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Strategies Small Business Leaders Use to Increase Employee Engagement

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Akeia Simmons

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Walden University
2018

Abstract

Strategies Small Business Leaders Use to Increase Employee Engagement

by

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MS, Ashford University, 2013

BS, University of Phoenix, 2010

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

June 2018

Abstract

When organizational leaders create cultures that foster employee engagement, the leaders experience multiple benefits such as enhanced organizational performance, increased profitability, and improved retention rates. Although small business leaders must create and sustain atmospheres that nurture employee engagement to experience maximized success, 85% of organizational leaders struggle with executing strategies that increase engagement. The purpose of this qualitative, single case study was to explore strategies that small business leaders use to increase employee engagement. Servant leadership theory was the conceptual framework chosen for this study. The population included 3 small business leaders of a coffee shop located in Birmingham, AL. A review of company documents, as well as member checking of initial interview transcripts, helped to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the interpretations. The final interpretations consisted of 2 main themes: creating a culture that enhances and sustains employee engagement and demonstrating leadership characteristics that increase employee engagement. Employee engagement increases when leaders use strategies that include effective employee development strategies, incentives and rewards, deliberate hiring practices, effective communication, leading by example, and leveraging employee innovation and ownership. These findings influence positive social change by uncovering strategies necessary to increase employee engagement, because employees who engage in the workplace display stronger forms of attachment to businesses, develop a significant bond within the community, and experience improved family interactions.

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Dedication

God, this one right here. . . is all for you!

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

The most productive and functional organizations include those that possess employees who engage physically, cognitively, and emotionally in their work (Storm, Sears, & Kelly, 2014). In fact, scholars often view employee engagement as the prerequisite to organizational success (Anand, 2017). Employees are more likely to become more productive and perform better when they become engaged in their workplace (Engelbrecht, Heine, & Mahembe, 2014). Researchers have indicated that a positive correlation exists between employee engagement and organizational performance, profitability, productivity, employee retention, customer loyalty, and safety (Popli & Rizvi, 2015). The primary characteristics that create these results often remain limited by a lack of congruity concerning employee engagement and the inability to distinguish it from other closely related topics (Gupta & Kumar, 2015). Gupta and Kumar suggested that employee engagement is not a stand-alone concept and to obtain maximum results, leaders must understand the variables that influence the outcome. To create an atmosphere that strengthens employee engagement, organizational leaders must learn to focus on developing a culture that supports employees in a way that keeps them motivated and positive, not just about their jobs but concerning the whole entity (Strom et al., 2014).

In this study, I explored the strategies of small business leaders who successfully created work environments that increased employee engagement to gain an understanding of potential techniques leaders can employ to experience similar results. I conducted a qualitative exploratory single case study; researchers apply this research technique when

desiring to view certain strategies in a real-life setting (Bettis, Gambardella, Helfat, & Mitchell, 2014). The implication of this research study includes the identification of effective strategies that increase employee engagement and challenges leaders may experience during the process.

Background of the Problem

Achieving high measurements of employee engagement promotes talent retention, fosters employee trust, improves organizational performance, and enhances stakeholder value (Bhuvanaiah & Raya, 2015). Countless small business leaders struggle with getting employees to engage in the workplace (Keating & Heslin, 2015). After conducting several studies, researchers uncovered that in 2014, 31% of employees engaged in the workplace, 51% of employees failed to engage, and 17.5% of employees were actively disengaged (Guaspari, 2015).

Small business leaders must become attentive to the employee disengagement phenomenon because the effects go beyond the direct employee and supervisor (Govindarajo, Kumar, & Ramulu, 2014). Countless organizational leaders worldwide seek to find ways to reach employees' sentiments, inspirations, and emotional state to boost their commitment levels regarding their work assignment and the company (Anand, 2017). The measure in which employees engage has a direct influence on overall organizational performance (Anitha, 2014). Small business leaders must determine the factors that drive high engagement and the features that cause employees to disengage (Carter & Baghurst, 2014). Understanding these key engagement drivers helps to

enhance performance and create an organizational culture that breeds commitment and performance success (Carter & Baghurst, 2014).

Problem Statement

Employee disengagement negatively affects organizational outcomes (Purcell, 2014). Organizational leaders that maintained low measurements of employee engagement displayed a 40% decrease in profit in comparison to organizations with high levels of workplace engagement (Jha & Kumar, 2016). The general business problem is that employee disengagement prohibits the maximization of organizational growth and profitability. The specific business problem is that some small business leaders lack strategies to increase employee engagement.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies some small business leaders use to increase employee engagement. The targeted population consisted of a small franchise located in Birmingham, Alabama, selected because leadership employed strategies that increased employee engagement. The implication for positive social change included the potential to aid organizational leaders to develop a culture that increases levels of profitability, productivity, and retention by improving engagement within the workplace.

Nature of the Study

I selected a qualitative method for this study. Researchers choose the qualitative method when the intent is to explore responses in an uncontrolled and natural environment, as this data derives from nonquantifiable or nonstatistically collected

sources (Jervis & Drake, 2014). Researchers use the qualitative method because of the flexibility and subject interpretation gained from it, which is required to provide understanding for complex phenomena (Singh, 2015). Through the quantitative method, researchers seek to identify the meanings and processes as understood by the individuals affected by the phenomena (Gergen, Josselson, & Freeman, 2015), but that was not the intent of this study. When researchers aim to combine the quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain overall findings from a composite study, they use the mixed method to accomplish this task (Sparkes, 2014). Although researchers use the mixed approach to generate evidence that supports valid conclusions (Sparkes, 2014), the qualitative method allows researchers to position themselves to use active listening, observation, and participation techniques to focus on why and how the phenomenon occurs (Drabble, Trocki, Salcedo, Walker, & Korcha, 2016).

Researchers can choose from various research designs when conducting a qualitative study. Qualitative designs include (a) phenomenology, (b) ground theory, (c) ethnography, (d) narrative research, and (e) case study (Yin, 2014). When researchers use the phenomenological design, they position themselves to examine the lived occurrences of participants who have experienced a phenomenon (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, & McKibbin, 2015). The intent of this study was to focus on the steps the participants took to experience success, not the meaning of the experience itself. Tetnowski (2015) indicated that researchers use the grounded theory when the focus is on insights of the participants regarding process or interaction. The grounded theory encompasses the development of one or more theories as a systematic methodology,

which exposes additional theories throughout the data collection process (Yin, 2015). Because of these factors, I eliminated grounded theory as an option for this study, as its structure was out of alignment with the intent of the research. Through the ethnographic design, researchers can study human groups and explore how they establish and maintain a culture (Tetnowski, 2015), which made it unfit for this study because the focus was on small business leaders and not a cultural group. Narrative researchers concentrate on the participants' experience through scholarly descriptions, which gives the readers a sense of being a part of the experience (Yin, 2015); this process may exclude relevant themes from participants. Choosing to use the narrative design prohibited the fulfillment of the primary objective for this study.

A case study design was most appropriate for this study because through the structure of this design, scholars can identify common themes from retrieved data to address a topic (Yin, 2014). The structure of case studies positions researchers to explore a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Tetnowski, 2015). Tetnowski (2015) encouraged researchers to use case studies when exploring this subject because it allows researchers to discover how leaders influence employee engagement, as opposed to only documenting whether an increase of employee engagement takes place.

Research Question

What strategies do small business leaders use to increase employee engagement?

Interview Questions

The objective of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies some small business leaders use to increase employee engagement. I asked the participants the following open-ended interview questions.

1. What strategies do you use to increase employee engagement?
2. What metrics did you employ to examine the efficacy of the strategies?
3. What barriers did you encounter when first attempting to increase employee engagement?
4. How did you address each of the significant challenges or barriers?
5. What strategies have you found most effective for motivating your employees to perform better?
6. How have you seen employee engagement drive the level of productivity?
7. What additional factors that we have not discussed have contributed to your success in this area?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is a tool that helps researchers compare study findings to the theory (Ivey, 2015). Through the conceptual framework, scholars can create a structure to collect data and address the research question (Turner, 2015). Researchers encounter a need to communicate ideas and identify concepts and linkages that need understanding; the conceptual framework meets this need (Ivey, 2015). Servant leadership theory was the conceptual framework chosen for this study. Carter and

Baghurst (2014) studied the influence of leadership on employee engagement through the lens of servant leadership, which justified the framework for this study.

Servant Leadership Theory

Greenleaf (2002) founded the concept of servant leadership on the premise that leaders who maintain the ability to motivate followers are those who focus less on gratifying their personal desires and prioritize the fulfillment of their employees. Greenleaf coined the phrase “servant leadership” in 1970 in a published essay, which introduced the concept to the academic environment (Center for Servant Leadership, 2016). Servant leadership describes motivated leaders interested in making positive differences in the lives of others (Du Plessis, Wakelin, & Nel, 2015). I selected servant leadership for my conceptual framework because Winston and Fields (2014) indicated that servant leaders create ethical work climates, where employees engage in behaviors that increase organizational engagement through the increase of organizational commitment.

Operational Definitions

The following definitions can assist readers to obtain a common perspective on these general terms. The intent of this section is to generate an understanding of these terms for the use of this doctoral study.

Employee disengagement: Disengaged employees go through the motions. These employees tend to respond in a perfunctory manner, which prohibits them from operating in their full identity, keeping their thoughts and feelings from manifesting in their work (Keating & Heslin, 2015).

Employee engagement: One of the most complex issues surrounding the concept of employee engagement is that employee engagement means different things to different scholars, and therefore no clear agreed upon definition exists (Saks & Gruman, 2014). For this study, I used the measurement that employees commit to accomplish the goals of an organization (Kahn, 1990).

Not engaged: Describes employees who lack motivation and are less likely to invest discretionary efforts towards accomplishing organizational goals or outcomes (Gupta & Sharma, 2016). This definition encompassed employees who present their bodies, but fail to present their emotions. These employees have the potential to damage the organization by causing significant morale issues by discussing their unhappiness and speaking poorly of the organization to their peers (Carter & Baghurst, 2014).

Servant leadership: Servant leadership is a leadership style that forces leaders to deny personal necessities, inclinations, and/or intentions so that they can focus and satisfy the primary concern of their followers (Ljungholm, 2016).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions and limitations within a study identify items outside of a researcher's control (Turner, 2015). Delimitations indicate the boundaries of the study (Thomas, 2015).

Assumptions

Several assumptions existed within this study. Assumptions allow researchers to identify assumed truths that exist within a study, but these truths remain unverifiable (Turner, 2015). Koch, Niesz, and McCarthy (2014) suggested that assumptions are

assertions within a study that researchers consider truths without verification. One assumption within this study is that every participant provided honest and open responses to all questions asked. Participants maintain the ability to give dishonest answers for many reasons; one reason is the fear of lack of confidentiality. To decrease this risk, I provided each participant with a consent form assuring confidentiality of all data reported. Another assumption within this study was that the sample population possessed the ability to provide information in the interview that is pertinent to the study topic and contributed to business knowledge of the topic.

Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses outside the control of the researcher in a study (Matza et al., 2015). One limitation within this study was the time restriction and limited time availability of the participant pool; this potentially causes challenges for researchers to meet and collect data from the necessary individuals. A geographical limitation also existed within this study, as the sample selected for this qualitative single case study was restricted to Birmingham, Alabama. The last limitation was that the validity of the research relied on the responses obtained through the interviewing process. The data collected from participants determined the outcome, and the contributors filtered this information through their personal perception of their experiences. Although interviews were not the sole source of data, the information provided through these interviews played a critical role in the foundation of the study.

Delimitations

Delimitations consist of the boundaries or scope of the study (Thomas, Silverman, & Nelson, 2015). I interviewed three small business leaders of a coffee shop in Birmingham, Alabama. The bounds of this study consisted of (a) a geographical location restricted to Birmingham, Alabama and (b) a sample size of leaders of a coffee shop who increased employee engagement within the workplace. The geographical boundaries restricted the study, as the information gained may not necessarily apply to other types of businesses or locations.

Significance of the Study

The objective of this study was to make an eminent contribution to business practice and produce a positive social change.

Contribution to Business Practice

Gupta and Sharma (2016) suggested that improving levels of engagement within organizations helps to develop positive attitudes within employees necessary for promoting organizational effectiveness and acquiring higher productivity. Researchers indicated that employees who display signs of high engagement within the workplace tend to accomplish goals of the organization, enhance productivity, and more likely to meet the expectations of customers (Alagaraja & Shuck, 2015). Conclusions from this qualitative single case study could help small business leaders to identify strategies to increase employee engagement, improve productivity, and maximize performance. Existing and aspiring small business leaders could benefit from the information as it may help them to develop a solidified management technique; strong management techniques

enable the maximization of employee engagement and in return, organizational leaders experience higher returns on investments (Gupta & Sharma, 2016).

Despite the availability of significant research focused on the role of employee engagement and the connection to managements' desired outcomes, many small business leaders fail to understand the specific strategies that drive engagement (Bhuvanaiah & Raya, 2015). Bhuvanaiah and Raya (2015) indicated that attractive opportunities with increased compensation and incentive benefits typically lead to improved employee performance; however, a shift in literature must transpire from financial supplements to the psychological fulfillment aspects. The purpose of conducting this study was to fill this gap by identifying the strategies that drive employee engagement and highlight the importance of creating a culture that sustains this behavior.

Implications for Social Change

A primary focus of small business leaders is to build passionate, inclusive, and multi-generational teams; therefore, scholars are drawn to the subject of employee engagement, as workplace engagement is a key driver to accomplish this task (Dagher, Chapa, & Junaid, 2015). Employee engagement stands as one of the most vital components for human resource management efficiency (Ergle, 2015). Ergle (2015) suggested that small business leaders who build a culture that maintains engaged employees not only maintain healthier teams, but healthier organizations.

One critical component of an individual's life, which helps to develop personal satisfaction, is place of employment (Secara, 2014). Enhancing employee engagement within the workplace may foster a more productive outcome and result in higher goal

attainment, which may be instrumental to adding value to the local community. The results of this study might contribute to social change by assisting small business leaders to become critical, creative, and reflective thinkers when creating cultures that initiate and sustain employee engagement. Data from this study may provide small business leaders with foundational knowledge required to recognize disengagement within the organization and implement corrective procedures to experience improvement.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The synthesis of an academic literature review provides a comprehensive overview of available information concerning a topic (Baker, 2016). The literature review gives an account of published literature surrounding the subject. According to Adedayo (2016), the purpose of the literature review is for the researcher to reveal information relevant to the research question and identify information published in journal articles, newspaper articles, books, historical records, government reports, theses and dissertations. In this section, I convey knowledge about published literature, identify gaps, compare viewpoints, and detect the strengths and weaknesses of past and current literature concerning strategies organizational leaders use to increase employee engagement. The intent of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies small business leaders use to increase employee engagement. The research question steering this study was: What strategies do small business leaders use to increase employee engagement?

The databases that I used to conduct research for the literature review were Google Scholar, Emerald Management Journals, ProQuest, LexisNexis Academic, and

Management & Organization Studies. Key words searched included *employee engagement, leadership, servant leadership, employee engagement strategies, characteristics of successful leaders, leaders of small business, engaging in small businesses, small businesses, employee disengagement, employee satisfaction, and the role of leadership*. I chose these keywords because they helped identify critical strategies, knowledge, and techniques some successful small business leaders use to maintain high levels of employee engagement.

I selected the preceding keywords to detect skills, knowledge, and strategies some small business leaders use to increase employee engagement. The publication dates comply with the 3-5-year requirement for the study. I used 281 references in the study. Two hundred and forty-four (86.83%) references were peer reviewed, and 231 (88.3%) references were less than 5 years old from the anticipated date of Chief Academic Officer approval.

