Although path-goal theory provides leaders with strategies to ensure employees achieve their goals, leaders also employ additional leadership styles to achieve employee and organizational goals.

Transformational leadership. Another concept framing positive leader-employee relationships was transformational leadership theory. Transformational leadership is a process in which leaders and followers help each other advance to a higher level of morale and motivation (Bass & Bass, 2008). In 1985, Bass and Bass expanded

on the concept of transformational leadership to highlight four underlying key constructs/propositions: (a) idealized influence, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individualized consideration (Bass & Bass, 2008).

Idealized influence means leading by example, showing a strong commitment to goals, and creating trust and confidence in employees (Rana et al., 2016). Employees are more productive when leaders ensure that employees clearly understand their role, lead and motivate with their own example, communicate, set high standards, and show commitment (Kamal & Kamal, 2014). Leaders who influence employees to remain motivated often experience an increase in employee productivity. By learning what employees value and communicating appreciation, team leaders gain the ability to focus on strategies to sustain positive leader-employee relationships in a work environment (White, 2014).

Inspirational motivation is another construct of transformational leadership theory. Inspirational motivation is a leader's ability to inspire employees to improve their outcomes, communicate change initiatives, and foster a strong sense of purpose (Avolio et al., 2009). Blanken (2013) stated that leaders who employ a transformational leadership style have the ability to impel others to action, expand an organization's position in the marketplace, and raise team morale and motivation. Most business leaders in the online work environment favor the transformational leadership style, as opposed to other leadership styles.

Employees remain motivated when they realize their purpose in the organization. Transformational leaders influence others through the power of personality and

motivation (Blanken, 2013). Transformational leaders motivate employees' to enhance their creativity, viewpoints, and goals (Jyoti & Dev, 2015). Motivation enables leaders and employees to conquer adversity, emerge stronger and more committed leader-employee relationships, enhance employee engagement, and stimulate employees' willingness to be more productive (Hirschi & Valero, 2017). Employee motivation was an important construct of the transformational leadership theory because employee motivation determined an employees' commitment to the organization.

Intellectual stimulation is the third construct of the transformational leadership theory. Intellectual stimulation enables leaders to challenge the status quo, aim for consistent innovation, and encourage employees' creativity (Avolio et al., 2009). There are positive effects of intellectual stimulation, such as experiential and explicit knowledge sharing which have a positive effect on employee productivity, and in turn, employee productivity has a positive effect on business performance (Fauji & Utami, 2013). When leaders shared knowledge, employees gained the ability to view situations from various perspectives and think creatively. To secure employees interest and growth, leaders must share knowledge in ways that sustain employee motivation and productivity (Dwivedula, Bredillet, & Müller, 2017).

The final construct of transformational leadership theory is individualized consideration. Individualized consideration enables leaders to attend to employee needs, act as a mentor or coach to employees, and listen to employee concerns (Avolio et al., 2009). Individualized consideration revolves around the efforts on the part of a leader to provide employees emotional and social support to develop and empower them through

coaching, mentoring, and growth opportunities (Stone, Conley, & Luo, 2014). Leaders who exhibit individualized consideration interact with employees as individuals, consider employees' individual needs, abilities, and aspirations, listen attentively, and further employee development (Stone et al., 2014). In essence, leaders listen, communicate, and encourage employees throughout their professional and personal journey (S. M. Y. Chua & Murray, 2015).

The transformational leadership style benefits leaders, employees, and organizations. Bass and Bass (2008) designed the concept of transformational leadership to explain leadership based upon the premise that leaders inspire followers to change expectations, perceptions, and motivations to work toward common goals.

Transformational leaders gain the ability to encourage employees to develop and share new knowledge, discover innovations, and increase productivity (Peltokorpi & Hasu, 2014). Transformational leaders exemplify behaviors that reflect a role model and execute decision-making techniques in the best interest of themselves, employees, and the organization (Ahmad, Abbas, Latif, & Rasheed, 2014). An expansion of the concept of transformational leadership was essential for team leaders to understand the influence of positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity in a work environment.

The constructs (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration) advanced by the theory assist in the evaluation of and determined employee perceptions and experiences. Leaders who are committed to ensuring employee productivity may employ a transformational leadership style to create and sustain a positive leader-employee relationship in a work environment

(Choi, Kim, & Kang, 2017). Transformational leadership theory enables team leaders to employ comprehensive improvement in their understanding of positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity, which could potentially place employees in a better economic position (Schlueter, 2014). Researchers use transformational leadership theory to examine the influence of positive leader-employee relationships and employee productivity in a work environment (Jordan & Troth, 2011). By utilizing transformational leadership style, team leaders at the online, for-profit high school education system gained the ability to explore perceptions and experiences regarding leaders' transformational leadership characteristics as a strategy to increase employee productivity.

Some business leaders chose a leadership style based on the best interest of a situation occurring in the workplace. Although no particular leadership style is universally effective, transformational leadership helps leaders to create and sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity in a work environment (Jordan & Troth, 2011). Leaders portray leadership styles based on values and cultural beliefs (Kuan Chen, 2017). The expansion of transformational leadership theory soon provided leaders with another channel to enhance follower trust, motivation, and empowerment (Sánchez-Manjavacas, Saorín-Iborra, & Willoughby, 2014). Transformational leadership style has a positive influence on employee morale and productivity and positively predicts a wide variety of performance outcomes.

Transformational leaders have the ability and skillset to inspire and encourage employees. Transformational leaders seek mainly long-term solutions (Kamal & Kamal,

2014). However, other leaders seek short-term solutions and as a result, employ several bargaining techniques to gain employee motivation and productivity in the work environment (Paul, Maitra, Mandal, Sadhukhan, & Saha, 2013). These bargaining techniques lead to improvement in employee motivation and performance (Arifah & Nurnida, 2016). Although several leaders used the transformational leadership style, some leaders preferred transactional leadership style.

Transactional leadership. Transactional leadership theory involves motivating and directing followers. Transactional leaders motivate and direct employees primarily through appealing to leaders' own self-interest (Yao, Fan, Guo, & Li, 2014) and although similar to transformational leadership, transactional leadership differs as well. Weber first introduced the transactional leadership theory in 1947 (Hlanganipai & Mazanai, 2014). In 1981, Bass extended transactional leadership theory and stated that managers who focus on the process of controlling, organizing, and short-term planning are more likely to employ transactional leadership style (Hlanganipai & Mazanai, 2014). Several leaders viewed the transactional leadership style as a critical asset in the online work environment.

Transactional leaders make decisions that reduce company costs and improve employee productivity. Transactional leaders provide performance feedback to employees and focus on assigning tasks (Mahdinezhad, Bin Suandi, Bin Silong, & Binti Omar, 2013). Hlanganipai and Mazanai (2014) suggested that transactional leaders tend to be highly directive and action-oriented, creating not only a temporary relationship with their employees but also a relationship not based on emotional connections. The

influence of transactional leadership style is not necessarily dependent on a leader's connection with the organization (Deichmann & Stam, 2015). Although several aspects of transformational and transactional leadership styles are similar, they also have differences.

To understand the differences between transformational and transactional leadership styles, it was beneficial to recognize the differences between a leader and a manager. Leaders view team members as followers, while managers view them as subordinates (Raj & Zaid, 2014). Leaders discuss team and individual goals with team members; managers focus more on providing goals and making sure employees meet those goals through a directive approach (Griffith, Connelly, Thiel, & Johnson, 2014). Leaders at the online, for-profit high school education system focused on employee development, thereby leading to employee productivity. Team leaders who employ a leader mentality and sustain a positive leader-employee relationship increase employee productivity (Raj & Zaid, 2014).

Employees' perception of leaders who used a transactional leadership style differed from leaders who used a transformational leadership style. Employees perceive transactional leaders have more of a managerial approach that may result from their authoritative behavior (Hamstra, Van Yperen, Wisse, & Sassenberg, 2014). One main goal of a transactional leader is to influence employees to follow their direction (Hamstra et al., 2014) through both rewards and punishment (Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013). By contrast, the transformational leader often includes their employees in the decision-

making process (Kamal & Kamal, 2014). Employees had a more favorable perception of their leader and the organization, and were more productive when they felt empowered.

Leaders continuously compare and contrast transformational and transactional leadership styles. Contrary to transformational leaders, transactional leaders suggest that employees are motivated by reward and punishment, are not self-motivated, and are closely monitored and controlled by their leader to get tasks completed for them (Nye, 2013). Transactional leadership style requires a leader-employee exchange of rewards for supportive and positive employee behavior (Zengele, 2013). Transactional leaders complete specific tasks by closely managing each task and the employee performing the task (Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013). Many leaders viewed transactional leadership style as ineffective because some transactional leaders do not promote change in the work environment, decreasing employee motivation and productivity.

Bargaining techniques create win-win situations. Vito et al. (2014) stated that a transactional leader uses bargaining power to enhance positive behavior in the workplace. In contrast, a transformational leader does not use bargaining power to enhance positive behavior in the workplace (Avolio et al., 2009). Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard (2011) determined that leaders use bargaining power in situations where leaders use their influence through a combination of their own initiatives, needs, and manipulative behavior to gain short-term solutions. Although many transactional leaders used bargaining techniques, transformational leaders sought other factors to enhance positive behavior in the workplace.

Some leaders use both transformational and transactional leadership styles in the workplace. However, because team leaders in the online, for-profit high school education system connect with people across not only cultures but also globally, a transformational leadership style is more effective, especially when attempting to increase employee productivity (Dörrenbächer & Gammelgaard, 2011) in a work environment. Transformational leaders encourage, motivate, and support employees (Paladan, 2015). By using the transformational leadership style, leaders sustained a positive leader-employee relationship and increased employee productivity. Leaders execute and sustain transformational leadership strategies to ensure positive leader-employee relationships (Paladan, 2015).

Leader-Employee Relationships

Leaders implement strategies to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase company profits and success rates. Leader-employee relationships could be the determining factor of an organization's success or failure (McFadden & Carr, 2015). Effective leaders share common behaviors and key leadership traits (Algahtani, 2014). By identifying key leadership traits, leaders establish a positive platform for learning and for positive leader-employee relationships (Garcia, Duncan, Carmody-Bubb, & Ree, 2014). Positive leader-employee relationships increased employee motivation and productivity.

Effective leadership styles positively impact leader-employee relationships and interactions. Sohail and Malik (2016) highlighted how positive leader-employee relationships influence employees' perceptions of their leader and their department's

productivity. For example, Sohail and Malik stated that positive leader-employee relationships may be the result of mediating the effect of employee empowerment and employee satisfaction. Employee empowerment and satisfaction improved positive leader-employee relationships and increased employee productivity. Leaders identify ineffective and effective leadership behaviors, sustain a positive work environment, and increase employee productivity (McFadden & Carr, 2015).

Ineffective leadership. Ineffective leadership could be detrimental to an organization's profits and reputation. Ineffective leadership results from unsuccessful recruitment efforts, lack of individual and organizational performance, and leadership style, resulting mainly from a lack of leadership qualities (Hu, Chen, Gu, Huang, & Liu, 2017). Employers complain they are unable to recruit employees with the specific skills they need, while applicants find it difficult to convince leaders they are more than capable of performing the job (Benderly, 2014). The difference between employers and applicants can be the determining factor whether or not human resources (HR) leaders are hiring the right person.

Leaders who display an ineffective leadership style, create a negative work environment. Unlike effective leadership, Aboassin and Abood (2013) noted that ineffective leadership behavior affects individual and organizational performance. Aboassin and Abood stated that ineffective leadership is present in companies at almost all levels. Individual differences and dysfunctional leaders may contribute to ineffective leadership (Heracleous & Werres, 2016). Leaders avoided ineffective leadership styles by identifying successful leadership strategies pertinent to an employee's success.

Ineffective leadership has a negative impact on employee productivity.

Ineffective leadership affects performance at both the organizational and individual level (Aboyassin & Abood, 2013). Ineffective leadership contributes to employees' high stress levels, well-being, and overall health (Volmer, Fritsche, Delespaul, & Gupta, 2016).

Church (2014) argued that there are contributing factors to poor leadership that include leaders' personality disorders, imperfect values, and reality separation. Through self-awareness, leaders avoid ineffective leadership by realizing their actions affect the organization and employees (Hazem, George, Baltazar, & Conty, 2017).

Employees may feel unimportant and feel as though they are not a contributing factor in the workplace because of ineffective leadership. Stark and Kelly (2015) found that negative personal attributes and organizational factors impeded leadership effectiveness of project managers. Stark and Kelly revealed that abuse of power, poor communication, and inexperience are the leading negative personal factors of ineffective leadership. Organizational factors that hinder leadership performance include lack of resources, lack of planning and control, and lack of upper management support (Stark & Kelly, 2015). By identifying ineffective leadership styles, leaders implemented strategies to sustain effective leadership and business practices.

Leaders realize the importance of positive leader-employee relationships. Leaders continue to examine strategies to ensure effective leader-employee relationships (Yao et al., 2014). By doing so, leaders refrain from ineffective leadership styles by eliminating those styles that are ineffective in the work environment (Sethuraman & Suresh, 2014). Leaders identified ineffective leadership styles in the workplace by measuring employee

productivity. Leaders must change leadership styles when appropriate to sustain a positive work environment, leading to a profitable, productive workforce (Sethuraman & Suresh, 2014).

