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Strategies for Reducing Employee Stress and Increasing Employee Engagement

Kumar G. Subramaniam
Walden University

Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Kumar Subramaniam

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Review Committee
Dr. Steve Roussas, Committee Chairperson, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. Christopher Beehner, Committee Member, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. Scott Burrus, University Reviewer, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer
Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University
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Abstract

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Kumar Subramaniam

MBA, University of Louisville, 2008

BE, Pune University, 1983

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Stress inside and outside of work affects employee productivity. In 2013, the estimated impact of employee absenteeism on U.S. businesses was $225 billion per year through reduced efficiency, overtime wages, fixed fringe benefits, and the cost of replacement employees. Based on the social exchange theory and the theory of planned behavior, the purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies that HR leaders in a single organization used to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress. Using semistructured interviews, data were collected from 12 HR leaders and line managers within a single healthcare organization in eastern Tennessee. Member checking and validations using organization records assured the credibility and reliability of the interpretations and findings. Using the thematic analysis approach, 4 themes emerged, (a) integration of employee engagement practices into culture and business processes, (b) providing managers with the job resources they need to lead staff, (c) being transparent and honest in communications, and (d) relying on supportive supervisor behavior to mitigate employee stress. A mission-driven and values-based organization culture served as the foundation for implementing these individual strategies. These findings could contribute to social change by helping organizations reduce stress in the workplace, improve employee wellbeing, and reduce individuals' risk of morbidity and mortality caused by stress, leading to a reduction in healthcare costs for communities.

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Kumar G. Subramaniam

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Dedication

I dedicate this research study to my dear wife and my best friend, Vrinda Kumar, whose support and motivation helped me stay the course. This achievement is as much hers as it is mine. I also dedicate this study to my parents who helped me understand the importance of knowledge and learning.

Acknowledgments

I am extremely grateful to my chair, Dr. Steve Roussas, for his steadying hand, for his direction, and for being my champion at all times during the study. During that time, he also taught me how to listen. I am also grateful to my committee members, Dr. Christopher Beehner and Dr. Scott Burrus, for their review, guidance, and support during my doctoral journey. Lastly, I am thankful to the study participants and leaders of the organization who gave so freely of their trust and time during the study.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Background of the Problem

Employees who bring an emotionally positive state of mind to their workplace invest of themselves emotionally and cognitively in their work (Lee, & Ok, 2015). Cohen (2014) observed that a motivated workforce improves business productivity, revenues, and performance. Analysis of data on employee engagement and financial performance from 94 companies between 2008 and 2012 found a significant correlation between increased engagement and sales growth (Merry, 2013).

People experience stress as physiological and psychological reactions when they are unable to handle the demands of life events, with work-related events, relationships, and finances being the most common stressors for adults (Durante & Laran, 2016). Employees can experience stress at work and outside of work for a variety of reasons. People experience job-related stresses, such as job dissatisfaction, job insecurity, organizational conflict, and organizational change (Smollan, 2015); money stress (Sturgeon, Zautra, & Okun, 2014); and retirement-related stress (Verne, 2015). Stress, inside and outside of work, affects employee productivity (Tunwall & Stutzman, 2012), and the estimated impact of employee absenteeism on U.S. businesses was $225 billion per year through reduced efficiency, overtime wages, fixed fringe benefits, and the cost of replacement employees (Biron & De Reuver, 2013).

Problem Statement

Stress, whether it is work related or from a person's life outside of work, causes an increase in employee disengagement and a decline in employee productivity and workplace performance (Voci, Veneziani, & Metta, 2016). Disengaged U.S. workers cost the country's businesses $225 billion annually in lost workdays, and overtime wages (Biron, & De Reuver, 2013). The general business problem is that leaders lack strategies to reduce employee stress and increase employee engagement. The specific business problem is that some human resource (HR) leaders and line managers lack the strategies to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies that HR leaders used to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress. The sample population for this study comprised of HR leaders and line managers within a single healthcare organization in Eastern Tennessee, who had used such strategies and had reduced employee disengagement caused by stress. The findings of this study could help employers reduce their employees' level of disengagement caused by stress. The implications for positive social change include the potential to improve human resource management (HRM) practices in organizations that might implement such strategies, which could lead to improved emotional wellbeing for employees, with concomitant benefits to their families and communities.

Nature of the Study

Researchers use qualitative methods to explore the ways in which people experience and perceive situations (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). I selected the qualitative method because I wanted to ask exploratory questions to understand the ways in which HR leaders and line managers experienced and perceived situations related to stress and engagement. Researchers use the quantitative method to examine the statistical significance of relationships or differences among variables to test hypotheses (Skott & Ward, 2016). Researchers use the mixed method to approach a topic from an objective, detached perspective and a participative, exploratory perspective to obtain a multidimensional view of the study topic using statistical analysis and rich descriptions, which they then analyze to identify and explore key themes either in parallel or in sequence (Stuart, Maynard, & Rouncefield, 2017). I did not use the quantitative method or the mixed method for my study because I did not intend to conduct a statistical analysis of significant relationships or differences among variables and therefore did not wish to test statistical hypotheses for relationships among variables as part of a mixed study.

Researchers use case study designs to ask *what, how,* or *why* qualitative research questions about a current day phenomenon in a real-life context and use multiple sources of data for triangulation of evidence (Morgan, Pullon, Macdonald, McKinlay, & Gray, 2016). Therefore, I used the case study design, as I wanted to interview managers in a single organization to determine the strategies they used to reduce the effect of stress on employees and improve employee engagement. I did not use the ethnographic design, which researchers use to explore the cultural values and beliefs of a group of participants (Shover, 2012), or the phenomenological design, which researchers use to explore the meanings of participants' lived experience with a phenomenon (Eberle, 2013).

Research Question

RQ: What strategies do HR leaders use to reduce employee stress and increase employee engagement?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies did you use to increase employee engagement and commitment to the organization?
2. What strategies did you use to reduce stress in the workplace?
3. How did you assess the effectiveness of these strategies on decreasing employee stress and increasing employee engagement?
4. What barriers/challenges did you experience in implementing these strategies?
5. How did you overcome these barriers/challenges?
6. What other topics that we did not cover in our discussion would you like to discuss that can contribute to my understanding of the strategies your organization utilized to reduce employee stress and increase employee engagement?

Conceptual Framework

Blau's (1964) social exchange theory and Ajzen's (1988) theory of planned behavior provided the conceptual framework for the study. Blau (1992) identified social exchange as the outcome of a process that leads to social associations based on mutual expectations of future benefits. Blau also asserted that social exchanges in organizations lead to situations of unequal status and power among individuals based on various levels of status and privilege. Teoh, Coyne, Devonish, Leather, and Zarola (2015) concluded that social exchange theory could explain the positive relationship between supportive manager behavior and employee engagement. Khalid and Ali (2016) argued that trust is the foundation that supports social exchange.

Ajzen (2004) extended the theory of reasoned action to develop the theory of planned behavior by adding an individual’s perceived behavioral control to their salient behavioral beliefs and salient normative beliefs in order to predict individuals’ behaviors. Shin and Kim (2015) verified that subjective norms and intention as hypothesized by Ajzen’s theory of planned behavior explained the relationship between perceived organizational support and employee proactive behavior.

Social exchange theory provided a potential basis for studying stress producing and stress reducing interactions between employees and their managers. The theory of planned behavior provided a potential basis for understanding issues affecting employee and manager behaviors as they interact within the organization. Both theories were expected to facilitate exploration and understanding of the strategies some organizations’ HR leaders and line managers used to reduce employee stress and increase employee engagement.

Operational Definitions

Acute stress: Acute stress occurs when new demands, pressures, and expectations are placed on an individual and these demands place their arousal levels above their threshold of adaptability (Colligan & Higgins, 2006).

Chronic stress: Chronic stress arises from the accumulation of persistent and long-standing stressors and is linked with poverty, chronic illness, and family issues (Colligan & Higgins, 2006).

Coping: Coping refers to the changes in thought and behavior that people use to regulate their emotional response to situations they appraise as stressful in order to manage a perceived problem (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

Disengagement: Employee disengagement is the physical, emotional, and cognitive alienation of employees from their work because they feel the need to protect themselves from personally harmful effects in the work environment (Kahn, 1990).

Employee engagement: Engagement is a measure of the degree to which individuals apply themselves in the performance of their jobs. Engagement is not an attitude. Engagement is the degree to which individuals are attentive and absorbed in the performance of their work role (Saks, 2006).

Human resource management (HRM): HRM is the set of all activities associated with the management of people in firms (Marescaux, De Winne, & Sels, 2013). Well-designed HRM practices align people across multiple levels in the organization (McDermott, Conway, Rousseau, & Flood, 2013).

Presenteeism: Presenteeism is a term used to describe employees who are unproductive at work due to physical, cognitive, or emotional issues. This affects quality of work, productivity, and safety (Tunwall & Stutzman (2012).

Psychological contract: A psychological contract is created when one party believes that future rewards have been promised, that that party has made the relevant contributions, and as a consequence, the other party is obligated to provide the promised benefits in return (Alcover, Rico, Turnley, & Bolino, 2016).

Social exchange: Social exchange involves informal obligations as opposed to contractual obligations; it occurs in an environment of trust between the two exchanging entities and tends to foster feelings of personal obligation and gratitude (Khalid & Ali, 2016).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

The first assumption was that the study participants would be available to interview as needed. To ensure this, I planned to approach the HR leadership in the organization to obtain their commitment to the study at the appropriate time. The second assumption was that participants would relate to and respond to the questions on employee engagement in their organization. The third assumption was that the participants would provide honest and unbiased feedback on employee engagement practices in their organization.

Limitations

This study was a single qualitative case study of one organization in the healthcare industry in the state of Tennessee. Other limitations included the availability of participants at the right level to provide a rich and deep set of data, participant time availability to provide data for qualitative analysis, and complexities involved in a changing leadership environment in the organization that might lead to changes in participants over time.

Delimitations

The proposed case study focused on a single organization in Franklin, TN. The organization was a service organization in the healthcare industry with a significant information technology investment. The study participants included a limited set of HR executives and line managers. Case study questions did not delve into employment criteria or remuneration policies of the organization.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practice

The participant population for this study was a group of HR executives and line managers from a single company in Tennessee. An analysis of the existing literature on employee stress, the effects of stress on employees, and employee disengagement, revealed that chronic exposure to stress can lead to chronic stress burnout among employees (Voci et al., 2016). Employee stress affects an employee's engagement, motivation, and productivity (Shuck, Zigarmi, & Owen, 2015; Verne, 2015). HR strategies and practices targeted at improving employee engagement depend on active involvement from line managers (Mitchell, Obeidat, & Bray, 2013). The findings could help HR executives design programs to improve line managers' participation in employee engagement activities to improve employee engagement and productivity for increasing similar organizations' performance.

Implications for Social Change

Stress costs the U.S. economy between $200 billion and $300 billion dollars on an annual basis; these costs include organizational effects of absenteeism, presenteeism, counterproductive work behaviors, and the costs imposed on society from increased risk of morbidity and mortality for individuals (Newton & Teo, 2013). The findings on what leads to employee stress and how organizations could increase employee engagement by reducing employee stress could help organizations reduce employee absenteeism and presenteeism through improved employee engagement initiatives. The results could also affect positive social change by reducing individuals' risk of morbidity and mortality caused by stress, leading to a reduction in healthcare costs for communities.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Research Strategy

The literature review for my study consisted of a critical analysis and synthesis of relevant literature associated with the problem statement, the conceptual framework topics of social exchange and planned behavior, the purpose statement, and the research question. I conducted a broad literature search and started with seminal articles and historical literature and included a discussion of contemporary literature on work related stress, employee burn out, disengagement, employee engagement, and human resource management practices. My sources included academic journals, proceedings from conferences, books, dissertations, and trade journals. I explored Walden University Library databases and Google Scholar to find relevant journals and articles about the topic of stress and disengagement. I searched peer-reviewed journal articles, books, periodicals, and conference papers using the following keywords and the variations of these key words: *stress, work stress, human resource management, human resource development, employee disengagement, employee engagement, social exchange, planned* *behavior, job demands*, *job control, job performance*, *job satisfaction*, *job burnout, performance improvement, well-being,* and *organizational climate*. I searched literature using the key words and variations using databases specialized in business management, organizational psychology, human resource management, social sciences, and nursing: Business Source Complete, Emerald Journals, Elsevier, Routledge, SAGE Premier Database, and Sage Publications. I also explored psychology and social sciences databases to discover peer-reviewed articles, journals, books, and periodicals dealing with qualitative research methods. Finally, I retrieved dissertation papers on the topic of employee engagement.

To ensure thoroughness, the literature review includes citation of 71 unique and relevant journals. A total of 65 journals (92.8%) were peer reviewed. Of the 98 articles referenced from the 71 unique sources, 89 articles were published after 2012, meaning 90.8% of sources have been published within 5 years of the anticipated completion date of the doctoral study (2017). Table 1 includes a summary of the sources cited in the literature review.

Table 1

Sources in the Literature Review

Reference type	Total	Less than 5 years	Greater than 5 years
Research-based peer reviewed journals	70	64	6
Dissertations	1	1	
Books and Encyclopedias	7	4	3

I start the literature review by restating the purpose of the study and the research question. Then, I describe the theoretical framework of the study as well as alternative theories used in previous studies. I then provide a critical analysis and synthesis of the literature pertaining to topics related to employee stress and employee engagement.

