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Strategies to Foster Employee Engagement Before, During, and After Organizational Mergers

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Abstract

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MBA, American InterContinental University, 2013

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Engaged employees contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of an organization's service to their community. Many organizational leaders struggle to engage their employees before, during, and after organizational mergers. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore strategies 9 leaders from 3 merged higher education organizations in the state of Georgia used to encourage employee engagement when their organizations were merging. The conceptual framework for this study was a combination of the transformational leadership theory, the self-efficacy theory, and the acquisition integration approach. After collecting data through semistructured interviews, organizational documentation, and member checking, data analysis through thematic review and triangulation revealed 4 key themes. The major themes for engaging employees during mergers were: strategies establishing a communication plan; strategies creating a cohesive culture, identity, or team; strategies mitigating barriers to employee engagement; and strategies assessing successful implementation for ongoing modification and adjustment of engagement strategies. The implications of this study for social change are that engaged employees might increase the institution's productivity in educating students to be more successful in the workforce after graduating, and therefore, have a greater capacity to provide for their families and strengthen their communities.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

The emphasis of recent doctoral research has shifted from the development of new theories to providing knowledge to identify, study, and then attempt to solve current issues in the business world (Baskerville & Myers, 2015). One current issue organizational leaders encounter in business is determining what strategies to use to reach established strategic goals when they undertake mergers within their organization (Galpin, Maellaro, & Whittington, 2012). Leaders of merging organizations can learn successful strategies to emulate during the merger process through other leaders' guidance and lessons learned (Nadolska & Barkema, 2014). This guidance can center on one or more aspects or areas within the organization including employees, leadership, customers, communication, organizational identity, and external environment (Agote, Aramburu, & Lines, 2016; Mangundjaya, 2015). With this study, I investigated successful strategies organizational leaders in higher education used to foster employee engagement within their organizations before, during, and after organizational mergers.

Background of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to explore strategies higher education leaders use to successfully foster employee engagement before, during, and after an organizational merger intended to improve organizational sustainability. Research exists concerning mergers in numerous industries, especially the banking and computer industries, but limited research exists concerning mergers of higher education organizations (Ribando & Evans, 2015). However, much of the existing literature focuses on factors that increase employee engagement rather than negative factors that leaders should minimize or eliminate during mergers. Organizational leaders can learn best practices in merger strategies from the successes of other organizational leaders (Reis, Carvalho, & Ferreira, 2015). Organizational leaders consider many factors when setting organizational goals to indicate the success of the merger initiatives. Friedman and Friedman (2018) found, from their research in higher education, leaders involved in change initiatives encountered issues such as integration, internal operations, communication, resources, people, change resistance, and culture. Perhaps the most important factor found within the research is employee commitment to the change initiatives set by the organization's leaders (Mangundjaya, 2015). Saks (2017) noted that extant literature focuses on factors that increase employee engagement rather than negative factors that leaders should minimize or eliminate. Organizations benefit from the development of high levels of employee engagement (Bakker, 2017), especially to maintain a competitive advantage within their industry and to improve organizational agility (Friedman & Friedman, 2018). Al Mehrzi and Singh (2016) further concluded organizational success and sustainability rely heavily on engagement of employees.

Problem Statement

Mergers are one of the more impactful changes in an organization's lifecycle (Renneboog & Vansteenkiste, 2019); however, two-thirds of organizational leaders do not realize their intended merger goals (Hu & Huynh, 2015). Sixty percent of managers interviewed stated they would like their employees to be more engaged (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). The general business problem is that leadership during many organizational mergers is unsuccessful in meeting intended merger goals because leaders are unaware of the importance of employee engagement for merger success. The specific business problem is some higher education leaders lack strategies to successfully foster employee engagement before, during, and after organizational mergers intended to improve organization sustainability.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies higher education leaders use to successfully foster employee engagement before, during, and after an organizational merger intended to improve organization sustainability. The target population consisted of nine leaders from three merged higher education organizations who used strategies to successfully foster employee engagement before, during, and after an organizational merger. The findings from my study could contribute to social change by identifying effective strategies for encouraging employee engagement. Employee engagement increases productivity in student education (Febriansyah, Pringgabayu, Hidayanti, & Febrianti, 2018), increases employment security (Antony, 2018), fosters continuous service to local community members, increases employee loyalty toward the organization (Thompson, Lemmon, & Walter, 2015), and develops relationships within the local communities (Antony, 2018).