Effective leadership. By implementing effective leadership practices, leaders ensure positive leader-employee relationships, thereby increasing productivity. Effective leadership ensures employee satisfaction, motivation, and productivity (Yao et al., 2014). Employees who experience high job satisfaction are likely to exhibit more interest in their job responsibilities and therefore, pursue organizational goals (Ingusci, Callea, Chirumbolo, & Urbini, 2016). Leaders who exemplify employee job satisfaction are more prepared to retain employees fitting their organizational needs (Ingusci et al., 2016). Effective leaders sustained employee motivation and productivity by implementing strategies that would enhance employee engagement.

Transformational leadership leads to employee productivity and job-longevity. Transformational leadership contributes to improving leadership behavior and preventing negative behavior in the workplace (Yao et al., 2014). Employee productivity and longevity are a direct result of leaders employing several methods to generate effective leadership in the work environment (Conner, 2014). Organizational leaders and stakeholders implement employee training as a principal role of leadership (Asfaw, Argaw, & Bayissa, 2015). When leaders implement employee training and include employees in the decision-making process, leaders noticed an increase in employee motivation and productivity. Training employees in areas of communication, customer

satisfaction, and values also help ensure employee satisfaction, motivation, and productivity (Blanz, 2017).

Leaders achieve effective leadership through the implementation of various leadership strategies. Effective leadership depends on leadership roles and styles executed in the work environment (Melo, Silva, & Parreira, 2014). Leadership effectiveness relies on the leaders' ability to engage employees in a manner that leads to employee productivity (Melo et al., 2014). Leaders should execute good interpersonal skills to sustain a positive work environment (Chuang, 2013). Mentoring experiences provide leaders the opportunity to become professionals and individuals (Woo, 2017). Employees better understood departmental and organizational goals when receiving mentorship and support from leaders.

An effective leader sets employee goals based on factors that motivate the employee. Sethuraman and Suresh (2014) defined an effective leader as having the ability to influence one or more employees and enabling them to achieve their goals. An effective leader is cognizant of strengths and weaknesses of employees and able to change his or her leadership style to become more effective in gaining trust and respect (Sethuraman & Suresh, 2014). Employee motivation and engagement helped leaders to sustain positive leader-employee relationships, thereby increasing productivity. When leaders in the online education-learning environment incorporate these leadership factors, they develop a positive working environment; increasing employee engagement and employee productivity (Black, 2015).

Leaders examine leadership strategies to ensure effective leader-employee relationships and to increase employee productivity. Leaders examine and use several leadership styles before finding the leadership style that best fits their work environment (Sethuraman & Suresh, 2014). Leaders are successful when they act as a mediator and remain mindful of others' needs (Dietl, 2015). Effective leadership is highly important in the work environment because it ensures employee satisfaction and motivation and therefore, increases employee productivity (Sethuraman & Suresh, 2014). Leaders avoided ineffective leadership styles by incorporating leadership strategies that not only sustain positive leader-employee relationships but also increase employee productivity.

Historical Background of Online Education

There are many advantages of online education. Online education initiatives enabled citizens residing in underserved populations to access higher learning environments and receive extended learning just as they would in a traditional education-learning environment (Linardopoulos, 2012). In 1728, distance learning enabled students to receive lessons by mail (Rury, 2013). Linardopoulos (2012) stated that complications for U.S. citizens to access online education-learning environments included the limitation of transportation to and from educational institutions, especially institutions located in rural areas. By initiating online education courses, citizens from all diversities, cultures, and backgrounds became more interested in pursuing their educational goals.

As online education initiatives became more prominent, citizens worldwide took advantage of online education-learning. In 1873, Ticknor founded the Society to Encourage Studies at Home, which became the first correspondence school in the U.S.

(Miller, 2014). In the 1900s, distance learning transformed from a written-era to radio-era (Rury, 2013). After advanced technologies enhanced television capabilities, leaders in the online education system gained the ability to offer television-based education courses (Moss & Pittaway, 2013). A host of education systems used television and radio as a way to connect with students who were interested in online education-learning.

Advanced technologies contributed to the success of online education. In 1908, the Calvert School of Baltimore became the first primary school to offer online education classes (Miller, 2014). Stanford University created the Stanford Instructional Television Network that was a network offering courses to part-time engineering students (Kruk & Zhuravlev, 2012). In 1965, the Department of Defense (DoD) created the Internet and less than 2 years later, the DoD introduced computer-based education (Moss & Pittaway, 2013). By offering online education courses, education systems began reaching citizens worldwide, especially citizens who required flexibility.

As online education-learning became more appealing to citizens, a host of education systems incorporated online education as part of their business structure. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Independent Study High School became the first education system to offer accredited high school diplomas in 1968 (Miller, 2014). By 2003, 81% of education systems offered at least one online course (Linardopoulos, 2012). Education systems experienced an increase in profits and citizens who took advantage of online education-learning acquired the necessary skillset to obtain employment.

Online education-learning was less expensive and more convenient than the traditional learning environment. In 2007, the Liberty University Online Academy

(LUOA), which offered a host of high school online courses, started with an enrollment of approximately 20 students engaged in online courses and has since grown to more than 1900 students worldwide (Online Schools Center, 2016). Two years later, over 5.5 million students were taking at least one online course (Kruk & Zhuravlev, 2012).

Terrell (2014) stated that online education embraced the Internet. As a result, the Internet became one of the most important features of the online education-learning environment.

Leaders implemented advanced technologies to expand their online education programs. According to Seirup, Tirota, and Blue (2016), online education is more appealing to learners mainly because of advanced technologies and therefore, online education systems continue to integrate technologies in the expansion of online education. As of 2014, over 40% of online education systems offered high school courses (Bolkan, 2014). Online education systems might offer high school courses because of student remediation, enhanced teacher engagement, and a connection between advanced technology and skill development (Bolkan, 2014). Leaders in online education systems created online learning curriculums and programs based on students' needs and interests.

Online education promotes independent learning, organization skillset, and self-discipline. Online education shifts learners' focus to independent learning, which could eliminate distractions sometimes experienced in a traditional environment (Bird, 2014). Online education evolved through a variety of delivery methods, enhancing the student learning experience and improving positive leader-employee interactions (Nguyen, 2015). Advanced technologies had made it possible for traditional work environments to

evolve into online work environments, reaching people worldwide (Graesser, 2013).

Because several organizations have online work environments (Yücel & Usluel, 2016), leaders found it less complicated to connect with employees in ways that created a trusting and positive leader-employee relationship.

Work Environment in Online Education

Leaders who sustained positive leader-employee relationships experienced several benefits in the work environment. Ronfeldt (2015) stated the importance of achieving a positive work environment (whether traditional or online), especially when attempting to develop and sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity.

Researchers have attempted to define the differences between traditional and online work environments (Nacu, Martin, Pinkard, & Gray, 2016). In 2012, 74% of team leaders in the education system worked in an online environment (Bureau of Labor & Statistics, 2012). By working in an online education system, leaders gained access to advanced technology, thereby gaining the competitive advantage.

Traditional education work environment. Traditional education work environments are not as appealing to students as online education work environments. In a traditional education work environment, employees travel to an office location, perform work, go home, and repeat these actions, usually Monday through Friday, typically from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Duffy, Lowyck, & Jonassen, 2012). Some leaders in a traditional work environment experience low employee turnover and increased dedication (Dobrowolska, 2015). However, some leaders in a traditional education work environment believe leaders base power of authority on their position within the company (Maqsood, Rehman,

& Hanif, 2016). Leaders who based power of authority on their position experienced an increase in company costs, a reduction in company profits, and a decrease in employee productivity.

Several factors cause employee turnover and a decrease in employee productivity. According to Phillips (2015), employee turnover costs organizations more than \$2.2 billion a year. Employee turnover might be a result of employee disengagement due to lack of employee empowerment, a negative work environment, or a negative leader-employee relationship. Whether traditional or online, leaders create working environments to promote leader-employee engagement, and therefore accomplish common organizational goals (De Clercq, Bouckenoghe, Raja, & Matsyborska, 2014).

Leaders in a traditional work environment have different leadership perspectives than leaders in an online work environment. Leaders in a traditional work environment often maintain ownership of information, as opposed to sharing information, and offer little flexibility (Babaita, 2013). Leaders in a traditional work environment believe information is power and will release information only on an as needed basis (Maqsood et al., 2016). When leaders shared knowledge, employees felt empowered and were more likely to remain not only committed to the organization but also productive. Changing from a traditional to online education work environment may be the answer to promoting creativity, a positive work environment, positive leader-employee interactions, and increased productivity and profitability (B. Clark, 2015).

A traditional work environment has many disadvantages. Face-to-face work environments enable leaders to support active engagement of their employees (Barr,

2014). However, leaders may have to monitor employees' actions (especially those of unmotivated employees) and the only way to accurately accomplish this is in a traditional education work environment (Babaita, 2013). Leaders who monitor employees create an unproductive work environment and a strained leader-employee relationship (Babaita, 2013). Negative leader-employee relationships destroyed employee trust, thereby increasing employee turnover and leading to an unfavorable organizational reputation.

Employer preferences for traditional or online education work environments still exist. Daymont, Blau, and Campbell (2015) stated that advantages of face-to-face work environments enable team leaders to examine employees' energy level, motivation, ability to read nonverbal cues, and engage in discussions, providing immediate feedback. However, due to advanced technologies and more flexibility, organizational leaders move to an online education work environment, providing employees more flexibility and increasing motivation and productivity (B. Clark, 2015). Advanced technologies were the enticing factor that encouraged student learners to become part of an online community and in turn, organizations' experienced higher profits and a favorable reputation. Over two-thirds of organizational leaders in online, for-profit education systems prefer an online work environment because it is crucial to the overall success of the organization (Tichavsky, Hunt, Driscoll, & Jicha, 2015).

Online high school education work environment. Advanced technology is more convenient and accessible than other technologies. Advanced technologies such as high-speed Internet, podcasting, e-mail, chat, teleconference, SKYPE, telephones, and message boards have made it possible to maintain a work environment from anywhere in

the world (Minoru, 2016). Frazer, Sullivan, Weatherspoon, and Hussey (2017) suggested that an online education work environment is the preferred method among business professionals mainly because it offers more flexibility than the traditional education work environment. For example, leaders can hold meetings anytime and from anywhere despite where employees are located. Organizations that offer online education work environments gain the competitive advantage by developing leaders who lead their teams in a manner that meets and exceeds their customer needs (Kin, Kareem, Nordin, & Bing, 2014).

Leaders who possess leadership competencies ensure high performance and enhanced employee development. Leaders consider leadership competencies regarding the effectiveness of both traditional and online education work environments (Nodine & Johnstone, 2015). Because some leaders do not properly display leadership competencies, leaders' behavior sometimes becomes defensive and uncommunicative which could lead to frustration and a nonproductive online education work environment (Nodine & Johnstone, 2015). Leaders exhibit leadership competencies by acquiring knowledge, traits, and behaviors that are sustainable in the workplace (Packard, 2014). By identifying and utilizing leadership competencies, leaders sustained a successful online work environment, thereby increasing employee productivity.

Online education work environments have more capabilities than the traditional work environment. Employees in an online setting had positive views of organization communication versus employees in a traditional setting (Flynn, Maiden, Smith, Wiley, & Wood, 2013). Team leaders who promote employee empowerment, provide

appropriate technologies and culture training, and provide extra social support to employees enhance employee motivation, time management, and engagement and create a more successful online work environment (Picciano, Seaman, & Day, 2015). Effective communication led to a trusting leader-employee relationship and a positive work environment. Effective communication allows team leaders in an online education work environment to better comprehend and solve problems, establish positive leader-employee relationships and therefore, increase employee productivity (Anvari & Atiyaye, 2014).

Effective communication is important to the success of the team leaders at the online, for-profit high school education system. However, some team leaders in an online education work environment continue to struggle with creating strategies that clearly define and structure their approach to address diversity, student engagement, delivery of classroom instruction, and other challenges that may be associated with communicating effectively within an online setting (Acosta-Tello, 2015). Effective communication and coordination displayed within an online education work environment, increases overall effectiveness and productivity (Poepelman & Blacksmith, 2015). Engaged employees maintain a work-related mindset empowered and sustained by appreciation and dedication, increasing productivity (Truss, Shantz, Soane, Alfes, & Delbridge, 2013). By enhancing employee engagement, team leaders at the study site gained the ability to increase employee satisfaction and motivation, while sustaining positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity.

Motivating Factors to Increase Productivity

By identifying motivating factors, leaders sustain positive leader-employee relationships and increase employee productivity. Employee motivation is an imperative factor for leaders to achieve in the work environment, leading to increased employee productivity (Zareen, Razzaq, & Mujtaba, 2014). Leaders sustained positive leader-employee relationships to ensure increased employee productivity by applying employee motivational factors (Zareen et al., 2014). These motivational factors included employee engagement, employee empowerment, executing a rewards system, and sustaining a positive work environment (Zareen et al., 2014). By sustaining a positive work environment, leaders and employees were more productive.

Leaders use various motivating factors in the workplace. Other motivational factors leaders should consider include self-development, friendship, future goals and endeavours, and the culture and environment (Mee, Jano, & Hussin, 2015). Leaders improved internal processes and methods by creating practical, engaging learning applications (Takaoka, Yonezu, & Namekawa, 2015), leading to increased motivation. When leaders had positive attitudes toward learners, leaders sustained a positive leader-employee relationship and learners were more productive. By deciphering a manner to cultivate employee motivation, leaders gained the ability to increase employee productivity (Zareen et al., 2014).

Employee engagement. Employee engagement is a motivating factor that increases employee productivity. Leaders increase employee engagement through active discussion and decision-making, enabling employees to sustain employee engagement

and employee empowerment (Vitt, 2014). Raj and Zaid (2014) noted that active discussion and employee engagement encourages leader-employee interaction. Leaders enable employees to be part of the decision-making process and welcome their ideas (Raj & Zaid, 2014). Overall, team leaders who establish employee engagement and participation sustain a positive leader-employee relationship and therefore, experience an increase in employee productivity.