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies that HR leaders used to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress. Two theories composed the conceptual framework for my study. Social exchange theory provided a basis for studying stress producing and stress reducing interactions between employees and their managers. Theory of planned behavior provided a basis for understanding issues affecting employee and manager behaviors as they interact within the organization.

Stress and Its Effect on Individuals and Organizations

Stress has adverse effects on individuals and organizations. Fifteen percent of American workers showed declines in productivity related to the financial stress they experienced (Verne, 2015). Newton and Teo (2013) estimated the annual cost of stress in the United States at around $200 to $300 billion including lost productivity and health care expenses; at the individual level, the social costs of unmanaged stress included increased risk of morbidity and mortality on individuals, families and institutions. Employee absenteeism alone costs U.S. businesses $225.8 billion per year through reduced efficiency, overtime wages, fixed fringe benefits, and the cost of replacement employees (Biron & De Reuver, 2013). Referring to the British Health and Safety Executive's estimation that 13.5 million working days were lost in 2009 at an annual cost of £4 billion, Jackson (2014) observed that the socioeconomic impacts of work related stress were amplified by individuals' health claims related to hypertension, heart disease, depression, and anxiety.

In this section, I introduce the concept of stress, its effects on individuals, and the ways in which they cope. Next, I introduce the antecedents of stress in the workplace, its effects on employee engagement, HRM practices aimed at improving employee engagement, and the effect of organizational climate on employee experience of management's engagement efforts.

Stress, stress types, and coping. Stress is a negative, bodily, and psychological reaction to individuals' inability to cope with situations in their life; work-related events, relationship issues, and finances are the most common stressors for adults (Durante & Laran, 2016). Jain, Giga, and Cooper (2013) observed that researchers have variously conceptualized stress as a stimulus, a response, an interaction between stress and the response, and an individual's specific interaction with their environment. The Hungarian scientist, Hans Selye, popularized the term "stress" in the 1960s when he first connected biological stress that influenced homeostasis to cause diseases in laboratory animals through a process he termed as "general adaptation syndrome" (Jackson, 2014). Selye later expanded his use of the term "stress" to describe it as an individual's response to stressors, thus converting his theory of general adaptation to a theory of stress (Becker, 2013).

Acute, episodic, and chronic stress each have characteristic emotional and psychological symptoms (Colligan & Higgins, 2006). Starcke and Brand (2016) noted that acute stressors cause increased levels of the chemical cortisol in the brain and that the resulting dopamine activity causes neurons to make large, immediate rewards salient to individuals. Researchers recognize stress as an individual's reaction to a stressor event based on their perception of the event (Jackson, 2014).

Becker (2013) argued that our concept of stress has evolved over time; our vernacular has changed from viewing stress as temporarily endured hardship, to a constant presence that can be both a cause and an effect and needs management as a medical condition. Even though Becker conceded that certain experiences are stressful and that people do experience stress in their lives, Becker observed that our faith in science and technology has led to the transformation of social phenomena into disease entities that individuals need to manage. Becker further observed that "the stress concept often obscures injustices and inequalities by seducing us into viewing those injustices and inequalities as individual problems" (p. 7). In a similar vein, McVicar, Munn-Giddings, and Seebohm (2013) opined that the emphasis on individuals' stress appraisal and coping mechanisms hinders attempts to understand organizational issues that create a stressful environment for employees. In a critique of existing literature on employee engagement, Valentin (2014) noted that researchers make sweeping assumptions about the clarity and articulation of organizational goals and managers' abilities to accurately identify these goals. Valentin also commented on the completeness of efforts at communicating organizational intents to goals and the absence of perspectives on organizations as places where societal and political economic situations, conflicts, and guesses by stakeholders compete to shape suboptimal organizational outcomes. Jenkins and Delbridge (2013) noted that extant literature on HRM practices tended to ignore the economy, market conditions, the specific industry, organizational governance controls, and inability of managers to implement engagement strategies in favor of developing insights into the psychological perspective on engagement. However, as Becker noted, stress does cause physical and psychological disease in individuals regardless of its source or cause.

Effect of stress on individuals. Behavioral reactions, physical reactions, and psychological reactions are the strains that individuals experience under stress (Spector, 2006). MacFadyen, MacFadyen, and Prince (1996) noted that stress is cumulative in its effect on individuals' mental wellbeing across stressors such as lack of employment, lack of social support, social status, organizational changes, savings, and income. Individuals' reactions to stress can manifest as muscle tension, mental fatigue, and cognitive impairment (Sandmark, Sarvento, Franke, & Akhavan, 2014; Voci et al., 2015). Cognitive stress responses include worrying, thinking in catastrophic terms, disturbed sleep, inability to concentrate, and withdrawal from society (Sandmark et al., 2014). Stress also causes deterioration in individuals' decision-making; people under stress disadvantage themselves by making riskier and more reward-seeking decisions than when they are not under stress (Starcke & Brand, 2016).

Financial distress is the mental or physical reaction to stress about the ability to manage economic events such as repaying debt, paying bills, providing for daily sustenance, responding to creditors, and lack of preparation to meet financial emergencies or life event needs from income or savings (Starkey, Keane, Terry, Marx, & Ricci, 2012). Individuals stressed about personal debt are far more likely to exhibit irritability, be chronically fatigued, and experience lack of sleep (Verne, 2015). Twenty four percent of financially stressed workers worry about their personal financial situation and 39% of those workers spend time during work dealing with financial problems (Verne, 2015). Nearly 75% of HR executives believe that financial issues affect worker effectiveness (Gilfedder, 2014).

Workplace stress. Walinga and Rowe (2013) noted that sustained stress experienced in the workplace led to employees experiencing job burnout resulting in absenteeism, lower organizational productivity, and higher attrition, causing increased costs for the organization on staffing and health benefits. Employees experiencing chronic work-related stress show lower concentration and productivity at work because their blood pressure is not steady, their cholesterol levels are elevated, they experience muscle tension, and they suffer from chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and clinical depression (Colligan & Higgins, 2006). Stress at work arises from issues such as too much work, conflicting goals, vague task goals, emotional demands, lack of autonomy, and absence of supervisory support (Corin & Bjork, 2016). Because of feeling burnout, employees experience mental fatigue, depression, and a decline in performance and productivity in the workplace (Voci et al., 2015). The employee's interaction with issues and unique characteristics of their work-environment, rather than with the work environment alone, lead to stress and burnout (Patching & Best, 2014). When employees feel insecure in their jobs, it affects their attitude toward work and their wellbeing (Cheng, Mauno, & Lee, 2014). Similarly, McCarthy, Trougakos, and Cheng (2016) observed that workplace anxiety had the effect of depleting individuals' cognitive and personal resources. Viotti and Converso (2016) found that the social climate in the organization, defined as organizational support and support from their superiors, were the strongest predictors of reduced work stress among employees. Employees cite their managers as one of their primary sources of stress at work (Matin, Razavi, & Emamgholizadeh, 2014; Mont, & Beehr, 2014). Topcic, Baum, and Kabst, (2016) noted that even high-performance work practices such as performance evaluation systems and continuing education programs in organizations are associated with higher stress among some employees because they are seen as energy depleting, job-related demands. However, Page, LaMontagne, Louie, Ostry, and Shoveller (2013) noted that people perceive stress as a problem that individuals need to manage rather than a problem that organizations need to address and stereotypically characterize work stress in feminine terms.

Employees can bring their stresses to work. Annor (2016) observed that family pressure appeared to have a greater influence on a person's experience of work-family conflict compared to work pressure, suggesting that a person's cultural context may influence a person's attribution of conflict to a particular domain. Individuals can experience stress at work and outside of work. Job-related stresses such as job dissatisfaction, job insecurity, organizational conflict, and organizational change (Smollan, 2015); money stress (Sturgeon et al., 2014); and retirement-related stress (Verne, 2015) are among the kinds of stresses that people experience. Scarcity hypothesis posits that a person's competing obligations towards their family and towards work causes depletion in their limited personal resources (Annor, 2016). Physical, social, or organizational characteristics of the job are job demands that require workers to deplete their limited resources leading to decreased wellbeing. Job resources help alleviate the impact of job demands on workers (Viotti & Converso, 2016). Van De Voorde, Van Veldhoven, and Veld (2016) found a stronger link between empowerment-focused HRM, work engagement, and labor productivity when an organization provided the job resources to match the demands related to the job.

Workplace stress places significant burdens, physical, cognitive, and emotional, on both the employee and the organization through lower productivity, increased absenteeism, increased presenteeism, counterproductive work behavior, and job burnout in the workplace (Colligan & Higgins, 2006). Employees with high sense of their ability to succeed in certain situations see more opportunities than situational threats and demonstrate greater efficacy in coping with stressful situations (Lu, Du, & Xu, 2016). Montgomery, Spanu, Baban, and Panagopoulou (2015) and Elst et al. (2016) commented on the job demands-resources model and stated that individual characteristics interact with work characteristics to cause psychological reactions such as burnout or work engagement and that job resource availability was the primary predictor of work engagement. Stress and cynicism affect enthusiasm in the workplace; cynicism, one of the components of burnout, is one of the first indicators of deteriorating wellbeing in the workplace (Viitala, Tanskanen, & Säntti, 2015).

Stress appraisal and coping. Individuals use various coping mechanisms to manage the negative effects of stress on their wellbeing (Cheng et al., 2014). The coping mechanism follows from an individual's appraisal of the situation as being a threat or otherwise, to their wellbeing, and researchers have categorized these mechanisms as either problem-focused coping or emotion-focused coping (Akanji, 2015; Johnstone & Feeney, 2015). Gomes, Faria, and Lopes (2016) carried out a cross sectional study on measures of nurses' stress, cognitive appraisal, and psychological health at work and reported that the nurses' cognitive appraisals of their stress-causing situations partially explained the relationship between stress and psychological health. Similarly, Teoh et al. (2015) suggested that social support reduces workplace stressors in employees. Conner et al. (2013) studied the moderating effect of socioeconomic status (SES) on intention, self-efficacy, and behavior and found a significant relationship between SES and intention in predicting behavior.

Spector, (2006) noted that individuals vary in their reaction to stressor events. An individual's stress appraisal behavior depends on their personality, their perception of control over an event, and the emotional support available from those around them (Spector, 2006). Men differ from women in how they cope with stress. Men tend to deny, distract, use alcohol, not seek help from others, and attempt to conceal their issues (Sandmark et al., 2014).

Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) and Lu et al. (2016) argued that an individual's primary and secondary appraisals of a stressful situation collectively determine their evaluation of the event as stressful and of the options available to them for coping with the event. Folkman and Moskowitz also noted that an individual's personal values, beliefs, and goals influence their primary appraisal of an event. Individuals' secondary appraisal is an evaluation of the extent of personal control they wield over the stressor event; the appraisal of the event as a stressor is higher when the event has greater personal significance to the individual and when the coping options available to them are low or nonexistent (Folkman & Moskowitz 2004). Employees experiencing stress, anxiety, role ambiguity, job insecurity, and apprehension potentially may disengage from their tasks and the organization (Richards, 2013). Valentin, (2014) argued that though the term 'disengagement' places the onus on the individual and their behavior, rather than on the structural conditions in the workplace, disengagement might be a reasonable employee response to unsafe work conditions, or unreasonable work demands.

Employee disengagement and engagement. Employee disengagement is the physical, emotional, and cognitive alienation of employees from their work because they feel the need to protect themselves from personally harmful effects in the work environment (Kahn, 1990). Employee disengagement hurts organizations worldwide. Keating and Heslin (2015) observed that disengaged employees hide their identities, withhold effort, attention, and do not form emotional connections with customers, clients, or colleagues resulting in reduced work performance. U.S. businesses lost $300 billion a year in lost productivity from disengaged employees (Gruman & Saks, 2011). In 2008, the U.K. economy lost between £59.4 billion and £64.7 billion because of disengaged employees (Valentin, 2014). An organization's success depends largely on its employees' professional performance, and finding ways to improve employee performance should be the organization's primary concern in a competitive market (Ratju, & Suciu, 2013).

Workplaces that demonstrate high levels of engagement potentially may attract top talent (Joyner, 2015). Kaliannan and Adjovu (2015) supporting Joyner, stated that organizations with high levels of engagement among employees experienced a 19% increase in net income and a 28% increase in earnings per share growth while those with low engagement levels experienced more than 32% drop in net income and a 11% decline in EPS. In contrast, Valentin (2014) stated that disengagement was likely a new term for unhappy employees and argued that organizations with unhappy workers on their rolls around the world, continue to profit.