Conceptual Framework

Servant leadership constantly captures the attention of many scholars, and the concept of servant leadership is in a consistent mode of evolution. The evolution of servant leadership in the academic community has gradually progressed, yet room for progression is present (Berger, 2014). These gaps have allowed researchers to offer multiple opinions with various similarities and differences relating to servant leadership. Although no single model or concept of servant leadership exists, numerous conceptual models and related measurement instruments of servant leadership have emerged (Berger, 2014).

Servant Leadership

Greenleaf (1977) founded the concept of servant leadership on the premise that leaders who maintain the ability to motivate followers are those who focus less on gratifying their personal desires and prioritize the fulfillment of their followers over themselves. In 1970, Greenleaf coined the theory in a published essay titled, “The Servant as Leader.” Greenleaf (1970) based the concept of servant leadership on the assertion that leaders who motivate followers the best consist of those who understand that the most important factor is not the need of the leader but the need of those who are following.

Servant leadership derived from an inclination to serve others, and its primary focal point is not the satisfaction of the leaders, but the development of the followers (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leadership transpires when leaders accept the role of servants with their following and maintain the mindset that selfishness and self-interest are not motivations; instead, servant leaders put their focus on others (Begzadeh & Nedaei, 2017). Song, Park, and Kang (2015) developed a similar mindset concerning the concept and suggested that servant leadership refers to a leadership style in which leaders surpass their personal self-interests and focus on serving followers with the intent of fostering individual growth and success. Ljungholm (2016) suggested that leaders, who find themselves operating as servant leaders, typically aim to annihilate their personal inclinations, desires, necessities, and intentions to foremost gratify the primary concern—their followers. Servant leaders who establish for-profit entities display managerial proficiency and coherence in helping followers tackle daily workplace tasks in a way that

displays their undivided commitment to the team's success (Popescu & Ciurlau, 2016). Servant leaders concentrate on enhancing the well-being of the employees by encouraging individuals to take initiative and design their job assessments (Harju, Schaufeli, & Hakanen, 2018). Ozyilmaz and Cicek (2015) believed that this commitment helps leaders to establish a culture where followers learn to appreciate the synchronization and solidified team structure. Leaders use servant leadership behaviors to create and set the vision for the organization (Peachey, Burton, Wells, & Chung, 2018). Additionally, Peachey et al. (2018) indicated that leaders meet the need for autonomy, relatedness, and competence through servant leadership.

The concept of servant leadership has consistently attracted the attention of scholars (Irving & Berndt, 2017). The differences of opinion concerning the topic appear when reviewing the effectiveness of the character of servant leaders in the workplace. Some researchers question the strength and validity of the concept of servant leadership. Bryant and Brown (2014) offered an opinion of uncertainty concerning servant leadership and questioned whether servant leadership is a legitimate means toward organizational success. Bryant and Brown also questioned whether servant leadership would be effective in this highly competitive economic world. The argument of some theorists was that servant leadership is a model cushioned with soft emotions and holds no business strategy (Sipe & Frick, 2015). Carter and Beal (2014), in contrast, noted that servant leadership holds potential to positively influence organizational processes and characteristics, increase the trust in organizational leaders, improve citizenship behavior, enhances collaboration, and amplify team efficiency. Servant leaders aim to provide

employees with positive work experiences by assisting subordinates to grow and succeed while behaving in an ethical way (Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2018).

Servant leaders produce a positive influence on follower well-being and the overall efficiency of individuals and teams (Van Dierendonck et al., 2017). Behaviors that servant leaders display maintain the ability to forecast employee organizational engagement behaviors both indirectly and directly by increasing commitment (Winston & Fields, 2014). Multiple scholars agreed that servant leadership positively influences satisfaction of the followers' psychological needs, organizational commitment, empowerment, promotion focus, job satisfaction, and creative behaviors (Van Dierendonck, Stam, Boersma, Windt, & Alkema, 2014). Enthusiasts of servant leadership typically support the theory because it corroborates and identifies their personal leadership style and philosophy, yet theorists have failed to require proof that the leadership style is effective in relation to engagement (Bryant & Brown, 2014). To understand the full influences of the behaviors of servant leadership, Lapointe and Vandenberghe (2018) conducted a study to identify how employees respond to servant leaders. Lapointe and Vandenberghe concluded that behaviors of servant leaders foster an employee's sense of emotional connection to the organization, strengthens loyalty, and enhances employees' perceived value of the organization.

Many theorists, such as Rachmawati and Lantu (2014), considered servant leadership a paradox, as the concept enforces the idea that one individual is a leader and a servant at the same time. Scholars have investigated this potential paradox of servant leadership, yet have failed to attain a consensus of a theoretical model (Berger, 2014).

The lack of empirical evidence has caused various scholars to view servant leadership as a movement, instead of an actual theory (Berger, 2014).

Van Dierendonck (2011) offered a different view of the theory and identified the limitations concerning servant leadership, which has caused researchers to respond and produce several definitions, interpretations, models, and methods to establish the theory of servant leadership. The rush to define and measure servant leadership has caused academics to fail to properly construct the theory or provide an adequate evaluation (Berger, 2014). According to Berger (2014), to advance servant leadership within mainstream leadership, more complex research designs and comprehensive explorations of antecedents and results are required. The information that this study provides may help scholars and leaders to understand best practices to applying servant leadership strategies.

Characteristics of Servant Leadership

Various scholars have attempted to capture the essence and behaviors of servant leaders. Tiaki (2014) considered Spears a chief expert; researchers heavily cite Spears when referencing servant leadership. Spears was the first researcher to classify the actual characteristics of a servant leader, after spending significant time with Greenleaf; this later qualified him for the role of the director of the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership (Tiaki, 2014). Spears (1995) conducted a 3-year study of Greenleaf's speeches, writings, and reflections, which led to the production of the 10 characteristics of a servant leader. Within this development, Spears captured the characteristics critical to the development of servant leaders and their influence on the practice of servant

leadership (Spears, 2010). Spears (2010) listed the 10 characteristics of servant leadership as listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and the ability to build community.

Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson (2008), described servant leaders as those who focus on (a) ethical behavior, (b) emotional healing, (c) putting subordinates first, (d) success and development of subordinates, (e) employee empowerment, (f) community value, and (g) conceptual tools that exceed other leadership approaches. Jit, Shekhar, and Kawatra (2016) offered a different view of servant leadership characteristics and suggested that the model manifests in various dimensions of a value-laden model and extends these fashions into other pro-follower characteristics. These characteristics include (a) motivation to serve, (b) humility, (c) persuasive approach, (d) care and concern for followers, (e) listening, (f) ensuring follower development, (h) sharing in decision making, and (i) promoting a sense of community (Jit et al., 2016).

Servant Leadership Influence on Employee Engagement

Researchers have conducted only a handful of studies on the influence that styles of leadership have on employee engagement (Breevart et al., 2014). Although leadership is popular in literature, followers remain virtually invisible, and though employee engagement explicitly connects to followers' intellectual and emotional commitment to an organization, many scholars have ignored the moderating influences of individual follower characteristics in engagement research (Zhang, Avery, & Bergsteiner, 2014).

Strom, Sears, and Kelly (2014) suggested that because the concept of leadership styles naturally arises in organizational settings, it demands academic attention.

Researchers have repeatedly studied the concept of servant leadership and the diverse type of favorable team, individual, and organizational outcomes that link to the construct (Coetzer, Bussin, & Geldenhuys, 2017). Researchers have supported the notion that leadership styles have a direct influence on the measure of trust employees develop in their organization, levels of optimism, and work engagement (Da Beer & Stander, 2015). After conducting research, De Clercq, Bouckenoghe, Raja, and Matsyborska (2014) indicated that servant leadership directly enhances employee work engagement as well as increases levels of goal congruence and social interaction.

The concept of servant leadership has been concerning for many, because it turns the chain of command upside-down (Mertel & Brill, 2015). The traditional hierarchy suggests that the customer and staff reside on the bottom of the pyramid and the leadership sits at the top. The notion to focus less on leaders does not reduce the significance of leaders attending to organizational outcomes; however, the servant leader believes that the method to accomplish organizational goals is through prioritizing focus on servicing followers (Irving & Berndt, 2017).

Numerous scholars have supported the idea of servant leadership positively increasing employee engagement, but other scholars have expressed concerns about the multiple gaps that exist surrounding the concept (De Clercq et al., 2014). Ozyilmaz and Cicek (2015) noted that leadership theorists focused on a leadership first approach, where leaders are the foundational player in the organization and followers simply follow. To

gain additional clarity, scholars must further examine and address the effects of servant leadership on diverse employee attitudes and workplace behaviors (Ozyilmaz & Cicek, 2015).

Popli and Rizvi (2015) took interest in the topic of employee engagement and suggested that appropriate styles of leadership drive engagement and generate atmospheres that enhance service performance. The way followers perceive leadership behavior directly influences levels of engagement (Zhang et al., 2014). Strom et al. (2014) indicated that organizational headships that offer high quality leaders, in a sensible and orderly work environment, hold the most potential for enhancing desired levels of employee engagement.

Grisaffe, VanMeter, and Chonko (2016) supported the idea of servant leadership positively influencing employee engagement and presented a unique observation of its measurement of success, yet researchers' doubts have remained. Grisaffe et al. noted that a lack of clarity has subsisted due to a deficient amount of empirical research on servant leadership, which has caused problems with content validity, discriminate validity, and construct validity. Without these confirmations, valid measurements of the construct remain compromised (Grisaffe et al., 2016). With a difference of opinion, Liden, Wayne, Liao, and Meuser (2014) noted that studies have displayed a consistent pattern of how the behavior of servant leaders contribute to building ethical behavior and enhance social responsibility among followers.

Rival Theories

Scholars have reviewed the concept of servant leadership as a multidimensional theory that encompasses all facets of leadership (Coetzer et al., 2017). Coetzer et al. (2017) suggested that although the characteristics show multiple similarities with other leadership theories, servant leadership differs, as it proposes a more meaningful way for leadership to encourage sustainable results for individuals, organizations, and societies. Grisaffe et al. (2016) noted that researchers have failed to demonstrate what is distinctive about the concept of servant leadership and what parts merely overlap with the other leadership styles. When comparing leadership styles, one variation that stands out concerning servant leadership is how the focus surrounding the theory has remained on individual integrity and the formation of strong long-term relationships with its followers (Bambale, 2014). Other leadership theories have included providing support to followers, as the name indicates, servant leadership has a strong emphasis on leading through serving others (Bambale, 2014).

Transformational leadership. Researchers can observe a phenomenon using several theoretical lenses. I initially considered transformational leadership for the grounding of this study. Unlike servant leadership, transformational leadership is a popular concept in literature. In fact, transformational leadership is the most popular research topic in leadership literature (Washington, Sutton, & Sauser, 2014). Washington et al. (2014) explained that researchers have conducted more studies on transformational leadership than all other popular leadership theories combined.

Transformational leadership is a form of leadership that creates an environment that brings both leaders and followers together to solve problems, manage change together, and create new ways of doing work (Choi, Kim, Ullah, & Kang, 2016). The transformational leader does not take charge in every situation, but communicates the vision, considers individuals, encourages intellectual stimulation, and motivates the team to be innovative while taking measurements to decrease risk (Wang, Tsai, & Tsai, 2014). Choi et al. (2016) explained that transformational leadership is an ethical leadership style that incorporates a leader's ability to promote intellectual stimulation through inspiration.

Some theorists believe that transformational leadership and servant leadership maintain similarities, as both concepts emphasize the necessity of inspiring followers to perform beyond the call of duty concerning the vision of the organization (Shima, Park, & Eomc, 2016). Grisaffe et al. (2016) offered a distinctive perception when comparing the two leadership styles and stated that the two shared a direct linkage, but suggested that the idiosyncratic nature of servant leadership hierarchically derived from transformational characteristics. Other researchers have implied that the two concepts possess few similarities, yet maintain major differences that researchers need to identify across organizational performance (Grisaffe et al., 2016).

Both transformational leadership and servant leadership maintain the ability to enhance employee engagement; however, they differ in the way the leader exerts the influence (Van Dierendonck et al., 2014). The behavior that transformational leaders exhibit positively relates to followers' daily engagement (Breevaart et al., 2014). Matthew and Gupta (2015) offered a similar inclination while identifying four basic

characteristics of transformational leaders. The first identified characteristic is that they maintain idealized influence, as the leaders operate as role models. The second characteristic is transformational leaders can motivate through inspiration, where the leaders inspire through motivation and team spirit. Transformational leaders also have intellectual stimulation, as the leader stimulates innovation and creativity. Last, transformational leaders maintain individualized consideration, where the leader supports and mentors each follower (Matthew & Gupta, 2015).

Like servant leaders, transformational leaders support the notion of follower imitation of leadership behavior (Bambale, 2014). Bambale (2014) suggested that while transformational and servant leaders both focus on the followers, servant leaders pay closer attention to servicing the followers, and transformational leaders concentrate on ushering followers toward a desired goal. Other researchers, like Allen et al. (2016), expressed similar opinions. Allen et al. indicated that the more researchers focus on these topics, the better positioned scholars will be to understand the similarities that lie within the structure of the leadership styles.

Authentic leadership. Although conceptual and empirical links between authentic leadership and followers' thinking, behaviors, and performance outcomes appear undeveloped, the subject matter continued to increase interest in practitioner and academic literature (Zhang et al., 2014). Joo and Nimon (2014) considered authentic leadership a supportive leadership role in which the behaviors promote followers' feelings as if their personal wellbeing is a major concern. Some scholars tend to maintain a genuine interest in developing followers' strengths, creating a positive and supportive

organizational culture, and broadening thought patterns. When followers perceive that leaders demonstrate this type of concern, they tend to maintain higher levels of engagement (Joo & Nimon, 2014).

Even with the abundant contribution of literature about authentic leadership, measuring its effectiveness is elusive (Cerne, Dimovski, Maric, Penger, & Skerlavai, 2014). Scholars have suggested to measure the effectiveness of authentic leadership in various ways, such as exploring leaders' personality traits, examining authentic behavior, or relying primarily on the perception of others (Crene et al., 2014). Yagil and Liraz (2014) suggested that although researchers claimed that authentic leadership enhances leader-follower relationships and increases engagement, little understanding exists concerning the correlation between the two subjects.

Like the comparison of transformational and servant leadership, multiple scholars noted that authentic leadership also share similarities with servant leadership (Ling, Liu, & Wu, 2016). Authentic leadership and servant leadership possess multiple common outcome variables, such as employee work satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviors, and employee performance (Ling et al, 2016). Ling et al. (2016) concluded that servant leaders possess a broader scope than authentic leaders, whose focus is on self-development and followers compared to servant leaders, who emphasize responsibilities to the organization, customers, society, and to their stakeholders. Scheepers and Elstob (2016) noted that the character of authentic leaders allows them to find an anchor in their own deep sense of self, understand their personal values and beliefs and stand on that system, which benefits employees and strengthens engagement.

Scheepers and Elstob (2016) stated that researchers should further study the influence of contextual variables on the relationship between authentic leaders and their followers in relation to authentic leadership.

Small businesses Background

The definition of small business leaders varies within the research environment (Turner & Endres, 2017). No accepted definition of a small business in journalism exists, but the range of workers within a small business number from 1 to 500 (Turner & Endres, 2017). For this study, the definition of a small business included a business owner who started a privately owned small business, employed 50 or fewer employees, and took on financial risk in search of profits (see Lawrence, 2014). Scholars have invested time to research how risk and profits vary in small businesses and how the enhancement of organizational performance lowers risk and increases profits (Bengesi & Roux, 2014; Halabi & Lussier, 2014).

Understanding the strategies that lead small business leaders into success is critical because small business leaders account for a significant portion of job creation in the United States (Artinger & Powell, 2015). Hess and Cottrell (2016) stated that small businesses are the backbone of the United States' economy. Avidar (2016) indicated that new types of organizations and initiatives emerged in the workplace. In 2016, The United States Small Business Administration (SBA) acknowledged that small business leaders encompassed 99.9% of all organizations within the United States, employed 48% of the private sector employees, and provided 41.2% of the United States' private sector

payroll. According to the Small Business Administration, 50% of small businesses fail within the first year.