Nature of the Study

Researchers use the quantitative method to examine interrelationships and differences among variables, whereas they use the qualitative method to explore and understand phenomena (Yin, 2018). Quantitative researchers establish facts about a phenomenon; qualitative researchers investigate how meanings are created via the distinctions assigned to aspects of the phenomenon (Barnham, 2015). Qualitative researchers seek to collect data to propose possible solutions to a problem that exists without a clearly most effective solution (Paradis et al., 2016). Using qualitative methodology, researchers capture data concerning the phenomenon from documents and other written messages as well as participants' thoughts and experiences and formal presentations from organizational leaders (Suchan, 2014). Sometimes qualitative researchers work to challenge accepted thinking about a specific problem, factors involved in the problem, and problem solutions (Paradis et al., 2016). Qualitative researchers gain unique insight into the participant's world through sometimes innovative and creative data collection methods (Halcomb, 2016). Therefore, the qualitative study methodology was the research method I used for this study. Barnham (2015) said the quantitative method is appropriate to test a theory or hypothesis or collect numerical data for statistical evaluation. Hence, the quantitative approach was not appropriate for the study as the purpose was not simply a statistical evaluation of numerical data. Mixed methods researchers focus on issues requiring blending both qualitative and quantitative research elements (e.g., to evaluate different research questions with different methods) (Flick, 2016). The mixed methods methodology was not appropriate because the intended emphasis of this study was a qualitative study to explore and understand strategies rather than quantitative study to examine numerical data of the events.

Yin (2018) said that using case studies enables researchers to look holistically at organizational and managerial processes through direct observation and interviews of participants familiar with the subject phenomena. Using a holistic approach in a case study, the researcher explores the specifics of the case environment where no predetermined answers to the research question exist (Yin, 2018) and where investigation of complex phenomena is expected to yield extensive and in-depth descriptions (Abdalla, Oliveira, Azevedo, & Gonzalez, 2018). The researcher improves case study rigor and generalization through the transparency and descriptions of case selection, case study details, and research procedure (Abdalla et al., 2018). Through direct interaction with the study participants in a case study design, I explored the strategies college leaders can use to foster employee engagement before, during, and after an organizational merger.

I considered two other qualitative designs: phenomenology and ethnography. Within the phenomenological study format, researchers seek to draw meaning from the in-depth, long-term investigation of the lived experiences of the interviewees with the focus on the experience, not the individual within the experience (Kruth, 2015). Barnham (2015) stressed that only those people who have experienced a phenomenon could express first-hand observations and feelings about the phenomenon with the outside world. Phenomenological descriptions are very context-dependent, resulting in researchers being unable to generalize these data (Giorgi, 2015). The exploration of the study participants' experiences as happened in the past, as well as the difficulty in generalization, precluded the phenomenological design for the research. Through ethnography methods, researchers seek patterns from interviews and observation of a group's culture (Kruth, 2015), if only a single component of that culture (Rashid, Caine, & Goez, 2015), investigating the abstract concept in human terms (Yin, 2018).

Addressing the purpose of this study did not require the data typically obtained from ethnographical observation of individuals.

Research Question

What strategies do higher education leaders use to successfully foster employee engagement before, during, and after an organizational merger for improving organization sustainability?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies did you use to foster employee engagement before the merger?
2. What strategies did you use to foster employee engagement during the merger?
3. What strategies did you use to foster employee engagement after the merger?
4. What barriers to implementing the strategies did you encounter?
5. How were those barriers addressed?
6. How is the effectiveness of the strategies measured?
7. What else might you want to add to this discussion of employee engagement strategies?