Employees engage when they have the resources to do their job, manage work stressors, feel safe in the work environment, find meaning in their work, have an interpersonally oriented leader, and connect with their colleagues to align with the organization's mission (Byrne, 2015). Schaufeli and Bakker (2015) proposed that work engagement is a specific psychological state that involves job satisfaction, work engagement, and job involvement and results in specific outcomes: performance, organizational commitment, and personal initiative. Eldor, Harpaz, and Westman (2016) observed that vigor, dedication, and absorption were characteristics of work engagement and the employee's related motivational state of mind. Lee and Ok (2015) defined an engaged employee as someone immersed in their work, persistent, and involved. Engaged employees can be successful at work when they can marshal resources such as positive self-esteem, self-efficacy, and can take advantage of work related resources such as autonomy and coaching offered by their line manager (Blomme, Kodden, & Beasley-Suffolk, 2015). Taking a slightly different perspective on engagement, Purcell (2014) observed that engagement is a dynamic state of being; even engaged employees can experience burnout, health problems, and disengagement because their unique personal situations at work and outside of work change over time. Montgomery et al. (2015) found a positive relation between effective teamwork and engagement levels among nurses in a hospital setting even though effective teamwork did not diminish the perceived job demands. McCarthy et al. (2016) found that providing coworker support to employees mitigated the effect of workplace stressors and improved job performance. Teoh et al. (2015) also found that supportive manager behavior predicted job satisfaction even though it did not predict employee engagement. Shuck and Rose (2013) observed that unless organizations create the conditions for engagement, the performance expectations from engaged employees might not materialize, even though other researchers have viewed engagement as an antecedent to organizational performance.

Yusoff, Kian, and Idris (2013) described Hertzberg's 1959 two-factor theory that conceptualized motivation (internal) and hygiene (external) factors, to explain employee attitudes and behaviors at work; the presence of hygiene factors only served to reduce employee dissatisfaction, but efforts taken by employers to support motivational factors improved employee attitudes towards work. Kahn (1990) studied the impact of individual, interpersonal, and organizational factors on peoples' attitudes and behaviors at work and proposed three psychological conditions for engagement that shaped employees' momentary behaviors: a sense of purpose, safety, and the psychological resources they have available to them. Gruman and Saks (2011) defined psychological availability as a person having the resources to engage with others at any particular moment, despite the social distractions at work and outside their place of work. Shuck et al. (2015) discussed engagement in the context of self-determination theory and suggested that organizations needed to understand their employees' basic psychological needs of job autonomy, and relatedness at work in order to understand their work behaviors. Berens (2013) suggested that an organization's managers and leaders embody the behaviors they seek from their subordinates. Viotti and Converso (2016) found that interventions aimed at improving the social environment in individual units had a positive relationship with reduced work-related stress in employees as measured by the degree of work life interference. Hakanen and Roodt (2015) observed that availability of job resources appeared to be salient in the presence of job demands. Saks (2006) examined engagement from a social exchange perspective and noted that when employees perceived organizational support, they tended to reciprocate with improved behavior towards the organization. Shin and Kim (2015) found that perceived organizational support and job autonomy informed employee attitude, evaluation of influencing peer pressure and norms, and perceived behavioral control. In an apparently complementary study, Wang, Huang, and You (2016) examined the role of personal resources on job burnout, and found that employees' who were able to bring their personal resources to their jobs did not experience job burnout because they were able to use organizational job resources effectively. Saks distinguished job engagement from organizational commitment, an individual's outlook towards their organization, and their involvement with the job, and stated that perceived organization support (POS) predicted job engagement and organization commitment.

Some researchers have defined engagement as the opposite of burnout; the three engagement related concepts of energy, involvement, and efficacy were each the opposite of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of efficacy, respectively, while other researchers have defined engagement as a state of being where the employee demonstrates vigor, dedication, and absorption (Byrne, 2015). Byrne (2015) also observed that researchers had defined engagement in terms of self-employment (effort, involvement, mindfulness, intrinsic motivation) and self-expression (creativity, nondefensive communication, playfulness, and ethical behavior) while on the job. Researchers had also defined engagement as a process; a process that employees navigate in their specific organizational environment, starting with trait engagement, leading to state engagement, and culminating in behavioral engagement (Byrne, 2015).

Employee engagement and HRM. Organizations typically implement their employee engagement strategies as part of their HRM function. Soft approaches to HRM are consistent with social exchange theory; they help bring about an alignment of interests by developing affective relationships between organizations and employees

(Gould, & Davies, 2005). A well implemented HRM function aims to improve employees' affective commitment by fostering relationships and creating channels of communication between employees and leadership through trust building activities (Lewica & Krot, 2015).

Jensen, Patel, and Messersmith (2013) noted that organizations' HRM function has, as its primary focus, the organization's operating results. Even in this operational environment, control-oriented HRM practices stand in stark contrast with commitment oriented HRM practices. The former set of practices treat the employee as a resource; to control, to make compliant with the organization's rules, and accepting of performance rewards, and the latter set of practices involve HR leaders including employees when making decisions that affect employees and showing concern for employee outcomes such as wellbeing (Jensen et al., 2013). A link exists between low level of employee engagement and low level of individual wellbeing in the workplace (Boreham, Povey, & Tomaszewski, 2016). Francis, Ramdhony, Reddington, and Staines (2013) noted that current high-performance work practices in organizations could result in adverse employee outcomes such as work intensification, job creep, increased stress levels, and job insecurity because organizations design performance practices with organizational performance and productivity as the end goal, not employee wellbeing. Additionally, HR departments in organizations that pursue a low-cost management strategy do not exert any significant influence over the organization's growth and value creating activities and instead, the HR function is largely focused on cost control, and administrative activities with little to no focus on challenges such as improving productivity, managing knowledge, and managing change (Boudreau, & Lawler, 2014). Topcic et al. (2016) analyzed data from 197 employees and their work environments and found a positive relationship between job demands, aspects of hard HRM practices measured as performance evaluation systems and continuing educations, and employee stress. However, Topcic et al. found no significant relationship between job resources measured as flexible work hours and involvement in decision-making and engagement. Arrowsmith and Parker (2013) argued that there was a gap in the literature on HR managers' understanding of employee engagement.

Kehoe and Wright (2013) observed that it might be necessary for leaders to consider employees' aggregate perceptions of the HR implementation because employees consider the experiences of their colleagues in their job group. The social exchange theory concept of affective employee commitment mediates the relationship between employees' attitudes towards their organization and their rate of absenteeism to their perceptions of high-performance HR practices (Kehoe & Wright, 2013). Oparaocha (2016) recommended that HR leaders recognize social capital's role in enabling intragroup collaboration among employees through the conscious design of an organizational social architecture.

Organizations need to transition their stress management programs from being individual focused to a systems-based approach aimed at modifying the workplace environment (McVicar et al., 2013). Exchange and uncertainty in the exchange context are important parts of social life that shape the nature of our relationships with others (Savage & Bergstand, 2013). Ko and Hur (2014) argued that social exchange theory could help us understand the role that organizations and managers play in creating feelings of employee reciprocation. Hayibor (2017), summarizing research on organizational stakeholder behavior, argued that individuals vary in their social exchange orientation and that this variation influences their desire to reciprocate with behaviors that are conducive to engagement in the organization. Khalid and Ali (2016) argued that trust is the foundation that supports social exchange and involves individuals looking back on their past experiences, their current interactions, and the expected length of the relationship in the context of the exchange transaction with others.

Gooty and Yammarino (2016) observed that social exchanges between leaders and employees suffer in the absence of shared perceptions of their work relationship. McDermott et al. (2013) hypothesized that line managers may serve as the link between the HRM department practices and firm performance. Kang and Kang (2014) studied supervisor roles as a moderator of job stress and observed that employee perception of the organization’s commitment to HRM strategy, and the employees’ experience of the organization’s HR practices could help them cope better with workplace stress.

Many researchers (Akanji, 2015; Gruman & Saks, 2011; Kaliannan & Adjovu, 2015; Marescaux et al., 2013; Sikora & Ferris, 2014; Spector, 2006; Yalabik, Popaitoon, Chowne, & Rayton, 2013) concur on the relationship between HRM practices and employee engagement, job performance, employee motivation, and affective commitment to the organization. Kopaneva and Sias (2015) stated that employee commitment to the organization comes from a shared understanding of the organization’s purpose and generates trust, leading to a sense of belonging. McVicar et al. (2013)

differed over the influence of HRM and high-performance work practices, on organization level performance. Sikora and Ferris (2014), and Kaliannan and Adjovu (2015) argued that effective HR practices could improve productivity and lower employee turnover. Medlin and Green (2013) referred to a 2008-09 report by WorkUSA that found firms with highly engaged employees demonstrated 26% higher revenue and 13% higher returns per capita, suggesting that higher employee engagement leads to significant improved business performance.

HR departments and line managers. Employees interact with their supervisors more frequently than the HR department. We need to better understand how the relationship between employees and their supervisors impacts attitudes in the workplace. Collins (2016) observed that negative feelings for their supervisors and employer affected employees' interpretation of the work environment and thereby affected behavioral and operational outcomes. Rose, Shuck, Twyford, and Bergman (2015) stated that between 13 to 36 percent of U.S. workers experienced a dysfunctional leader at work.

McDermott et al. (2013) suggested that line managers could play an important role in fulfilling the organization's psychological contracts with its employees and serve as the link between HR policies and organization performance by going beyond enforcement of contractual obligations between employees and employers. Psychological contracts help to explain the relationship between the employee and the employer and help to establish behavioral expectations (Alcover et al., 2016). Psychological contract fulfillment occurs when the employee's perception of fulfilled employer promises matches their expectations of their employer based on the quality of their relationship (Birtch, Chiang & Van Esch, 2016).

In order for HR practice to become effective, line managers in the organization need to consistently implement the HR practices across the organization (Sikora & Ferris, 2014). Similarly, Mitchell et al. (2013) noted that organizations needed to devolve HR implementation activities to line managers because line manager behaviors were largely responsible for the difference between the proposed and actual HRM implementations at the employee level. Consistent supportive behavior from managers can help employee engagement by providing job resources, emotional support, and appropriate working conditions (Luchman & Gonzalez-Morales, 2013).

Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees, and Gatenby (2013) argued for a systemic approach to HRM design and implementations that includes improvement in organization culture, climate and a feedback mechanism that allows employees to provide their inputs on the implementation and their perceptions of their line manager. Takeuchi and Takeuchi (2013) observed that employees' perception of organizational support and justice in workplace procedures influenced their evaluation of the organization's HRM efforts.

Line managers are ideally positioned to create the right work environment for their subordinates (Risher, 2013). Bos-Nehles, Van Riemsdijk, and Looise (2013) noted the need for HRM leaders to train line managers and provide them the time and resources to carry out the HR practices at the department and employee level. Marescaux et al. (2013) maintained the importance of line managers in the context of employee engagement, and argued that line managers need to consider individual employee talents, interests, and expectations to help the organization achieve its HR practice outcomes. Because attitudes, beliefs, values, and political views held in the organization shape organizational culture, Sikora and Ferris (2014) proposed that it is important to understand the broader organizational social context that affects line managers' HR practice implementation levels.

Organizational social context and employee engagement. Cox (2016) perceived an organization as a set of weak and strong social networks; weak networks were sources of early information discovery and strong networks engendered trust, shared norms, reciprocity, and sharing behavior among members. Employees use an organization's psychological workplace climate as an interpretive lens directed at their work environment. Employees in psychologically challenging work environments and those who experience negative emotions as a result of their work, such as a lack of peer or managerial support, lack of contribution to the organization, or feeling that their work is taken for granted, are far less likely to experience positive emotion (Shuck & Reio, 2014). Birtch et al. (2016) observed that the physical and psychological requirements of the job – workload, time pressure, role ambiguity, conflicting work demands, created demands on the employee that in combination with low job resources could induce job dissatisfaction and turnover. Birtch et al. also suggested integrating social exchange theory with the job demands and resources model and employee perceptions about the employment relationship to better understand the social exchange aspects underlying job demands and outcomes.

Shuck, Collins, Rocco, and Diaz (2016) argued that the organizational culture related privilege and power structures that an employee had to overcome or work around, determined the employee's experience of engagement in the organization. Shuck et al. (2016) further observed that the majority of studies on employee engagement ignored the impact of work conditions and the employees' lack of ability to influence the outcomes caused by such conditions. On a related note, Byrne (2015) observed that the wide variety in leadership styles, job characteristics, organizational climate, and supervisor support between organizations made it unlikely that a single engagement measurement scale will work well for each organization. Shuck et al. (2016) suggested that organizations seeking greater levels of engagement from their employees have an obligation to confront manifestations of privilege and power in the organization and examine the power and privilege structures they enable, as a precondition to creating conditions for employee engagement**.**

Many individual and organizational factors might inhibit employee engagement. Individual factors include physical and emotional stress, feeling undervalued or taken advantage of, lack of necessary skills for the job, family issues, conflicts, personality issues, and poor feedback cycles (Byrne, 2015). Organizational factors include lack of support, physical resource constraints, hostile or abusive work environment, micromanagement, absent or ineffective leadership, inequity, politics, and constant change (Byrne, 2015). Shuck et al. (2016) argued that when an employee who does not benefit from unearned privilege, and lacks sufficient earned privilege, experiences inconsistent decision making, evaluation bias, or a lack of work resources, the employee will experience this as a form of organizational injustice and as a manifestation of their lack of power. The resources needed for work engagement are assumed as statically available, and accessible in an equitable manner, free of any organizational bias towards those in positions of privilege or power (Shuck et al., 2016).