Small businesses typically experience fewer resources and organizational structure than larger companies (McDowell, Harris, & Geho, 2016). McDowell et al. (2016) indicated that this lack of resources gives small business leaders leeway to make different decisions and add a more adaptive planning strategy. Turner and Endres (2017) stated that many business leaders fail to recognize strategies that cause success in the organization and do not know the proper decisions to make. With a similar opinion, Mutnura (2016) suggested that small business leaders must understand the importance of internal controls to provide higher levels of assurance that achieve desired operating measurements, financial desires, and compliance objectives. Mutrura mentioned that the levels at which employees engage within the small business structures influence these production measurements. A gap exists in literature concerning recognized best practices for supporting high engagement in the small business environment and frequent practices linked with low engagement (Joyner, 2015). The intent of this study was to bridge this gap by examining strategies small business leaders use to increase and sustain employee engagement within the workplace.

Employee Engagement

Academics and professionals have intensively studied methods that foster employee engagement (Caniëls, Semeijn, & Renders, 2018). Caniëls et al. suggested that because employee engagement is critical to achieving organizational goals, researchers took interest in the subject matter in hopes to identify contextual and personal

characteristics that reinforce or restrict employee engagement. The primary reason employee engagement consistently remains a popular concept is because it is a predictor of essential employee, team, and organizational outcomes (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018).

Kahn (1990) was the first to introduce the concept of employee engagement as occurring when individuals employ and express themselves cognitively, physically, or personally when performing a given role. Kahn initially labeled the term as personal engagement. Kahn viewed moments of engagement (or disengagement) as responses to work environments and individual variables (Huertas-Valdivia, Llorens-Montes, & Ruiz-Moreno, 2018). Scholars recognized employee engagement as an interchangeable term with personal engagement, role engagement, work engagement, and job engagement (Carsco-Saul, W. Kim, & Kim, 2014).

Scholars defined the term engagement in a variety of ways; the definitions began from capturing the essence of an employee's level of engagement in the workplace, to defining engagement in the functioning of the entire organization (Harrell-Cook, Levitt, & Grimm, 2017). Bhuvanaiah and Raya (2015) defined employee engagement as a process in which a continuous generation of behavioral energy assists the employee in connecting mentally, physically, and cognitively to a given task. Karumuri (2016) insisted that employee engagement is the magnitude of emotional and intellectual commitment that an employee has toward their business, as well as the employee's willingness to invest additional time to assist their business in maximizing organizational goals. Anitha (2014) described employee engagement as the general level of involvement and commitment an employee displays toward their organization and its

values. Some researchers have described employee engagement as the pinnacle of positive employee attitudes and supported the idea that it operates as a forceful tool that drives business outcomes (Thompson, Lemmon, & Walter, 2015). An assessment of the employee engagement literature reveals a sequence of contradictions found within the research, which scholars have created from a cloudy conceptualization of the construct itself (Harrell-Cook et al., 2017).

A glaring concern in relation to the subject of employee engagement was that there is no clear definition as practitioners used numerous terms to describe the phrase (Anitha, 2014). Employee engagement was too complex to define, but the concepts that existed within the theory remain entities for people and organizational success (Hewitt, 2015). Kassa and Raju (2015) agreed with this notion and suggested that neither practitioners nor scholars have yet developed a uniform, clear definition and noted that psychologists took the task of developing a theoretical ground for the elaborations on employee engagement in the workplace. One scholar found while conducting an overview of the definitions of engagement that as times changed, the definition evolved (Bettis et al., 2014). Bettis et al. (2014) concluded that the consistent change is an indication of the necessary development and building of the theory, which is vital to the advancement of the discipline.

Kahn (1990) described employee engagement as the measurement that employees commit to the accomplishment of goals of an organization; this was the interpretation used for this study. When employees experience fulfillment in the workplace, they gain the perception that they are a part of something significant, something that provides them

opportunities for personal development (Kahn, 1990). On the other hand, Saks and Gruman (2014) recognized employee engagement as a popular subject in management.

The topic of employee engagement gaining momentum and attracting attention in the academic environment as well as within organizations is not a secret; this movement suggested that the development and application of engagement breeds successful results (Guest, 2014). Multiple researchers have indicated that a strong positive correlation exists between high levels of employee engagement and producing better business results (Guaspari, 2015). Organizational leaders that have maintained employees who are entirely- cognitively, physically, and emotionally-engaged in their work become the most productive and functional (Strom et al., 2014). Despite the differences of opinion, employee engagement remains a strategic foundational concept that is critical for maximizing organizational success for small business leaders and viewed as a popular topic in literature (Cheema, Akram, & Javed, 2015). Cheema et al. (2015) mentioned that this truth holds because when comparing three decades of research findings, scholars proposed the idea that if an employee engages whole-heartedly and works hard, these efforts attract more intelligently skilled individuals to the organization.

Current Literature about Employee Engagement

Very few constructs captured the interest of researchers and practitioners in such a limited period as employee engagement (Saks & Gruman, 2014). According to Dagher et al. (2015), employee engagement is a universal objective lauded by scholars, practitioners, and researchers. Within a 10-year period, an explosion of research activity

and increased interest expanded concerning employee engagement among organizational leaders, consultants, and management scholars (Saks & Gruman, 2014).

Although literature exists regarding the importance of employee engagement, the theoretical views presented failed to deal with how leaders should perceive employee engagement (Georgiades, 2015). Scholars also failed to mention the performance techniques leaders should implement to increase these measurements (Georgiades, 2015). Kerns (2014) suggested that a critical factor in leadership understanding how to enhance employee engagement is to understand the strategies that influence and foster engagement behaviors.

The concept of employee engagement vastly expanded; however, according to Saks and Gruman (2014), two major gaps stunt the growth of this theory. The first issue is that numerous definitions of employee engagement exist and there is continual disagreement and lack of consensus on what engagement looks like (Saks & Gruman, 2014). Saks and Gruman suggested that the second issue is, that while researchers developed several instruments to measure employee engagement, scholars still question how to measure engagement and the validity of the existing measurements. To fill these literature gaps, researchers must conduct a context-specific conceptual exploration of the construct of employee engagement relating to other existing well-researched job attitude and organizational constructs in literature (Kaliannan & Adjovu, 2015).

Categories of Employee Engagement

Adkins (2015) identified three specific categories of employee participation (or lack thereof): engaged, not engaged, and actively disengaged. Engaged employees desire

to know what leaders expect from them, so that they can put forth adequate effort to meet or exceed those expectations. Popli and Rizvi (2015) described not engaged employees as those who arrive to work simply to serve time but put no passion or energy into their work assignments. Not engaged employees are individuals that require leaders to tell them what to do, so that they can fulfill those specific instructions and adds no additional value. Actively disengaged employees hold the potential of producing damage to an organization's development and growth, as they sow seeds of negativity among others, which causes tension throughout the company (Popli & Rizvi, 2015).

Engaged employee. Researchers associate employee engagement with a variety of positive individual and organizational outcomes (Albrecht, Bredahl, & Marty, 2018). Albrecht et al. (2018) promoted engagement as a primary tool to enhance competitive advantage and financial profitability. Because of these factors, the concept continues to receive attention from practitioners.

Padhi and Panda (2015) formulated numerous postulates about employee engagement, and several definitions derived from the multitude of perspectives. Employee engagement consists of the harnessing of an organization's employee individualism to their work roles; when employees engage, they express their individuality physically, cognitively, and emotionally while performing these roles (Kahn, 1990). When individuals engage in the workplace, they become more enthusiastic about emerging themselves in their work assignments, and demonstrate the tenacity to persevere to complete even the most challenging assignments (Agarwal & Gupta, 2018). Thompson et al. (2015) supported the claim that employees who commit

to these higher levels of employee engagement receive benefits such as achieving higher quality of work performance, making fewer errors, maintaining stronger commitments to the organization, and upholding a mind set to go above-and-beyond for the organization (Thompson et al., 2015). When organizational leaders create cultures that foster high employee engagement, they create an avenue that positively influences organizational sustainment, human resource management, competitive advantage, and the community (Saunders & Tiwari, 2014).

Sambrook, Jones, and Doloriert (2014) described employee engagement as the antithesis of burnout. Myers (2014) agreed with this notion, and considered employee engagement and burnout on two opposite extremes. When employees engage, notions of work and self become difficult to separate because the two integrate with one another (Kahn, 1990).

Not engaged. Adkins (2016) described “not engaged” employees as those who lack motivation and are less likely to invest discretionary energy and effort to accomplish organizational goals and enhance outcomes. Instead of focusing on goals and expected outcomes, “not-engaged” employees focus on task assignments. Organizations lose production on employees who fail to engage (Valentin & Nafukho, 2015). Researchers indicated that unengaged employees count for 51% of employees in the workplace (Mann & Harter, 2016).

According to Popli and Rizvi (2015), “not engaged” employees present themselves in the workplace, but only to serve their allotted time and withhold both passion and energy. “Not engaged” employees lack healthy relationships with

leadership, tend to gain the perception that others overlook their contributions, and tend to experience levels of stagnation (Adkins, 2016). “Not engaged” employees differ from disengaged employees, because while their actions stifle productivity, unlike disengaged employees, “not-engaged” employees do not spread a negative perspective to other individuals (Chaudhary, Rangnekar, & Barua, 2013).

Actively disengaged. In 2013, the global employee disengagement rate was 63% (Pansari, 2014). Researchers proposed that moral disengagement is an inherently interpersonal phenomenon and should be a salient concern for organizational and leadership researchers (Johnson & Buckley, 2015). Employee disengagement received attention in the academic world; however, a limited amount of studies exists regarding disengagement in organizations (Johnson & Buckley, 2015).

With the concept of engagement acquiring more attention from executives in the corporate sector, scholars must determine the difference between engaged employees in contrast to disengaged employees. According to Popli and Rizvi (2015), disengagement has a damaging influence on organizational success. Scholars have often viewed employee disengagement as an opposite entity of employee engagement (Kaur, 2017). When researchers understand the separation between engaged and disengaged employees, a precise intervention can take place to increase the ratio of engaged employees (Pansari, 2014). Disengaged employees simply go through the motions and lack inspiration. Actively disengaged employees consistently sow seeds of negativity within the organization, undermine the accomplishments of those who engage, and have the potential to cause damage to the functioning of the team (Kerns, 2014). Patkin (2014)

indicated that disengaged employees produce less, show less innovation, and lower measures of collaboration.

Although, literature relating to the importance of gaining employee engagement exists, the theoretical views presented failed to deal with the methods responsible managers should perceive and perform to increase employee engagement (Georgiades, 2015). Joyner (2015) suggested that while 90% of organizational leaders indicated that employee engagement is a critical factor to their success, most of those leaders fail to implement strategies to increase employee engagement. Uninspired role performances result from employees who refuse to release their full potential, attention, effort, and emotional investment in their work, and these attributes keep disengagement rates high (Keating & Heslin, 2015).

Benefits of Employee Engagement

The concept of employee engagement gained more notice as scholars identified numerous drivers that influenced employee performance and wellbeing at the workplace (Bedarkar & Pandita, 2014). With agreeable notions, Lather and Jain (2015) reported that the world's top-performing business leaders recognized employee engagement as a force that drives business outcomes. Employee engagement became more valuable to organizational leaders as researchers specified that employee engagement was a key tool to determine the extent of organizational effectiveness, competitiveness, and innovation (Bedarkar & Padita, 2014). Lather and Jain labeled employee engagement as a strategic foundational tool to establish a successful small business. Scholars often viewed the concept of employee engagement as the key business driver for organizational success

(Griffin, Bryant, & Koerber, 2015). Organizational leaders must learn how to develop strategies that effectively deal with disengaged employees to protect the success of the organization (Keeble-Ramsay & Armitage, 2014).

Measurements. Albrecht et al. (2015) suggested that researchers that capture modifications in employee engagement levels may be more accurate than static measurements of employee engagement. According to Cerasoli and Ford (2014), a strong relationship between engagement and performance exists. Highly engaged employees demonstrate higher job performance and self-efficacy (Albrecht et al., 2015; Byrne, 2015). Mackay, Allen, and Landis (2017) stated that the way employees engage determines the outcome of their overall performance, shows in their absenteeism, and influences turnover intentions.

When measuring employee engagement, it is critical to view both job performance and job task. Job performance demonstrates the behaviors that employees distribute to fulfilling a job task and is measured by employees' behavior towards organizational effectiveness (Byrne, 2015). Task performance refers to the effectiveness of employees within job activities, which directly contributes to the core of the organization (Byrne, 2015). Costa, Passos, and Bakkar (2014) stated that to properly measure engagement, researchers must measure the work engagement of a team rather than individual members. How individuals engage within a team directly influences team effectiveness (Costa et al., 2014). This theory supports the idea that engaged employees can find themselves connected to either an engaged team or a disengaged team.

Profitability. Multiple researchers supported the idea that employee engagement positively influences profits (Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014). A strongly engaged staff contributes to a high-performance organization (Mishra et al., 2014). Organizational leaders who detect the primary influences on employee engagement receive a promise of profits beyond their wildest dreams (Popli & Rizvi, 2014). Hewitt (2015) suggested that one disengaged employee equates to an average of -\$1000 annually. Organizations that possessed low measurements of employee engagement displayed lower operating incomes (Geldenhuys, Laba, & Venter, 2014). When comparing organizations within the same industry, organizational leaders who optimized workplace engagement experience 2.6 times more growth in the earnings per share compared to organizational leaders who experience lower measures of engagement (Lather & Jain, 2015).

Productivity. A common theme exists among findings when examining the correlation between employee engagement and productivity. Some researchers have recommended that the most effective way to promote an effective service climate in the organization is to hire employees with a record of job engagement (Musgrove, A.D. Ellinger, & Ellinger, 2014). Houlihan and Harvey (2014) indicated that when organizational leaders hire employees who desire purpose, fulfillment, and the ability to advance, they simultaneously build engagement within the company.

Employee engagement remains a foundational cornerstone that promotes effective service climates and favorably influences the provision of service (Musgrove et al., 2014). Thomas et al. (2015) conducted a study to scrutinize the influence employee engagement has on organizational performance. The results indicated that employees

who engage tend to maintain increased work quality and less errors, uphold higher organizational commitment, are more willing to go beyond their daily job description, and are more likely to stay with the organization (Thomas et al., 2015). Engaged employees can complete a diverse range of work assignments and are more likely to perform better in the workplace (Sekhar, Patwardhan, & Vyas, 2018).

Employee engagement links to a variety of positive outcomes, but researchers have given little attention to its antecedents concerning engagement (Ugwa, Onyishi, & Sanchez, 2014). Keating and Heslin (2015) suggested that engaged employees perform vigorously, experience enhanced levels of satisfaction in their workday, and absorb themselves mentally in their work. Sekhar et al. (2018) suggested that engaged employees demonstrate more energy because they are more connected to their work. Because of this emotional attachment, employees who engage are more apt to step beyond the bound of their defined assignments and involve themselves in work, which causes them to produce more than disengaged employees (Sekhar et al., 2018). Additionally, engaged employees are likely to work more intense for longer periods of time (Gupta & Shukla, 2018); therefore, engaged employees produce 15% more than those employees who lack engagement (Garg, 2014). Employees such as these become more than physically involved with their work; they remain cognitively alert, attentive, and emotionally invested in their performance (Keating & Heslin, 2015). Researchers indicated, when comparing organizations in the same industry, that those which optimize engagement experience higher growth rates in earnings per share in comparison to those

organizations that do not take measures to enhance workplace engagement (Lather & Jain, 2015).