Leaders incorporate several leadership practices in their organizational and business structure as a method to sustain employee engagement. By combining macrolevel (organization-wide) with microlevel (manager to employee) leadership practices, business leaders can more effectively sustain employee engagement (Galpin & Whittington, 2012). Galpin and Whittington (2012) used a narrative synthesis approach to explore ways in which leaders can leverage employee engagement to implement a comprehensive sustainability strategy. By allowing employees to make informed decisions and feel as though they were part of the organization, employees were more likely to remain committed to the organization and engaged in the workplace. Leaders achieve employee engagement by using effective communication strategies and allowing employees to participate in various work-related activities (Georgiades, 2015).

Leaders consider sustainability as a motivating factor to increase employee engagement. Galpin and Whittington (2012) suggested that macro organizational factors include sustainability and organizational mission, sustainability and strategy, sustainability and organizational values, and the HR value chain. Macro factors enable team leaders to better prepare for shifts in an organization's mission, strategy, and values

that ensure an organization's practices align with sustainability strategies (Galpin & Whittington, 2012). By contrast, micro organizational factors include full-range leadership, job enrichment, goal setting, and outcomes of employee engagement (Galpin & Whittington, 2012). Leaders implemented sustainable strategies to ensure employees meet not only their personal goals but also organizational goals.

Sustainability initiatives help leaders achieve employee engagement and productivity. Micro factors helped business leaders develop an engaged workforce when leaders include employees in the decision-making process of sustainability initiatives (Galpin & Whittington, 2012). Employee engagement might motivate employees to transcend their self-interests for the good of the organization (Galpin & Whittington, 2012). Leaders created an environment of engagement by clearly communicating the organizations' values, mission, and goals. Business leaders can maximize employee engagement by embedding sustainability into the organization's core values (Galpin & Whittington, 2012).

Team leaders continuously explore ways to improve organizational and departmental processes and procedures. In several instances, employees may become tired and subject a *burnt-out* feeling (Brajer-Marczak, 2014). By improving organizational and departmental processes and procedures, leaders provide employees with an outlet to become critical and creative thinkers (Brajer-Marczak, 2014). Employees perform their best and demonstrate their commitment to the organization (Holbeche & Matthews, 2015). Engaged employees promoted innovation, enhanced creative thinking, and moved the organization upward.

Engaged employees are passionate about their job and have a connection to the organization. When employees become critical and creative thinkers, they are more susceptible to engaging in new opportunities, such as participating in process improvements (Brajer-Marczak, 2014). Several factors lead to employee engagement:

- Involvement in the decision-making process,
- Ability to freely express opinions,
- Open communication,
- Having an input in defining their work, and
- Being part of an organization/team that appreciates their contributions (Brajer-Marczak, 2014).

Leaders develop stronger leader-employee relationships when leaders involve employees in the decision-making process because employees gain the ability to express their opinions freely (Yoerger, Crowe, & Allen, 2015). Leaders who measured employee engagement had high performing employees and sustained a positive work environment.

Leaders encourage employees to participate in active discussion. Gaining the ability to express opinions leads to open communication, enabling employees to feel part of the team, leading to widespread participation, informed decision-making, and process improvements (Farrell, 2016). Employees trust the organization has their best interest and genuinely wants them to succeed (Brajer-Marczak, 2014). Employee engagement required leaders to establish a positive leader-employee relationship by identifying who their employees were and not just what their employees were hired to do. Employee engagement enhances academic success, school connectedness, and process

improvements, leading to support from those in the online education work environment and the community (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Johnson, 2014).

Employee engagement could be the determining factor of an organization's success or failure. The need for critical and creative thinking with the hope to improve processes might ensure employees remain involved and engaged in various work-related activities (Brajer-Marczak, 2014). Employee engagement positively influences performance, well-being, and productivity (Truss, Delbridge, Alfes, Shantz, & Soane, 2013). Business leaders facilitate active discussion and improve employee morale and satisfaction in the workplace. Leaders achieved employee morale and satisfaction by ensuring employee engagement and promoting employee empowerment, leading to increased employee productivity.

Employee empowerment. Employee empowerment is a critical factor in increasing employee productivity in a work environment. Employee empowerment enables employees to assist leaders in the decision-making process (Pradhan, Kamlanabhan, Thulasiraj, & Muraleedharan, 2014). Empowerment enables employees to understand their professional and personal benefits (Frank, 2015). To achieve employee empowerment, leaders shared leadership vision, goals, and decision-making authority with employees. Empowerment allows employees to perform duties and responsibilities beyond the requirements of their regular job duties (Martin, 2016).

Employee empowerment enhances employee motivation, productivity, and commitment to the organization. Frank (2015) stated that approximately 75% of employees remain disengaged in the workplace. Employee disengagement may be a

result of leaders who struggle to implement strategies to sustain empowerment and to comprehend the complexities of employee empowerment, resulting in low performance and productivity (Huq, 2015). By implementing employee satisfaction and empowerment factors in the workplace, leaders promoted a positive leader-employee relationship and increased employee productivity. Leaders should consider incorporating sustainable leadership practices as a strategy to increase employee satisfaction and empowerment (Suriyankietkaew & Avery, 2014).

Some team leaders examine leadership roles, practices, and influences as factors that sustain creativity and innovation. Leaders recognize roles and responsibilities of their team members to sustain employee engagement and positive leader-employee relationships (Frank, 2015). Leaders and employees experience satisfaction and empowerment when leaders employ a participatory approach in which leaders consider everyone's perspective and issue rewards, creating individual and organizational success (Waite, 2014). Participatory approach enabled leaders to execute problem-solving techniques and reward and recognize employees for their achievements and accomplishments.

Rewards system. A rewards system helps leaders to better manage employee retention, motivation, and productivity. These rewards might include various incentives such as gift cards, paid time-off accrual, work from home days, annual bonus, and the ability to leave work early (Kristiani, Sumarwan, Noor-Yuliati, & Saefuddin, 2013). One goal of a rewards system is to ensure employees remain motivated in the work environment (Kristiani et al., 2013). Rewards reduce employee turnover and employees

perform at a higher rate, increasing employee retention and productivity (Holston & Kleiner, 2015). By implementing a rewards system, leaders increased employee morale and productivity.

When leaders properly manage employee retention and productivity, organizations could experience higher profits. Leaders who create a strategy that exemplifies a rewards system gain the ability to manage employee retention and productivity (Renard & Snelgar, 2016). Employee retention refers to initiatives taken by management to keep employees from leaving the organization, such as rewarding employees for performing their jobs effectively and ensuring positive leader-employee relationships (Koekemoer, 2014). Traditional employee retention and productivity strategies alone cannot remove uncertainties from leaders' ability to successfully manage or improve retention and productivity and keep turnover rates below industry norms (Benton, 2016). Employee motivation increased when leaders properly managed employee retention and productivity.

Organizational leaders explore strategies to control high employee turnover rates. Business leaders had become increasingly aware of issues that arise from employing old and outdated employee retention and productivity strategies, which has led to the question: What approaches and strategies are needed to better control high employee turnover rates and nonproductivity (Benton, 2016)? Terera and Ngirande (2014) explored the impact of a rewards system on job satisfaction and employee retention and productivity. Terera and Ngirande used a quantitative, correlational research design in which participants responded to self-administered questionnaires. Business leaders

created an efficient rewards system and addressed employees' needs, thereby increasing employee retention rates and productivity.

The HR department at the study site was responsible for recruiting top talented employees. Leaders execute strategies to retain talented and engaged employees (Lucas & Goodman, 2015). Leaders who implement a rewards system, ensure employees remain loyal and committed to the organization, perform at high levels, and remain engaged in the work environment (Barling, 2014). A rewards system inspired employees to perform at high levels and achieve their goals.

The HR department at the study site was also responsible for creating the organizations' compensation package. Terera and Ngirande (2014) stated that employers retain a positive workforce by offering a competitive compensation package. One of the main reasons an organization is successful is because of the leaders' ability to offer rewards based on competitive market-related pay and benefits (Lucas & Goodman, 2015). For example, competitive pay motivates employees to be committed to the organization. When employees are committed to the organization, leaders improved employee retention and increased employee productivity (Terera & Ngirande, 2014).

Effective communication is a vital factor to establish and sustain a rewards system. Employees expect leaders to be honest and thorough and therefore, leaders understand the effectiveness of communication and establishing a positive rewards system (WorldatWork, 2015). The rewards system affects the performance of some employees and their willingness to stay at the organization (Tangthong, Trimetsoontorn, & Rojniruntikul, 2014). Sánchez-Manjavacas et al. (2014) suggested that business

leaders strengthen leader-employee relationships through professional recognition, employee satisfaction, and rewards and commitment. By strengthening leader-employee relationships, leaders created a positive work environment and experienced an increase in employee productivity.

Executive leaders and stakeholders should invest in a rewards system and recognition programs to ensure employee retention. According to WorldatWork (2013), 46% of executive leaders view employee rewards and recognition programs as an investment, not an expense. Leaders should implement a rewards system by conducting a thorough analysis of existing rewards programs and executing effective communication (WorldatWork, 2015). Tangthong et al. (2014) suggested that the proper implementation of a rewards system contributes to employee retention and productivity. Leaders sustained positive leader-employee relationships and positive work environments by implementing a rewards system and recognition programs.

Positive work environment. Success in any organization depends on the work environment and the leader's ability to lead. Employees spend the majority of their weekday in the workplace and therefore, it is essential that the work environment is pleasant and satisfying (V. Heath, 2006). Employees who experience a negative work environment are usually unhappy, possess a negative attitude, and are less productive (Peters, 2013). Unhappy people may be preoccupied, increasing their chances of making mistakes (V. Heath, 2006). Leaders must take necessary steps to ensure a positive work environment.

A negative work environment produces different outcomes than a positive work environment. Leaders and employees are less productive in a negative work environment opposed to a positive one (Pastor, 2014). Darden (2014) stated that a negative work environment interferes with organizational goals and the employee's success. As a best business practice, all leaders must engage employees in the workplace so employees can feel as though they are part of the organization, creating a positive work environment (Peters, 2013). Team leaders could ensure a positive work environment by executing a positive vision of not only the organization but also themselves (Kauffman, Joseph, & Scoular, 2015).

Employees who are part of a positive work environment remain committed to the organization. A positive work environment is an atmosphere where employees feel valued and remain committed and productive (Peters, 2013). Leaders understand the importance of employee engagement and a positive work environment because both factors influence an employee's level of innovation, collaboration, job-longevity, and productivity (V. Heath, 2006). Leaders must create a strategy for recognizing and acknowledging employee achievements and milestones (Lewis, 2013) and incorporate workplace performance factors. By incorporating workplace performance factors, leaders sustained a positive work environment and positive leader-employee relationship, thereby experiencing an increase in employee productivity.

Leaders communicate several workplace performance factors to employees.

Workplace performance factors include but are not limited to:

- Goal setting,

- Performance feedback,
- Workplace incentives,
- Support and mentorship, and
- Resource availability (V. Heath, 2006).

Goal setting provides the opportunity for employees to set goals that demonstrate positive effects of achieving objectives set by their leader (Taing, Smith, Singla, Johnson, & Chang, 2013). Leaders support employees by providing performance feedback to ensure employees achieve their goals (Taing et al., 2013). Goal achievement was an important factor to sustaining a positive work environment.

Leaders use performance feedback as an essential communication technique to enhance employee performance. Leaders provide performance feedback by engaging in constant communication with employees (Au & Chan, 2013). Performance feedback ensures that all involved parties are on track to meet objectives (Au & Chan, 2013). London (2014) stated that leaders employ performance feedback as a mechanism to improve employee performance, motivation, and productivity. By using performance feedback as a factor to sustain a positive work environment, leaders gained a better understanding that workplace incentives were just as important as goal setting and performance management.

The online education-learning environment appeals to citizens from across the nation. For more than 10 years, the number of high school students interested in online classes have increased from approximately 50,000 to more than two million (Barbour, Grzebyk, & Eye, 2014). Employees are constantly enhancing their skills and acquiring

additional ones, in addition to gaining new knowledge and ideas in informal settings (Dunphy, 2014). Leaders must include workplace incentives to control employee turnover (Dunphy, 2014) and incentivize employees to stay committed to the organization. Employee commitment helped leaders properly manage employee retention.

Leader support and mentorship help to enhance not only employees' careers but also motivation. Leader support and mentorship are important factors of workplace performance, ensuring a positive work environment (Dunphy, 2014). Leaders may consider employing a transformational leadership style to create a positive work environment where employees remain committed and organizations sustain stability (Sang Long, Chin Fei, Adam, & Owee Kowang, 2016). A transformational leader increases positive influence among employees and in the work environment (Men & Stacks, 2013). Leaders who use transformational leadership style ensure high workplace performance and productivity.

Lastly, resource availability must be present to ensure workplace performance. Leaders who use resource availability influence departmental and organizational long-term goals and objectives (Pringle, 2016). Leaders should evaluate and analyze the organization's current resource availability (i.e., structure and systems) and make resources available at all times (Zhao, 2014). Resource availability and the other workplace performance factors listed, serve as motivating factors that contribute to workplace performance, ensuring productivity in the work environment (Sun & Yu,

2015). These motivating factors ensure positive leader-employee relationships and positive work environments, increasing employee productivity.