Transition

Stress, leads to mental fatigue, depression, and a decline in performance and productivity in the workplace. The general business problem is that leaders are lacking strategies to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress. The specific business problem is that some HR leaders are lacking strategies to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress. The purpose of this qualitative single case study design was to explore the strategies that HR leaders use to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress. The research question I intended to answer in this study was as follows: “What strategies do HR leaders use to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress?” The findings of this study could help employers reduce their employees’ level of disengagement caused by stress and improve the employer’s productivity and profitability.

My review of the literature on stress and employee engagement showed a broad consensus on the effects of stress on employee productivity, job satisfaction, and employee engagement. Many researchers advocated for changes in HRM practices to improve employee-employer relationships including the importance of devolving HR practices to line managers and the need to recognize psychological contracts between employees and their employers. Researchers proposed that attitudes and perceptions of control affected how individuals engaged in social exchanges and these in turn affected behavior between employees and their supervisors. Other researchers proposed that employee access to job resources was uneven in organizations at best. They further proposed an analysis of employee engagement from a social exchange perspective and that organizational leaders needed to address perceptions of unequal access to job resources caused power and privilege structures as a precondition to efforts at employee engagement.

Section 2 of this proposal describes the problem and purpose statement, identifies the role of the researcher, describes the participant sample, details the research method and design, discusses ethical considerations, and describes tools and techniques used in data.

Section 2: The Project

In this section I reiterate the purpose statement, delineate the researcher's role, identify the study participants and sample size, and describe the research method and design. I then describe the tools and techniques I used to collect and analyze data, and the steps I took to ensure qualitative rigor in the study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies that HR leaders use to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress. The sample population for this study was HR leaders and line managers in a single healthcare organization in Eastern Tennessee, who had used such strategies and had reduced employee disengagement caused by stress. The findings of this study could help employers reduce their employees' level of disengagement caused by stress. The implications for positive social change include the potential to improve HRM practices in organizations that might implement such strategies, which could lead to improved emotional wellbeing for employees with concomitant benefits to their families and communities.

Role of the Researcher

I conducted a qualitative case study. I had to acknowledge that my cognitive and emotional biases from my own experiences as an employee responding to employee engagement initiatives in organizations could influence my interactions with the study participants and the subsequent analysis of the data collected during the study. Moustakas (1994) suggested that researchers needed to acknowledge biases and attitudes towards the researched phenomenon as an important step in being able to refrain from judgment during the study. This ability to refrain from judgment allowed me to transition from being a participant to contemplating what it meant to be a participant in the business world. In the process, I developed an attitude that acknowledged phenomena rather than looking through them (Sokolowski, 2008). Tuohy, Cooney, Dovling, Murphy, and Smith (2013) observed that qualitative researchers needed to acknowledge the fact that they are an integral part of the research effort, not disinterested, objective, and value neutral observers. Intentionality or the directedness of the mind towards an existing or imagined object allows researchers to recognize and acknowledge that their perceptual and cognitive biases might have influenced their research findings (Moustakas, 1994).

I engaged 12 participants from a single organization in Franklin, TN, for my research study. As I approached the interview process, I had to identify, acknowledge, and set aside my biases to ensure that they did not negatively influence the way I posed questions or unconsciously conveyed my feelings via body language. Because of my relationship as an ex-colleague to the study participants, I obtained permission from leaders in the organization to conduct personal interviews. I used a formatted participation request and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved consent letter to each participant and used a defined list of interview questions that ensured consistency in data collection across all interviews.

Participants

I interviewed 12 participants. Boddy (2016) suggested that sample size of 12 participants might be sufficient for data saturation when the participants come from a relatively homogeneous population. I selected the participants from a population of HR leaders, executives, and other line managers of a single organization that had implemented soft HRM practices. Malterud, Siersma and Guassora (2016) observed that when researchers used specific theories as a lens to narrowly define their research, they required smaller participant samples to produce adequate information power (data saturation). Additionally, when the participants selected for the study have specific expertise in the topic, a smaller number of participants can help achieve data saturation (Malterud et al., 2016**)**. The geographic location of the study was a single healthcare organization in Franklin, TN.

I obtained a written letter of cooperation from the organization's HR department before approaching participants for the study. In my participation request, I shared the study's purpose, the interview procedure, required time commitment, the voluntary nature of their participation, the absence of any remuneration, and my commitment towards privacy and security of the information gathered with the participants. Miles et al. (2014) observed that researchers could build a rapport with participants and gain their confidence by sharing the researcher's motivations in selecting them for the study and informing them of the purpose for the study. I also secured informed consent by requesting that all participants complete an IRB approved consent form. Each participant provided explicit consent to participate in the study prior to any data collection or interview. I informed participants that I would not be gathering personal information during or after the study and that I would make all efforts to keep their responses and identity confidential. These actions helped me gain access to the participants and to gain their confidence during the course of the study.

I selected participants based on their willingness to be interviewed for the study and based on the requirements criteria listed. During the course of the study, participants had the option of either not participating in the interview process or withdrawing at any time from the study after informing me in writing. I kept participant and organization identity confidential during the course of the study, in all documentation used for coding and categorization, and in the final study dissertation. In keeping with Moustakas' (1994) suggestions that participants need to be deeply interested not only in understanding the experienced phenomenon but also in the process of participation in the study, I sought out and obtained active participant collaboration in reviewing the progress of the study research.

Research Method and Design

I carried out a qualitative research study. I used the case study design because I was interviewing managers in a single organization to determine how they perceived stress and its effect on employee engagement. In the following subsections I outline the study method and design and clarify the reasons for selecting a specific approach for the study.

Research Method

I selected the qualitative method because I wanted to ask exploratory questions. Qualitative approaches originate from the belief that individuals construct reality from their social experiences (Arnold & Lane 2011; Miles et al., 2014). Researchers conducting qualitative research accept the possibility that participants in the study may bring their own perspective of the truth as opposed to the researcher's perspective (Kisely & Kendall, 2011). Qualitative and quantitative approaches originate from different paradigms relating to the nature of reality (ontology), the relationship between the inquirer and the subject (epistemology), and the process of knowledge creation (Hall, Griffiths, & McKenna, 2013). Researchers using quantitative methods theorize concepts within a framework, identify a limited set of measures that represent these concepts, and use a random sample of participants to collect data using surveys or questionnaires on the measures that represent concepts (Kisely & Kendall, 2011).

In contrast, qualitative research is interpretivist in nature; theories and concepts emerge from the analyzed data rather than from a priori hypotheses as in quantitative research (Arnold & Lane, 2011). Qualitative studies are more exploratory in their approach and quantitative studies are more explanatory in their approach (Morgan, 2015). Researchers use qualitative methods to explore the ways in which people perceive situations (Miles et al., 2014). I explored the strategies that HR leaders in a single organization used to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress without attempting to understand the relationship between two things, in this case, stress and employee engagement, as expressed by numbers. Therefore, a quantitative or mixed method approach was not suitable my study.

Research Design

The qualitative research designs are ethnography, phenomenology, and case study. Yin, (2014) recommended that the form of the research question is key to being able to differentiate between the types of design most appropriate for a study. Researchers use ethnographic designs to explore the values and beliefs of a group of participants (Shover, 2012). Ethnographers carry out social research in everyday settings using participant observations (Arnold & Lane, 2011). Because I used a questionnaire to understand the engagement strategies in an organizational context, I did not use an ethnographic design for my study (Arnold & Lane, 2011). Researchers use the phenomenological design to explore the lived experience of a significant phenomenon by the participants (Eberle, 2013). A researcher employs a phenomenological research design to investigate the meaning of an individual's lived experience in its entirety in order to determine the essence of the particular experience (Arnold & Lane, 2011. I did not intend to explore the lived experiences of individuals with the objective of understanding the essence of their stress experience and its impact on their engagement at work. Therefore, I did not use a phenomenological design for my study.

I used a case study design because I studied an event or an activity that involved people within a bounded system for generating case-based themes (Yin, 2014). Mariotto, Zanni, de Moraes, and Salati (2014) defined a case study as a detailed description of a management situation. Yin (2014) observed that researchers use a case study design to study a current day phenomenon in a real-world context. Echoing Yin, Morgan et al. (2016) observed that researchers use the case study design to explore *how* or *why* qualitative research questions when they explore a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context. I used a single case study design for my study. Boddy (2016) observed that a single case study involving participants with specific knowledge could generate great insight and allow for data saturation. It is appropriate to use a single case study approach when it represents a critical case in testing a well formulated theory (Yin, 2014). A single case study may contribute to theory development by allowing refinements to an existing understanding of a phenomenon (Mariotto et al., 2014).

Data saturation is a key principle that guides a researcher in a qualitative study where the researcher collects data based on interviews and achieves saturation when additional interviews do not reveal any new data and produce redundant data (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). Researchers have successfully used the concept of data saturation to define the sample size of the participants for their study (Boddy, 2016). Boddy (2016) also observed that data saturation allows researchers to generalize study results.

Population and Sampling

I conducted a single case study in a healthcare organization in Franklin, TN, that had implemented policies and practices towards employee engagement. The identified participant population was 12 executives who either oversaw the HR function or were line managers with responsibility for supervising other employees. Table 1 provides a classification of the participants based on their role and tenure in the organization. Seventy five percent of the participants had worked in the organization for 5 or more years.

Table 2

Role Category and Tenure of Study Participants

Alias	Role category	Tenure

		(Years)
P1	Communications and culture manager	10-20
P2	HRM practice leader	10-20
P3	Emerging business division leader	5-10
P4	Clinical operations manager	5-10
P5	Technology operations manager	0-3
P6	HR business liaison leader	0-3
P7	Technology leader	10-20
P8	Coaching operations leader	5-10
P9	Call center leader	10-20
P10	Account management leader	20+
P11	Finance manager	5-10
P12	Emerging business manager	0-3

Malterud et al. (2016) opined that a study's aim, the specificity of the selected sample of participants, the use of established concepts and frameworks, the quality of the interview, and the approach to data analysis determine sample size by influencing the sample's information power. I used census sampling to identify the pool of 12 study participants in the single organization. Guest, Namey, and Mitchell (2017) observed that sample sizes in case studies are generally small because the researcher is interested in the case's special attributes. Boddy (2016) suggested that a large sample size does not allow the researcher to conduct a deep analysis of the phenomenon that is the purpose of qualitative inquiry because the volume of data generated would render difficult the timely, qualitative analysis of data. Arguing in a similar vein, Malterud et al. (2016) suggested that a purposive sample of six to 10 participants with diverse experiences might be sufficient to achieve data saturation. The final list of participants represented executives with a varying range of employment tenure from across many business functions within the organization: human resources, clinical operations, coaching operations, technology, emerging business, account management, and finance. The specialized knowledge that the participants had, the specific focus of my study, and my use of established theory justified the small sample size for the study.

Ethical Research

I commenced my study after I received approval from the Walden University IRB (approval number 07-24-17-0266195). Participants signed an informed letter of consent that contained the confidentiality policy and outlined the study settings, expectations, and benefits from the study before participating in the study. I also asked participants to consent to being audio recorded during their interview and I stored the interviews in a secure, password protected state on my computer, where I will retain the data for a period of five years. As part of the process of obtaining informed consent, I informed participants in writing that they could, at any time, withdraw from the study with written notification. The written notification would allow me to keep accurate participation records that could be reproduced as part of any subsequent peer review or audit process. Participants did not receive any incentives or compensation. I transcribed interview audio records into my computer, and stored the information in a password protected state. Information stored on my computer did not contain participants' personal information to preserve confidentiality.

Data Collection Instruments

As the researcher, I was the primary data collection tool. Talmage (2014) observed that the interviewer's role in the interview is that of an active listener and collaborating participant. The interviewer is not merely a passive absorber of information (Talmage, 2014). I used a face to face interview strategy with study participants and recorded my interviews using an audio recording microphone connected to a software called Audacity. As the primary data collection tool, I was aware of my own biases on the research topic as I set those aside during the interviews to allow participants to answer questions in a manner that reflected their perception of reality.

Guest et al. (2017) observed that an in-depth interview involves a skilled interviewer asks probing questions of a participant knowledgeable about the research topic. The in-depth interview process was well suited to obtaining information as well as generating understanding. An interview is a reciprocal exchange of views between two persons on a topic that interests both persons and implies an element of collaboration as a precondition for the communication (Brinkmann, 2014). Challenging this view, Anyan (2013) suggested that an interview may be less of a collaborative dialogue because of the lopsided nature of power distribution between the interviewer and the participant where both attempt to control or constrain the other from expressing their views and attempt to enforce their will on the other as they express an opinion.

My interview questionnaire comprised of a list of preliminary questions, in-depth questions, and follow up questions (Appendix A). The questionnaire comprised of six open ended questions typewritten on a sheet of paper. The interviews were semistructured in nature. Semistructured interviews provide interviewers with greater flexibility in coming across as knowledge-producing participants and take advantage of the dialogical potentials in conversations for creating knowledge (Brinkmann, 2014). Questions in an in-depth interview are generally open-ended, designed to steer the conversation into the topic of interest, and involve inductive probing based on the participants' detailed and layered responses (Guest et al., 2017). I guided participants through the list of open-ended questions but encouraged them to provide me a detailed response to each question. I followed through after the interview to check with participants whether I had accurately captured our dialogue. To aid in triangulation during data analysis, I obtained additional information on the Gallup Q12 instrument that the organization used from 2010 to 2015 to capture its employee engagement results.