Retention. One priority for organizational leaders is employee retention (Harris, Li, & Kirkman, 2014). Guilding, Lamminmaki, & McManus (2014) indicated that the reason talent retention is critical to organizational success is because the replacing of employees' costs more than retaining them. Mutsuddi (2016) estimated employee replacement costs about \$40K per employee. The Bureau of National Affairs found that United States businesses annually lose approximately \$11 billion dollars because of employee turnover; this equates to about 1.5 times higher than the annual offered salary (Hanzlik, 2015).

A common theme exists within research concerning the correlation between employee engagement and retention, which indicates that organizational cultures that support engagement experience higher levels of employee retention (Cloutier, Felusiak, Hill, & Jones, 2015). Employees who engage in their work give businesses critical competitive advantages, such as higher retention, productivity, and lower employee turnover (Mutsuddi, 2016). After conducting a study to examine the correlation between employee engagement and talent retention, Mutsuddi indicated that employees who engage within the workplace are five times less likely to voluntarily leave the organization. Because employee engagement positively influences retention, leaders must take the necessary steps to lower the risk of employees losing their sense of fulfillment and keep employees engaged (Houlihan & Harvey, 2014).

According to Bedarkar and Pandita (2014), the way leadership communicates with employees is a critical role in building employee engagement. With similar notions, Cloutier et al. (2015) suggested that a foundational step to ensure the increase of employee engagement and employee retention is effective communication between business leaders and their employees. A primary characteristic of a servant leader is the ability to communicate appropriately; however, conflict in literature exists concerning this matter. Wirsching, Mayfield, and Wang (2014) suggested that researchers have conducted limited studies to illustrate what aspects of servant leaders transmit through communication and suggested that a gap exists to confirm how communication influences these outcomes.

Challenges of Employee Engagement

Employee engagement emerged as the most difficult challenge for numerous organizations (Garg, 2014). A challenge that HR and organizational leaders consistently face is the ability to ensure that employees daily check in physically, mentally, and emotionally (Bedarkar & Pandita, 2014). Jha and Kumar (2016) conducted an exploratory research study surveying 100 participants to explore the issues surrounding the lack of employee engagement. The results indicated that 75% of the participants did not love working for their current organization, 85% believed they are undercompensated, 80% did not enjoy working, and 85% failed to work toward the goal of the organization. Employees lacked the ability to associate their significance and purpose with the organization; because of this, enthusiasm and work engagement remained low (Jha & Kumar, 2016).

According to Kahn (1990), when employees decide whether to engage or not, they first ask themselves if the interaction is meaningful. Second, they ask how safe engaging would be; third, they ask how physically, emotionally, or psychologically ready they are to involve themselves (Kahn, 1990). The measurements of meaningfulness that employees find in their work control their willingness to engage and breaks down into three layers. Kahn suggested that the initial aspect of meaningfulness consists of whether the task brings levels of satisfaction to the employees' existential requirements and whether it provides meaning to their work and life. The second concept of meaningfulness refers to how individuals view themselves when relating to others in their role (Zhang et al., 2014). The last component consists of work interaction, respect, mutual appreciation, and positive feedback derived from personal interactions that contribute to the employee's dignity, self-appreciation, and sense of worth (Zhang et al., 2014).

Leadership

Leadership is a targeted subject in organizational science (Carasco-Saul et al., 2015). Mehmood, Nawab, and Hamstra (2016) stated that the way to develop and change an organization is through the development of the key contributor of organizational performance— leadership. Chughtai (2014) noted that scholars invested little time to investigate leaderships' role in fostering work engagement, and to fully grasp and uncover the full potential of employee engagement, scholars must investigate the subject matter further. Despite this gap, scholars discovered one hidden truth the quality of the

relationship that lies between leaders and followers directly correlates to the measure of an employee's willingness to engage (Rayton & Yalabik, 2014).

Variances in literature exist concerning leaders' influence on employee engagement. After conducting field research, Burch and Guarana (2015) indicated that employees' unique relationship with leadership creates follower engagement, and this engagement mediates the relationship between leadership and key employee outcomes, such as employee turnover and organizational citizenship behavior. Employees who fail to engaged in their work environment maintain the potential to engage when leadership creates the appropriate opportunity and guides them through the path to accomplish personal goals (Bhuvanaiah & Raya, 2015).

Leadership Strategies to Increase Employee Engagement

Researchers consistently highlight the significance of employee engagement in literature; however, identifying leadership practices that lead to increased employee engagement is critical (Medlin & Green, 2014). Kumar and Pansari (2015) noted that to increase employee engagement, leaders must obtain a thorough understanding of effective strategies that increase engagement. Just as researchers failed to agree on a solidified definition of employee engagement (Saks & Gruman, 2014), academics failed to come into agreement on the leadership strategies that enhance employee engagement (Carasco-Saul et al., 2015). One thing is evident; engagement begins and ends with leadership (Howell, 2017).

Organizational leaders neglected to recognize that employees desire to engage in their work when the organization's culture is set to produce a sense of accomplishment

within each employee (Bedarkar & Pandita, 2014). Satisfied employees require a sense of meaningfulness in the workplace, and some researchers supported the idea that organizational leaders must create an atmosphere that acts as a stimulant to drive employee engagement (Gupta, 2015). According to Gutpa (2015), six primary factors exist that increase employee engagement: encourage employee involvement in decisions making, encourage employees' involvement in companywide initiatives, encourage creativity and innovation, encourage open communication, provide educational opportunities, and share significant information. McManus and Mosca (2015) suggested that the development of trust, equitable treatment, positive recognition, focus on goal attainment, and the continued development of knowledge and skill of employees serve as the foundational tools required to increase employee engagement. For the basis of this study, I will focus on trust, effective communication, and recognition and rewards.

Develop trust. Leaders must learn how to transmit and reinforce the message to employees that the leadership staff desires their participation and trust their judgement (Huertas-Valdivia et al., 2018). Trust-developing strategies are critically important factors in successful organizations. Trust is an influential constituent to organizational performance and a prerequisite to engagement (Khuong & Dung, 2015). Trust is also the core element in the relationship that exists between organizational leaders and subordinates because it possesses the ability to positively influence how the employee perceives the work environment (Engelbrecht et al., 2014). Ogwu et al. (2014) indicated that trust is a factor that motivates employees to effectively complete job tasks and go beyond the call of duty with no additional rewards. Pollitt (2014) offered an original

contribution to the continuing discussion of employee engagement, and noted that employees' trust does not always connect to employee commitment behaviors within the organization.

Hough, Green, and Plumlee (2015) conducted the first empirical research study that combined the measure of ethical environment, organizational trust, human resources practices, and employee engagement in a comprehensive model. The findings indicated that a significant positive relationship exists between how employees perceive how ethical or unethical an organization's environment is and the trust or mistrust given by the employee or managers. Trust (or mistrust), significantly influences whether employees engage (or disengage) in the workplace (Hough et al., 2015).

Researchers indicated that when employees find themselves in a trustworthy work environment, employee engagement increases (Downey, Werff, Thomas, & Plaut, 2015). According to McManus and Mosca, the goal is not just for employees to develop a level of trust with their leaders; leaders must learn how to develop trust in their employees. Developing a culture of trust requires committed dedication from leadership (McManus & Mosca, 2015). When leaders assign employees various responsibilities without adequate authority to implement the steps, the employees become filled with doubt and frustration (McManus & Mosca, 2015).

Servant leadership is a more effective style than other leadership techniques because leaders who lead on the principle of "primus inter pares" (first among equals) can gain employee trust and reciprocal obligation in return (Greenleaf, 1977). Greenleaf believed that leaders who lead their followers with respect and trust demonstrate this trust

by empowering them. Employees who trust their leaders display higher levels of engagement (Downey et al., 2015).

Effective communication. Interest in leadership continues to increase in both professional and academic literature (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016). Ruben and Gigliotti (2016) insisted that the topic of communication is a popular subject in relation to leadership, especially when it offers a tool for leaders to use to achieve a specific purpose. Scholars have begun to reexamine the critical connection between leadership and communication (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). Some researchers suggested that employee engagement refined by strategic communication efforts lead to increased organizational commitment (Walden, Jung, & Westerman, 2017). Yet, Ruben and Gigliotti (2016) proposed that researchers should conduct additional exploration to gain a full understanding of the connections and limitations of communication. Bakar and McCann (2016) implied that while a substantial body of literature addresses the role of communication in leadership, limited research exists concerning how leaders use communication to influence performance, enhance engagement, and promote job satisfaction among employees.

Scholars emphasized the significance of the relationship that exists between internal communication and employee engagement; yet, a failure to test the association resides in literature (Karanges, Johnston, Beatson, & Lings, 2015). Karanges et al. (2015) conducted a linear regression analysis to empirically test the existing relationship between internal communication (organizational leadership) and employee engagement. Findings indicated that effective communication from leadership fostered workplace

relationships that obtained meaning, worth, and played a significant part in developing and maintaining optimal employee engagement. Because employee engagement is a product of effective communication, Lemon and Palenchar (2018) recommended for scholars to gain an understand the factors that cause the communication to be successful.

Researchers have developed various tactics to increase the effectiveness of leadership's communication with employees. Pollitt (2014) suggested that leaders must properly communicate with employees as honestly and directly as possible and should encourage employee participation in decision-making processes. To compare, McManus and Mosca (2015) insisted that many organizational leaders should host open forums that give employees the ability to share data, ask questions, and receive feedback. This type of feedback provides leadership with the necessary understanding of the needs of the employees so that adequate improvements can take place (McManus & Mosca, 2015). Swartout, Boykins, Dixon, and Ivanov (2015) noted that leaders must avoid becoming evaluative when communicating with employees, as this creates an atmosphere for employees to become immediately defensive. Instead, he encouraged leaders to use supportive communication by addressing the problem and not the people. When a leader focuses on specific behaviors that need alteration or the occurrence that they need to address, the individual does not become the base of the issue and becomes more willing to take away something positive from a negative situation (Swartout et al., 2015).

Solaja, Idowu, and James (2016) signified that organizational leaders frequently encounter the challenge of transitioning between various communication styles to produce a clear articulation of ideas and knowledge to employees, which hinders

organizational productivity. Because of this, Solaja et al. (2016) conducted a study to examine the relationship between leadership communication style, leadership traits (styles), and productivity. The study included 112 academic staff, which the scholars selected through a multi-stage sampling technique. The structured questionnaire revealed that a direct correlation exists between leadership communication style and leadership traits (style), and these components directly influence organizational productivity (Solaja et al., 2016).

Bakar and McCann (2016) conducted a study to investigate the correlation of the style of communication servant leaders employ and the group's organizational citizenship behavior. The researchers insisted that the communication style used by servant leaders helped followers by affirming their strengths, identifying leadership potential, and providing developmental support for the team. The results indicated that the communication strategies used by servant leaders contribute to a supportive communication climate in which employees reciprocate by exerting effort, increasing commitment, and displaying organizational citizenship behavior (Bakar & McCann, 2016).

Recognition and rewards. Organizational leaders must find a business model that merges profitable business strategies with employees who commit to the goals of the organization (Stoyanova & Iliev, 2017). To find this pivotal balance, employees must know that their leaders see them as valuable constituents to the business (Stoyanova & Iliev, 2017). A critical component of effective leadership is developing and sustaining an effective recognition and reward policy (Danish, Saeed, Mehreen, & Shahid, 2014).

Ajayi, Odusanya, and Morton (2016) indicated that for small business leaders to experience an incremental change in their organization, they must learn how to invest human capital.

Various scholars possess a range of perceptions concerning the relationship that recognition and rewards has on the measure that employees engage. Malik, Butt, and Choi (2015) called for additional investigation to transpire concerning the potential contingencies that determine and define the relationship between recognition, reward, and employee engagement. Because of these uncertainties, Ghosh, Ragini, Gargi, and Srivastava (2016) conducted a study to examine the potential correlation role of employee engagement and rewards and recognition. After reviewing the sample of 176 employees, the results found that recognition and rewards significantly influence employee engagement. Malik et al. (2015) agreed with that notation, and noted that literature operates off the assumption that recognition and rewards influence employees in a similar fashion, despite their individual uniqueness. After surveying 179 employees and conducting a cluster-wise regression analysis, Gieter and Hofmans (2015) challenged that perception and noted that the levels of satisfaction, recognition, and rewards given to employees are skewed by the type of employee, socio-demographic characteristics, and personal work values.

Swartout et al. (2015) suggested that leaders are both counselors and coaches to employees and that their purpose is to reward employees for good performance and repair deficiencies in behavior, attitude, and work. As coaches, leaders become directive and incredibly supportive, while focusing on the employees' abilities (Swartout et al, 2015).

When employees show a need for emotional support, effective leaders know how to adjust to that need by narrowing their focus on the employee's psychological wellbeing (Swartout et al., 2015).

Small business leaders hold the potential to offer a variety of types of rewards to their employees. The ideal small business leader possesses the ability to offer extrinsic rewards, such as financial incentives (job security, salary, bonuses and incentive pay), non-financial incentives (recognition and appreciation), and better career opportunities (promotional opportunities) (Malik et al., 2015). Although extrinsic rewards are important to employees, they fail to create the daily excitement and energy necessary to motivate employees to engage within the workplace (Tymon & Dam, 2016). Tymon and Dam noted that scholars unconsciously limited engagement potential by focusing on catering extrinsically, instead of exploring how leaders can foster an ongoing sense of intrinsic task motivation.

Training and development. Rana, Ardichvili, and Tkachenko (2014) viewed training and development as a prerequisite to employee engagement. Limited training decreases employee engagement and influences employees' decision to leave organizations (Anitha, 2014). Gupta (2015) encouraged small business leaders to maintain a workplace environment that provides employees with opportunities to develop their abilities, acquire new knowledge, learn new skills, and realize their potential.

When small business leaders create a plan of educational advancement for employees, it allows them to believe that leaders are invested in them, which promotes employee engagement (Gupta, 2015). Training and developing employees improves the

performance and moods of employees, and it benefits the organization in multiple ways (Smith, Stokes, & Wilson, 2014). With the idea that training and development influences employee engagement, Smith et al. (2014) suggested that no association between satisfaction with employment, lack of awareness, employee engagement, and training and development exists.

Leadership Character

In academic research, the concept of leadership typically includes an acknowledgement of a fountainhead of energy and motivation, which enables followers to transcend limitations to perceive the vision and mission of the organization (Gupta, 2015). Zhang et al. (2014) suggested that the way leadership interacts with employees play a critical role in encouraging or discouraging how employees engage. In contrast, Khuong and Dung (2014) indicated that the top tool for organizational sustainment is the efficiency of leadership within the workplace. After conducting a study to uncover the underlying processes of how leadership behaviors influence work engagement, Chughtai (2014) advised that the behavior leadership displays toward followers directly influences employee engagement, whether positively or negatively.

A positive correlation exists between ethical leadership and employee engagement (Khuong & Dung, 2015). One component that makes servant leadership different is the way leaders respond to the demand for positive ethical behavior, especially when society emphasizes profitability over concern for the individual (Wirsching et al., 2014). Jaramillo, Bande, and Varela (2015) supported this idea and implied that servant leaders embrace and live by high ethical standards, which plays a

role in instituting and preserving ethical small business environments. Ethical leaders, like servant leaders, positively influence employee engagement (De Clercq, Bouckennooghe, Raja, & Matsyborska, 2014). Jaramillo et al. suggested that while leaderships' character influences the ethical climate of an organization, a gap in literature exists concerning its influence on employee engagement.

Transition and Summary

The literature supports the need to conduct research to compare and identify strategies that might assist small business leaders in strengthening employee engagement within the workplace. Section 1 encompassed the business problem and purpose of this study. The literature review provided detailed insight from multiple scholars on the data relating to the importance of leadership characteristics and their influence on employee engagement, which directly affects organizational results. Servant leadership was the relevant construct for this study, as the insights gained from the theory contributed to enhancing leadership behavior, employee performance, and organizational outcome. In Section 2, I provide information concerning the (a) role of the researcher, (b) selected participants, (c) method and selected design for the study, (d) data saturation criteria, and (e) data collection and analysis process.