Conceptual Framework

Through the use of a framework, researchers outline the rationale for the development of the research questions or hypotheses and keep the project's objectives coherent to the reader (Green, 2014). The objective of this study was to explore strategies leaders use that foster employee engagement before, during, and after higher education mergers for improving organization sustainability. The conceptual framework involved three theories: (a) transformational leadership theory by Bass (1985), (b) the self-efficacy theory by Bandura (1977), and (c) the acquisition integration approach by Haspeslagh and Jemison (1991). Researchers use the transformational leadership theory to address issues and dynamics dealing with commitment, involvement, loyalty, and performance (Bass, 1985). Transformational leadership includes four fundamental components: charismatic, inspirational, intellectually stimulating, and individually considerate (Popli & Rizvi, 2017). Self-efficacy is defined as a person’s beliefs or confidence in their capabilities to organize and execute the actions necessary to achieve a particular goal (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy affects what a person can achieve, above what that person could accomplish through normal effort alone (Choi, Kluemper, & Sauley, 2013). Successful efficacy efforts require a collaborative environment that rewards accomplishments, fosters aspirations, and values productive engagement (Bandura, 1997). Through the acquisition integration approach, Haspeslagh and Jemison (1991) established a perspective on successful acquisitions and mergers stemming from understanding and managing the processes within the acquisition decisions and the implementation of those decisions. Furthermore, Haspeslagh and Jemison addressed how strategy, organization, and performance interact within the acquisition process.

These theories were appropriate for the conceptual framework for this study because they provided the structure to view the leadership’s use of strategies to build the employees’ engagement within the organization during the time of an organizational merger. This study explored how a leader supports employee engagement through the use of the leadership techniques of communication, employee inclusion, and cultural integration to encourage self-efficacy amongst employees during a period of organizational change, specifically the merger each population's organization encountered.

Operational Definitions

Communication: A social process where people of a particular culture create and exchange realities of everyday experiences (Simoes & Esposito, 2014).

Continuous improvement: A state in which the members of an organization permanently search for areas of positive change (Brajer-Marczak, 2014).

Employee engagement: A working person's expression of self in terms of task behaviors that promote positive and active performance (Shuck, Adelson, & Reio, 2017), or a worker's level of commitment to and involvement in the organization and organizational values (Anitha, 2014).

Engagement: A positive, motivational state of vigor, dedication, and absorption (Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2014); conversely, with disengagement, employers see increases in attrition and poor job performance in employees (Kaliannan & Adjovu, 2015).

Inclusion: The atmosphere within an organization that reflects attitudes and perspectives that remove barriers, allowing all organizational members to perform at their best (Nart, Yaprak, Yildrim, & Sarihan, 2018).

Job satisfaction: An attitude of an employee, rather than behavior, toward the work environment (Yang, 2016).

Leader efficacy: The belief in oneself as effective in setting tasks and goals for employees while gaining their trust and confidence (Grant, 2014).

Organizational change: The process where an institution moves from a present state to a desired future state to achieve one or more institutional objectives (Agote et al., 2016).

Voice: The expression of constructive opinions, concerns, or ideas about work related issues (Wang, Gan, Wu, & Wang, 2015).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are the items a researcher decides to use as the factual basis of a research study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Assumptions, determined by the researcher, shape the direction of the research study (Kirkwood & Price, 2013). This study included the assumption that data gathered from the participants was true and resulted from actual activities and personal experiences during a merger. I also made the assumption that each participant had successful strategies to contribute to the research.

Limitations

Limitations for a study represent the recognized weaknesses in the research study design and conceptual framework (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). A limitation of this study was that the participants would be from only three of the merged colleges within the college system. Therefore, the findings of the study may not be generalizable to other colleges undertaking an organizational merger. The second limitation was the time available for each interview. The intent was to collect information to reach saturation of data for the research question. I considered the limitations of the participants' schedules and balanced those limitations against the need to collect all the pertinent information from each participant. The final limitation of this study was that I researched the strategies that fostered employee engagement, not the effectiveness of the strategies for bringing about the desired outcomes.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the boundaries, factors, or constructs that narrow the scope of the research study (Ellis & Levy, 2009). One delimitation for this study was the exclusion of members of the Institutional Effectiveness (IE) or Institutional Research (IR) staff from interviews. These college employees, by nature of their job duties, develop a base of knowledge of the college that might cause them, if included as participants, to contribute second-hand experiences. The second delimitation involved the lens used to explore the data. A researcher chooses a lens for each research study to limit the factors considered as important within the thesis (Merriam, 2009). Other researchers have studied method bias controls within recent research work to determine the effects method bias has on study validity, reliability, and findings (Noble & Smith, 2015).