Data Collection Technique

My research question for the study was as follows: What strategies do HR leaders use to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress? I used the case study design because I interviewed managers in a single organization to determine how they perceived stress and its effect on employee engagement. A case study uses existing propositions in theory to guide data collection and analysis and relies on multiple sources of data and evidence to triangulate findings (Yin 2014). Interview questions were open ended and consisted of (a) initial probing questions, (b) targeted concept questions, and (c) targeted follow up questions. The initial probing questions helped me (a) identify the participant and (b) establish the participant's credentials for the study to improve reliability. The targeted concept questions directly addressed the research concepts; manifestations of stress among employees, employee engagement, employee disengagement, organizational HR practices, the role of line managers, privilege and power structures, and equality of access to resources, and the social exchange aspects of engagement (see Appendix A). Before the interview, I recorded my thoughts about the study topic in a memo so I could respond to the participants' answers with as little bias as possible.

I posed each question in exactly the same order, recorded the participant's detailed response, and asked probing questions where required. I used the list of questions consistently across all interviews to ensure reliability of the instrument. I stored raw audio data collected during the study on my computer and can make such data available on request. As recommended by Miles et al. (2014), after receiving IRB approval and before conducting interviews with participants, I conducted a field test with one participant with the objectives of refining the interview questions, check for any personal bias on my part during the interview process, and refine data collection and storage processes. I conducted the interviews in a conference room set aside for the purpose and away from the participant's place of work. I recorded the interviews, captured field notes, wrote analytical memos of my impressions from each interview and stored the data I collected on my password protected laptop computer.

Data Organization Technique

I used a password protected laptop computer to store audio recordings of interviews, subsequent transcriptions, and my field notes. I used a secondary storage device to back up all data. I organized participant data and information generated during the research into separate folders to ensure privacy and easy reporting out. I will store data for a period of five years. I will store all physical copies of field notes in a secured location under lock and key for five years and destroy them later.

Data Analysis

Codes and relationships discovered during the qualitative research study influence data analysis in a dynamic manner as do evolving interpretations of the information collated and analyzed during the course of the researcher's data collection, data management, classification, and interpretation (Miles et al., 2014). The inductive and flexible nature of qualitative data collection methods allows the researcher to ask probing questions on interviewees' responses or observations during and after the interview to obtain detailed descriptions and explanations of experiences, behaviors, and beliefs (Guest et al., 2015). I started my data analysis with the data collection process as advised by Miles et al. (2014) so that the analysis of the transcribed raw data could begin to surface initial themes and evaluate progress during the study. Miles et al. (2014) observed that coding is not merely the process of reducing observed data into manageable units; it is the process of differentiating data in the context of the study's conceptual framework and retaining the relationship between the identified parts.

After I transcribed each interview, I created analytic memos that captured metadata related to the participant, the setting, the interview, and the main themes that surfaced during the interview. I used the modified Van Kaam method as proposed by Moustakas (1994) to list and group the data, eliminate repetitive ideas, create clusters of related expressions to develop conceptual themes, validate the content of the expressions and themes, create textural and structural descriptions, combine the textural and structural descriptions, and present the findings using a tabular display format. As Saldana (2016) suggested, I found it useful to use process coding to identify codes that reflected the problem-solving interactions between leaders in the organization and employees.

I used NVivo, a software tool, to analyze the transcribed notes and to identify the codes, code aggregation, and generate themes. Miles et al. (2014) asserted that coding is analysis because codes are labels that assign meanings to phrases or sentences encountered in the unstructured text of the transcribed document. Coding is the process of differentiating and combining transcript data to allow reflection overall and its parts (Miles et al., 2014). I started with an a priori list of provisional, descriptive codes that I derived from the conceptual framework and from the research questions. I made changes to the provisional list of codes and created new codes during the course of the data analysis process as suggested by Miles et al. (2014). My first round of coding the transcripts resulted in 62 unique codes. I condensed these 62 codes into 7 code categories during a second round of coding. Table 4 lists the number of code categories, codes, and sources (participant responses).

Table 3

Code Categories

Code categories	Codes	Sources
Organizational culture	6	10
HRM engagement practices	8	9
Communication strategies	2	9
Engagement barriers	15	9
Stress mitigation strategies	16	8
Supervisor behavior	6	9
Work Stressors	9	11

As the analysis progressed across participants' inputs and over successive reading of the transcribed data, I further condensed the code categories to identify general themes from the data. I used methodological triangulation, a process that Drouin, Stewart, and Gorder (2015) defined as the integrating multiple sources of data to reveal a different dimension of the phenomenon. Hargis, Cavanaugh, Kamali, and Soto (2014) implemented methodological triangulation in their study on iPad integration in an educational setting in the United Arab Emirates and found that each source of information presented a slightly different perspective on reported study outcomes.

Reliability and Validity

Qualitative researchers implement methodological strategies to establish the credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability of their findings (Noble &

Smith, 2015). Credibility and transferability are equivalent to internal and external validity strategies in quantitative research while dependability and conformability are equivalent to reliability and objectivity, respectively (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

Reliability (Dependability and Confirmability)

Researchers consider a study's findings as dependable when they can independently follow and audit a researcher's decision trail (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). A qualitative study's dependability is a measure of the consistency between the findings and the collected data rather than a measure of whether other researchers can replicate the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2013). A researcher can improve a study's dependability by formulating clear questions, aligning the research design with the questions, collecting data across the full range of participants, implementing coding checks across participants and time, checking for convergence of participants' accounts over settings and time, and implementing a peer review process (Miles et al., 2014).

A researcher can implement conformability by specifying the study's purpose, clarifying the how and why of participant selection, describing the data collection process and time frame, explaining the data transformation and reduction process, sharing the methods and tools used to determine data credibility, and presenting the interpreted research findings (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). I recorded memos using the NVivo software to capture an audit trail of the data collection, data categorization, and decision-making processes. I posed identical questions to all study participants across interview settings and time. I used the NVivo software tool to develop codes and themes from the transcribed data. During the analysis phase, I correlated the key themes from the data with the conceptual framework for my study.

Validity (Credibility and Transferability)

Miles et al. (2014) discussed a study's validity from an internal and an external perspective. Internal validity requires that the study findings make sense and appear credible and researchers use external validity to examine the transferability of the findings to other contexts and settings (Miles et al., 2014). Internal validity or credibility of a qualitative study is a measure of how well the researcher has represented the participants' construction of reality so that the readers find the findings credible given the purpose and circumstances of the research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2013). Tuohy et al. (2013) suggested that a researcher could help improve the study's credibility by clarifying the researcher's biases towards the studied phenomenon and requesting an external audit. Merriam and Tisdell (2013) stated that generalizability or transferability of a qualitative research study's findings is the extent to which the results of the study are applicable to other contexts. Researchers use rich and thick descriptions of participants, data collection settings, provide a detailed description of the findings, and include direct participant quotes to improve generalizability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2013).

Researchers improve a study's internal validity by developing a detailed understanding of the phenomenon, collecting context-rich data, validating findings as internally consistent and related to concepts from the literature, confirming findings with the participants, using a peer review process, and actively seeking and analyzing negative findings, if any (Miles et al., 2014). I conducted in-depth interviews, asked probing questions based on participants' responses, and requested participant feedback on the transcripts of each interview and on the themes that emerged from the data analysis. I correlated the findings from the study with the conceptual models of social exchange theory and the theory of planned behavior.

Noble and Smith (2015) stated that validity refers to the integrity and application of the research method and the extent to which the findings reflect the data. Thomas and Magilvy (2011) related the property of transferability in qualitative research to the property of external validity in quantitative research. Transferability refers to the extent to which a study's findings are applicable to participants with differing demographics characteristics including location. Researchers can establish transferability by providing a detailed description of the population sample studied including the demographic and geographic characteristics (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). I conducted the study within a single healthcare organization in Franklin, TN. The participants were either HR leaders or line managers in clinical operations, call center operations, information technology, business units, and finance. Seventy five percent of the participants had 5 or more years of tenure with the organization.

Transition and Summary

I conducted a qualitative research study using a single case study design because I wanted to interview managers in a single organization to determine how they perceived stress and its effect on employee engagement. My research question for the study was as follows: What strategies do HR leaders use to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress? Data collection commenced after necessary approvals from Walden University.

As the researcher, I was the primary data collection tool and had to acknowledge my biases. I used a semi-structured interview questionnaire to collect data. I stored the data gathered during the collection phase securely on my password protected computer. I used the NVivo software to manage and analyze data, generate themes and create thick, descriptive displays of the identified themes. As suggested by other researchers, I used methodological triangulation to ensure the reliability and validity of my study findings.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

In this section I present my findings, describe the application of my research findings to professional practice, describe the implications for social change, and make recommendations for further action and further research. I conclude with reflections on the DBA process and the personal biases that might limit the generalizability of the findings.

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies that HR leaders use to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress. The general themes that emerged from my study on the stress mitigation strategies the organization used to reduce disengagement and improve engagement were as follows:

a. The integration of employee engagement practices into culture and business processes.
b. Providing managers with the job resources they need to lead staff.
c. Being transparent and honest in communications.
d. Supportive supervisor behavior as essential to mitigating employee stress.

Social exchange theory and the theory of planned behavior were appropriate in understanding the relationships between the organization and its employees and employee and manager attitudes in the context of employee engagement.

Presentation of the Findings

My RQ was as follows: What strategies do HR leaders use to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress? Based on my analysis and interpretation of the findings from data collected at a single healthcare organization in Franklin, TN, I identified four themes related to business practice as shown in Figure 1. The four themes were (a) integration of employee engagement practices into culture and business processes, (b) providing managers with the job resources they need, (c) being transparent and honest in communications, and (d) relying on supportive supervisor behavior.

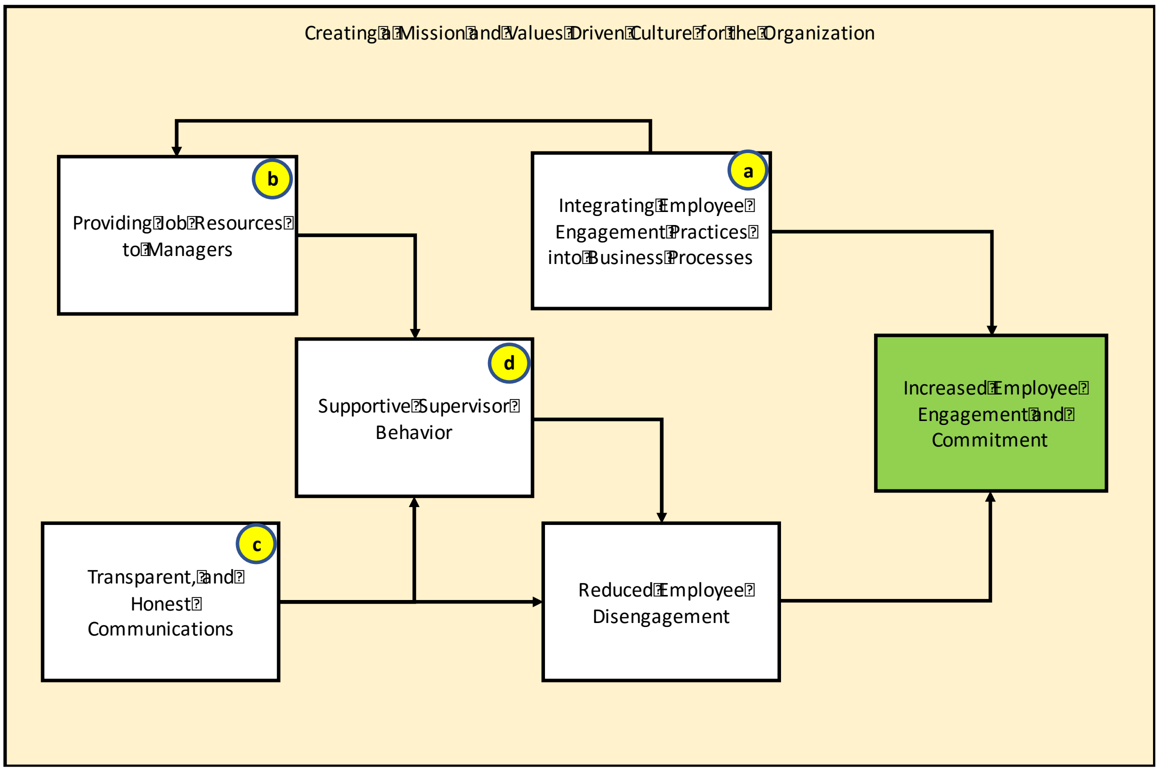

Figure 1. Strategies for reducing employee disengagement and improving employee engagement.

I conducted the study within a healthcare organization in Franklin, TN, to understand the strategies its HR leaders used to improve employee engagement and mitigate employee stressors. The organization had experienced a long period of business success leading up to 2015. During this period, the organization empowered high commitment human resource practices, invested in leadership training and support activities over a period of years, framed these activities within a set of organizational culture development practices, and embedded employee engagement practices into business processes. The organization trained line managers, provided them the tools to help employees mitigate work stressors, and involved them in defining employee engagement practices.