Section 2: The Project

Companies in the United States forfeit billions of dollars annually in loss of productivity due to a lack of employee engagement (Saratun, 2016). The purpose of conducting this qualitative case study was to explore strategies small business leaders used to increase and maintain employee engagement. Numerous researchers have studied engagement enhancement strategies for employees to obtain a better understanding of the phenomenon because of its significant influence on organizational performance (Anitha, 2014). Researchers have indicated that many business leaders fail to understand how to develop effective and efficient ways to enhance employee engagement (Albrecht, Bakker, Gruman, Macey, & Saks, 2015). The objective for conducting this study was to fill this gap.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies some small business leaders use to increase employee engagement. The targeted population consists of a small franchise located in Birmingham, Alabama selected because leadership employed strategies that increased employee engagement. The implication for positive social change includes the potential to aid organizational leaders to develop a culture that increases levels of profitability, productivity, and retention by improving engagement within the workplace.

Role of the Researcher

The role of a researcher is one of the most critical elements in the success of a qualitative study. A researcher is the principle data collection instrument within the

study. According to Turner (2015), the responsibility of a researcher is to evaluate the literature published on the existing knowledge of the topic; develop the research method and design; choose participants; and collect, analyze, and report findings stemming from a variety of data sources.

As a business owner of two small organizations and a leader in the workplace, I am familiar with the challenges that leaders experience with creating cultures that enhance levels of employee engagement. Additionally, over 3 years of business interactions took place in the business setting with the participants of this study as a customer. A researcher is responsible for identifying any form of bias, which includes personal backgrounds, experience, and values that hold the potential to shape interpretations during the process of collecting data (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). I put various strategies in place to ensure that the approach to collect data remained trustworthy. To aide in setting aside personal bias, judgments, and values, I took interview notes, audiotaped each individual interview, and wrote a verbatim transcript. In additional efforts to mitigate bias, once I compiled the data, I verified the validity of the responses and my interpretations from interviews through the process of member checking.

Throughout the interviewing process, researchers should avoid exposing participants to any form of harm, whether psychological or physical (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Therefore, the focus remained on accomplishing this task by operating in accordance with the Belmont Report and through adhering to the creed of beneficence, justice, and respect (Department of Health & Services, 2014). The guidelines of the

report ensure that research involving human subjects occurs ethically according to the standards set by the United States Department of Health & Services (1979). I treated all participants in an ethical manner while upholding their privacy as a top priority.

As the researcher, my primary responsibility included designing questions to use during the interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to gather necessary data to answer the research question, as the researcher uses the interview questions to examine the participants' experience. I requested that participants complete an interview for this study in person. Before conducting the interviews, I provided each participant with a copy of the consent form. The consent form informed participants that they (a) retained the right to withdraw from the interviewing process at any time, (b) confirmed that they freely chose to participate in the process, and (c) affirmed that all obtained information is confidential and permanently secure. After conducting the interviews, I transcribed them and wrote out my interpretation for each interview. I then conducted follow-up interviews and delivered the transcription and interpretation to each participant as a form of member checking. I assumed data saturation transpired when participants offered no new data (Marshall & Rossman, 2015).

I conducted semistructured interviews, which allowed me to use prepared questions as a guide and respond with additional questions based on the participant's reply (Turner, 2015). I asked participants the interview questions in the same order as listed in the Interview Protocol (see Appendix A). The interview protocol included the following six steps: (a) an initial opening statement, (b) semistructured interview questioning, (c) additional probing questions, (d) verification of themes by participants

that I notated during the interviews, (e) identification of corrections listed by participants, and (f) the gathering of recording and reflective notes (see Thomas, 2015).

Participants

One foundational component to a qualitative study is for the researcher to select participants on a voluntary basis (Maskara, 2014). Yin (2014) noted that when conducting a qualitative case study, it is critical for researchers to recruit participants who possess experience with the phenomenon. The criterion for this research consisted of small business leaders who employed successful strategies to create and sustain workplace engagement. The knowledge and insight retrieved from the participants may help identify trends and characteristics that might contribute to the successful engagement in businesses (Alagaraja & Shuck, 2015).

Effective participants included those who held the ability to articulate their conscious experience concerning the phenomenon (Yin, 2014). According to Yin (2011), a researcher maintains the ability to conduct a qualitative study using a single unit with multiple participants at the same site. To determine patterns of meaning, researchers hold the ability to study a small number of subjects (Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014).

The participants consisted of three small business leaders of a coffee shop in Birmingham, Alabama. The selected leaders for this study directly supervised a minimum of three employees and each employed strategies to increase and sustain employee engagement within the establishment. Leaders who failed to meet all the parameters listed above failed to qualify for participation in this study. I used the same study participant criteria to select all participants (see Scott, 2016).

Depending on the targeted population, researchers risk experiencing challenges when accessing participants while conducting a qualitative study (Yin, 2015). Information concerning participants came from professional associations with a local business. The requirements to conduct a case study include the researcher establishing a working relationship with the participants (Yin, 2014). A critical factor in building successful relationships includes maintaining mutual respect and effectively communicating; a breach in these components holds the potential to break trust, which was a potential barrier in this study (Yin, 2014). Participants should experience a clear understanding of the intentions, principles, and interactions of the researcher (Breitkopf et al., 2015); therefore, I ensured that participants received clarity by thoroughly exposing all the details of the interviewing process.

After receiving IRB approval, I visited the coffee shop and asked the owner for information concerning contacting the leaders within the organization. From the owner, I received contact information of all leaders in the establishment who fit the criteria for the study. I spoke directly to potential participants who were available. If someone was not available, I e-mailed him or her to ask his or her agreement to participate in this study (see Appendix A). To avoid the potential for perceived coercion, I informed participants that their participation was voluntary basis and that they could withdraw their participation at any time, without penalty. Additionally, I listed this information on the consent form that I gave to each participant prior to the interview. Each participant signed the consent form, and I retrieved it at the beginning of each interview.

Research Method and Design

The researcher strategically selects a method to answer the research question. Researchers can choose from three different research methods: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Yin, 2014). Qualitative and quantitative methods require different techniques for addressing diverse forms of research questions; therefore, researchers must remain cautious of the method selected. In this section, I identify the use of a specific research method and design chosen for this study and justify the execution of these choices.

Research Method

Throughout the planning process for this study, I considered all three methodologies and found that the qualitative single case study design best fit the structure of this study. Researchers use the qualitative methodology to gain an understanding of meanings, phenomena, and various processes as understood by the individuals affected by them (Gergen et al., 2015). According to Baley (2014), researchers choose the qualitative method when they desire to offer an in-depth analysis on a specific topic.

I used the qualitative method because the aim of the study was to provide a greater understanding of the varied and lived experiences of the participants and examine how that experience relates to the proposed research question. Researchers obtain the opportunity to gain an understanding of individual lived experiences, which may assist in creating an empathetic interview, when they use the qualitative approach (Baley, 2014). Participants use words instead of numerical figures to convey data and display what the researcher learns about the topic of the study (Kate, Graham, McCaughan, Angus, &

Bauld, 2015). Rejno and Berg (2015) noted that researchers give participants an avenue to share their personal experiences by answering open-ended questions surrounding the phenomenon. Bernard (2013) indicated that the usage of qualitative research allows significant response in relation to organizations whose leaders (a) failed or succeeded in employing leadership styles, (b) addressed employee engagement, or (c) led to profitable textual data rather than numerical data, which lacks depth. The usage of the qualitative method permits researchers to investigate how leaders execute practices that improve employee engagement and organizational performance (Bernard, 2013). These implications resonated with the focus of the study and assisted in answering the research question.

There are several reasons why I chose to eliminate the quantitative and the mixed method as options. When conducting a quantitative study, researchers use numerical data to prove or disapprove a hypothesis (Groeneveld, Tummers, Bronkhorst, Ashikali, & Van Thiel, 2015). A researcher who conducts a quantitative study assumes that the reality is measurable (Smith, 2014), and this was not the case for this study. When using the quantitative approach, the researcher strives to isolate and identify variables that lie within the context and seeks relationship ties, correlation, and causality of the study (Park & Park, 2016). My aim for the study was to take the advice given by Park and Park (2016) and use the qualitative approach to focus on a holistic view of the subject through the review of archived data (employee handbook and director meeting minutes), observations, and interviews.

The mixed methodology allows researchers to merge both the qualitative and quantitative approaches (Sparkes, 2014). Although the mixed method has the potential to promote greater understanding of the findings by minimizing the weakness inherited in a single approach (Annansingh & Howell, 2016), a philosophic assumption, such as the quantitative method, did not fit the purpose of the study. The qualitative method allows researchers to gain an understanding of the phenomenon by examining the perceptions of participants (Park & Park, 2016); this was the primary focus of this study.

Research Design

The research design a researcher selects is a critical component of a study. The selection of the research design depends on the research question, research method, the researcher's philosophical inclination, and time (Aguirre & Bolton, 2014; DeLsyer & Sui, 2014; Yin, 2014). Throughout the preparation for this study, I considered several designs, including grounded theory, ethnographic, phenomenology, and a case study. Some of these options seemed compatible for the study, yet the differences that separated each design narrowed the selection process. The case study design seemed most suitable.

According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), researchers use the grounded approach when they desire to uncover theories that lie within data. When researchers use this method, typically no preconceived ideas concerning what is happening to guide the research exist and no previous investigations transpired (Harris, 2014). One major difference between grounded theory and the other concepts is the purpose of the grounded theory, which is for the researcher to provide an explanation for the phenomenon under investigation versus providing descriptive accounts of the highlighted

subject matter (Denscombe, 2014). Both subject matters, employee engagement and leadership, receive attention from researchers, and many studies exist because of this interest (Guaspari, 2015). For those reasons, I omitted grounded theory as an option for this study.

Researchers use the ethnographic approach when the aim is to focus on groups that maintain a common culture (Thomas, 2015). Baskerville and Myers (2014) suggested that scholars use the ethnographic design when they want to concentrate on the specific culture within the field in efforts to describe the phenomenon without consideration of empirical proof that moderates the phenomenon. The primary aim of the researcher, when using the ethnographic method, is not necessarily to understand the phenomenon but gain insight on the behaviors of a culture (Thomas, 2015). The intent of this study is to explore the detailed experiences of leaders of an organization and their interaction with employees, not to trace the behavior of a specific group who possess a collected belief. For this reason, the ethnographic approach seemed irrelevant and an unsuitable method for this study.

The foundational purpose of phenomenology is for researchers to study the experience of individuals from the view of those who experienced it, as little information is obtainable concerning the phenomenon (Aguirre & Bolton, 2014). Although researchers position themselves to explore the meaning of lived experience using the phenomenology design (Gentles et al., 2015), the design failed to support such an in-depth exploration required for this study.

Yin (2014) suggested that through case studies researchers have the potential to answer the questions *when* and *how*. Researchers find it advantageous to use case studies when performing evaluations, studying a phenomenon in a natural setting, or investigating what and why something happened (Yin, 2014). Researchers who use the case study method tend to explore events and programs that extend over a prolonged time span (Thomas, 2015). I followed the advice of Abma and Stakes (2014) and used a case study to position myself to explore the perception and experiences of small business leaders and investigate their strategies surrounding the phenomenon, while interviewing them in their natural settings. Abma and Stakes indicated that a case study design is best suited when researchers desire to focus on the time and context of the event and capture a rich description from what the researcher gathers.

Effective research requires the researcher to obtain data saturation (Ando, Cousins, and Young, 2014). After conducting each interview, I transcribed each interview. I then conducted member checking by allowing participants to view the transcription of their interview and my interpretations of what they stated to verify accuracy. I continued to ask additional questions during the follow-up interviews until I no longer discovered new information. Researchers obtain data saturation when at the point when they can uncover no new codings, themes, or data (Fusch & Ness, 2015); when I reached this point, I assumed I had obtained data saturation.

Population and Sampling

Roy, Zvonkovic, Goldberg, Sharp, and LaRossa (2015) considered a distinction concerning sampling schemes to be whether a researcher deliberately chooses a design-

based sample before a data collection (selective), or decides to allow the data collection process (purposive) to shape the sample selection. I used a nonrandom, purposive participant selection for this study. According to Suen, Huang, and Lee (2014), researchers use a nonrandom purposive participant selection process when conducting qualitative studies with the expectation for each participant to provide unique and enriched information to the study.

Cleary et al. (2014) suggested that it is important for researchers to maintain clear reasoning and achieve a defined purpose related to the research question. Although I chose purposive sampling as the sampling method for this study, other options existed; yet, the best sampling strategy addresses the research question appropriately (Cleary et al., 2014). Researchers must ensure that all participants satisfy specific eligibility criteria and possess the ability to answer the research question when they employ purpose sampling (Patton, 2015). Through the technique of purposive sampling, researchers position themselves to retrieve the necessary information while the participants remain comfortable in their natural environment (Suen et al., 2014). Participants can provide familiarity, alignment, and additional understanding of the research topic when researchers use purposive sampling (Suen et al., 2014).

Researchers who use the quantitative method employ a power analysis to detect an adequate sample size; however, no such formula exists for qualitative case studies (Yin, 2014). Though no concrete way to justify a sample size within qualitative research subsists (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013), purposeful participant selection has the potential to assist the researcher to address the research question (Marshall &

Rossman, 2015). Robinson, Wang, and Kiewitz (2014) stated that when researchers conduct a case study, the usage of typical sampling is not a logical technique because generalizations of a population are not retrievable through a sample. According to Yin (2014), a case study involving three to eight participants is suitable to obtain a fitting measure of richness and produce a balance of participant views. The population for this study included a purposeful sample of three individuals who possessed a leadership role in a coffee shop in Birmingham, Alabama and have employed strategies that increased employee engagement. These leaders directly supervised a minimum of three employees and maintained at least five years of experience in a managerial capacity. I gained access to these participants through professional relationships with the owner.

Researchers possess the ability to explore participants' experiences surrounding a research topic by employing a qualitative case study (Turner, 2015). The foundation of the population selected for this study includes participant work experience, access to the participants, geographical convenience, and participant residences in Birmingham, Alabama. Turner (2015) suggested that findings from studies are limited by location and fail to provide transferability to small business leaders who practice outside of that specific location.

A critical factor in upholding validity within research is for the researcher to achieve data saturation (Galvin, 2015). Fusch and Ness (2015) encouraged researchers to select a sample size that allows the researcher to reach data saturation. Researchers cannot assume they have obtained data saturation just because one exhausts resources; the researcher reaches data saturation when they uncover no new data, codings, or themes

(Fusch & Ness, 2015). Researchers attain data saturation by uncovering repetitions in themes, codes, and patterns that emerge from data evidence (Alsaawi, 2014). I employed the advice given by Silva (2016), which was to conduct semistructured interviews, paraphrase participants' responses to ensure proper interpretation takes place (member checking), and ask additional questions to collect additional information. I continued to ask questions and sought to uncover data until I reached data saturation. I obtained data saturation when I found myself unable to uncover new information or themes (see Thomas, 2015).

Ethical Research

A critical responsibility of a researcher is to protect the confidentiality and common welfare of the participants (Wallace & Sheldon, 2015). Parsell, Ambler, and Jacenyik-Trawoger (2014) suggested that ethical concerns are critical constituents to research. I took precaution by upholding and maintaining ethical research standards. The Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was used to guarantee ethical standards were met before releasing permission to conduct the research. I collected no data until the board released the approval. The Walden University IRB board issued the approval number 12-11-17-0438664.