Significance of the Study

Organizational leaders determined that approximately 70% of change initiatives, especially within merging companies, do not attain the expected results and report value reductions in about 50% of all mergers (Wetzel & Dievernich, 2014). The majority of merging companies' leaders were unprepared to manage differences in employee and organizational cultures during and after a merger initiative (Katz & Miller, 2012). Researchers have linked post-acquisition turnover within the top leadership of an organization, overall negative performance of the organization, and potential leadership succession issues (Butler, Perryman, & Ranft, 2012). D. Park, Krishnan, Chinta, and Lee (2017) concluded that continuity of management during the merger and management's involvement throughout the entire process was essential to the success of the merger initiative. A college colleague, Veteran Services Coordinator (personal communication, December 17, 2015), told the college president that starting a merger without a plan is like putting together a puzzle without the box top. The significance of this study may be to provide organizational leaders with a set of strategies that higher education leaders could use to foster employee engagement before, during, and after organizational mergers intended to improve organization sustainability.

The social responsibility of colleges toward their communities is to provide the best training and education to students for employment in the workplace and to help build an educational system to help students meet the challenges in building and maintaining a sustainable society (Makrakis & Kostoulas-Makrakis, 2016). College leadership fulfills this responsibility by establishing the atmosphere and providing resources, through motivated staff (Fong & Snape, 2015) and effective organizational policies (Smith, 2013), as completely and quickly as possible after the organizational merge. Results of the changes to the organization (e.g., the addition of new services, the implementation of new technology, or concentration of applicable programs within the communities) could directly benefit the communities' stakeholders whether students or potential employers of the graduates, creating a culture of sustainability within the organization.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this research study was to explore employee engagement strategies used by higher education leadership during times of organizational change, specifically during periods of organizational mergers, to foster sustainable practices in their organizations. The literature review for this study consisted of primarily peer-reviewed articles published between October 2014 and October 2019. I supplemented these articles with scholarly texts and resources, research documents, and dissertations that were relevant to my research question. I retrieved these sources by using databases from the Walden University Library. Specific databases and database search platforms that I used were: ABI/Inforum, Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, Emerald Insight, Galileo, Political Science Complete, ProQuest, PsycINFO, Sage Journals, and Thoreau Multi-Database Search. The keywords used include: *acquisition integration, communication, efficacy, employee engagement, higher education, mergers, organizational change, self-efficacy, and transformational leadership.* Table 1 depicts the number of peer-reviewed sources as well as how many were published less than 5 years before my program completion.

Table 1

Overview of Sources Used in the Study

	Total references	Total (2015 or newer)	% of Total (2015 or newer)	Total peer-reviewed references	% of total peer-reviewed references
Doctoral Study	302	250	82.78%	288	95.36%
Literature Review	149	120	80.54%	143	95.97%

Researchers historically have studied mergers and acquisitions using quantitatively based theoretical approaches, usually measured in economic or social terms (Wetzel & Dievernich, 2014). More recent researchers have shifted toward the qualitative investigation of firm-level issues involving individuals in the organization (Sahu, Pathardikar, & Kumar, 2018) and influences on those individuals by external forces such as organizational alignment (Alagaraja & Shuck, 2015). Few researchers have studied specific organizational contexts (Griffin, 2015) and researchers have rarely studied the emotions and aspects of control in organizational change (Smollan & Pio, 2018). Researchers make study decisions based on criteria from a chosen conceptual framework (Berterö, 2015). In this literature review, I discussed the conceptual framework I chose for my review of leadership strategies used to encourage employee engagement. I also used this framework to address some of the issues and challenges impacting employee engagement during college mergers. The selected framework included Bass's (1985) transformational leadership theory, Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory, and Haspeslagh and Jemison’s (1991) acquisition integration approach. After presenting my conceptual framework, I briefly covered current scholarship on mergers, especially mergers in higher education, to elucidate the differences that may be important to this study on successful employee engagement strategies.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Leaders, and their leadership style, have significantly influenced the outcome of an organizational merger (D. Park et al., 2017). Organizational change occurs in one of two forms: incremental and radical (Feng, Huang, & Zhang, 2016). Incremental change has encompassed the purposeful, ongoing, minute adjustments to policies and procedures whereas radical change has occured in major disruptions and reworking of organizational structure and policies (Feng et al., 2016). Actions of key leaders have ultimately determined the results (Reis et al., 2015) and diminished the effects of an impending crisis by recognizing and reacting to signals of the developing situation (Sahu et al., 2018). Therefore, the emphasis for upper organizational leadership should be on identifying the best individuals to lead the organization into and through the merger, focusing on choosing strategic thinkers (Sahu et al., 2018), people whose leadership behaviors are based on values congruent with the organization and who have proven ability to lead with the best interests of others in the forefront of all decision-making (Copeland, 2016). Many organizations undergoing change chose to have middle leaders provide an increasing role in the change process (Sahu et al., 2018). These chosen leaders have been expected to build a purpose or process for the organizational change based on communication and trust (Baltzley, 2016; Bansal, 2016). Organizational leaders have chosen change leaders who are open to change and who have possessed skills and experience that are needed in the change initiative (Syed, Rehman, & Kitchlew, 2018). Successful organizational leaders have shown awareness of specific needs of the workforce, often in work-life balance (Braun & Peus, 2018). They also have provided job resources and developed avenues for personnel to adapt to the changing environment (Leslie, Abu-Rahma, & Jaleel, 2018). The correct choice of leaders to direct employee efforts during organizational change helped determine the success of the organizational change.