Between 2014 and 2016, the organization had to reduce costs in response to setbacks in business. In the process, the organization brought in new leadership, made business process changes, and terminated employees. Then, in 2016, the employees experienced more change when the board split a significant division from its parent and sold it to another organization.

At the time of my study, the new organization was assimilating the division into its systems and processes. As a result, the study participants had experienced or heard about the prosperous years, had faced periodic layoff events since 2014, and had become employees of a new organization in 2017. Based on discussions with the organization's HR leadership, I decided to present my findings over these two distinct periods in the organization's recent history, "the golden years" and "the change years", in order to provide a context for strategies HR leaders used to reduce disengagement caused by stress and improve employee engagement. I identified the golden years as the period between 2008 and 2015. The following themes relate to the golden years of the organization.

The Golden Years

Integration of employee engagement practices into culture and processes.

During its golden years the organization created a mission-driven, values-based work culture. The study participants were nearly unanimous in their responses (10 out of 12 participants) on this theme. Berens (2013) stated the four qualities conducive to employee engagement were (a) employees want to be part of something bigger than themselves, (b) they feel a sense of belonging, (c) their journey needs to have a purpose and be meaningful, and (d) they want to see their contributions make a significant impact. Byrne (2015) observed that the organizational factors that inhibit employee engagement include lack of perceived organizational support, physical resource constraints, hostile or abusive work environment, micromanagement, absent or ineffective leadership, and constant change.

The organization's leaders, knowing that "there will always be a culture in an organization so long as you have people because of the people, the personalities, the dynamics, and the way people engage" (P2), were intentional about creating a work environment in which employees felt a sense of purpose and developed a sense of commitment to the organization. Organizations determine the employees' engagement experience through the creation and sustainment of an organizational culture (Shuck et al., 2016). The organization's approach contrasted with Valentin's (2014) observation that organizations' employee engagement initiatives focused on performance and overshadowed discussions around the employee's workplace experience and wellbeing.

The organization's mission, as P8 stated, was "to create a healthier world, one person at a time." The human resource department integrated the mission statement and the organization's set of values into its employee hiring, employee onboarding, employee development, and performance evaluation procedures. These procedures helped articulate that the organization's values were "more than just knowing what the values were, but how they interacted, and why it was important that we had those ones and what they meant" (P2). P8 explained the link between the organization's mission and values.

> When we had a clear mission with very clear values, I felt like most colleagues that interacted with across the board were "dialed into" that mission and people came to work even when it was hard, I would hear people say, "I am helping people."

These statements appeared to support the Kopaneva and Sias (2015) assertion that employee commitment to the organization arises from a shared understanding of the organization's purpose and generates trust, leading to a sense of belonging. The organization was intentional about nurturing a culture of engagement in the work environment as the following responses indicated.

> One of the things that I believe is unique about XYZCo in its history is that there was an intentional effort, a decision made by our founders to define the culture that they wanted. They wanted to define the workplace where they wanted to work and went about a series of steps to put that culture into play (P2).

As P2 stated, “We made that shift, and with that we put a lot of effort into defining what engagement meant for our managers and for our colleagues and to really build into the culture a sense of engagement.”

The organization’s leaders believed that leaders, managers, and employees had a collective responsibility to create an engaged workforce. Eight of the 12 participants agreed that the organization signaled their commitment, financial support, and leadership in creating a work environment that reflected the organization’s mission and values, and tasked the managers and employees with defining and implementing the required practices and procedures. This aligned with the observation by Shuck et al. (2016) that employees engage when organizations (through organizational development and culture) and managers (through leadership) nurture the conditions of engagement. Organizations can counter the negative effects of stress and burnout by building a positive trusting work culture (Anthony-McMann, Ellinger, Astakhova, & Halbesleben, 2017).

As a result, employees and managers in the organization felt a sense of ownership in creating the environment in which they worked. As P1 stated,

> that was helpful for our colleagues and our leaders because our colleagues were able to participate and drive their own engagement and drive the engagement of their peers. Our managers and senior leaders were able to say, “it is not just up to us, engagement is all of our jobs” and I think it gave people more sense of pride in our engagement because we all owned it.

Bakker (2017) asserted that HR practices such as creating a culture of trust and empowerment, performance development, training, career development, and ongoing appraisals influence employee engagement. P7 compared the organization's effort at engagement with other organizations,

> XYZCo has been one of those places where I have worked where you have more of those types of individuals that are here because of the mission and they want to know that what they do every day adds value in helping the organizations achieve its mission. Whereas, other organizations I have worked for, not so much.

The HR department partnered with business leaders to embed employee engagement practices into business processes and workflows. The organization updated its performance evaluation process to measure not just performance goal achievement but also how the manager and employee went about achieving those goals. Saks (2017) stated that organizations should manage employee engagement the same way they manage job performance, by making employee engagement the focus of and embedding it into the ongoing performance management process. Anthony-McMann et al. (2017) found that training leaders and employees in fostering a work environment that helped develop positive work relationships was the most important activity an HR department could undertake to improve employee engagement.

The organization trained leaders and line managers on the tactical activities designed to improve employee engagement, including training on the Gallup Q12 survey methodology, a tool used to measure engagement scores at the individual, team, division, and organization levels. The organization shared the list of Q12 survey questions (Table 4).

Table 4

Gallup Q12 Survey Questions

Number	Question Wording
Q0	How satisfied are you with XYZCo as a place to work?
Q1	I know what is expected of me at work.
Q2	I have the materials and equipment to do my job right.
Q3	At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
Q4	In the last 7 days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
Q5	My supervisor, or someone at work, appears to care about me as a person.
Q6	There is someone at work who encourages my development.
Q7	At work, my opinions seem to count.
Q8	The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important.
Q9	My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work
Q10	I have a best friend at work.
Q11	In the last 6 months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
Q12	This last year, I have had the opportunities at work to learn and grow.

The organization developed a robust set of activities framed within the purpose and values of the organization to implement, measure, and monitor employee engagement and commitment to the organization based on responses to questions 1 to 12. Managers received regular training on creating engagement impact plans and tools to measure, monitor, and report progress on an annual basis. Participant P10 observed that

> every year, it wasn't just that we got the readout of the result. We were further challenged to take the read out of the results, look for the areas where we could obviously improve, and then generate action plans that we measured throughout the year to try to address those areas for opportunities for improvement.

Participant P2 observed that

> On the whole, we did see significant improvements from year to year in our engagement results that we felt stemmed from the work we did, not only around engagement but also around change management, around training and development, leadership development and such, and overall communication path and strategy.

The HR department also empowered employees to take an active role in creating the impact plans to ensure they had a voice. The organization's HR department, with support from senior leadership, developed policies and practices that were people-centered. Hiring and selection processes assessed applicants' identification with the organization's purpose and values. Such recruiting practices may have helped hire staff who came equipped with coping mechanism defenses to deal with negative effects of stressors (Newton & Teo, 2013). Employees were known as "colleagues" (P1). The HR department developed trusting relationships with managers and employees. Bakker (2017) asserted that high-performance HR practices engender employee engagement. As P1 stated, “Our colleagues are our customers and they are the center of our experience. And everything we do is to make their experience better.” P6 echoed this by saying, “I think all that plays into people knowing that they are treated with respect and there is an openness about the culture.”

The organization created a work environment that felt open and bright. Leaders and managers encouraged work-at-home and flexible hours to promote a work-life balance among employees and invested in creating a work environment that supported physical activities and made it easy for employees to find healthy food options. Participants P3 and P12 described their efforts at helping their staff step away from their community level engagement responsibilities. P1 stated that her supervisor encouraged her to balance her work and life commitments. P5 explained how he encouraged his staff to take vacations and not answer e-mails while being away. P6 talked about the opportunities to engage in physical activity and the general approach to wellbeing within the organization. P7 contrasted his work experience at the organization and his earlier companies to say that the organization implemented employee engagement practices across the board. The organization appeared to mirror an observation from Boreham et al. (2016), who asserted that low levels of employee engagement were linked to low level of wellbeing at an organizational level. P11, a line manager, stated,

> the company really prides itself in having a culture that is very health oriented and along with that, being an employee-friendly, work-life balance sort of focus.

> Having a flexible generous PTO policy for one thing, paying for our gym memberships, and things like that.

The organization encouraged managers to involve frontline staff in the decision-making process even if it meant merely listening to employees' reactions to leadership decisions. As P10 stated, "Just the fact that somebody took the time to listen to them and to hear out their perspective, to me, makes a huge difference in their engagement and whatever process or activity is being rolled out." When colleagues' positions had to be terminated, the organization ensured that the decision was carried out in a respectful manner and did the most it could do for the employee being terminated. As P1 stated,

> we had 155 colleagues at the time and only five left and the other 149[*sic*] stayed to the very end and to this day, I get emails from people who say this was the best place they ever worked and there is a Facebook group of them that I am a part of and the ones that are still in Raleigh still get together. And we had people thank us at the end . . . "thank you for doing this in a dignified way" and "thank you for this being a great place to work," and that's not always the case when you close a facility with 150 people losing their jobs on the same day.

Providing managers with the job resources they need. The organization empowered employees and their managers to collaborate in identifying barriers that prevented them from achieving their best work outcomes, creating improvement plans, and implementing robust monitoring and reporting processes around such plans. The HR department provided managers opportunities to participate in leadership training events as part of their personal development plan and emphasized equipping managers with the tools, the talking points, and the context behind organizational changes so they could proactively address employee concerns. In providing managers job resources such as leadership training and training in engagement practices, the organization engaged in a social exchange principle of reciprocal interdependence (Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005).

HR practices, such as creating a culture of trust and empowerment, employee development, training, career development, and ongoing appraisals influence employee engagement (Bakker, 2017). Employees engage when they have the resources to do their job, manage work stressors, feel safe in the work environment, find meaning in their work, have an interpersonally oriented leader, and connect with their colleagues to align with the organization's mission (Byrne, 2015). Bakker (2017) observed that leadership development intervention had a positive effect on followers' perceptions of work-culture support and strategic alignment. Schaufeli (2017) stated that increasing job resources such as social support, job control and frequent feedback for employees they achieve two goals: preventing burnout and increasing employee engagement. Social exchange relationships at work evolve when employers take care of employees, which thereby gives rise to beneficial consequences (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). As P4 stated, "HR would take a lot of depth in the leadership growth, being an active partner in not only being a part of the team, a superficial part of the team, but being able to really help, 'how can I help you have that conversation?', 'how can I help you develop this certain skill?' and watching." HR managers were involved in providing the mentorship and support managers needed in implementing the leadership training.

The HR department recognized the importance of providing line managers the information, the support, and the tools they needed to engage with their staff to facilitate two-way communicate about the organization's direction and leaders' decisions. Many participants praised the HR-sponsored training and development programs. P8 stated, "I feel like they were important for manager engagement. It helped them feel like they were supported. On a scale of 1-10, the value they provided in 2010 and 2011 was 7 or 8. They were good programs." Referring to the HR department, P10 stated, "Having a team of people waking up every day trying to think about how to make sure we support and sustain our culture is significant to the success". Social exchange theory explains employee engagement by stating that employees who perceive higher organizational support are more likely to reciprocate with greater levels of engagement in their job and in the organization (Saks, 2006). Dewettinck and Vroonen (2017) found that managers' beliefs regarding the usefulness of employee performance management activities were the key determinants of a successful implementation. Anthony-McMann et al. (2017) found that training leaders and employees in fostering a work environment that helped develop positive work relationships, was the most important activity a HR department could undertake to improve employee engagement. P2 explained how the organization approached its role in supporting line managers

> they may have limited amounts of information or context, but yet, they are needing to craft a message for their employees that motivates, that gives them hope, that gives them meaning and so, if you are able to empower them, give them more tools, more information, then I think you are set up for more success

> when you think about colleague engagement, when you think about stress levels and the ability to impact anxiety.

Being transparent and honest in communications with employees. Five participants responded that the organization developed a communication strategy that emphasized transparency, helped employees understand what organizational decisions and events meant to them, provided managers with the talking points they would need to cascade information to their staff, and helped develop trust with the employees. Meyer (2017) had suggested that effective, two-way communication was important in shaping employee perceptions of the organization's efforts at creating a values-based culture and implementing employee engagement practices. A communications and culture specialist within the HR department described the role was about "ensuring our colleagues and leaders are set up for success through transparent and timely communications, so making sure our messaging makes sense to people, aligning messages of our senior leaders on down to our front-line colleagues" (P1). Straatmann, Kohnke, Hattrup, and Mueller (2016) found that implementation of change related communications processes helped employees perceive greater behavioral control around change events because they felt informed. Straatmann, Kohnke, Hattrup, and Mueller found that the theory of planned behavior constructs of attitude, perceived behavioral control and subjective norms explained about 47% of the variance in employee intentions to engage in organizational change events and process. As P2 stated,

> some level of transparency I think, was very important, for colleagues to feel a sense of trust from the organization and for them to understand what it truly

> meant for them – positive impact or not, they knew where they stood, to the degree it could be communicated but on the other side it was important to prepare our leaders – frontline and middle management with the talking points, the tools, the context behind that change because they were the ones that had to carry that change forward and they were the ones that were going to get the questions and concerns from their team about this change, they were the ones that were going to see the stress and anxiety in their team mates and were going to be ones that had to address it.