As previously noted, many employees prefer an online work environment opposed to a traditional work environment. In a traditional education work environment, employees travel to an office location, perform work, go home, and repeat these actions, usually Monday through Friday, typically from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Duffy et al., 2012). Daymont et al. (2015) stated that the advantages of face-to-face work environments include enabling team leaders to examine employees' energy levels, motivations, and abilities to read nonverbal cues and engage in discussions where leaders provide employees immediate feedback. However, the use of advanced technologies provided organizational leaders the opportunity to transition to an online education work environment, providing employees more work-life balance opportunities, thereby increasing employee motivation and productivity (B. Clark, 2015). Leaders employed advantaged technologies to ensure employee engagement and productivity.

An online work environment enhances employee engagement and increases job-longevity. Frazer et al. (2017) suggested that an online education work environment is the preferred method among business professionals mainly because it offers more flexibility than the traditional education work environment. An online education work environment promotes and enhances employee engagement and positive leader-employee relationships (Jiang & Men, 2017). Leaders execute motivational factors to ensure employees remain engaged and loyal to the organization, resulting in employee

productivity. Leaders must develop and sustain a positive work environment to ensure employees remain engaged and loyal to the organization (Frazer et al., 2017).

Transition and Summary

In Section 1, I highlighted employees' perceptions of their leaders' behaviors and leadership style as well as how those perceptions affect leader-employee relationships. I highlighted several factors that could influence how to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase employee productivity. The research I conducted was on areas of leadership theories (path-goal, transformational, and transactional), work environments (traditional education and online education work environments), leader-employee relationships (ineffective and effective), and motivating factors to increase employee productivity (engagement, empowerment, rewards system, and positive work environment).

The transformational leadership style became the recommended means to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase employee productivity in the work environment (Choi et al., 2017). Team leaders' perception of the value of employing the transformational leadership style could determine how leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale, motivation, and satisfaction (Men & Stacks, 2013). However, some team leaders in the online, for-profit high school education system lack strategies to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase employee productivity and therefore, are uncertain about the effectiveness of the transformational leadership style. To explore strategies that team leaders used to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase employee productivity in a work

environment, a qualitative case study was imperative that involved interviewing participants, and collecting and analyzing data.

Section 2, includes a comprehensive description of the research design and approach I utilized to comprehend employee perceptions of leadership behavior and style and how that perception affects leader-employee relationships to increase employee productivity. Section 2 also includes a rich description of my role as the researcher in a qualitative single-unit case study, population and sampling, ethical research principles, and data collection and analysis techniques. Section 2 concludes with a transition to Section 3. Section 3 includes a description of the application to professional practice and implications for social change, a presentation of the findings, recommendations for action and further research, and an in depth narrative about the experience throughout my Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) journey at Walden University. Section 3 concludes with a rich summary of this doctoral study and the outcomes achieved.

Section 2: The Project

In Section 2, I offer the purpose statement and then discuss my role as researcher, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research principles, data collection, and data analysis. I then discuss the reliability and validity of chosen data instrument tools, and conclude with a transition and summary.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative single-unit case study was to explore strategies that team leaders at one online, for-profit high school education system used to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase employee productivity. I collected data from team leaders who had experienced team member losses, yet had improved leader-employee relationships and increased employee productivity. The population consisted of current team leaders at an online, for-profit high school education system located in the Delaware area. This study's implications for positive social change include the potential for team leaders to increase the number of positive leader-employee relationships, resulting in increased productivity, lower turnover rates, and a favorable organizational reputation, which, in turn, may contribute to the financial stability and prosperity of their employees, communities, and families.

Role of the Researcher

This was a qualitative, descriptive, single-unit case study. Qualitative researchers use data-driven instruments to collect reliable data through methods including open-ended interview questions, questionnaires, or interviews (Nelson, London, & Strobel, 2015). Data collection methods supply data for the researcher to interpret and explain

complex situations that sustain cases (Galloway et al., 2015). I used the data to explore a phenomenon in which no established logic exists. As a qualitative researcher, I was aware of my influence during the entire research process, especially during my interaction with my selected participants. Some influences of the researcher on the participant may include but are not limited to, a personal relationship with participants, the same or similar life experiences, and business associates (E. Williams & Walter, 2015).

My experience with sustaining strategies and ensuring positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity originate from my professional background in change management and employee satisfaction. I always had a vested interest in fairness and equality, especially when it involves managing change in a team environment. My passion for managing change in a team environment significantly facilitated my career enhancement, especially after I earned my Master of Business Administration (MBA) in International Business with a concentration in change management. I am now the director at a small technology solutions company.

Although I had worked in the online education system for over 10 years, I had not worked with or had contact with any of the participants in this doctoral study. My job in the online education system was located in downtown Baltimore, MD. However, the participants in this doctoral study were located in the Delaware area, and at a different online education system.

The Belmont Report highlights several ethical guidelines and principles to help protect human participants who participate in research studies (National Commission for

the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1978). I focused on the three basic ethical principles for research involving human participants including respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1978).

Bias can occur at any point in the research process (e.g., planning, data collection, publication stages, and analysis; Gorrell, Ford, Madden, Holdridge, & Eaglestone, 2011). Humans have flaws, and therefore certain biases might affect research studies (Grant, Rohr, & Grant, 2012). I conducted self-reflections throughout the entire research process to mitigate bias and view data from an objective lens. By self-reflecting, I gained the ability to highlight learning outcomes and view data from various perspectives and not from a biased one. Also, I remained sincere to the purpose of this doctoral study and maintained a clear understanding and vision of the research topic.

Gorrell et al. (2011) suggested researchers use unbiased design, wording, and style when creating interview questions and protocols. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), researchers must not overtly react to any interview responses. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) stated that a skilled interviewer is a systematic observer who pays attention to the interviewee, writes descriptively, and validates and triangulates observations. I self-reflecting during the entire research process by reviewing participant interview protocol responses prior to performing interviews.

I did not personally know the participants, which helped reduce bias. I used the same interview protocol (see Appendix A) with all of the participants to secure my role as the researcher. A good interview protocol enables the researcher to gather important

information from participants in the study, add to the reliability of the study, and pinpoint biases (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Because bias can occur during any stage of research (Haans, Bruijn, & Ijsselsteijn, 2014), I avoided biases by choosing participants I did not know, by using the same interview protocol for each participant, and not overtly reacting to any interview responses. By using these methods, I refrained from biases, ensuring that responses resulted only from the human participants' perspectives.

Participants

The purpose of this qualitative single-unit case study was to highlight strategies that team leaders at the online, for-profit high school education system employed to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity. The eligibility criteria for participants included team leaders who had been in the online, for-profit high school education system and had experienced team member losses, yet had improved leader-employee relationships, thereby increasing productivity. Using a list of prequalifying interview questions (see Appendix A), I asked specific questions to ensure that the eligibility criteria were met. The questions included, but were not limited to, (a) What strategies do you use to improve and sustain leader-employee relationships, increasing productivity? and (b) How do you measure increased productivity?

I used extreme and deviant purposive sampling for this case study. According to Palinkas et al. (2013), researchers use extreme and deviant purposive sampling to identify participants' eligibility, assisting the researcher in the selection of qualified participants based on certain criteria. By using an extreme and deviant case sampling, I gained knowledge from unusual manifestations of phenomena of interest. Seawright (2016)

stated that extreme and deviant case sampling focuses on enlightening cases, providing the researcher the ability to highlight participant successes. I gained the ability to reveal lessons about outcomes relevant to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase employee productivity. The population consisted of current team leaders at an online, for-profit high school education system located in the Delaware area.

Accessing research participants is a challenge, and only 3-20% of eligible participants agree to participate in any study (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). I gained entry into the organization by obtaining permission to access participants from the assistant principal at the study site. One strategy I used to gain access to participants was to provide the assistant principal and participants as much detail as possible about the study and the anticipated outcomes. Details included information about how participants' involvement in this doctoral study would possibly contribute to not only their organization but also society at large. By raising awareness and preparedness, participants are more likely to commit to the entire interview process (Høyland et al., 2015).

Researchers collect and analyze data from participants and therefore select each participant carefully because each selection may close some opportunities yet open others (Reybold, Lammert, & Stribling, 2013). Hysong et al. (2013) suggested a several-step methodology for gaining access to participants and maintainig their interest. My first step to gaining access to participants was to receive approval from the Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB approval number for this study was 04-13-17-0142245. Once approved, I gained entry to the organization by contacting the

assistant principal via telephone and e-mail and requesting permission to conduct this doctoral study.

Once I received permission, I continued to the next step, which was to obtain participant eligibility and contact information. I contacted the assistant principal via telephone and e-mail, and discussed this doctoral study's purpose in full detail. I requested that the assistant principal send a group e-mail (blind copying recipients, including myself) to all faculty members and executives in the online program informing them of this doctoral study and study requirements. The e-mail explained the purpose of and time commitment required for this doctoral study. The e-mail included my contact information and instructed interested participants to contact me directly to take part in and/or find out more information about this study.

Once I received participant interest, I contacted participants via e-mail and telephone, informing them that I would not share their information. I communicated to each participant that I would not use his or her personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. I informed participants that I would not include their name, the organization's name, or anything else that could identify them in the study reports.

I communicated to each participant that I would secure the written data in a locked file cabinet and store electronic data on a personal, password-protected flash drive. I informed each participant that I would retain data for a period of at least, but no longer than 5 years, as required by the university. I will destroy the data after the 5 year period by shredding paper data and erasing the flash drive. I selected five current team

leaders consisting of faculty and executives at the online, for-profit high school education system who had experienced team member losses, yet had improved leader-employee relationships, increasing productivity.

Determining a participant's willingness to participate is a result of the participant's prior experience and current knowledge about the study topic (Walter & Davis, 2016), making them a significant contributor to the study's outcome. I spoke with selected participants via e-mail and telephone communication to determine their willingness to participate. I e-mailed a consent form to the participants, providing a detailed and thorough outline of the objective, potential risk factors, and benefits of this doctoral study. After I received the participants' consent to participate in this doctoral study, I scheduled a prescreening interview and began the data collection process.

Scheduling participants for data collection is the final step in gaining access to participants (Hysong et al., 2013). Prior to scheduling participant interviews, I sent each participant a consent form via e-mail communication to review, provide consent to participate, and return. Once I received consent, I contacted each participant via telephone to schedule an interview, which lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes. Brown et al. (2013) stated the importance of contacting participants via telephone to schedule a date and time convenient for them.

Using member checking, I reviewed and updated the interview results with the participants until I received final approval of their responses. Member checking allows participants an opportunity to review and approve all aspects of the interpretation of the information they provided during the interview (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Lastly, I

contacted the stakeholders and participants via e-mail or telephone after completing this doctoral study to share the results and thank them for participating. By executing these strategies, I established a working relationship with participants. The working relationship between the researcher and participant is essential to the research process (Enosh & Ben-Ari, 2015).

I established a positive working relationship with participants, and as a result viewed the participants as partners. I created a trustworthy working relationship with participants by ensuring open communication and dialogue, leading to a clear understanding of my intent and desired outcome. Open communication and dialogue between the researcher and participant leads to a trusting relationship and increases the participants' willingness to participate (Zaugg & Davies, 2013).

Gaining trust allowed the participants to feel comfortable with sharing honest responses and life experiences, which resulted in new knowledge pertaining to the study's topic (see Enosh & Ben-Ari, 2015). Because participants were current team leaders at the study site, they provided rich data that I could use to answer the central research question: What strategies do some business team leaders in an online, for-profit high school education system employ to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity? Each of the participants were team leaders who had experienced team member losses, yet had improved leader-employee relationships, increasing productivity.

Research Method and Design

In this section, I expand the Nature of the Study section. I chose a qualitative research method and a descriptive single-unit case study as the research design. I provide additional information and resources regarding the selection of the research method and design.

Research Method

I employed a qualitative methodology to understand how effective leadership styles affect leader-employee relationships and productivity. Qualitative research methods enable researchers to make assertions based on constructivist viewpoints (Drisko, 2016). By using a qualitative research method, researchers understand the experiences and perceptions of participants (Peticca-Harris, deGama, & Elias, 2016). In qualitative research, researchers analyze primarily rich textural data rather than numbers and collect data from human participants (Smith, 2015).

Researchers using a quantitative research approach examine relationships and differences between variables, testing theories as reliable sources of knowledge, and placing more focus on what is solid within the social context (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). A mixed-methods research approach was not appropriate because I did not use *both* quantitative and qualitative methods. Also, I did not include quantitative inquiry to study objective information. A qualitative research method was appropriate because it provided me the opportunity to explore and develop an understanding of the depth and breadth of a subject area through a rigorous case study.

Research Design

I utilized a descriptive single-unit case study research design. According to Merriam (2014), a descriptive single-unit case study research design provides the researcher a better understanding of the *why* and *how* of a situation based on real-life instances. A descriptive single-unit case study research design allows the researcher to highlight risk factors (Verner & Abdullah, 2012), which may potentially lead to negative leader-employee relationships, decreasing productivity. By employing a case study, I revealed strategies (such as business processes and best practices) that team leaders at the study site employed to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity, allowing me to gain a better understanding of the case studied and also a better understanding of real-life events. Since I focused on the leader-employee interaction and the process to establish strategies that led to positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity, a descriptive single-unit case study research approach was appropriate.

Tomkins and Eatough (2013) stated that phenomenology researchers examine participants' real-life experiences, focusing on the meaning of those experiences. Because I focused on a rich description of each participant's experience, if I had used a phenomenological design, I might have potentially bypassed important information about events leading up to the experience. I also employed interview techniques and note taking and therefore, using a phenomenological research design may have made it difficult to reach data saturation. Phenomenological research design was not appropriate for this doctoral study.