Many leadership styles exist and organizational leaders have utilized these leadership styles to their advantage. The basic attributes above are considered to be key for leaders to be considered authentic (Agote et al., 2016) or ethical leaders (Wang et al., 2015). Authentic and ethical behaviors in leaders have become more important to organizations to reform leadership and management styles from the pervasive lack of integrity, honor, and morality in the early 21st century (Copeland, 2016). These traits are common to many leadership styles, including transformational (Popli & Rizvi, 2017) and servant (Nart et al., 2018). I considered using servant, full range, and transformational leadership perspectives for my conceptual framework for the study.

A major characteristic of the servant leadership style is that it is not just a management technique but a way of life through service (Nart et al., 2018). Full range leadership allows organizational figures to use transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles as the situation requires (Geier, 2016). This balance is difficult for researchers to study and for leaders to teach managers (Tonini, Burbules, &

Gunsalus, 2017). For these reasons, I rejected the use of the servant and full range leadership styles as the lens for this study on employee engagement strategies.

I also considered using the transformational leadership style, as developed by Bass (1985), as a lens for the study. A tenant of transformational leadership theory is the characterization of leaders' behaviors as those which motivate employees by creating a vision for the future. Transformational leaders have concentrated their efforts by using techniques of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Popli & Rizvi, 2017). I chose transformational leadership as the leadership component for this study due to the aspects of inspiration, motivation, and vision that are integral to this leadership style.

Transformational leadership and the employee. Although many researchers have studied transformational leadership in for-profit organizations, fewer have conducted studies within not-for-profit organizations (Freeborough & Patterson, 2015). Transformational leaders seek to satisfy the higher needs of employees and engage them to achieve their full potential (Popli & Rizvi, 2017) as well as to encourage employee creativity in the workplace (Abelha, da Costa Carneiro, & de Souza Neves Cavazotte, 2018). A transformational leader's goal is to ultimately improve the performance of the organization as a whole (Abelha et al., 2018; Malik, 2015), often through actions that impact employee engagement on a daily basis (Bakker, 2017). Transformational leaders have often achieved this performance improvement through the role modeling of personal traits to employees (Geier, 2016). A transformational leader develops opportunities to enhance potential and growth of employees (Abelha et al., 2018; Antony, 2018) and reinforces employees' efforts by expressing confidence in their employees' abilities (Popli & Rizvi, 2016). Transformational leaders use these tactics to support and reinforce their employees and their efforts.