After receiving the approval, I conducted the interviews and gave respect and reverence to all participants by ensuring necessary data was covered with clarity and that each participant fully understood each step. I selected a prospective research site and participants. I then visited the site and spoke to participants who met the criteria for the study. For those participants who were not available, I emailed them an invitation to

participate in the study. I gave each participant specific and transparent details regarding the nature of the research, the implications for social change, and the undertones that held the potential to interfere with the exploration of the phenomenon. Afterwards, participants received an informed consent form. This consent form contained additional information concerning the assurance of confidentiality and the detailed intent of the study. Additionally, the consent form notified the participants that they maintained the ability to withdraw their participation at any time through a verbal or written request without any penalty. I followed the advice given by Thomas (2015) and offered no incentives for participating in this study.

Before beginning the interview process, I followed the instructions of Marshall and Rossman (2014) and assigned a pseudonym to each participant and an alpha moniker to protect the name of the organization. I labeled the company's name as Company XYZ and used *S01*, *S02*, and *S03* to identify the participants. I also stored signed consent forms and all interview notes in a locked storage cabinet to which no one else possessed a key. I will keep all electronic data on a password protected 8GB flash drive, place it in the locked cabinet, and store these items for five years. After this time expires, I will shred hard copies and delete the flash drive.

Data Collection Instruments

The preceding subheadings described the instruments and procedures I used to collect and organize data. This section includes how I gained insight to the participants' perspectives concerning the research question. To gain broad and in-depth insight and

assure that the confidentiality of the participants remains protected, I completed the following procedures.

Instrument

Dubé, Scheinke, Strasser, and Lightfoot (2014) indicated that as the primary data collection instrument, researchers can interact with participants in the environment and convey their experiences of the observed phenomena. The way researchers gather and document data remains a critical factor to the validity of the study (Dubé et al., 2014). When researchers find themselves as the primary data-collection tool, they often use interviews to abstract information (Thomas, 2015). McIntosh and Morse (2015) noted that qualitative researchers best collect data through the employment of open-ended questions. Asking open-ended questions benefits researchers as it positions participants to possess the opportunity to provide comprehensive answers (Cole, Chen, Ford, Phillips, & Stevens, 2014).

With the concentration of this qualitative single case study on the perception of small business leaders, I collected data through a face-to-face interview with each participant and asked seven open-ended questions to collect data regarding the research problem. According to Dubé et al (2014), it is a good idea for researchers who conduct qualitative studies to limit the interview to less than an hour when possible; this limitation helps the researcher to keep participants engaged. The time to complete each interview consisted of about 30-45 minutes. In employing this structure, I permitted participants enough time and ability to describe their experiences of implementing strategies that increased employee engagement, without losing their concentration.

Validity entails the degree to which a conclusion concerning variables is correct (Kratochwill & Levin, 2014). To guarantee validity and reliability in this study, I used member checking. According to Vance (2015) researchers use member checking to give participants the ability to validate the researcher's interpretation of the interview. Milosevic, Bass, and Combs (2015) noted that member checking allows researchers to improve the validity and reliability of the data collected. Through member checking, the researcher gains the participant's validation, which increases trustworthiness and credibility of findings (Bellhouse, Crebbin, Fairley, & Bilardi, 2015). Member checking improves precision by making sure the researcher did not leave any gaps in understanding the phenomenon (Bellhouse et al., 2015).

After transcribing the interviews, I interpreted each transcript, and emailed every participant the information pertaining to his or her interview. I accomplished member checking by conducting a follow-up face to face interview with each participant and allowed them to provide feedback to determine if the data was a truthful depiction of the responses to the interview. The follow-up interview took 10-15 minutes per participant.

Data Collection Technique

Before collecting data, I visited the site and spoke with the owner concerning the purpose and intent of the study. I had the owner to sign a letter of cooperation, which granted permission to conduct the study within the establishment. I emailed the letter of cooperation to Walden's IRB department with additional documentation and received permission to move forward in the research process. Once I received permission, I requested potential participant contact information from the owner. I then spoke with the

participants who were present at the site; for participants who were unavailable, I sent an email explaining my intent for the study and requested their involvement (see Appendix A). Each participant received a consent form detailing the purpose of the study and expectations, either in person or through email. To avoid the potential for perceived coercion, I informed participants that their participation was on a voluntary basis and that they could withdraw their participation at any time, without penalty. I provided each participant with a variety of options concerning the meeting date and time, which Yin (2014) suggested would help to increase the likelihood of participation. With the permission of the owner, I conducted interviews at the site to ensure comfort, confidentiality, privacy, and uniformity; this was the interview structure for all participants. I followed the instructions of Silverman (2015) and used the same protocol for each face-to-face interview, which guaranteed consistency and strengthened validity (see Appendix A).

I received verbal permission from each participant to audio record the interview and recorded each interview using a standard audio recorder for immediacy of data collection. Each interview lasted between 30-45 minutes; during this time, each participant answered questions concerning their personal understanding of leadership strategies to increase employee engagement in the workplace. Open-ended questions allow participants the opportunity to explore additional information if it arises (Cairney & St. Denny, 2015). While asking questions, Baskarada (2016) suggested that researchers observe body language to look for assistance in capturing what participants mean versus what they stated, as nonverbal feedback enhances the value of the study. Because of this,

while interviewing, I paid close attention to nonverbal communications of each participant throughout the interview process. Yin (2014) suggested that it is important for researchers to display gratitude to each participant; therefore, I ended each interview by thanking each participant for his or her time.

I transcribed each interview, imported the textual transcripts into a Microsoft Word document, and wrote my interpretation of the responses. I then followed the advice of Turner (2015) and conducted the process of member checking. Member checking entails asking the participants to evaluate the researcher's responses and interpretation to ensure precision and accuracy (Morse, 2015). To accomplish this task, I followed up with each participant with a face-to-face interview, allowing them to review the transcription and my interpretation. During this interview, each participant had the ability to determine if the information properly gave a truthful depiction of their responses. Throughout the process, each participant maintained the ability to clarify or modify his or her responses. If the participants requested modification to take place within the data, I kept the transcript as originally written and made notes regarding how the participant desired to change the response. The follow-up interview lasted 10-15 minutes for each participant.

Because Yin indicated that a case study requires a collection from a variety of sources of data, I used semistructured interviews and organizational documents, such as the employee handbook and director meeting minutes, to identify correlations that strengthen employee engagement within the organization. The usage of archival data is a critical factor when researchers employ a case study to address the research problem

(Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014). I analyzed the data by following the recommendations of Yin (2014), which were to: (a) compile the data, (b) disassemble the data, (c) interpret the meaning of the data, and (d) conclude the meaning of the data.

Various advantages and disadvantages existed within the data collection techniques utilized. Advantages of potential data collection procedures include (a) gaining an opportunity to obtain insight concerning the topic of employee engagement, (b) gaining an understanding of employee engagement from the perception of the participant, and (c) experiencing the usefulness of gathering evidence for the study (Rowley, 2012). Disadvantages of the data collection techniques include (a) time constraints, (b) bias, (c) expenses concerning collection techniques, and (d) the potential for participants to feel as if the researcher is intrusive (Rowley, 2012). Yin (2014) suggested that in complicated studies it is necessary to complete a pilot study. However, because this single-case study was not a complicated case study, a pilot study was not applicable.

Data Organization Technique

One way for researchers to increase their effectiveness is to use the heuristic tool of journaling (Hoover & Morrow, 2015). Though this process, researchers maintain the ability to identify and learn new concepts through reviewing the journal entries (Hoover & Morrow, 2015). Therefore, I journaled while conducting each interview to notate elements of non-verbal communication for personal reflection. I notated when each participant displayed excitement and confidence in their responses and other times when

they displayed signs of uncertainty. In cases where the participants sounded unsure, I asked more questions to gain clarity, which helped them to better access their thoughts. In cases where the participants showed signs of nervousness (through shaky hands, or stuttering), I reassured them with words of affirmation, reminded them that the interview was confidential, and assured them that they could cancel the meeting at any time without any consequences. This made the participants more comfortable, and each participant agreed to move forward with the interview.

Marshall and Rossman (2016) encouraged researchers to label audio recordings auspiciously to provide an easier way to identify transcription. I audiotaped each interview and assigned pseudonyms for participants. For security purposes, Marshall and Rossman (2014) encouraged researchers to choose a pseudonym for participants and an alpha moniker for the name of the organization. I labeled participants as *S01*, *S02*, and *S03*, and I labeled the organization *Company XYZ*.

I transcribed each interview verbatim into a Microsoft Word document, saved it into an 8GB flash drive, and saved all components in a secured cabinet. In addition, I used NVivo 10 software to input and store data so that I could code and explore the themes, while maintaining the confidentiality of participants. I chose NVivo 10 over the other software options because by using this software researchers positioned themselves to manage data, ideas, and query the data (Thomas, 2015). I obtained the signed consent form and interview recordings that I intend to keep locked in a secured storage cabinet, in my home, for 5 years. After this time expires, I will erase the jump drive and shred hard copies of any data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis takes place as a vital step in conceptually translating the data set using certain analytic approaches to convert raw data into an original and lucid depiction of the research topic (Crowe, Inder, & Porter, 2015). To properly analyze data, it is critical for researchers to complete several steps. According to Marshall and Rossman (2015), the first steps entail organizing and preparing the data for the research analysis. The second step consists of completing a review of all data collected; this gives researchers the ability to explain the findings and provides the opportunity to filter out data that did not add to the purpose of the study or answer the research question (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). The third step includes the commencement of the coding process, which allows segmentation of the data to begin (Yin, 2014).

Each interview question aligned with the proposed research question and holds the potential to aid in gathering information on the strategies small business leaders use to increase employee engagement. The interview questions are below and listed in Appendix A.

Interview Questions

1. What strategies do you use to increase employee engagement?
2. What metrics did you employ to examine the efficacy of the strategies?
3. What barriers did you encounter when first attempting to increase employee engagement?
4. How did you address each of the significant challenges or barriers?

5. What strategies have you found most effective for motivating your employees to perform better?
6. How have you seen employee engagement drive the level of productivity?
7. What additional factors that we have not discussed may have contributed to your success in this area?

According to Yin (2014), every case study analysis should use a general analytic strategy because the primary techniques lack a firm definition. Methodological triangulation consists of researchers collecting data from a variety of sources and analyzing the data to capture a full understanding of the phenomenon (Carter et al., 2014). According to Carter et al. (2014), to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the topic, qualitative researchers should collect data from several sources, including semistructured interviews, field notes, and archival data. I attained methodological triangulation through interviewing three participants, taking field notes, obtaining archival data (employee handbook and director meeting minutes) from the owner, and screening my interview notes to guarantee validity during the data analysis.

Yin (2014) encouraged qualitative researchers to set aside prior experiences and prejudgments as the data analysis process entails identifying all meanings through reductions and analysis of detailed statements into themes. To accomplish this task, Yin offered a five-step process to conduct a qualitative analysis: (a) compile the data, (b) disassemble the data, (c) reassemble the data, (d) interpret the data, and (e) conclude the data. The data analysis process starts when researchers begin compiling the notes, transcriptions, and additional research data (Yin, 2015). During the second step, I

disassembled the collected data into more manageable fragments (see Edwards-Jones, 2014).

With the progressively complex tools made available to researchers to diagnose data, thoughtful discussions are critical (Humble, 2015). Although ATLAS and NVivo are two of the most commonly used programs, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of each program helps to assist researchers in selecting the appropriate technique (Humble, 2015). Humble (2015) indicated that both programs have the potential to overwhelm scholars with the complex language used to navigate the application. Because Thomas (2015) suggested that NVivo 10 software possessed an auto-coding feature that aided qualitative researchers in identifying consistencies, I selected to use NVivo 10.

NVivo 10 software is a data analysis software that researchers can use to identify correlations within the study (Beato, 2017) by enabling them to input, store, code, and explore themes and patterns (Thomas, 2014). I used NVivo 10 as a tool to keep all data in a single location with easy access to information and continued to identify themes. One of the primary distinctions of NVivo 10 is the word frequency feature of the program, which gives researchers the ability to recognize how often participants use certain words during the interviews (Beato, 2017). I used the word frequency feature to organize the data by creating themes, which I used to cluster the information. After I organized and reviewed all the information, I interpreted the data. The final phase of the data analysis process entails researchers making conclusions from the interpretations gathered (Yin, 2015). Edward-Jones indicated that when necessary, during the data

interpretation process researchers can compile, disassemble, and reassemble the data again.

The conceptual framework of a study is critical because researchers should link the chosen method, literature, and the findings of the study (Borrego, Foster, & Froyd, 2014). Servant leadership was the conceptual lens for this study. Behaviors that servant leaders exhibit can forecast employee organizational engagement patterns both indirectly and directly by increasing commitment (Winston & Fields, 2014). For leadership characteristics, I used characteristics described by Spears (1995): listener, empathetic, healer, aware, persuasive, ability to conceptualize, possess foresight, good stewardship, commitment to growth of people, and the ability to build the community. Although I classified these topics as ideal categories, I allowed the data collected to dictate the final groupings. If new information arose that failed to fit in the initial categories but emerged during subsequent interviews, I established supplementary categories and reviewed previous interviews to identify the need to add any information to the new categories. In taking this approach, I identified and highlighted the strategies that small business leaders use to increase employee engagement within the workplace.

Yin (2015) suggested that a critical responsibility of researchers is to stay current on their research topic. I will accomplish this task by following the instructions of Wray (2016), who recommended that researchers stay up-to-date on future publications in relation to their research topic by setting up alerts to receive automatic indications through email when new articles corresponding with a specific topic populates. Signing

up for these alerts concerning leadership and employee engagement ensures that I will fulfill my responsibility to stay current with the development of my research topic.

Reliability and Validity

The academic community uses reliability and validity to measure the quality of a study (Noble & Smith, 2015). According to Noble and Smith (2015), reliability and validity are two scholarly terms that describe the accuracy and precision of research. In a qualitative study, the researcher relies on semistructured interview protocols to obtain commonality and strengthen consistency, reliability, and validity (Dubé et al., 2014). According to Koch et al. (2014), when conducting a qualitative research study, the trustworthiness and quality remains instrumental in demonstrating the reliability and validity of a study. This section details the processes I used to ensure reliability and strengthen validity.

Reliability

Upholding reliability is a practice that enables researchers to increase quality in qualitative research (Koch et al., 2014). Reliability consists of the degree of the researcher's ability to remain consistent in his or her approach across varied research studies (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). In efforts to increase reliability, Harvey (2015) encouraged scholars to address the concern of dependability.

Morse (2015) recommended that researchers use member checking to enhance reliability in qualitative research, which directly addresses the concerns about dependability. Member checking is the preferred data validation method for qualitative interviewers (Morse, 2015). Fusch and Ness (2015) noted that member checking is a

quality control method that qualitative researchers use to validate data retrieved from interviews. Yin (2015) encouraged qualitative researchers to use member checking over transcript review whenever viable.

When researchers use member checking to increase measurements of dependability, they simultaneously improve the reliability of the findings (Harvey, 2015). Morse (2015) encouraged researchers to follow a three-step process to increase reliability through member checking: (a) perform the initial interview, (b) interpret the data retrieved by the participant, and (c) share the perceived interpretation with the participant for validation. In efforts to address the concern of reliability, I ensured dependability by using member checking and followed the steps identified by Morse.

Validity

According to Leung (2015), validity refers to the suitability of the selected design, methodology, sample size, data collection strategies and analysis, and the results of the research in relation to the research question. Dwork et al. (2015) suggested that qualitative researchers could increase the quality of their study by ensuring validity. Ensuring credibility, transferability, confirmability, and data saturation helps researchers achieve validity within the research.

Because researchers depend on multiple sources to support data when conducting a case study (Turner, 2015), I used member checking and methodological triangulation to validate the data from the interviews and promote credibility, transferability, and conformability (Thomas, 2015). Yin (2014) suggested that methodological triangulation increases the validity in case studies. Therefore, I validated findings by collecting data

from independent sources and offered participants a copy of their transcribed interview interpretation.