Ethnographic research is appropriate when a researcher wishes to develop a complete description of the culture of a group and is suitable for studying the constitution of psychological phenomena in social practices across time (Tanggaard, 2014). In an ethnographic research study, the researcher explores research participants' lives in their community over time (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). Since I excluded research participants in their community from this research study, ethnographic research design was not appropriate. The purpose of this doctoral study was to develop an understanding of strategies that team leaders at an online, for-profit high school education system employed to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity and therefore, a descriptive single-unit case study design was appropriate.

I achieved data saturation when I (a) obtained significant data to duplicate the study, (b) gained the ability to attain new information, and (c) no longer required additional coding. Chikweche and Fletcher (2012) stated that noting evidence regarding participants' perspectives and involvement of the study's topic helps researchers to achieve data saturation. According to O'Reilly and Parker (2012), one method a researcher uses to reach data saturation is to interview participants with knowledge and expertise pertaining to the research topic. I highlighted and interviewed participants with knowledge and expertise pertaining to the research topic.

I conducted participant interviews through face-to-face, e-mail, and telephone communication. Member checking continued until I was no longer able to identify new information. Silverman (2016) stated that interviewing enables researchers to gain

accurate and true accounts of participants' experiences. I gained the ability to attain new information by audio recording interviews.

If a participant refused to be audio-recorded, I removed them from the participant pool and moved forward to the next participant. By audio recording participant interviews, I thoroughly reviewed the participant interview responses to determine if I needed to ask additional questions or if I attained all new information and could move forward to the next participant. According to DeFelice and Janesick (2015), by audio recording interviews, researchers gain the ability to transcribe data that are secure, accurate, permanent, and transferable.

Coding allowed me to ensure reliability and validity. To obtain accurate and clear results of a case study, researchers must become proficient in coding (Saldaña, 2013). I developed a coding scheme using NVivo 11 software and Excel, enabling me to highlight variables of this doctoral study and determine the need for additional coding. I based this qualitative research study on coded open-ended interviews using a semistructured interview technique mainly because coding supports qualitative data analysis (Glaser & Laudel, 2013). I used coding as a method to enter participant data into NVivo 11 software and Excel, ensuring I reached data saturation.

Population and Sampling

I used the extreme and deviant purposive case sampling method for this doctoral study. Extreme and deviant purposive case sampling allows the researcher to select participants from the target population based on their suitability with the purpose of the study (Daniel, 2012). The advantage of extreme and deviant sampling is the ability to

choose qualified participants based on participant knowledge, experience, and willingness to share information (Etikan, 2016). By using extreme and deviant sampling, participants employed their ability to clarify a specific concept, phenomenon, or theme, producing solid results of the study.

Researchers use extreme and deviant purposive case sampling in the data selection process of participants for open-ended interviews using a semistructured interview technique (Robinson, 2014). Open-ended interviews using a semistructured interview technique allows the researcher and participant to engage in conversation whether it is through e-mail or telephone communication (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). I developed an interview guide that consists of 10 open-ended interview questions (see Appendix B).

I structured the overarching research question and 10 open-ended interview questions to ensure that participants felt comfortable in speaking openly and honestly. Open-ended questions promote engaging conversation, producing effective feedback, to acquire new knowledge (Wasik & Hindman, 2013). As I sought to understand strategies that team leaders employed to ensure positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity, an extreme and deviant purposive case sampling method with the use of open-ended interviews using a semistructured interview technique for the data collection process was appropriate for this research study.

I recruited participants who were current team leaders at an online, for-profit high school education system who had experienced team member losses, yet had improved leader-employee relationships, increasing productivity. In the prescreening interview

process (see Appendix A), participants answered a question that explained how they improved leader-employee relationships that resulted in increased productivity: Have you employed strategies to improve and sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity? If so, what strategies and how did you measure increased productivity?

I reached out to potential participants via telephone and e-mail, and asked general prequalifying questions based on an interview protocol (see Appendix A) to ensure participants met this doctoral study requirements. Extreme and deviant purposive case sampling helps researchers identify relativity of events, experiences, and knowledge (Shneerson & Gale, 2015). By using extreme and deviant purposive case sampling, I gained the ability to comprehend strategies that team leaders at the online, for-profit high school education system employed to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity. Participant eligibility criteria provides the researcher an opportunity to recruit qualified participants and to develop a recruitment strategy (Hennick, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). McBride (2016) stated that researchers who ask predetermined interview questions gather sufficient information meaningful to readers.

I chose the selection of participants based on a target population consisting of geographic location; employment status; employment title; experience and knowledge in the online, for-profit high school education system; and willingness to participate. Iphofen (2011) stated that researchers may use a participant eligibility criteria to recruit qualified participants. By using the participant eligibility criteria to recruit qualified participants, I was able to better manage and control each stage of the interview process.

With a small sample size, I saved time in the participant recruitment process and therefore, the interview was more engaging and produced accurate, solid results.

I achieved data saturation when I (a) obtained significant data, (b) gained the ability to attain new information, and (c) no longer required additional coding. I obtained significant data by conducting participant interviews through telephone and e-mail communication. According to Daniel (2012), a researcher should continue the interview process until he or she is no longer able to identify new information. I obtained new information and knowledge through audio-recorded interviews.

Ethical Research

Researchers must conduct ethical research with any study. Representatives of the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) were responsible for reviewing this doctoral study to determine that the research outweighed potential risks and benefits, and IRB approval lasts for 1 year (Center for Research Quality, n.d.). One important factor to consider regarding ethical research is the protection of participants (American Psychological Association, 2010). As a best practice, and a requirement of the IRB, I submitted an informed consent form to all qualified participants. Obtaining participant consent was the foundation of this research, ensuring participants gained a better understanding of what I was trying to accomplish.

The Walden IRB required that all participants provided a consent form prior to the interview process (Trochim, 2006). The consent form disclosed certain elements (Center for Research Quality, n.d.) such as but not limited to:

- Statement that the study involves and reason topic was selected.

- Identity and role of the researcher.
- Understandable explanation or research purpose and description of procedures.
- Duration of subject's participation.
- Statement that participation is voluntary.
- Description of risks and anticipated benefits.

The informed consent form ensures all involved parties are willing and available to participate in a research study (Nishimura, Carey, Erwin, Tilburt, Murad, & McCormick, 2013). Data confidentiality is another benefit of the informed consent form (Seidman, 2013) and therefore, by utilizing the informed consent form, I reduced the risk of exploiting and identifying each participant.

According to the American Psychological Association (2010), researchers must remove all identity links that could identify participants. Since this doctoral study involved human participants; I removed all identity links and therefore, the participants remain protected. I obtained consent to participate in this doctoral study through e-mail and telephone communication. By obtaining consent to participate, I was able to ensure confidentiality and protect human participant identity.

Greenaway, Wright, Willingham, Reynolds, and Haslam (2015) stated that effective communication is a significant human social function. There were no incentives to participate in this doctoral study. No participant expressed the need or desire to withdraw from this doctoral study. However, in the event a participant wanted to withdraw from this doctoral study, I would have communicated to participants that

everyone will respect his or her decision of whether or not they chose to participate. I included this statement in the informed consent form and informed participants that (a) no one at Walden University will treat them differently if they decide not to be in this doctoral study, (b) if they decide to join the study now, participants can still change their minds later, and (c) they may withdraw at any time.

As this doctoral study involved an organization, I submitted a letter of cooperation to the assistant principal at the online, for-profit high school education system. The letter of cooperation confirmed the organization was willing to participate in this doctoral study and granted permission for me to conduct interview activities. The signed letter of cooperation highlighted participant recruitment and data collection methods, member checking, and the study procedures. The letter of cooperation ensured the chosen organization that the data I collected will remain confidential.

The data will remain in a safe place for a period of at least, but no longer than 5 years, as required by Walden University. I did not use participant personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. I did not include participant names, the organization's name, or anything else that could identify the participants in any of the study reports. The written data will remain secure in a locked file cabinet and the electronic data will remain secure on a personal, password-protected, flash drive for 5 years. I will destroy the data after the 5 year period by shredding paper data and erasing the flash drive.

Data Collection Instruments

I was the primary data collection instrument in this qualitative single-unit case study. As a case study requires a minimum of two data collection instruments (Tsang, 2013), I presented open-ended interview questions using semistructured interview techniques, note taking, and a review of company documents. Semistructured interview techniques allow the researcher and participant to engage in conversation whether it is telephone or e-mail communication (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

By taking notes, researchers compare new knowledge (i.e., knowledge gained from interviews) with emerging themes from all data sources (Akhavan & Dehghani, 2015). By reviewing company documents, I viewed and documented information pertinent to this doctoral study and addressed the need for data mining. I prescreened participants by asking prequalifying interview questions (see Appendix A). One of the prequalifying interview questions revolved around the overarching research question: What strategies do some business team leaders in the online, for-profit high school education system employ to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity?

Methodology triangulation requires using more than one source of data to study a construct (L. Heath, 2015). I collected data through semistructured interview techniques, note taking, and review of company documents (including employee retention and turnover reports, performance guidelines as outlined in the organization's employee handbook, and employee reward and recognition programs). Methodology triangulation

increases the validity of the research findings and broadens an understanding of the studied construct (Yeasmin & Rahman, 2012).

As the interviewer, I conducted informal and open-ended interviews using a semistructured interview technique. Semistructured interview techniques allow the researcher and participant to engage in conversation (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). With open-ended interviews using a semistructured interview technique, I gained the ability to ask the same questions of all participants. However, the order of questions and follow-up questions varied based on the feedback and dialogue captured during the interview.

Because the interview process is a conversation held between the researcher and participant (Ferreira, 2014), I practiced excellent verbal communication to reveal important information related to the study and to establish a trusting relationship. A good interviewer possesses (a) technical, communication, and interactive abilities; (b) good attention to details, and (c) knowledge on how to address personal bias (Goodell, Stage, & Cooke, 2016). By using technical ability, I organized the interviews accurately and therefore, I initiated arrangements for interview dates and times and communicated confidentiality measures to each participant. Being interactive enables the researcher to pay attention to the interviewee and guide the interview on a desired path (Goodell et al., 2016), resulting in the ability to observe and comprehend nonverbal cues.

I pinpointed my own personal thoughts and insights, ensuring not to verbalize my perspective to remain unbiased. I achieved reliability and validity mainly through consistency. I obtained each participant's permission to record each interview session. I

reviewed each interview, while transcribing notes and therefore, ensuring consistency and accuracy.

Leung (2015) stated that reliability in qualitative research is another term for consistency. One approach I used to enhance reliability was constant data comparison through triangulation. Triangulation assists researchers in increasing the validity of the research findings and broadening an understanding of the studied construct (Yeasmin & Rahman, 2012). I verified the accuracy of the data collected through constant data comparison. I performed a data comparison after the completion of participant interviews and repeated data comparisons until no new information emerged.

Member checking is a method that helps the researcher enhance the trustworthiness of the results (Chang, 2014). I performed member checking at the completion of the participant interview process to ensure I interpreted the participants' answers accurately. Chua and Adams (2014) stated that member checking provides participants the opportunity to review and adjust their responses, immediately. The last question of the interview provided participants the opportunity to add to or change answers to previously asked questions, ensuring reliable and valid study results.

Final interview question:

Do you have anything to add to or address the strategies and processes you implemented that improved and sustained positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity?

Data Collection Technique

I conducted open-ended interviews using a semistructured interview technique, note taking, and review of company documents for data collection techniques. An advantage of employing interview techniques is that I was able to explore the nature of current team leaders' experiences and the quality of team leaders' work ethics.

Silverman (2016) stated that interviewing enables researchers to gain accurate and true accounts of participants' experiences.

I sent an e-mail to or contacted through telephone a selected number of participants, including prescreening questions. The assistant principal at the online, for-profit high school education system sent a group e-mail (blind copying recipients, including myself) to a list of potential participants. Through e-mail and telephone communication, I clarified the purpose of this doctoral study, obtained instructions to withdraw or consent to participation, and included my contact information. E-mail and telephone communication contributes to the unveiling of new knowledge (McGovern, 2016).

One prescreening question that was asked to each participant determined whether the participant implemented strategies to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity: Have you employed strategies to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity? If so, what strategies and how did you measure increased productivity? Participants answered as either *yes* or *no* to the first question. Participants expanded on the second question, defining how the participants

measured increased productivity. Answers to the remaining prescreening questions determined whether the participant was qualified to participate in this doctoral study.

If qualified, I sent an invitation via e-mail communication requesting participation in this doctoral study. If not qualified, I sent an e-mail notification thanking the participant for their willingness to participate and informed them they were not selected to continue in this doctoral study, indicating the reason. According to Morse (2015), by implementing prescreening questions, researchers determine the participants' eligibilities to participate and his or her dedication and creditability.

Morse (2015) stated that researchers comprehend the trustworthiness of participants when researchers determine participants' reliability and transferability with dependability and creditability. I conducted the prescreening process through either telephone or e-mail communication until I reached five qualified participants. If participants did not have access to e-mail or preferred I contacted them via telephone, I proceeded as requested. If a telephone interview was the participant's preferred method of contact, I called the participant to solidify a time, date, and commitment to length of the interview (approximately 30 to 40 minutes). Once the participant and I agreed to a time, date, and commitment to length of interview, I contacted the participant at the specified time.

I conducted audio-recorded interviews. If a participant did not agree to be audio-recorded, I removed them from this doctoral study and moved forward to select a different participant. The prescreening process took place through either e-mail or telephone communication. Once I prequalified the participant, I scheduled a date and

time and conducted the interview. DeFelice and Janesick (2015) stated that audio recording interviews, enables researchers to better transcribe data that are secure, accurate, permanent, and transferable.