HR leaders reached out to influencers within the organization as part of an overall change management strategy and communications plan in advance of major organizational events. Participants P6 and P12 insisted that it was important to be open and as professionally transparent as possible with their staff. P12 observed, "I think, if people think that something is going on and they are kept in the dark about that, it just creates more stress and gossip and speculation". P10 emphasized the importance of communication as part of an overall engagement approach, my leadership philosophy has always been that it's really important sometimes, to the point of over communicating to make sure that you're consistently informing the people that report to you, about anything that's happening in the company both positive and negative.

However, these communications practices were likely insufficient to cope with the sheer size and frequency of the organizational changes that occurred during the change years. Responses from a few participants appear in the change years section of this study. Meyer (2017) argued that organizations that recognized the basic human needs of autonomy, efficacy, self-control, social connection; implemented HR policies that reflected fairness in hiring, development, and evaluation practices; and implemented frequent and effective two-way communications with their employees, as best principles, had a greater chance of improving employee engagement and improvements to the bottom line. As P10 observed,

> the values of the organization were the focus on culture, the fact that we looked at it, we measured it, we talked about it, we where we had it on our badges, where we were consistently reminded of the importance of culture and the very specific tenets of that culture that we wanted to uphold.

The organization invested in these strategies over a period of more than 7 years to allow employee engagement practices and perspectives to become part of the way the whole organization conducted itself. Figure 2 shows the trends in annual employee engagement Gallup Q12 scores for the organization. Organizational engagement scores measured on a scale of 0 to 5, rose from 3.82 in 2008 to 4.20 in 2012, and plateaued for the next three years.

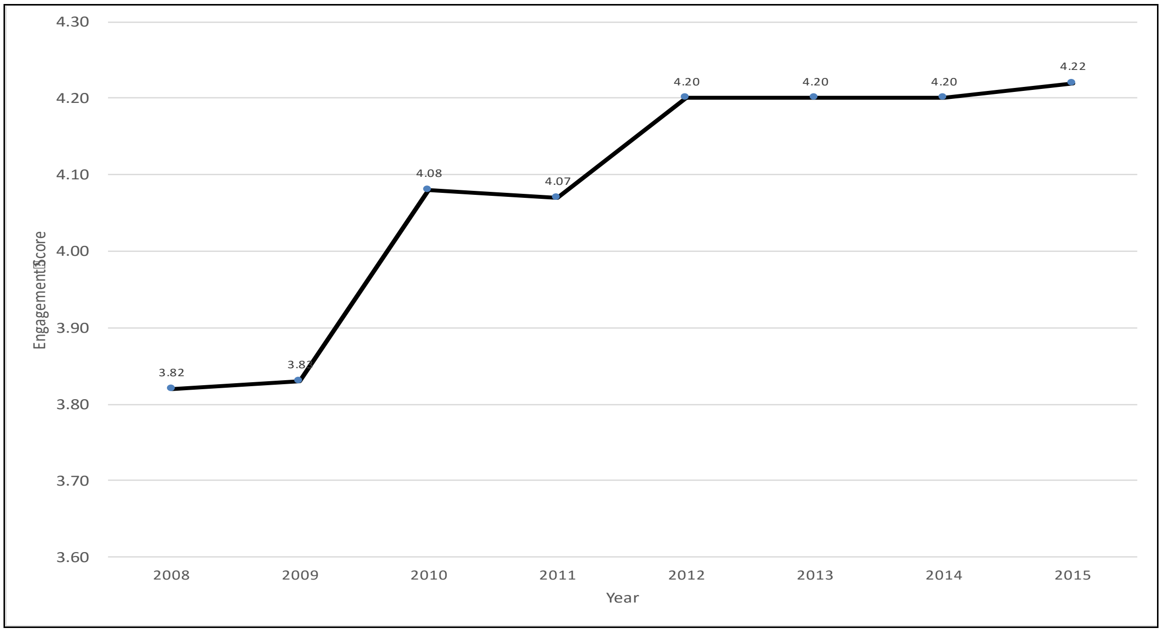

Figure 2. Trend in employee engagement trend between 2008 and 2015as provided by participating organization.

However, even in an engagement oriented culture, there remained pockets of disengaged employees. As Shuck, Collins, Rocco, and Diaz (2016) observed, even though organizations determine the experience of employee engagement by creating and sustaining an organizational culture, employees may become disengaged because of an uncontrollable, local condition of work. P9 mentioned the differential treatment towards the call center staff by saying, “For the longest time, I feel that the call center people were treated like a different caste or group within the corporation.” Leaders in the call center had to go to lengths to create, according to P9, a “bubble around the call center” to make it a fun place. The call center leaders developed a manager training program that focused on building team morale by “promoting from within” (P9). They created a program that would allow front line staff to take on managerial roles when they became available. P7 wished that HR's scope of engagement could have extended from the organization level to the employee level. P3 mentioned having to customize organization-level communications to suit his business. Participants' responses related to the change years revealed additional details related to some of the themes from the organization's golden years.

The Change Years

Organizational changes including changes in leadership, curtailment of non-essential expenses, and staff headcount reductions started in late 2014. Employees lost long-term friends to departures or layoffs. Remaining team members saw an increase in their workloads. The organization stopped administering the Gallup Q12 survey after 2015 even though employee engagement practices remained integrated into business processes. Then, in 2016, the organization was spun-off from its parent company and sold. More changes occurred in leadership positions. New rounds of layoffs occurred across the organization. Reporting relationships changed.

Integration of employee engagement practices into culture and processes. Leadership commitment to creating and maintaining a culture of engagement appeared to be important leading up to and during the change years. Six participants responded to the changes in organization culture during the change years. P10 used the term "counter cultural" to describe the effect on the organization's values and culture as new leaders came into the organization and spoke about the need for leaders to be aligned with the organization's culture because the organization took its cues from their behaviors. P12 spoke about the palpable sense of loss employees felt in the organization's culture activities after the acquisition. P2 spoke about the "ebbs and flows, and changes based on new leaders" as the reason for the shift away from the values that formed the basis for the organization's culture during the golden years.

The relatively sudden erosion of values starting in 2015 and the associated ambiguity about the organization's mission after the acquisition, caused perceptible changes in how employees talked about the organization. The main source of stress during the change period arose from uncertainty about changing job roles, potential redeployment, layoffs, perceptions of change processes, lack of resources, and the absence of consultation and information (Smollan, 2017). Based on their findings on organizational identity and employee stress, Newton and Teo (2013) suggested that organizations should facilitate high levels of identification with the organization, its mission, and values because such identification would allow employees to adjust better to organization changes and the effects of such stressors. When individuals identify with the organization, they are likely to express satisfaction and commitment to the organization (Lee, Park, & Koo. 2015). Newton and Teo (2013) found that employees who identified strongly with their organization showed decreases in their job satisfaction levels and their psychological health when they were unclear about their role.

P2 mentioned that employees were not sure how they fit into the organization after the acquisition. P8 stated, "And where we are now is, we don't have any values, we got some values thrown on to our annual performance evaluation. They weren't all that meaningful and they were a little confusing" when speaking about the sense of confusion among employees about the organization's purpose under the new parent. P1 was optimistic, but cautious about the future of culture-related activities after the acquisition. P12 spoke about the steps the team took to reinstate the cultural values of employee recognition and celebration of life events when they realized that the HR department had stopped doing so.

Employees appeared to be going through an identity crisis because they sensed a loss of identification with the organization. Organizational identification forms the basis for the theory of planned behavior model of attitudes and behaviors in organizations (Lee, Park, & Koo, 2015). It is common for individuals to construct their identity from the identity of the organization they work for because being part of and working for an organization consume a significant portion of a person's life (Lee, Park, & Koo, 2015). Balanescu (2017) found that the three motivational factors that motivate employees to stay with their employer were (a) the working environment, (b) relationships with coworkers and supervisors, and (c) identification with the organization. P7 used the term "wandering in the wilderness" to describe employees who did not understand what the "tsunami of changes" (P10) meant for them in their jobs. Sung et al. (2017) suggested that perceived changes in employees' social exchange relationship with the organization based on their perceptions of job security, job continuity, and distributive justice, affected their attachment to the organization. Thus, it appeared as though employees who identified strongly with the organization felt stressed, disengaged, and less committed to the organization during the change years because of the erosion in employees' sense of organizational identity. Supervisors had an important role to play in helping employees reduce their stress, regain their sense of belonging and commitment to the organization.

Providing supervisors with the job resources they need. Seven participants highlighted the importance of psychological contract fulfillment through employee training and development programs during the change years. A psychological contract represents employee beliefs and perceptions about implicit promises and obligations between the employee and employer in an employment exchange relationship (Birtch, Chiang & Van Esch, 2016). Participants lamented the absence of ongoing training and development programs during these years. P4 missed HR's involvement and active participation in leadership development programs. P10 stated that the training programs were "critical to our success in engagement". P11 stated that he had received little to no management training since his promotion as a manager in 2016. P3, P8, and P11 spoke of the constraints they faced in trying to invest in training and development programs for their staff. P7 regretted the "lip service" the organization was providing to investing in employee growth. These participants appeared to be referring to concept of psychological contract fulfillment. Birtch, Chiang and Van Esch (2016) stated that psychological contract fulfillment, a social exchange perspective on the employer-employee exchange process, reflected employee beliefs, expectations, and perceptions about the employment relationship and the satisfaction of implicit promises between employee and employer. Communications strategies provide employees with the tools to manage their beliefs, expectations, and perceptions of the organization's decisions and activities.

Being transparent, and honest in communications with employees. During the change years, the organization increased its use of communications as a tool to help reduce employee disengagement and mitigate change-related stresses. Straatmann, Kohnke, Hattrup, and Mueller (2016) found that implementation of change-related communication processes helped employees perceive greater behavioral control about the change because they felt informed about the change. As identified by Francis, Ramdhony, Reddington, and Staines (2013), the HR department recognized the role that line managers could play in moderating the adverse effects of the workplace changes on employees, by engaging in near continuous dialogue with their staff, to help reconcile individual and organizational needs and interests. Tucker (2017) stated that managers could play an important communications role to reduce employee frustrations caused by lack of direction and information by planning their communications ahead of time, sharing information as completely as allowable, and listening carefully to employee feedback. The department leaders implemented a change management strategy that included a detailed communications plan. The plan included, as P2 stated, “talking point” memos that provided managers with information on the nature of the change, impacts if any, and the reason for the change.

P7 expressed concern about the communications strategy implemented during the change years by saying, “They communicate that change is occurring but they don’t communicate what is the overall objective behind this change, and what are we trying to accomplish, and getting everybody aligned around that proverbial North Star.” P7 positioned his concern with the communications strategy within the context of lack of job resources; mission clarity, the absence of clearly defined goals, and objectives for operational teams, after the acquisition. The common factor between engagement and burnout may be the presence or absence of job resources; the physical, psychological, and organizational features that help employees achieve their goals (Gruman & Saks, 2011; Hernandez, Stanley & Miller, 2014). Supervisors play an important role in providing essential job resources to their staff.

Supportive supervisor behavior is essential to mitigating employee stress. Ten participants provided a variety of examples on how supportive supervisory behavior can help organizations with employee stress mitigation. The change years highlighted the importance of training and developing managers in employee engagement activities because the training helped mitigate employee stresses. Teoh et al. (2016) found that social exchange theory explained the positive relationship between supportive manager behavior and employee engagement.

Kang and Kang (2016) asserted that perceived supervisor support significantly reduced employee job stress and reinforced the effect of high-commitment HRM practices in lowering employee job stress. Kinman and Jones (2005) observed that managers' beliefs and attitudes regarding work-related stress and its impact on employees would determine the culture of the organization and inform its policies and practices on dealing with stress. During the change years managers had to focus on strategies that would help employee reduce disengagement and mitigate stress. The stress mitigation strategies required building and leveraging trusting relationships with employees by being available to employees, engaging in honest and transparent communications, listening with compassion, and helping employees cope with organizational change.

The dominant cause of stress participants reported hearing from their staff was the fear of losing their jobs after the acquisition. Referring to the frequent layoffs in the recent past, P6 stated, “I think people have it in the back of their minds that another shoe is going to drop.” This stressor remained dominant in employees’ minds despite attempts by the organization’s leaders to increase the frequency and types of communications and events. P9 confessed that attempts to obtain feedback from employees about their job-related concerns generally devolved to the questions “when am I going to get fired, when am I going to get laid off, when is the next layoff?” P6, P7, P8, and P10 expressed distrust in leadership because of the perceived dishonesty about the number of organization changes that they experienced. Stress at work arises from issues such as work overload, conflicting goals, unclear tasks, emotional demands, lack of control, and lack of supervisory support (Corin & Bjork, 2016; Newton & Teo, 2013). P10 appeared to echo Balanescu (2017) by stating that, while he was keeping his employee options open, he worried about leaving a work environment that was supportive of his work-life balance needs. P5 felt that his staff feared change even though their skills were in high demand in the industry.