Nyhan (2015) recommended that qualitative researchers should always establish credibility to affirm the validity of the findings. Researchers view credibility as the measure of trust readers have in the data findings of a study (Nyhan, 2015). One way to accomplish this task is to record interviews and maintain a duplicate copy of the recordings (Yin, 2015). Morse (2015) encouraged researchers to use member checking to promote credibility because it validates the accuracy of the interpretations of the interviews. To ensure that I obtain credibility, I recorded each interview and used member checking to verify that no errors exist within the interpretations. I confirmed the accuracy of the interpretations by asking participants to validate my perception of their responses. By following these procedures, I promoted credibility and increased validity within the study.

In the scholarly environment, transferability refers to the measure that the findings of a research study can transfer or surpass the boundaries of the study (Elo et al., 2014). According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), by providing a detailed description of the research context, researchers can achieve transferability. When researchers give fluent descriptions, they position readers with the necessary tools to determine whether the study is transferable to another study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). To enhance transferability, I provided a rich description of the process of data analysis, participants, and research context.

Morse (2015) indicated that conformability is critical to qualitative research and pertinent to the objectivity of the study; it is the measure by which researchers ensure results are descriptive of the perspective of the participants, as opposed to the opinion of the researcher. Qualitative researchers can enhance confirmability by providing readers with a duplicate of the data from where the scholar made the interpretations, such as the transcriptions of the interviews, table, and charts (Childers, 2014). Researchers can also increase conformability by conducting member checking (Fusch & Ness, 2015). To achieve conformability, I made sure to ask probing questions to uncover additional details of each response, carefully documented interviews, and conducted member checking to give participants the ability to validate my perceptions of his or her interview.

According to Yin (2015), data saturation is also a critical component of enhancing validity in qualitative research. Researchers can obtain data saturation by continuing to interview participants until no new data emerges (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Researchers should achieve data saturation to increase the validity of the study (Yin, 2015). The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore strategies small business leaders use to increase employee engagement. To achieve data saturation within this study, I interviewed small business leaders until no new data emerged and no new coding was viable.

Transition and Summary

Within Section 2, I presented the proposed research method, design, and rationale I used in the selection of a qualitative single case study to explore strategies small

business leaders use to increase employee engagement. This section also included a description of the role of the researcher, the participants, and the purposeful sampling method. I included the data collection technique, highlighted my intent of conducting ethical research, and described the process for ensuring validity and reliability. In Section 3, I incorporated the actual findings of the study, significance of the study, and potential implications for social change. I also supplied recommendations for action and opportunities for future study concerning the research topic.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies some small business leaders use to increase employee engagement. I compiled and analyzed the data retrieved from the interviews, director meeting minutes, and the employee handbook. The findings showed strategies that small business leaders use to increase employee engagement. In doing so, I identified two main themes: (a) creating a culture that enhances and sustains employee engagement and (b) demonstrating strategic leadership characteristics that increase employee engagement. Section 3 includes the presentation of the findings and an appliance to the professional environment of how and why the results of this study relate to the enhancement of business practice.

Presentation of the Findings

To obtain an understanding of the strategies small business leaders use to increase employee engagement, I conducted semistructured, face-to-face interviews. I also acquired and reviewed Company XYZ's director meeting minutes and employee handbook. All interviews took place on-site in a private meeting space. Interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes. I transcribed each interview and interpreted the data. Afterwards, I conducted member checking by conducting a follow-up face-to-face interview with each participant and allowed them to provide feedback to determine if my interpretation was a truthful depiction of their responses (Harvey, 2015). I followed the advice of Yin (2014), which was to compile, disassemble, reassemble, interpret the data, and then create a conclusion. I compiled the data received from the direct observation, interview transcripts, employee

handbook, and the director minute notes. I then imported all information into Nivo10 to analyze the findings. Afterwards, I disassembled the data according to the information each participant provided, reassembled the data clustering information that shared similarities, and interpreted the data by creating two main themes, which answered the research question.

The major two themes were creating a culture that enhances and sustains employee engagement and demonstrating strategic leadership characteristics that increase employee engagement. The minor themes that developed from creating a culture that enhances and sustains employee engagement were (a) maintaining a clear and effective pathway for advancement and promotions; (b) executing effective training and development approaches; (c) recognition, increasing rewards and incentives; and (d) hiring employees that fit the culture. The minor themes that developed from demonstrating strategic leadership characteristics that increases employee engagement comprised of (a) effective communication techniques, (b) leveraging employee innovation and ownership, (c) leaderships' ability to lead by example, (d) trustworthiness, and (e) barriers to engagement.

Servant leadership was the conceptual framework for this study. Chan and Mak (2014) defined the basis of servant leadership as a leadership style that presents leadership as a service to the followers while using servitude to build a beneficial and trusting relationship. Researchers view the concept of servant leadership in an odd way because it turns the chain of command upside-down (Mertel & Brill, 2015). The theory is based on leaders focusing less on themselves and valuing the accomplishment of

organizational goals by serving followers (Irving & Berndt, 2017). S03 suggested that the ability for engagement to take place within the workplace first begins with leaderships' ability to engage with the team and not the other way around. S03 also indicated that employee engagement starts with leadership's willingness serve the employees; therefore, leaders of Company XYZ intentionally look for ways to demonstrate servitude.

Throughout the collection data process, multiple responses from participants supported the theory. I viewed the framework in relation to the connect the findings to gain a clearer understanding of creating a culture that enhances and sustains employee engagement and strategic leadership behaviors that increase engagement. The findings indicated that S01, S02, and S03 all suggested that employee engagement is a key ingredient to organizational success. According to S01, nothing is more important than employee engagement and the success of a small business depends on it.

Creating a Culture that Enhances and Sustains Employee Engagement

A common concept that participants shared was the importance of organizational leaders developing a culture that enhances and sustains employee engagement. Leadership must create and maintain a healthy work environment to create and sustain a culture that fosters employee engagement (Poulsen et al., 2014). Research questions and participant responses that revealed the most data concerning this specific theme included the first two interview questions. S02 indicated that small business leaders sabotage the success of their organization when they fail to create a culture that fosters employee

engagement. S03 suggested that employees engage best when leadership establishes an organizational culture that motivates employees to engage.

The responses of the participants aligned with previous noted research, as Sikora and Ferris (2014) specified that the culture of an organization can either strengthen employee engagement or cause employees to disengage. When small business leaders put the proper tactics in place, they simultaneously develop a culture that enhances workplace engagement and an upsurge in business performance takes place (Romans & Tobaben, 2016). Small business leaders can form an effective culture when a corporate strategy is intentional (Suriyah, 2016); the proper execution of these intentions positively influence workplace engagement (Sikora & Ferris, 2014).

Researchers have indicated that motivated and engaged employees are critical factors in developing an effective culture and enhancing organizational performance (Zhang et al., 2014). To experience enhanced performance, organizational leaders must create a culture that supports engagement (Sikora & Ferris, 2014). Four minor themes developed in relation to small business leaders creating a culture that sustains employee engagement: advancement and promotions; training and development; recognition, rewards, and incentives; and hiring to fit the culture.

Clear and effective pathway for advancement and promotions. The findings indicated that an effective strategy to create a culture that increases employee engagement was to maintain a clear and effective pathway for advancement and promotions. S03 indicated that many times employees of small businesses do not consider their job as a part of their career path, and this mindset negatively influences the

measurement in which employees engage. S02 shared a similar concern and suggested that employees who fail to connect their current job to their future goals are less likely to engage, especially when not presented with opportunities of growth and advancement. According to S03, to offset this mentality, small business leaders must present a clear path that shows employees how to position themselves to advance with the company.

S01, S02, and S03 all indicated that growth and development is the culture of Company XYZ, and believe that this environment helps to sustain workplace engagement. Director meeting minutes indicated that a primary concern for employees continue to be their ability to consistently grow with the company. Because of this, S03 stated that leadership create clear avenues for employee advancement and promotions. Company XYZ has an entire section of their employee handbook dedicated to their pathway to company advancement. The company handbook states that although leaders receive high volumes of applications, the goal is to promote from within.

Company XYZ's employee handbook also displays the route for promotion. The handbook indicates that if an employee wants to grow at Company XYZ, there is a specific path to follow. Senior leadership will post written job descriptions on Company XYZ at all locations for employees to apply at their will. S02 stated that if an employee is interested in a promotion, he or she would inform the manager who would spend time equipping him or her with the proper knowledge, tools, and experience for preparation for the position. S01 stated that in addition to the mentoring received on site, leaders consistently offer training and development courses geared toward individuals who desire to advance. S01 also indicated that with the path to advancement and promotion spelled

out, employees are more motivated and driven because they have something tangible to reach toward.

Effective training and development approaches. S02 and S03 stated that one of the ways leaders sustain employee engagement is through effective training and proper development. These responses supported previous research, as Heymann (2015) suggested that organizational leaders experience an increase of profits and productivity when they equip engaged employees with adequate tools to perform their assigned task, and this includes training and development. Training and employee development positively influences employee engagement and helps to strengthen the culture required to sustain the engagement (Presbitero, 2017).

S03 suggested that it is critical for leaders to set the bar from the onset that learning is not a temporary mindset at Company XYZ, but a continual expectation. S03 indicated that monthly senior leaders conduct a round table and one of the topics discussed is how to ensure training stays effective. Director minutes support this response and indicated that from these meetings six different on-going training sessions came into existence. Senior leaders made these training courses available to all employees to take advantage of and permit anyone who would like to take a course sign up. S03 indicated that this availability keeps the employees engaged as they maintain the control of their growth and development.

The Company XYZ handbook provides clear expectations regarding training and the development of their employees. The handbook states, “Do not underestimate what you have to learn to be competent at Company XYZ. The good news is, we have great

trainers and materials to help you. Be a good student and ask a lot of questions.” S01 suggested that one reason leadership has gained such success with the training program is because the training department offers multiple options and employees receive monetary compensation for attending each training session.

Recognition, rewards, and incentives. Recognition, rewards, and incentives was a minor theme that emerged from the data. The responses of S01, S02, and S03 correlated with Company XYZ records confirmed preceding research findings concerning this topic. S02 indicated that recognition and rewards helps to increase confidence, which increases engagement. S01 stated that when recognizing an extra mile that an employee has intentionally traveled, the employee becomes motivated to do more. S01 continued to state that an effective key that helped to sustain engagement was consistent recognition and rewarding those additional steps helps to affirm the behavior. S01 agreed with Putra, Cho, and Liu (2015), who indicated that the proper reward systems positively reinforce behaviors that lead to preferred results. Taylor (2015) indicated that when organizational leaders learn how to balance the performance levels and extrinsic rewards, engagement is more likely to develop and sustain. S03 shared that leadership saw a dramatic increase in engagement when they created a method for them to receive tips. The additional tips boosted moral, and S03 included that the key to sustaining employee engagement is to put things in place to sustain high employee morale. S01 stated that leaders must find out what motivates their team and suggested that sometimes it is just a matter of bringing in cookies and everyone is happy.

Hiring to fit culture. One connection that I found consistent within all three interviews is the need to hire employees who fit the culture. Leadership build engagement within the workplace by hiring employees who desire purpose, fulfillment, and advancement within the company (Houlihan & Harvey, 2014). One of the first pages in Company XYZ's handbook includes a personal note to all new hires, informing them that leaders only select the "cream of the crop" to work with Company XYZ. S01 stressed that one reason the staff engages is because leadership sought specific characteristics during the hiring process. S01 shared that when Company XYZ leaders bring an individual in to interview, managers monitor how the interviewee interacts with the staff. In doing so, S01 revealed that individuals that display any characteristics that conflict with behaviors that foster engagement fails to qualify for the position. According to S02, it is easy to teach employees skill, but it is difficult to teach them how to have a servant's heart. The weeding out process begins during the hiring process.

The frequency of occurrence, shown below in Table 1, displays the minor themes that emerged from the data analysis surrounding creating a culture that enhances and sustains employee engagement. The minor themes include (a) advancement and promotions; (b) training and development; (c) recognition, rewards, and incentives; and (d) hiring practices. The frequency displays each time a specific topic was mentioned in the employee handbook, director meeting minutes, or revealed in the responses of a participant. The results support the idea that creating a culture that enhances and sustains employee engagement is necessary to increase employee engagement.

Table 1

Frequency of Themes for Creating a Culture that Enhances and Sustains Employee Engagement

Theme	<i>n</i>	% of frequency of occurrence
Advancement and Promotions	17	22.97 %
Training and Development	21	28.38 %
Recognition, Rewards, and Incentives	17	22.97 %
Hiring Practices	19	25.68 %

Note: n= frequency

Leadership Characteristics that Increase Employee engagement

Leadership characteristics that increase employee engagement is the second major theme. Responses from interview questions 1, 2, and 3 helped to uncover leadership characteristics that increase employee engagement. Researchers suggested that the behaviors that leaders display directly influences employee engagement (Breevaart et al., 2014). One of the responsibilities of leaders is to form a culture that provides the resources that influence employee engagement and maintain an environment that reinforces behaviors that cause employees to want to invest in the business (Carasco-Saul & Kim, 2015). Storm, Sears, and Kelly (2014) indicated that for employees to engage physically, cognitively, and emotionally, leaders must intentionally contribute attention to the work conditions of employees and set the appropriate atmosphere to receive such benefits.

The minor themes that emerged from leadership characteristics that increase employee engagement seem to directly align with the servant leadership theory. S03

suggested that to lead in Company XYZ one must first have a servant heart. In fact, S03 stated that having a servant's heart is a prerequisite for being in a leadership position at Company XYZ. S02 echoed the idea of servant leadership when answering interview question seven and inclined that the most effective leadership strategy to increase employee engagement is for leaders to become a servant leader. S02 stressed the importance of leaders digging in and finding out what can they do for the employees to make their jobs easier and once they find out, they need to do it.

Effective communication. Hart (2016) indicated that communication between employees and leaders that included high measurements of openness, respect, and transparency enhances employee engagement. Because effective communication tactics increase employee engagement (Hart, 2016), 50% of business leaders intentionally have made communication a foundational piece of the employee engagement priorities within their organizations (Mishra et al., 2014). Men and Hung-Baesecke (2015) suggested that effective communication has a direct effect on employees' willingness to engage.

Employees receive and accomplish work task through communication, and the way leaders communicate plays a critical role in the outcome of the employee and organizational productivity (Mikkelsen, York, & Arritola, 2015). Often, when employees lack appropriate information, it is due to poor communication methods (Mikkelsen et al., 2015). When asked interview question 1, S02 expressed that without communication, no engagement takes place.

Participants' responses identified that constant and effective communication plays a role in employee engagement. S03 indicated that without employee engagement, there

is no success, and without communication there is no engagement. Additionally, S03 suggested that the establishment had an open-door policy, which allowed employees to express their concerns openly, without any repercussions at any time. S02 expressed that the daily allowance of feedback from employees kept morale up as it allowed leadership to address concerns immediately and make any necessary changes. Researchers repeatedly supported this notation and highlighted communication as an essential factor in increasing employee engagement (Mishra et al., 2014). Therefore, organizational leaders should consider the significant correlation of successful communication techniques when aiming to increase employee engagement.

Leveraging employee innovation and ownership. Researchers suggested that a significant correlation exists between employee engagement behaviors and employee performance outcomes and goal alignment (Alagaraja & Shuck, 2015). Alagaraja and Shuck indicated that organizational leaders who properly align individual performance goals with organizational goals gain additional benefits from actively engaged employees and, in return, meet more organizational goals. The responses of S02 supported previous research and stated that it is critical to find the strengths of each employee and build on those strengths, and encourages small business leaders to do the same.

Company XYZ's handbook supported S02's responses as one of the very first pages inform new employees that they were not hired as observers but contributors. S01, S02, and S03 all indicated that when leadership takes into consideration the concerns of employees, engagement increases. According to S01, giving employees the ability to be creative and innovate not only increases engagement, but enhances performance.