Although interview techniques are the most preferred data collection technique in qualitative research (Alshenqeeti, 2014), interview techniques have disadvantages. As I conducted open-ended interviews using semistructured interview techniques, there was an open dialogue and in some cases, the interview was very time-consuming. I monitored the time of each interview and if the interview exceeded the allotted time, I ensured the interviewee agreed to continue. I scheduled interviews in 2-hour increments such that each interview was scheduled for 30-40 minutes, providing over an hour to review notes before the next scheduled interview. Because interviews are never 100% anonymous (Alshenqeeti, 2014), I ensured participant confidentiality by establishing a trusting, open, and honest rapport with participants and continuously informed the participants about confidentiality.

I gained permission from the assistant principal to access qualified participants. I e-mailed the assistant principal a letter of cooperation, detailing the purpose of this doctoral study. Once I received permission and access to interested participants, I conducted the prescreening process with team leaders who fit the criteria of this doctoral study. I selected the first team leader who prequalified. I received participant consent through either e-mail or telephone communication. Obtaining participant consent is the foundation of research (Nishimura et al., 2013).

I took notes during participant interviews. I transcribed notes and asked the participants to review their interview transcript for any discrepancies. By utilizing this technique, I was able to complete an accurate transcript review. I used a transcript review as a tool to validate data since there were no variables in the study. Alshenqeeti (2014) stated that using data collection methods, allows researchers the ability to gather an abundance of data, validating research results.

I performed member checking at the completion of the interview process to ensure I interpreted the participants' answers accurately and to enhance the trustworthiness of the study's results. I performed member checking at the completion of each interview, summarizing my understanding of what each participant stated during their interview. When researchers summarize their understanding of participant responses, they interpret each response accurately (Thomas, 2017). I allowed my participants to review the final analysis of their interview to ensure there were no misinterpretations or omissions.

Data Organization Technique

The way researchers organize and document data is crucial in qualitative research studies (Yin, 2014). Structuring the data by organizing predetermined interview questions and notes, results in baseline and follow-up qualitative data organization techniques (Johnson, Dunlap, & Benoit, 2010). I audio recorded and transcribed the five interviews. I gained written consent to audio record each participant interview.

I used the QuickTime Player audio recorder located on my laptop. Prior to each interview, I tested the QuickTime Player to ensure it was working. I performed member

checking until the participant agreed with the accuracy of my interview notes. Member checking enables researchers to explore the credibility of the results by returning results to participants and allowing the participants to check them for accuracy (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016).

Once I received member checking approval from each participant, I created an Excel spreadsheet which helped me to organize data. The Excel spreadsheet served as a research log. I created tabs within the Excel spreadsheet and labeled them in sequence of each interview question (see Appendix B). Each spreadsheet included the participant's number and his or her response. Once I entered all of the data onto the spreadsheet, I notated similarities and differences and highlighted data elements pertaining to the topic of this doctoral study.

Field note taking is an observation technique that enables the researcher to take notes while observing and documenting observations (Johnson et al., 2010). I compiled and transcribed field notes in the same manner that I used for interviews. I performed member checking until the participant approved my interview notes. Once approved, I created a tab within the Excel spreadsheet and performed data analysis, enabling me to highlight data elements that corresponded with the interview questions.

Data elements helped me to determine and document main themes that emerged from the interview results. Thematic analyses assist researchers with finding common themes and creating a profuse presentation of the findings (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Researchers gain the ability to create categories based on themes presented in the analysis by developing an in depth thematic framework (Gibbs, 2007). As an added measure to

ensure data accuracy, I gained access to NVivo 11 once I compiled all the data within the spreadsheet and developed a common theme. NVivo 11 is an online tool that helps researchers organize, validate, and better present data results (Gibbs, 2010). I only gained access to NVivo 11 after I compiled, analyzed, and organized data elements to take advantage of NVivo's 11 14-day free trial.

I informed the participants that any information they provided would be kept confidential. I communicated to the participants that I would not use his or her personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. I informed participants that I would not include their name, organization's name, or anything else that could identify them in the study reports. I communicated to each participant that the written data would remain secure in a locked file cabinet and the electronic data would remain on a personal, password-protected, flash drive. I informed each participant that I would retain the data for a period of at least, but no longer than 5 years, as required by the university. I will destroy the data after the 5 year period by shredding paper data and erasing the flash drive.

Data Analysis

I used both Excel and NVivo 11 as data analysis tools in this doctoral study. By using Excel and NVivo 11, I translated data that I retrieved from the interviews and observations, enabling me to better comprehend the participants' real-life experiences. Since the research design was a descriptive single-unit case study, and I used several data sources, a constant comparison data analysis was the best approach.

Constant comparison data analysis is the process of comparing new data to old data, and repeating the process until the researcher is no longer able to reveal new data (Neale, 2016). Coding is a significant part of constant comparison data analyses (Saldaña, 2014). I used three types of coding: (a) open coding identifies categories of data, (b), axial coding identifies specific categories, explaining the main category, and (c) selective coding connects the categories to develop a story.

I extracted data from the transcripts and audio recordings were retrieved from participant interviews, note taking, and review of company documents. By coding, I revealed a plethora of topics and themes from the participant interviews and review of company documents. Within the Excel spreadsheet, I developed codes based on common themes and topics. I created codes for participants and interview data (e.g., *P1*, *P2*, etc.). I created codes for company documents (e.g., *D1*, *D2*, etc.). If no common theme or topic existed, I created a new code and included that theme in this doctoral study.

The Excel spreadsheet is a data analysis tool (Saldaña, 2014) that enables the researcher to code common themes and topics and identify pertinent relationships within each text. Regarding the interview findings, I transcribed data, entered the findings on the spreadsheet, and documented commonalities. Regarding participant interviews, I replayed the audio recordings and transferred the results onto the spreadsheet. Once I transferred all data onto the spreadsheet, I scrubbed the data and placed data with common themes and topics in appropriate categories. Saturation occurred only when the interview data and document review data became repetitive (Grant et al., 2012).

Finally, I performed coding data analysis through NVivo 11. By using NVivo 11, I identified key themes, and word frequencies and therefore, interpreted data accurately. Aspin (2016) stated that researchers must modify data to ensure it is accurate when data analysis is complete. By performing data analysis, I gained the ability to identify strategies that team leaders at the online, for-profit high school education system used to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity.

I focused on common themes through coding. By categorizing themes, a common theme emerged, enabling me to correlate these themes with the current literature by performing research on the common themes. Research consisted of obtaining sources such as online research sources and peer reviewed articles and journals that aligned with path-goal and transformational leadership theories, the chosen conceptual frameworks. I used several search engines, including key words from the common themes.

Reliability and Validity

Throughout the years, the use of reliability and validity criteria has become common in qualitative research (Lakshmi & Mohideen, 2013). However, researchers experience several challenges of achieving reliability and validity criteria (Lakshmi & Mohideen, 2013). Researchers must identify reliability criteria and the validity of their research findings (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In this qualitative single-unit case study, I identified the research as (a) credible, (b) dependable, and (c) transferable, thereby establishing this doctoral study's confirmability.

Reliability

The researcher achieves reliability when the data analysis tool produces the same results during the course of multiple data analyses (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Since I conducted open-ended interviews using a semistructured interview technique, I did not ask questions that would guide participants' answers. According to Alshenqeeti (2014), researchers who avoid guiding participants' answers, most likely remain unbiased and achieve reliability. I performed member checking and reached data saturation. Member checking and data saturation are methods researchers employ to enhance the dependability of the study's results (Chang, 2014).

The concept of dependability aligns with reliability (Munn et al., 2014). Member checking is a method for validating dependability (Burchett et al., 2013). In an effort to ensure dependability, I discussed the interview data with participants after data collection and allowed for the participants to clarify any information. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), researchers achieve data saturation when he or she (a) obtain significant data, (b) gain the ability to attain new information, and (c) no longer require additional coding. I obtained significant data to duplicate this doctoral study by conducting participant interviews through e-mails or telephone communication.

Validity

Researchers use validity to assess the quality and accuracy of their study results through several criteria including but not limited to (a) credibility, (b) confirmability, and (c) transferability (Trochim, 2006). Trochim (2006) stated that researchers achieve credibility when the participant(s) of the study believes the study results are credible. I

achieved credibility by performing member checking of data interpretation and triangulation. Member checking occurred at the completion of each interview.

Credibility. Credibility helps researchers ensure the findings of the study are from participants' perspectives (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Each participant reviewed a transcript of his or her interview. By using this method, I captured accurate data and provided participants the opportunity to make any necessary changes. According to Munn et al. (2014), participants are best qualified to judge the credibility of the study results. Since I sought to understand strategies that team leaders use to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity, participants were best qualified to judge the credibility and reliability of the study results.

The methodology triangulation increases the validity of the research findings and broadens an understanding of the studied construct (Yeasmin & Rahman, 2012). I performed data comparison after the completion of participant interviews and repeated data comparisons until no new information emerged. I discussed the interview data with participants after data collection and allowed for the participants to clarify any information. I shared with the participants the findings of this doctoral study and discussed how I reached the conclusions. I kept the participants informed through e-mail, phone conversations, and face-to-face conversations.

Confirmability. Marshall and Rossman (2016) stated that researchers achieve confirmability when others gain the ability to confirm or corroborate the study's results. I probed participants during the interview process, enabling me to question participants from various perspectives and better analyze data. Qualitative analyses ensure study

results are confirmable (Nilsson et al., 2016). I performed member checking at the completion of the interview process to ensure I interpreted participants' answers accurately. M. Chua and Adams (2014) stated that member checking provides participants the opportunity to review and adjust their responses, immediately.

Transferability. Another specification of validity is transferability.

Transferability refers to the study results being applicable in other contexts, which enables a researcher to transfer data about the study to others (Burchett, Mayhew, Lavis, & Dobrow, 2013). I used an interview protocol (see Appendix A), providing in depth context and discussion related to this doctoral study's topic which enabled others to determine the transferability of the study's findings. A good interview protocol enables researchers to gather important information from participants in the study (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

Fusch and Ness (2015) stated that data saturation is imperative in research because replication in categories is essential. I interviewed participants with knowledge and expertise pertaining to the research topic to ensure data saturation. According to Harland (2014), the results for a research study must be stable and comparable over time. I conducted interviews with each participant until no new information emerged and until data saturation was evident. According to Rooney et al. (2016), conducting a thorough review of interview data addresses a study's credibility by assessing validity and transferability.

Transition and Summary

In Section 2, I provided a detailed description of the research design and approach utilized to gain a comprehensive understanding of employee perceptions of leadership behavior and style and how that perception affects leader-employee relationships to increase productivity. I highlighted the purpose statement, my role as the researcher in a qualitative single-unit case study, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research principles, and data collection and analysis techniques. I described methods of reliability and validity of selected data analysis tools.

Section 3 includes a description of the application to professional practice and implications for social change and a presentation of the findings of this doctoral study. Section 3 also includes recommendations for action and further research and an in depth narrative about the experience throughout my Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) journey at Walden University. Section 3 concludes with a rich summary and the outcomes achieved.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative single-unit case study was to explore strategies that team leaders at an online, for-profit high school education system used to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity. All five participants were team leaders at the study site located in the Delaware area who had experienced team member losses, yet had improved leader-employee relationships, thereby increasing productivity. The participants answered 10 open-ended questions (see Appendix B) to identify the strategies that they use to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity. Four themes emerged through my analysis of the data: (a) leadership styles and strategies, (b) motivation, (c), goal setting, and (d) employee engagement and productivity.

By identifying leadership styles and strategies, team leaders at the online, for-profit high school education system created a positive work environment and sustained positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity. Team leaders noted the importance of employee motivation by highlighting motivational factors that they executed in the work environment. Goal setting was another important strategy that team leaders used to ensure the success of not only employees but also the organization. Team leaders found it helpful to promote employee engagement as a strategy to increase employee productivity. The findings of this study indicated that the strategies team leaders used to sustain positive leader-employee relationships increased employee productivity.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching question for this doctoral study was: What strategies do some business team leaders at an online, for-profit high school education system employ to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity? I conducted semistructured interviews in private settings, took notes collected from participant interviews, and reviewed company documents (e.g., documents related to employee retention and turnover rates, and employee rewards and recognition programs). I reached data saturation when no new information emerged from document review, notes, or interview data. After audio-recording and thoroughly transcribing the interviews, and reviewing data from company documents and my notes, I imported the data into NVivo 11 for coding. I used codes to identify each participant (P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5) and each document (D1 – employee handbook, D2 – rewards program, and D3 – recognition program). Through a thorough data analysis, four themes emerged: (a) leadership styles and strategies, (b) motivation, (c), goal setting, and (d) employee engagement and productivity (see Table 1).

Table 1

Summary of Themes for Strategies to Sustain Positive Leader-Employee Relationships

	Theme	%
Theme 1	Leadership styles and strategies	28
Theme 2	Motivation	27
Theme 3	Goal setting	25
Theme 4	Employee engagement and productivity	20

Key Words

After analyzing the data, I generated a list of keywords (see Table 2) from interview responses, notes, and company documents. The words *leadership* and *strategies* occurred the most frequently, and all participants used both words. P1 (vice president of change management), P2 (faculty member), P3 (faculty member), and P5 (assistant principal) used *motivation* and *goal setting* approximately 32 times during his or her interview. P4 (an assistant principal) used the same words, but less frequently than the other participants.