Leader support of employee efforts is not limited to personal traits alone. An organization's human resources have been viewed as a real competitive advantage and corporate value (Popli & Rizvi, 2015). Transformational leaders have enabled autonomy and independent work efforts of employees (Antony, 2018; Aydogmus, Camgoz, Ergeneli, & Ekmekci, 2018). They also have involved employees in decision making within the organization (Aravopoulou, Branine, Stone, & Mitsakis, 2018). Through information-rich communication channels (Senior, Fearon, Mclaughlin, & Manalsuren, 2017), a transformational leader articulates tasks and aligns the personal goals with organizational goals for employees. Thereby, employees derived meaning (Antony, 2018; Aydogmus et al., 2018), gain guidance (Barbars, 2015), and gained a sense of control (Smollan & Pio, 2018) from their contributions to the organization. Through the use of internal communication channels, organizational leaders have created a sense of community and trust among employees (Antony, 2018). Leaders have created trust through the provision of opportunities for self-direction and self-control as evidence of management's view of employees personal and organizational worth (Abelha et al., 2018; Norman, Gardner, & Pierce, 2015). Through these practices, transformational leaders have created a supportive environment for their employees.

Transformational leadership in a changing organization. Malbašić, Rey, and Potočan (2015) said success rates have not improved with additional study of the success or failure of the increasing number of merger and acquisitions. Leaders have tended to focus on abstract concepts of a merger rather than on helping individuals in the organization successfully cope with the changes and emotions of the merger process (Smollan & Pio, 2018; Vosse & Aliyu, 2018). A successful leader is one who has demonstrated an understanding of the relationship between emotions and the activities of an organizational transition (Rao, 2017). Popli and Rizvi (2015) suggested one of the key influences on workplace engagement is leadership. Indecisiveness in establishing policy, organizational direction, and overall change management, as well as political insensitivity, were critical areas of leadership failure (Martin & Butler, 2015). To ensure greater success in reaching the goals of a merger, organization leaders have prepared the merger’s team leaders to direct and lead the specific change actions of the merger (Wetzel & Dievernich, 2014). Leaders have often emphasized employee engagement (Besieux, Baillien, Verbeke, & Euwema, 2015) and organizational commitment (Malbašić et al., 2015). The success in attaining organizational change goals has depended on the organizational leadership style and strategies; therefore, informed choice of style and strategies to employ has remained vital.

Management style differences, employees’ perceptions of these styles, and diversity within the leadership has greatly influenced employees’ motivation to attain organizational goals (Aydogmus et al., 2018; Caiazza & Volpe, 2015). Some recent researchers have studied how leaders handle differences in mergers and acquisitions (Angwin, Mellahi, Gomes, & Peter, 2016). Other researchers indicated that a leader’s behavior influences the organization and organization culture (Braun & Peus, 2018), as well as the employees' attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, and engagement (Aydogmus et al., 2018; Barbars, 2015; Popli & Rizvi, 2016). Leaders have also developed dimensions of sharing, flexibility, collaboration, trust, learning, and innovation (Anbumathi, 2016). Through these dimensions, employees influenced their job tasks, requirements, and resources, as well as the processes, hierarchies, overall structures, and vision of the emerging and evolving organization (Podgorski & Sherwood, 2015). In these ways, leaders have shaped the success paths for employees during times of organizational change.

Transformational leadership and employee engagement. The changes integral to a merger have required leaders to strive to maintain engagement of employees within the workplace because employee productivity is vital to economic success (Barbars, 2015). Leaders of organizations undergoing a merger have worked to regain employee involvement and satisfaction with, as well as enthusiasm for, their work within the combined company (Aydogmus et al., 2018). Organizational leaders devoted much effort and resources to employee engagement: attracting, recruiting, and retaining, proactive, engaged, and committed employees (Sonnentag, 2017). Leaders worked hard to build a culture of employee engagement (Barbars, 2015). Many organizational leaders have believed they could promote employee engagement by providing the right work environment, proper leadership, and when needed, employee training in self-efficacy and self-awareness to positively affect employee commitment and feelings of value and significance (Byrne, 2015; Charoensukmongkol, 2017; Copeland, 2016). Aydogmus et al. (2018) said employee engagement is most effectively fostered through perceived supervisor support.