The findings regarding this theme supported the servant leadership theory. Servant leaders are leaders who contribute high measurements of empowerment and moral constructs regarding sharing decision-making responsibilities and demonstrating accountability (Staats, 2015). Rachmawati and Lantu (2014) proposed that a characteristic of the servant leader is to create cultures that foster employee growth, atmospheres to learn, and demonstrate a transfer of power through employee development. Servant leaders have a way of increasing self-assurance within employees, as this style of leadership tends to build environments where the opinions of the employees matter, and because of this, employees experience stronger ties to their organization (Carter & Baghurst, 2014).

Leading by example. Every interviewer indicated the connection between employee engagement and leadership behavior. All participants suggested that for employees to fully engage in the workplace, leadership must lead by example. The findings indicated that when leaders fail to lead as an example, leaders fail to create an atmosphere that fosters engagement. S01 shared that the example that leaders give to employees drives their loyalty. S02 proposed something similar and indicated that employees are not asked to do anything that leadership is not willing to do. Both S01 and S02 described one of the primary benefits of leaders leading by example, is the increase of willingness of employees to step out of their assigned duty for the advancement of the organization. These notions supported research, as scholars suggested that leading by example is a factor that directly influences measurements of engagement (De Clercq et al., 2014).

Trustworthiness. Researchers indicated that trust is a prerequisite to employee engagement, and distrust prohibits maximum potential (Ogwu, Onyishi, & Rodriguez-Sanchez, 2014). Da Beer et al. (2015) suggested that employees should see organizational leaders as trust figures, as trust remains one of the most prominent characteristics of employee engagement. S02 indicated that employees and leadership must share a mutual trust. Employees must trust the leaders and leaders must trust the employees and without this balance, S02 suggested, leadership will experience a decrease in engagement.

The responses of the participants support research findings, which indicated that when employees trust leadership, they are more apt to demonstrate behaviors and attitudes that stem from engagement (Downey, Werff, Thomas, & Plaut, 2015). Downey et al. (2015) also implied that employee participation is a critical factor that directly relates to trust. As employees' trust their leaders, the level of their engagement increases (Downey et al., 2015).

S01 stated that one of the reasons employees find themselves more engaged in the workplace is because of the level of trust they have in leadership. S01 suggested that leadership consciously invest time in getting to know employees and build healthy relationships, and this is one of the primary factors that sustains trust. According to S02, to sustain high levels of engagement, leaders must consistently put the employees first and display attitudes that foster trust, reveal sincere concern, and reveal a daily intent to build healthy relationships. When answering interview question number six, S01 proposed that one way leadership measured employee engagement was by their

willingness to trust enough to give more than asked of them, knowing that leadership are invested enough to reward them, even if it was not always in a monetary form.

The participants' suggestions support research surrounding servant leadership in relation to trust. One of the foundational characteristic of a servant leader is to serve their followers through emphasizing individual growth and building mutual trust (Carter & Baghurst, 2015). Liden et al. (2014) explained that servant leaders strengthen employee engagement through the avenue of building trusting relationships with their followers. Servant leaders intentionally demonstrate behaviors that focus on their followers, which fosters environments that lead to reciprocated trust between the leader and the employee (Bambale, 2014).

Barriers and critical factors influencing engagement. Participants' responses to interview questions 3, 4, and 7 exposed that barriers exist and have the potential to prohibit employee engagement strategies from succeeding. The findings signified that while there are successful strategies that leaders can employ, many strategies are ineffective and leaders must recognize the difference. The findings of this study proposed that small business leaders should gain a full understanding of the elements that decrease employee engagement strategies from being effective.

Barriers to engagement. S02 mentioned that one of the barriers of employee engagement was not necessarily getting employees to engage but sustaining that engagement. S02 stressed the importance of small business leaders incorporating strategies that sustain engagement and being willing to make alterations as necessary. Successful small business leaders understand that achieving sustainability requires

consistent change (Abdelkafi & Tauscher, 2016). S03 emphasized the difficulty experienced when trying to overcome barriers of engagement, especially when leadership is not able to identify the need. In efforts to overcome those obstacles, S03 created focus groups that included both managers and employees. The group meets monthly and senior leaders force themselves to hear concerns that employees may otherwise fail to articulate.

Another barrier that S03 identified was time constraints. As a senior leader, S03 mentioned that many times leaders know what to do; however, time limits prohibit action. S01 indicated that because of the nature of the small business, leaders wear multiple hats and conduct multiple tasks. Unfortunately, because of this, leaders fail to meet some of the desires of the employees. S02 mentioned that leaders should be intentional about assuring employees that their needs are important to them and constant communication aids in these efforts.

S03 mentioned, to avoid mediocre outcomes, it is important for leaders to have a true heart for serving others. People understand your actions better when they understand the heart of the leader. One of the characteristics of servant leaders is commitment to others (Spears, 1995). Allowing employees to experience this commitment influences the relationship between employees and leaders and employees' reactions.

Critical factors. One primary concern, and a common thread between participants, was the inability to measure the honesty of the employees in relation to their thoughts, feelings, and perception of leadership. According to the director minute notes from Company XYZ, employees shared the need to have a safe place to share their concerns without the fear of consequences. Because of this concern, S03 indicated that

leadership executed strategies to meet this need. Along with the open-door policy, S03 indicated that leadership gives the employees the ability to evaluate the performance of leadership after training, after their first month, and at their will afterwards. The employees do not have to put their names on the evaluations and can safely submit them at their convenience. The leaders of Company XYZ updated the employee handbook to identify the ways for the employee to submit the evaluations and encouraged employees to express their perception on any leader of the company, including the owner.

When answering interview question number seven, S02 stressed the importance of organizational leaders listening to their employees. S01 also stressed the importance of small business leaders listening to the voice of their employees if leadership desires to experience a culture that fosters employee engagement. S02 went on to suggest that one of the barriers that hinder small business leaders from experiencing the full benefits of engagement is neglecting to make necessary changes that are important to employees. S02 suggested that many times employees disconnect from the leaders of the organization before they leave the organization. These findings supported previously data exposed by researchers, such as Sharma (2014), who expressed that failing to act after seeking feedback from employees hinders employee engagement.

Below, Table 2 presents the minor themes that emerged from the analysis conducted surrounding leadership characteristics that increase employee engagement. The minor themes are (a) effective communication, (b) the willingness to leverage employee innovation, (c) leading by example, (d) trustworthiness, and (e) barriers to engagement. The results support previous research, which indicated that character that

leaders display in the workplace directly influences the measures in which employees engage (Breevaart et al., 2014).

Table 2

Frequency of Themes for Demonstrating Leadership Characteristics that Increase Employee Engagement

<i>Theme</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>% of frequency of occurrence</i>
Effective Communication	20	21.97 %
Innovation and Ownership	18	19.78 %
Leading by Example	26	28.57 %
Trust	14	15.38 %
Barriers and Critical Factors	13	14.28 %

Note: n= frequency

Applications to Professional Practice

The findings of this study are meaningful to employee engagement practices in various aspects. The primary objective of this study was to explore participants' views concerning strategies small business leaders use to increase employee engagement. The results of this study could strengthen relationships within the business, enhance performance, and increase productivity within small businesses. Data from this research supported and added to prior and existing knowledge concerning employee engagement. The findings from this study are also relative to the servant leadership theory and indicated that organizational leaders who demonstrate characteristics of servant leaders positively influence employee engagement levels (Carter & Baghurst, 2014).

The first theme that emerged from this study consisted of creating a culture that enhances and sustains employee engagement. By focusing on the needs and desires of employees, organizational leaders are more apt to foster atmospheres that generate behaviors that demonstrate engagement (De Clercq et al., 2014). Small business leaders could implement strategies found within this study as participants' responses confirmed prior and current literature to solidify the importance of creating a culture in which employees know their value.

The second theme revealed leadership characteristics that increase employee engagement. According to Kopperud, Martinsen, and Humborstad (2014), the way leaders respond to employees has a direct influence on how employees react. Small business leaders could use this information based on the findings from participants' responses as it directly correlates with prior and current research to develop healthy relationships with employees, which is necessary to experience desired outcomes.

This study offers enriched evidence of past and current literature on how small businesses leaders can benefit from creating a strategy that enhances employee engagement and the necessary leadership characteristics required to increase employee engagement. Implementing various strategies revealed in this study may contribute to social change.

Implications for Social Change

The results of this study have the potential to contribute to social change within small businesses. Because a highly engaged workforce enhances productivity by 78% and increases profitability 40% more than the average outcome (Jha & Kumar, 2016),

small business leaders can benefit in various ways from this data. The participants of this study consisted of three small business leaders who employed strategies that increased and sustained employee engagement. The aim was for small business leaders to experience growth of production and performance within their organization and their economic communities.

Researchers agreed that when small business leaders create cultures that support workplace engagement, the increased levels of employee commitment produces a positive workforce (Saunders & Tiwari, 2014). Mishra et al. (2014) suggested that employees who engaged in the workplace displayed stronger forms of attachment to the business, a greater bond within the community, better family interactions, and positively influence general relationships.

To experience such benefits, small business leaders must gain an understanding of the strategies that promote their desired results. Griffin et al. (2015) indicated that small business leaders must comprehend techniques that enhances employee engagement, while also recognizing barriers that prevent their desired outcomes. Any small business leader can incorporate strategies discussed within this study to increase employee engagement and potentially experience these benefits.

Recommendations for Action

Scholars considered employee engagement as an emerging phenomenon that small business leaders viewed as a highly critical component (Iqbal, Shabbir, Zameer, Khan, & Sandhu, 2017). Workplace engagement improves through the fostering of positive cultures and from monitoring every component of the organization's strategy

(Alagaraja & Shuck, 2015). Small business leaders should consider whether the strategies found in this study align with their business practices. If the strategies do not exist within an organization, leaders should strongly consider adapting their current strategies of engagement and create new tactics that would allow them to produce the desired results. Increased measurements of workplace engagement lead to enhanced productivity, increased productivity, and reduced turnover (Walker, 2016). Small business leaders should consider creating strategic goals and objectives that assist them in providing an opportunity to create an action plan to implement and experience improvement (Cattermole, Johnson, & Jackson, 2014).

Recommendations for Further Research

The results from this study support current and prior research studies concerning the topic. In this study, I conducted an exploration of employee engagement strategies. I recommend that scholars conduct additional research addressing the limitations of this study, particularly the restricted geographical location and minimal sample size. The limitations of this study consisted of three small business leaders of a single coffee shop, in Birmingham, Alabama. In the future, researchers should explore employee engagement strategies outside of this geographical location and include a broader sample size.

Recommendations for further study also include conducting additional research with a larger organization or conducting a multi-case study. In doing so, researchers will have the ability to expand their research pool and gather additional information. Another option would be to conduct a phenomenological study. The findings from a

phenomenological study can uncover factors about the lived experiences of employees (Tavakol & Sandars, 2014), which may add a clearer context concerning leadership strategies to enhance employee engagement.

Reflections

One of my primary goals was to obtain a doctoral degree. I wanted to do something that I never thought I could do. After failing the seventh grade and barely making it through high school, no one would imagine that I would one day have the title “Dr.”. This process was an incredibly difficult task to say the least. I am overly excited about this accomplishment; it is indeed by far my favorite! In the beginning of my doctoral journey, I was unsure of what to expect. My experience throughout this process has been rewarding, yet challenging. While walking through the steps of the Doctoral of Business Administration (DBA) doctoral program, I faced many challenges that would lead to many giving up. However, I knew that giving up was not an option.

The purpose of this study was to explore strategies that small business leaders used to increase employee engagement in the workplace. I had to complete this process section by section, and each section possessed its own uncertainties and ambiguities. During the process of obtaining this accomplishment, I learned how to conduct actual research. Additionally, I developed my scholarly voice, which I will continue to use throughout my life. I am more than grateful to Walden University, its staff, and all the contributions to making me a better me.

Throughout this process, I felt overwhelmed by the information that emerged during the semistructured interviews and the data uncovered from the review of company

records. Each participant from XYZ Company was excited and passionate about increasing employee engagement, and expressed their desire to see continued enhancement. The findings of this study were like my personal experiences, as a leader who strives to maintain high levels of employee engagement within my small business. Although, some differences existed between each participant's perspective, I identified numerous similarities and challenges that countless small business leaders encounter when looking to increase employee engagement. The findings from this study exposed me to strategies and practices that I can use to increase employee engagement.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies small business leaders use to increase employee engagement. When organizational leaders create cultures that create and sustain employee engagement they experience various benefits such as enhanced performance, increased profits, and decreased turnover rates. Servant leadership was the conceptual framework used for this study. To gain a better understanding of employee engagement semistructured interviews took place, along with triangulated data, which included member checking, an employee handbook, and director meeting minutes. Two main themes emerged from this study, which included (a) creating a culture that enhances and sustains employee engagement and (b) demonstrating leadership characteristics that increase employee engagement. The findings from this study indicated that leaders who apply these strategies possess the ability to increase employee engagement and may not only possess healthier teams, but a healthier organization.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

I will use the following interview protocol:

After approval to conduct study, I will go to the site and speak with the owner asking for potential participant information. Once I receive names and contact information of participants, I will speak to participants concerning the interview process in person. If participants are not available, I will email a request for an interview. The email request follows:

Dear Participant,

As a small business leader who implemented strategies to increase employee engagement, I am requesting your participation in a doctoral study regarding strategies that contribute to engagement in the workplace.

If you agree to participate in this study, I ask you to allow me to interview you for no longer than one hour as well as hold a follow-up interview to verify interpretations. I will hold the interview at the site for your convenience. Your participation in this doctoral study is voluntary, and you have the ability to withdraw your participation at any time without penalty. The purpose of this study is to explore experiences of small business leaders who have launched and maintained a successful culture in relation to workplace engagement. I have attached the consent form that outlines the procedures that I will follow for this study as well as the interview questions for your review.

I will keep any information that you share confidential and the data from all the interviews will be presented in aggregate format. I plan to conduct the interviews from XXX to XXX and if you would provide me a good time and phone number to call you, I would be grateful.

Please feel free to contact my faculty chair or myself by clicking reply all or directly emailing me. I am open to any questions or expressions of any concerns you may have.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Akeia Simmons
Doctor of Business Administration Candidate Walden University

2. Upon receipt of acknowledgement of the volunteers willing to participate, I will ensure that I obtain the signed Consent to Participate documentation from each participant before the interview begins. I will store all materials relating to this study in a locked safe for a minimum of 5 years. I am the only one who will have access to this data.

3. I will meet with each participant at the time/date that the volunteer designates. I will remind each participant that he/she may withdraw from the study at any time and that all data is confidential. I will then thank each participant for volunteering his or her insights and experiences. I will remind each participant that the focus of the interview will relate to success factors of small business leaders. I will ask the following questions as well as probing questions as needed to get more in-depth information:

1. What strategies do you use to increase employee engagement?
2. What metrics did you employ to examine the efficacy of the strategies?
3. What barriers did you encounter when first attempting to increase employee engagement?
4. How did you address each of the significant challenges or barriers?
5. What strategies have you found most effective for motivating your employees to perform better?
6. How have you seen employee engagement drive the level of productivity?
7. What additional factors that we have not discussed contributed to your success in this area?

4. Upon the completion of the initial face-to-face interview and follow-up interviews, I will send the following thank you letter to each participant:

Dear <Participant>:

I would like to take the opportunity to express my gratitude for your participation in my research study. I recognize that you are incredibly busy, and I truly appreciate your time, effort, and shared expertise. I am currently exploring the data to identify themes. I will provide you with a summary of the results of my findings upon completion of the research and final approval of the study.

Thank you again for your time and insight!

Sincerely,

Akeia Simmons

Doctor of Business Administration Candidate Walden University