The phrases *employee engagement* or *employee productivity* occurred more than 69 times during participant interviews. Other keywords and phrases included *leaders*, *employees*, *communication*, *coaching*, *accountability*, *transformational leadership*, *path-goal leadership*, *work environment*, *respect*, *recognition*, and *positivity*. Each keyword and phrase reflected an emphasis on either processes and procedures, stakeholders, leaders, employees and the community, or the work environment. Each participant connected strategies to sustain positive leader-employee relationships by employing various leadership styles, mostly transformational.

Table 2

Keyword Frequency: Top 17 Keywords and Phrases

Keyword/phrases	Frequency
Leadership	130
Strategies	128
Motivation	125
Goal setting	123
Employee engagement	120
Employee productivity	116
Leaders	116
Employees	113
Communication	97
Coaching	86
Accountability	83
Transformational leadership	79
Path-goal leadership	57
Work environment	51
Respect	37
Recognition	28
Positivity	27

Theme 1: Leadership Styles and Strategies

The first theme that emerged from data analysis was *leadership styles and strategies*. P1 stated that, “The key to sustaining positive leader-employee relationships is to employ a leadership style and strategy that fits the personalities of the employees and the work environment.” P1 indicated that transformational leadership style is most effective in the online high school education system. P2, P3, and P4 shared similar viewpoints about the effectiveness of the transformational leadership style. Employee perceptions usually remain positive when team leaders lead by example, identify employee needs, initiate employee training, and gain the ability to sustain a positive work environment (Hameiri & Nir, 2016), which all result from the use of leadership styles and strategies.

Transformational leadership is a process in which leaders and followers help each other advance to a higher level of morale and motivation (Bass & Bass, 2008). To advance to a higher level of morale and motivation, leaders must design jobs in ways that encourage employees' interest and secure employees' growth (Dwivedula et al., 2017). P3 stated,

When a manager looks out for the best interest of an employee, the employee is motivated to succeed. Leaders want to ensure that they can trust their staff to do his or her job. Leaders can build trust through effective communication and fostering positive relationships. An employee who feels respected and valued is more likely to go above and beyond to achieve successful results.

After reviewing the organization's employee retention and turnover rates shown in the employee handbook (D1), I noticed that several strategies were in place to ensure job-longevity, mostly relating to the transformational leadership style.

The employee handbook (D1) included sections regarding employee retention and turnover rates, indicating that "the organization's stakeholders and executives are committed to synthesizing resources that guarantee team leader, employee, and organizational success." Leaders at the high school were committed to making team leaders and employees feel like an integral part of the working environment by including them in various decision-making processes. The employee retention section of the employee handbook (D1) consists of assessment strategies that top executives used to "ensure new and current faculty are well-prepared to manage all facets of their job." A few assessment strategies noted in the handbook included the

Use of quizzes to test comprehension and cognitive ability and strategic questioning to enhance critical thinking. These assessments identify team leader weaknesses and strengths, enabling team leaders to focus on best practices by first identifying their leadership style, and improving leader-employee relationships, employee engagement and productivity, and retention rates.

Addressing the issue of faculty retention, P5 stated,

Most faculty members quit because they are not well-prepared to manage their job responsibilities in a manner that will ensure not only their success but also employee success. As an assistant principal, I clearly understand the importance of embedding employee retention strategies in our core values.

P3 stated that “When strategies are not implemented from the top down or from all departments, employee productivity suffers.” Several methods can enhance team leaders’ understanding of different variations of strategic processes and best practices (Vaara & Lamberg, 2016). Each participant mentioned that employee training to ensure best practices and accuracy of process documentation are resources team leaders used to ensure the success of employees and the organization. P2 mentioned, “When employees feel his or her leader is approachable, team leaders better communicate with and identify employee and organizational needs, enhancing employee growth through morale, trust, and motivation.”

Theme 2: Motivation

The second theme that emerged from data analysis was *employee motivation*. Idealized influence, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation are all

factors of employee motivation (Bass & Bass, 2008). Each participant indicated that *leading by example by being a positive influence* is a strategy team leaders employ to motivate employees. P4 stated,

Practice what you preach or model what you want to see. Teachers find it hard to argue with ‘going the extra mile’ for a student if they see an administrator doing the same thing. I try to model hard work and the mindset that our role is to treat each student as an individual and give him or her what they need.

Each participant also indicated that *showing consideration for each other* is a successful strategy for influencing others and for sustaining positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity. P2 indicated that leaders should let their employee know “how important their job is and how valuable they are to the company.” P3 stated that “respecting employees as individuals” helps leaders to sustain positive influence in the work environment and shows employees that their leader genuinely cares. A good leader shows consideration by paying attention to, supporting, and encouraging employees (Ahmad et al., 2014), which leads to and sustains positive leader-employee relationships.

Leaders must treat each employee in a caring and unique way. Transformational leaders exemplify behaviors that reflect those of a role model, and execute decision-making techniques in the best interest of themselves, employees, and the organization (Ahmad et al., 2014). P5 indicated that by “speaking with employees about their concerns and making interactions professional, purposeful, and personal helps to grow and develop trust.” P3 noted that when leaders and employees maintain open

communication, leaders are more likely to “trust employees with information necessary to perform their jobs, increasing productivity.”

Transformational leaders (a) enhance employees’ skills, (b) treat employees equally, and (c) encourage employees to achieve not only organizational goals but also their own goals (Jyoti & Dev, 2015). Transformational leadership is a favored framework because of its motivational style that enables leaders to motivate employees’ to enhance their creativity, viewpoints, and goals (Jyoti & Dev, 2015). Transformational leadership presents leaders as visionaries (Tourish, 2013). P5 stated,

I have a passion for the work. I am a visionary leader. I expect all stakeholders to have a foot in the present and at the very least, a finger in the future. We should always look at how things can be better for leaders, employees, and the organization.

Leaders direct employees to solve issues logically rather than traditionally and therefore, employees become more creative, logical, and critical thinkers (Ahmad et al., 2014), which enhances intellectual stimulation. P1 stated, “When leaders encourage employees to formatively identify and solve problems, leaders create and sustain a trusting leader-employee relationship and intellectually stimulating behavior in the work environment.” Leaders should encourage employees to communicate new perspectives and become more innovative (Peng, Lin, Schaubroeck, McDonough, & Zhang, 2015), which leads to higher levels of employee engagement and productivity. Employees who provide his or her ideas feel valued, feel appreciated, and remain productive. P5 stated,

I celebrate brainstorming and problem solving techniques when encouraging employees to express their ability to identify and solve problems creatively.

When a stakeholder shares a solution to a problem, celebrating their initiative and innovation is key. Providing feedback that maintains employees' creative effort is vitally important.

According to Phillips (2015), faculty member turnover costs organizations more than \$2.2 billion a year. P4 stated, "In the past, high turnover rates contributed to poor working conditions, ineffective leadership, team leaders' feeling of isolation and inability to make decisions, and lack of leader support." After reviewing the employee handbook (D1), I noticed several strategies had been implemented to combat these issues, reducing turnover rates. For example, "employees are encouraged to think creatively which allow them to make informed decisions that affect the work environment." Decision-making enabled team leaders to feel part of the organization and have positive views of their leadership team, increasing job-longevity and decreasing turnover rates.

Theme 3: Goal Setting

The findings of the research showed that team leaders set goals to achieve employees' growth, creativity, decision making abilities, and performance, increasing productivity. Leaders will act in a certain way based on the expectation that their actions will produce a certain outcome and that the outcome will encourage employees to be productive (Clark, 2013). Although I identified transformational leadership as the most frequently used leadership style by participants, P1 and P3 stated that they also use path-goal leadership as a method to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase

productivity. P1 stated that by using both “path-goal and transformational leadership styles, employees’ creativity is more invigorated, enabling employees to set attainable goals” and therefore increase productivity. Leaders must optimize employee motivation and contribution to both employee and organizational goals (Ahmad et al., 2014).

Path-goal theory helps leaders identify an effective leadership style that leads to the accomplishment of a goal in which the leader attempts to clear the path and encourage employees to tread on it (Talal-Ratyan et al., 2013). The focus of path-goal theory is (a) characteristics of the employee, task, and work environment; (b) leadership styles, and (c) motivation (MacDonald & de Luque, 2013). Employee, task, and work environment characteristics arise when obstacles become unbearable for employees and therefore, the leader should intervene (Clark, 2013). For example, P2 stated,

When an employee appears stressed or confused, I speak with them to better understand the issue. I provide solutions to assist the employee in resolving the issue. I let the employee decide which solution is best. That way, I am not only helping to alleviate stress but also providing employee empowerment.

Leaders help employees set goals, support employees, and incorporate a positive attitude in the work environment when generating a pathway to overcome obstacles (Hansen et al., 2014).

P1 indicated, “By using path-goal leadership style, leaders ensure employees have enough potential for achieving their goals.” Employee performances depend upon the skillset and knowledge an employee possesses regarding job-related responsibilities (Ahmad et al., 2014). P5 stated that in order to lead employees on a successful path,

“leaders and employees must have a shared vision that will unify the work and coordinate efforts of staff members. Having SMART goals that relate to the common mission make the work relevant.” Both *P1* and *P3* indicated several procedures (e.g., setting tangible and measurable goals, coaching employees, documenting processes, and conducting employee trainings) they had implemented to ensure employees achieve their goals and remain productive.

A leader must provide employees with constant encouragement, feedback, and motivation (Asfaw et al., 2015). *P3* stated,

Promoting from within an organization is critical to retaining top talent and to providing employee support and development, motivating employees to remain committed to the organization. An employee’s first promotion to a leadership role requires appropriate training and ongoing support. The core values of the organization should be reflected in every task and process. Additionally, the values should be evident both in evaluating employees’ performance and in coaching and training.

P4 indicated that leaders must let employees know “what they have done right before discussing what they need to re-visit and re-evaluate.” *P5* stated that leaders “grow future leaders through goal-setting and providing employees with meaningful feedback to ensure employees achieve their goals.”

Organizational leaders and stakeholders implement employee training as a principal role of leadership (Asfaw et al., 2015). Leaders must use job-related training as a mechanism for employee development, leading to and sustaining motivation (Ahmad et

al., 2014). As explained in the employee handbook (D1), “all employees receive job-related training to identify employee strengths and weaknesses.” Leaders sustain employee motivation when they identify employee goals and a path for employees to achieve those goals by ensuring the goals are valuable to employees, stakeholders, and the organization (Rogelberg, 2016). P3 stated,

Leaders must provide employees with management and leadership support in a way that will resonate with each individual. An effective leader must be in tune to the strengths and limitations of each employee and be able to provide feedback and coaching in a way that helps all employees be successful.

Path-goal leadership enables leaders to increase employee gains, rewards, engagement, and productivity by removing obstacles and clarifying goals, creating a more conveniently treaded path to goal achievement (Rogelberg, 2016).

P1 stated, “Employee rewards and recognition programs enhance and promote individual performance by ensuring employees achieve their goals.” One way team leaders at the high school ensured goal achievement was to offer employees a competitive benefits package. As noted in the employee handbook (D1), “all employees receive a competitive benefits package specific to their needs, one of the organization’s most beneficial retention strategies.” P4 stated that “most employees who receive a competitive benefits package remain committed to the organization.”

I noted that in the employee rewards program (D2) and the employee retention program (D3), the organization’s top executives and stakeholders viewed “employee rewards and recognition programs as investments.” P3 stated,

Employee rewards and recognition programs are part of our core values and executed by all leaders, across all departments to ensure the success of all employees. When employees receive rewards and recognition, they hold a positive perception of the organization, are more inclined to achieve goals, and are more motivated and productive.

P4 stated that “employees want to be praised and acknowledged for their accomplishments.” According to WorldatWork (2013), 46% of executive leaders view employee rewards and recognition programs as an investment, not an expense, ensuring employee commitment and goal achievement.

Theme 4: Employee Engagement and Productivity

The final theme that emerged from analyzing the data was employee engagement and productivity. Leaders focus on positive leadership strategies to ensure job satisfaction, employee engagement, and employee productivity (Van Elst & Meurs, 2016). Facilitating active discussion increases employee interests and engagement (Raj & Zaid, 2014). Raj and Zaid (2014) noted that active discussion and employee engagement encourages leader-employee interaction. Leaders enable employees to be part of the decision-making process and welcome their ideas (Raj & Zaid, 2014).

I noticed several rewards mentioned in the employee rewards program (D2) that top executives and stakeholders implemented to “incentivize team leaders and employees to remain motivated in ways that increase productivity.” P3 stated,

Employee rewards and recognition programs include various incentives such as gift cards, paid time-off accrual, work-from-home days, annual bonus, and the

ability to leave work early. Also, employees who have worked at the organization for up to 1, 3, or 5 years receive gift cards (e.g., 1 year - \$50, 3 years - \$100, and 5 years - \$150).

The employee recognition program (D3) consisted of the “recognition process for employees who have worked at the organization for 10 years and beyond, providing these employees with a gift card and 2 days off.” I noticed that both the employee rewards program (D2) and the employee recognition program (D3) mentioned “team leaders provide rewards and recognition to employees who have earned a degree or certificate relating to their current field.” Also, the employee recognition program (D3) highlighted the “recognition process for employees who go beyond their regular scope of duties.”

P2 stated, “Employees have the opportunity to be employee of the month (i.e., have their own parking spot, leave the workplace early one day during the workweek, and work from home any day of the week).” P1 stated,

As a leader, I embody the values that employees should be learning by always remaining engaged and humbling myself and never expecting my employees to do a job that I am not willing or able to do. I also make employee engagement a priority.