Six participants discussed the reasons why employees felt disengaged. The primary reasons for disengagement during the change years were ambiguity of mission, feeling uncertain about the future, unclear or unstated organizational objectives, and lack of clarity on employees’ roles in the future organization. Participants P1, P7, P9, and P12 differentiated between good stress and bad stress. They were unanimous in their belief that the organization had a history of coming together to resolve the good stress situations. Their staff had told them that the organization could have done a much better job of stating the organizations' change objectives, reasons for the changes, and what they meant for teams and employees.

Mont and Beehr (2014) noted that supervisor communication and social support for employees had the largest positive effect on employees' subjective wellbeing. Managers helped mitigate employee stress by sharing their own feelings honestly with their staff, providing examples of how they coped with their stress, and by channeling the conversation towards the tasks at hand that both, manager and employee, needed to focus on. Schaufeli (2017) stated that increasing job resources such as social support, job control and frequent feedback for employees helps achieve two goals: preventing burnout and increasing employee engagement. Anthony-McMann et al. (2017) observed that organizations might be able to mitigate stresses caused by role conflict, role ambiguity, and role-stress fit through improved resource allocation, increased team collaboration, improved communications, and developing a culture in which employees can safely express their concerns. P4 and P12 allowed staff to vent their feelings by providing them a safe environment to do so and then helping them channel their feelings into focusing on tasks ahead. P9 helped employees face where they were in their "state of change" by facilitating team discussions where employees assessed their readiness to accept the organizational changes and focus on their daily tasks. P5 helped his staff see that despite the many changes in the organization leading up to and beyond the acquisition, nothing had changed about their tasks and their relationships with their internal customers. Consistent supportive behavior from managers can help employee engagement by providing job resources, emotional support, and appropriate working conditions (Byrne, 2015; Luchman & Gonzalez-Morales, 2013).

Tucker (2017) asserted that managers could encourage continued learning and development by their staff by helping them identify new learning opportunities, and providing them with opportunities to connect with experts. Most manager participants invested their time in helping their staff deal with stressors and helping them with career growth options. P7 and P12 allowed staff time to pursue skills adjacent to their core skills and said, “I think the type of people you need to be able to grow an organization you have to bake time in to let them explore internally and to look at things and learn and bring something back that is different”. P8 found creative ways to help staff pursue low-cost training opportunities and by finding other roles within the organization. P9 spent a significant portion of each morning being available to staff and engaging in team and individual mentoring activities. P11 kept his team engaged by helping them acquire new skills related to their roles. Managers in the organization used stress mitigation strategies they learned as part of their HR sponsored leadership training programs. They were responsible for meeting the organization’s commitment to its customers and other stakeholders. Byrne (2015) asserted that employees see supervisors who demonstrate support for their staff and value individual employee contributions, as good role models. The elements of organization culture and employee engagement practices that remained in place allowed them to help their staff cope with the stresses during the change years.

Thus, participant responses spanning the organization’s golden years and change years provided a unique set of contexts to explore the themes that emerged and yielded information about the importance of the strategies the organization's leaders used to mitigate employee stress and reduce disengagement. The intentional deployment of employee engagement strategies occurred within the context of the organization's golden years. The strategies to mitigate employee stress and reduce disengagement, were realized to greater extent within the context of the change years. The conceptual framework theories of social exchange and planned behavior were adequate in identifying the four themes. These strategies might have useful applications to professional practices within the context of employee stress mitigation and employee engagement in other organizations.

Applications to Professional Practice

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the strategies that HR leaders used to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress. Based on the research question, an analysis of interview responses and review of company documents, I found that, when an organization provides managers and employees with the job resources they need within the framework of a mission-driven and values-based organizational culture, integrate employee engagement practices into business processes, implement transparent and honest communications practices, and the organization's managers demonstrate supportive supervisor behavior towards their staff, the organization can likely position itself to mitigate employee stress, reduce disengagement, and improve employee engagement in good and bad times. The extant literature on stress mitigation and employee and engagement supported these strategies.

The partner organization for my case study, a healthcare company, had a comprehensive approach to mitigating stress at work. The organization approached the issue of stress mitigation through the lens of employee engagement. Leaders in the organization determined that working towards employee satisfaction was necessary but insufficient for the organization. The leaders realized that they needed employees to go above and beyond their individual job roles and work collaboratively towards the organization's mission of creating a healthier world, one person at a time. Individuals with high organizational identification are more likely to voluntarily go above and beyond their job role and perform tasks that benefit the whole organization than just themselves (Lee, Park, & Koo, 2015).

The leaders designed a mission-driven and values-based, employee-centered work environment and organization culture. The organization implemented business practices that integrated this culture into their processes such as hiring, onboarding, ongoing employee training, communications, culture development, and leadership development for managers and leaders. The HR department played a central role in implementing these strategies. Bakker (2017) observed that HR practices such as creating a culture of trust and empowerment, performance development, training, career development, and ongoing appraisals influence employee engagement. The organization also involved line managers, obtained their buy-in on the initiatives, and provided them with the necessary training and development opportunities to implement employee engagement with their frontline staff. Bakker also found a positive effect of the leadership development intervention on subordinates' job characteristics and well-being compared to a control group of leaders.

The organization's strategies of (a) integrating employee engagement in business processes, (b) providing job resources to managers, (c) engaging in transparent and honest communications, and (d) relying on supportive supervisor behavior, helped mitigate employee stress by providing employees with abundant job resources such as role clarity, career opportunity, social support, job autonomy, task significance, and participatory decision making (Keating & Heslin, 2015). Shuck et al. (2015) observed that a strategy that produces high levels of employee engagement increases organizational performance through higher productivity, profitability, employee retention and customer service. Tucker (2017) noted that managers can play an important communications role to reduce employee frustrations caused by lack of direction and information by planning their communications ahead of time, sharing information as completely as allowable, and listening carefully to employee feedback. Corin and Bjork (2016) argued when organizations created good working conditions for their managers they were indirectly influencing working conditions for all their employees. Viitala et al. (2015) stated that leadership and supervisor support, participatory decision-making and social relationships were key factors contributing to wellbeing in the workplace.

However, almost all participants stressed the importance of the organization's implementation of a mission-driven and values-based organization culture, as the overarching strategy that served as the foundation from which the organization was able to implement other individual strategies. Balanescu (2017) observed that workplace atmosphere and social relationships with coworkers motivate employees in their job roles while a work culture that encourages empowers employees and builds trust in leaders, creates a sense of commitment to the organization. Shuck, Collins, Rocco and Diaz (2016) noted that organization leaders and managers can create and maintain a culture where employee engagement can occur. The resulting improvement in the organization's employee engagement scores as measured using the Gallup Q12 survey rose from a grand mean of 3.82 in 2008 to 4.22 in 2015 on a scale of 0 to 5.

Any organization exists within its community. Engaged employees are part of their community and their sense of engagement and commitment to the organization could have implications for social change. The following section outlines the implications of reduced stress and improved employee engagement on social change within the community.

Implications for Social Change

These findings on stress mitigation strategies and employee engagement strategies could help organizations reduce employee absenteeism and presenteeism. Jain, Giga, and Cooper (2013) found that when employees show commitment to, and perceive commitment from their organization, the relationship reduces the negative impact of organizational stressors on the employees' health and wellbeing. Cheng et al. (2014) stated that supportive supervisors improve employee wellbeing by helping them cope better with stress at work.

The results could also engender positive social change by reducing individuals' risk of morbidity and mortality caused by stress, leading to a reduction in healthcare costs for communities. Jackson (2014) observed that health claims related to hypertension, heart disease, depression and anxiety amplified the socioeconomic impacts of work related stress. Reducing work related stress and employee disengagement can improve employees' wellbeing (Viitala et al., 2015) and their work life interference (Viotti & Converso, 2016). The following section details recommendations for action by the organization and other organizations that may consider implementing employee engagement strategies.

Recommendations for Action

Many study participants reported that ambiguity of mission and objectives, and lack of role clarity were causing stress and disengagement among employees. The organization's leaders might consider implementing a comprehensive communications plan that clearly presents the parent company's mission, and the role that various divisions and teams within the organization play in achieving that vision. They might consider utilizing the available set of change management and communications practices developed by the HR department over time.

Given the dynamic nature of business environments in which organizations exist, senior executives and HR leaders in other organizations could consider a proactive implementation of similar strategies to identify opportunities to mitigate employee work place stress, reduce disengagement, and improve employee engagement and commitment to the organization. Leaders could engage with researchers on employee engagement to stay abreast of latest research on implementation outcomes. They could partner with organizations like Gallup to implement a data-driven employee engagement strategy.

The leaders could experiment with these strategies in a relatively insulated division in the company to understand costs and benefits before full implementation. However, these strategies required significant, long-term investments and therefore might be available to a limited set of organizations. Organizations that consider themselves either as startups, or large companies with many geographically dispersed divisions, would need to address differing sets of challenges in implementing these strategies. Byrne (2015) cautioned against using a single approach to stress mitigation and employee engagement because organizational environments are likely heterogeneous in terms of organizational climate, job characteristics, and leadership style.

The benefits of implementing such strategies appear to be attractive, nonetheless. Workplaces that demonstrate high levels of engagement potentially may attract top talent (Joyner, 2015). Kaliannan and Adjovu (2015) supported Joyner and stated that organizations with high levels of engagement among employees experienced a 19% increase in net income and a 28% increase in earnings per share growth while those with low engagement levels experienced more than 32% drop in net income and an 11% decline in EPS. The organization had not been able to objectively relate their employee engagement initiatives to business outcomes, however. I propose recommendations for future research that could address this and other limitations of the study.

Recommendations for Further Research

I conducted this case study research in a single healthcare organization in Franklin, Tennessee. Recommendations for future research include the following:

- Conduct a quantitative study to determine the relationship between improvement in employee engagement score as the independent variable and reduction in healthcare costs for an organization as the dependent variable.
- Conduct a follow-up case study after 12 months to understand the resiliency of the employee engagement strategy implementation in a post-acquisition scenario.
- Conduct a comparative case study across two or more similar organizations to compare their approaches to mitigating employee stress and reducing employee disengagement.
- Conduct research on employee stress mitigation and reducing employee disengagement in other types of healthcare organizations such as health plans and hospitals, using other conceptual frameworks such as social identity theory, organizational identity theory, and conservation of resources theory.

These recommendations may provide organizations additional insights into employee engagement practices and the long-term economic benefits of creating an organization culture that allows managers to develop productive, engaged, and committed employees.

Reflections

I enjoyed the Walden University Doctor Business Administration (DBA) Program immensely. The terminal nature of the degree and its online format required a lot of discipline, rigor, and commitment on my part even though the university provided many resources including my chair, the committee, the research center, the library, and a cohort of students on the same journey. I learned what it means to be a researching professional. I also learned to listen.

The proposal approval process felt most stressful and yet, very rewarding. I loved carrying out the literature review and becoming a scholar on my topic of interest. The data collection stage of the study was the most humbling experience of all. I realized that I stood on the shoulders of giants whose research helped guide me through the research and interview questions.

As an experienced leader in a healthcare organization, even though I empathized with the participants as they shared their perspectives on stress and engagement, work culture, supervisor behavior and other job-related characteristics, I had to bracket my feelings to ensure that my probing questions did not become leading questions. I am happy that the participants got to tell their stories and present representation of their realities. During the literature review process, I had developed an academic perspective on employee stress mitigation and employee engagement. My point of view was that organizations needed to do more to improve the conditions that reduced stress and improved engagement for their employees. During the analysis process, I realized that while organizations and their leaders do have a significant role to play, engagement outcomes are likely better when organizations and their employees co-create the work culture that enables employee engagement and commitment to the organization, however. Employees' voices are equally important. As I conclude with my findings, I feel that this journey has made me a better person and I hope to be a better leader of people as a result of this research study.

Conclusion

Stress, whether it is work-related or from a person's life outside of work, causes an increase in employee disengagement and a decline in employee productivity and workplace performance. Disengaged U.S. workers cost the country's businesses $225 billion annually in lost workdays and overtime wages. In contrast, organizations with high levels of engagement among employees experienced a 19% increase in net income and a 28% increase in earnings per share growth while those with low engagement levels experienced more than 32% drop in net income and an 11% decline in EPS.

I explored strategies that HR leaders within a single healthcare organization in Franklin, Tennessee, used to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress and identified four themes related to business practice. The four themes were (a) integration of employee engagement practices into culture and business processes, (b) providing managers with the job resources they need, (c) intentionality, transparency, and honesty in communications, and (d) relying on supportive supervisor behavior. Given the dynamic nature of business environments in which organizations exist, senior executives and HR leaders should examine the feasibility of proactively implementing similar strategies to mitigate employee work place stress, reduce disengagement, and improve employee engagement and commitment to the organization.

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Appendix A: Data Collection Instrument: Interview Questionnaire

Participant code/classification #: ______________________

1. What is your role within the organization?
2. What are your responsibilities in your role?
3. What strategies did you use to increase employee engagement and commitment to the organization?
4. What strategies did you use to reduce stress in the workplace?
5. How did you assess the effectiveness of these strategies on decreasing EE stress and increasing EE engagement?
6. What barriers/challenges did you experience in implementing these strategies?
7. How did you overcome these barriers/challenges?
8. What other topics that we did not cover in our discussion would you like to discuss that can contribute to my understanding of the strategies your organization utilized to reduce employee stress and increase employee engagement?

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