An employee mindset of growth or orientation to engagement within their organization influences employee engagement. A growth mindset in an employee encompasses an enthusiasm for personal and career development, effort, attention, attitude toward setbacks, and interpersonal interactions (Keating & Heslin, 2015). Kumar and Pansari (2016) suggested specific ways of developing an *engagement orientation* within an organization. Individual employee engagement, values, and goals can manifest into shared organizational employee engagement; within this shared engagement, employees influence each other to create identity and engagement on an organizational level (Bakker, Rodriguez-Munoz, & Sanz-Vergel, 2016; Barrick, Thurgood, Smith, Courtright, & Texas, 2015; Ismail, Baki, Omar, & Bebenroth, 2016). Additionally, leaders have worked to develop a *culture of growth* within the organization, a culture that reinforces the belief that talent and intelligence can be cultivated within employees through praise for hard work and initiative (Aydogmus et al., 2018; Keating & Heslin, 2015). Employers have needed to be aware of fluctuations in employee engagement and know the factors of the workplace that influence this fluctuation to organize the environment for optimum engagement (Vosse & Aliyu, 2018). Sonnentag (2017) shared that engagement fluctuates from task to task in the workplace. Encouraging and supportive leaders create an environment conducive to change within the organization.

Change-positive workplace environments benefitted from strong employee engagement. Leaders have capitalized on the strengths and capabilities of the organization’s employees by promoting sustainable organizational culture through the creation of a working framework consisting of a communication plan, a concise organizational mission, and a sustainability plan (Appelbaum, Calcagno, Magarelli, & Saliba, 2016). Leaders worked to minimize issues encountered during mergers. First, leaders encountered organizational or cultural fit issues (Reis et al., 2015). The second was the development of organizational identity (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2015; Stensaker, 2015). The third was the perception of employees toward initiatives establishing a new organizational purpose and mission (Antony, 2018). Leaders minimized the effects of issues that could impede the attainment of organizational goals.

Strong leaders have proved important during an organizational merger. During the process of a merger, a firm's employees looked to their leaders for guidance and a role model (Alessandri, Borgogni, Schaufeli, Caprara, & Consiglio, 2015; Jain, 2016). Employees have also sought a defined, preferred, and desirable objective for the change initiative, often linked to the overall strategic plan for the organization (Antony, 2018; Grover, Kovach, & Cudney, 2016). Leaders have presented intended change regarding the existing procedure that no longer satisfies the environment of the organization and necessary steps toward improvement (Wetzel & Dievernich, 2014). When managers have been interactive, visionary, creative, inspiring, empowering, and exhibited a pattern of openness and clarity in their behavior their employees have been more satisfied with the process and the organization itself (Antony, 2018). Even the personal traits of leaders have influenced employees when organizations are in the midst of change. These leaders needed management development and organizational change training support to maintain their personal commitment and motivation while leading the change initiatives within the organization (Antony, 2018).

Employees sought another important personal trait in their leaders, trust. Employees have been more satisfied working for people in whom they believe they could place their trust, people in whom they recognize the positive trait of character (Agote et al., 2016). Trust influenced employee engagement, citizenship behavior, commitment, personal and job satisfaction, productivity, and performance outcomes (Bansal, 2016; Besieux et al., 2015; Jain, 2016). Employee trust of their immediate supervisors significantly predicted turnover intention, especially in environments where turnover rates are elevated (Ariyabuddhiphongs & Kahn, 2017). Trust has been widely regarded by organizational leaders as essential to building and supporting long-term relationships and a supportive environment within the organization (Kujala, Lehtimaki, & Pucetaite, 2016). Trust, representing the unity of thought in an organization, however, has resulted in groupthink within an organization (Kujala et al., 2016) and lead to the exclusion of differing ideas. Distrust, or the fragmentation of thought within an organization, has been beneficial in some circumstances as it allows for awareness of different values and organizational subcultures (Kujala et al., 2016). Leaders benefitted from earning employee trust and managing instances of distrust during times of organizational change.

The engaged employee has exhibited many traits in the workplace. These traits have included the characteristics of abundant energy, connection to their work, efficacy with the job situation, a positive outlook, vigor, dedication, and job absorption (Antony, 2018; Deschamps, Rinfret, Lagacé, & Privé, 2016). The engaged employee has transformed nonmeaningful work into something meaningful that has become more beneficial to the organization (Byrne, 2015). Work engagement allowed the individual to feel connected to others in the organization and become a part of something bigger than just themselves, especially when the job task aligned with the strategic goals or priorities of the organization and its leaders (Byrne, 2015). Employees incorporated their unique qualities and efforts into their work yet influenced each other within the workplace through their levels of engagement (Griffin, 2015). These interpersonal dynamics have been especially important for leaders to understand particularly how these dynamics affected engagement (Felix & Bento, 2018). Employee engagement has lead to work engagement through the components of employee satisfaction, employee identification with the organization, employee commitment, employee loyalty, and employee performance (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Employee engagement has been vital to successful outcomes in times of organizational change because of the increased level of effort that engaged employees devoted to the work of the organization.