P3 indicated that “employees remain engaged when leaders recognize them by showing appreciation for his or her efforts.” P3 also stated, “Providing genuine cognition for achieving positive results and by saying please and thank you, goes a long way to express appreciation for the staff’s contribution to the organization.”

Engaged employees maintain a work-related mindset empowered and sustained by appreciation and dedication, increasing productivity (Truss et al., 2013). P5 stated that leaders sustain employee engagement by “encouraging and celebrating employees to make sure they know that they are appreciated and revered as important parts of the process.” P4 indicated that leaders must “praise employees for their creativity in lesson planning and encourage employees to share their thoughts and ideas with others.” Leaders must include reward and recognition programs in their organizational structure to control employee turnover (Dunphy, 2014) and to incentivize employees to remain motivated and committed to the organization. Employee engagement enhances academic success, school connectedness, and process improvements, leading to support from those in the online education work environment and the community (Bradshaw et al., 2014).

Team leaders at the high school identified many challenges to implementing strategies that sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity. P1 stated that some key challenges are “maintaining momentum and productivity, and finding a motivational source to keep the team alive.” P2 stated that “When employees’ goals are unclear, employees become unproductive.” P3 indicated that “The lack of leader support, communication, and positive feedback, could be detrimental to the success of employees and the organization.” P4 stated,

When teachers are not told the reason for the change or if they do not see the value in it, buy-in is less likely. There can be pushback. But, if teachers understand why they are being asked to do whatever they are being asked to do, and if they see value in it, they will usually comply.

Leaders at the online, for-profit high school education system employed strategies to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity by employing either path-goal or transformational leadership styles. Through data analysis, I revealed that leaders who encourage and motivate employees to communicate new perspectives and become more innovative, lead employees on a path to higher levels of employee engagement and productivity. Leaders can measure the magnitude of employee effort by monitoring the results of various tasks and employee engagement (Akkas et al., 2015). The findings of this doctoral study support the existing literature found in the literature review and conceptual frameworks on effective business practices that identify strategies that team leaders at the online, for-profit high school education system used to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity.

Applications to Professional Practice

The business impact of this issue was the team leaders' ability to sustain positive leader-employee relationships that affect work environments, corporate images, and employee motivation, and productivity. Strategies that were successful in the selected organization in sustaining positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity were (a) using transformational or path-goal leadership style, (b) leading by example and communicating effectively, (c) implementing rewards and recognition programs, (d) following employee retention procedures, (e) motivating employees to achieve their goals, and (f) allowing employees to be part of the decision-making process. These strategies led to replicating effective interventions to sustain positive leader-employee relationships, thereby to increasing employee productivity. The practice of developing

positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity is advancing and increasing in businesses (Sturm et al., 2016). Leaders who strengthen leader-employee relationships create learning and growth opportunities for employees (Sturm et al., 2016) through goal setting, motivation, and engagement, thus sustaining both a positive work environment and a positive leader-employee relationship.

Path-goal and transformational leadership theories have improved business practices for team leaders at the online, for-profit high school education system. For example, job-related training was a process outlined in the employee handbook (D1), stating that all employees must receive training. This business practice enabled top executives to highlight team leaders' strengths and weaknesses and in turn, team leaders' gained the ability to identify their employees' strengths and weaknesses. The organization gained the competitive advantage because their employees were well-prepared to be successful in the work environment. Employee perceptions regarding their leaders and the organization remained positive because team leaders led by example, identified employee needs, and initiated employee training, not only sustaining a positive work environment but also increasing productivity.

The findings of this doctoral study incorporated business practices that combine leadership styles and strategies, motivation, goal setting, and employee engagement and productivity. Team leaders in the online, for-profit high school education system and worldwide may find the solution to improved business practices by using transformational or path-goal leadership style, motivating employees to achieve goals, and promoting employee engagement to sustain positive leader-employee relationships

and increase employee productivity. The results of this doctoral study may contribute to strategies that lead to improved decision-making processes, lower turnover rates, a favorable corporate image, higher business profits, and positive leader-employee relationships to increase employee productivity.

Implications for Social Change

The implications for positive social change include the potential to increase the number of positive leader-employee relationships resulting in increased productivity, a favorable organizational reputation, and lower turnover rates, which contribute to the financial stability and prosperity of employees, communities, and families.

Organizational leaders have realized they benefit from positive leader-employee relationships to increase employee productivity. The findings, conclusions, and recommendations from this doctoral study provided team leaders at the online, for-profit high school education system with an understanding of how to connect with and relate to the needs of employees, families, and the community more effectively. By sustaining positive leader-employee relationships, employees achieve job-longevity and gain the ability to better support their financial needs more effectively, and in turn, people and communities experience a decrease in poverty rates (Glinska-Newes & Winska, 2013).

Recommendations for Action

The purpose of this qualitative single-unit case study was to explore strategies that team leaders at the online, for-profit high school education system used to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity. Based on the results of this doctoral study, creating effective strategies to sustain positive leader-employee

relationships to increase productivity is crucial to the success and prosperity of any organization. Although this doctoral study included only team leaders from an online, for-profit high school education system, leaders from across the nation and from various work environments could benefit from the study findings.

Leaders at the online, for-profit high school education system used leadership styles that promoted employee engagement and empowerment, thereby resulting in high performance and increased productivity. Team leaders must implement strategies that outline the necessary steps to manage in ways that accelerate profits, innovation, organizational learning, and employee productivity (Holmes et al., 2013). Employee motivation and support contribute to positive work performance (Sukoco, 2017), leading to increased productivity. Employees who feel more empowered by their leader's competence and decision-making tend to have a more favorable perception of their leaders and the organization, and are more productive (Men & Stacks, 2013).

Leaders at the study site implemented several strategies in the workplace to accurately address organizational needs. Top executives, stakeholders, and leaders seek to understand the strategies necessary to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity (Men & Stacks, 2013). When leaders use strategies to sustain positive leader-employee relationships, top executives and stakeholders obtain an even higher level of commitment and appreciation of goals (Pucher et al., 2017). A concise, well-written leadership structure and using pertinent change management strategies (Pucher et al., 2017), could lead to a favorable organizational reputation, lower turnover rates, and increased productivity.

Top executives, stakeholders, and leaders benefit from business profits and success rates and therefore, should pay attention to this doctoral study's results. Because no particular leadership style or strategy is universally effective (Jordan & Troth, 2011), researchers who have an interest in expanding on this topic must understand that, to achieve maximum results, further research is crucial. The implications for positive social change include the potential to increase the number of positive leader-employee relationships resulting in increased productivity, a favorable organizational reputation, and lower turnover rates, which contribute to the financial stability and prosperity of employees, communities, and families.

Organizational leaders have realized they benefit from positive leader-employee relationships to increase employee productivity. The findings, conclusions, and recommendations from this doctoral study provided team leaders at the high school with an understanding of how to connect with and relate to the needs of employees, families, and the community more effectively. By sustaining positive leader-employee relationships, employees achieve job-longevity and gain the ability to better support their financial needs more effectively, and in turn, people and communities experience a decrease in poverty rates (Glinska-Newes & Winska, 2013). I presented the findings of this doctoral study to stakeholders and participants through e-mail, including a one-to-two page summary of the study results.

Recommendations for Further Research

I used a descriptive single-unit case study to explore strategies that team leaders at the online, for-profit high school education system employed to sustain positive leader-

employee relationships to increase productivity. One limitation of this doctoral study was external validity contributing to the use of a single geographic location. As most qualitative researchers use a case study research methodology (Singh, 2014), expanding the study to different geographical locations, various online education systems (i.e., not just a high school), and a more diverse population will add to the existing literature. Another limitation of this doctoral study was time. Researchers performing similar studies will add to the existing literature by creating an intense, strategic timeline to include dates and times of interviews to ensure alignment with the time needed to complete the dissertation.

The last limitation of this doctoral study was determining the honesty and thoroughness of the participants' responses. I chose team leaders who had experienced team member losses, yet had improved leader-employee relationships and increased employee productivity. Expanding the participant pool to include leaders (i.e., not just team leaders) who have not experienced team member losses will contribute to future research. Future researchers can expand the research by developing and testing a strategy aimed at creating and sustaining positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity using a quantitative methodology. Because several organizations have online work environments (Yücel & Usluel, 2016), I suggest researchers expand their studies globally within online education systems and focus on strategies that could strengthen and sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase employee productivity and business profits and success rates.

Reflections

My experience within the DBA doctoral study program was challenging yet enlightening. I enhanced my abilities as a researcher, mainly by viewing scenarios from various perspectives. Although the program was challenging, I remained positive and motivated. I acquired a leadership role among my classmates by initiating phone conversations, holding one-on-one and group meetings, and assisting with various topics, discussions, and assignments. I remained focused and successfully completed the program because of the encouragement from current and past classmates, family, friends, church members, and Walden faculty.

My experience and interest in sustaining strategies and ensuring positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity originated from my professional background in change management and employee satisfaction. I have always had a vested interest in fairness and equality, especially when it involves managing change in a team environment. Because of the negative leader-employee relationship that plagued my previous work environment, many team members were unproductive and emotionally stressed. That is the main reason I sought to identify strategies that team leaders in the online, for-profit high school education system used to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity. Although I had a personal interest in this doctoral study's topic, I remained unbiased and true to my values.

Humans have flaws and therefore, certain biases might affect research studies (Grant et al., 2012). Due to my professional experience working with faculty in an online environment, I sought to eliminate personal bias by conducting self-reflections

throughout the entire research process. By self-reflecting, I gained the ability to highlight learning outcomes and view data from various perspectives and not from a biased one. I alleviated any preconceived notions that I had about leader-employee relationships and the honesty and thoroughness of participants' responses through (a) implementing an interview protocol (see Appendix A) and (b) not personally knowing any of the participants. I remained sincere to the purpose of this doctoral study and maintained a clear understanding and vision of the research topic.

The five participants in this qualitative single-unit case study were knowledgeable about the topic and emphasized the importance of sustaining positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity. The findings from this doctoral study enhanced my knowledge about creating and sustaining positive leader-employee relationships. Understanding how to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity can provide me with a competitive advantage in my current leadership role and future business endeavors.

Summary and Study Conclusions

Leaders create and implement strategies in the workplace to sustain positive leader-employee relationships, to increase productivity, and to ensure an organization's success. Frank (2015) stated that approximately 75% of employees remain disengaged in the workplace. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2015) noted that faculty turnover had increased over the past 15 years due to employee disengagement. According to Darden (2014), a negative work environment interferes with organizational goals and the employee's success. Team leaders might lack

competencies to respond to rapidly changing business conditions resulting from negative leader-employee interactions (Borup et al., 2014) if they do not create strategies to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity.

Team leaders who sustain positive leader-employee relationships gain the ability to support and motivate employees to help employees achieve their goals, thereby increasing employee retention rates and employee productivity. Because every work environment is unique, team leaders must identify sustainable strategies to increase productivity specific to their work environment. The findings, conclusions, and recommendations of this doctoral study provided essential strategies that team leaders at the online, for-profit high school education system require to create effective strategies that (a) improve business practices, (b) sustain positive leader-employee relationships, and (c) increase employee productivity. The key to sustaining positive leader-employee relationships to increase employee productivity depends on how leaders manage employees, which should include ways to accelerate profits, innovation, organizational learning, and employee productivity (Holmes et al., 2013). By creating strategies to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase employee productivity, team leaders in the online, for-profit high school education system may contribute to effective business practices for improved decision-making processes and increase not only employee productivity but also business profits and success rates.

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Appendix A: Prequalifying Interview Questions (Screening for Participant Selection) and

Interview Protocol

Prequalifying Interview Questions

1. Are you a current a faculty member or executive at the chosen online, for-profit high school education system?
2. Have you employed strategies to improve and sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity? If so, what strategies and how did you measure increased productivity?
3. Have you experienced team member losses, yet been able to improve and sustain positive leader-employee relationships?
4. If you are selected to participate in this doctoral study, are you willing to be audio-recorded?
5. What is your current title/position?

Interview Protocol

- I. Introduce self to participant(s).
- II. Present consent form, go over content, and answer questions and concerns of participant(s).
- III. Give participant copy of consent form.
- IV. Turn on recording device.
- V. Follow procedure to introduce participant(s) with pseudonym/coded identification, and note the date and time.
- VI. Begin interview with question #1; follow through to final question.
- VII. Follow up with additional questions.

VIII. End interview sequence; discuss transcript review and member checking with participant(s).

IX. Thank the participant(s) for his/her part in the study. Reiterate contact numbers for scheduling follow-up member checking interview, questions, and concerns from participants.

X. End protocol.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. What strategies do you find useful when successfully managing/implementing positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity?
2. What are key challenges you have experienced when implementing strategies to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity?
3. What strategies have not been helpful for implementing strategies to sustain positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity?
4. How do you, as a leader in the organization, embody the values that employees should be learning and internalizing?
5. What procedures do you take to ensure productivity?
6. How do you, as a leader in the organization, motivate employees' thoughts and imaginations, as well as encourage them to express their ability to identify and solve problems, creatively?
7. How do you, as a leader in the organization, coach employees based on their needs and spend time treating each employee in a caring and unique way?
8. How do you, as a leader in the organization, implement strategies that lead employees on a successful path to accomplish not only departmental goals but also organizational goals?
9. What steps have you taken to (a) sustain positive leader-employee relationships, (b) create a positive work environment, and (c) ensure employee productivity?

10. Do you have anything to add to or address the strategies and processes you implemented that improved and sustained positive leader-employee relationships to increase productivity?