An employee's personal experience in the processes of mergers benefits the employee's organization. Tonini et al. (2017) studied how leadership teams could learn from the experience of members who have been through other merger processes. This research also included findings that leadership teams that incorporate experienced members tended to be more successful in reaching the merger goals of the organization because these leaders learned from previous successes and mistakes (Reis et al., 2015). Alternately, inexperienced leaders within organizations have lead to unsuccessful operation of the organization and supervision of its employees (Lawton, Taye, & Ivanov, 2014). Experienced leaders, especially change management experience, have helped an organization’s leadership team successfully manage the changes needed by the employees and the organization.

Experienced leadership and employees have benefitted the organization; however, these workforces have fluctuated over time. Workforce downsizing has been a tactic used by firm leaders facing economic challenges (Gandolfi, 2013) although organizational well-being during times of crisis can also depend on leaders’ maintaining a priority outlook on organizational capacity (van der Voet & Vermeeren, 2017). On average, organizations that are the target of an acquisition lost on average about one-fourth of their leadership in the first year following the acquisition, a turnover rate approximately three times higher than usual (Krug, Wright, & Kroll, 2015). Furthermore, an average of 60% of the leaders present at the beginning of the acquisition left the organization within 5 years of the acquisition (Krug et al., 2015). However, sometimes a firm’s leadership team assigned employees to other positions within the organization to benefit the work processes and goals of the changed organization (Antony, 2018; Hu & Huynh, 2015). Many leadership teams are not successful in maintaining their base of trained employees throughout a change to the organization; leaders have found that employee turnover impedes the sustainability of employee engagement within the organization.

Self-efficacy Theory

One means by which leaders have influenced employee engagement is through encouraging self-efficacy within the organization’s employees. Bandura (1977) shared in his seminal work on self-efficacy that when people believe they have control to overcome issues through their chosen actions, they used that power to overcome issues when encountering problems in their work or personal environments. Bandura (2006) further shared that people have little incentive to attempt to overcome challenging situations only when they believe their actions could attain the desired effect. When allowed to do so, people have solved problems that they believed they are capable of handling (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, when possible, leaders should allow participation of employees in decisions concerning the change process of the organization (Smollan & Pio, 2018). Nelson, Poms, and Wolf (2012) indicated that self-efficacy could be developed within students to empower them to pursue and follow through on actions that would improve organizations and society as a whole. The strength of these efficacy beliefs determined the effort people expended to overcome difficulties, how long those efforts persisted (Bandura, 1977), and the confidence these individuals had in their skills (Austin & Nauta, 2015). Efficacy, related to resilience, enabled individuals to respond quickly to adverse situations (Hicks & Knies, 2015). Research evidence showed efficacy beliefs contributed to a person's level of motivation, emotional well-being, and personal accomplishments through a *control over circumstances* mindset (Bandura, 2006). Employees need to feel valued and involved (Claxton, 2014). Transformational leaders raised employee efficacy as such leaders have been concerned with employee personal development and team collaboration and cohesiveness (Getachew & Zhou, 2018). Employees looked for indications that change processes are collaborative (Alagaraja & Shuck, 2015). These feelings of value empowered employees despite changes to the work environment. Conversely, lack of self-efficacy has been shown as a reason engaged workers experience failures at work, according to research by Alessandri et al. (2015). When employees have felt empowered, they engaged more positively within the workplace.

Self-efficacy and voice. Other self-efficacy researchers have found that self-efficacy is positively related to employee voice, employees having and sharing ideas to improve their current work situation or to promote sustainable development within the organization (Kulualp, 2016; Wang et al., 2015). Effective leaders have encouraged self-efficacy and voice within their organization's employees (Antony, 2018; Wang et al., 2015). An important component of being effective at encouraging voice has been to listen and respond to employees (Ruck, Welch, & Menara, 2017), created through a culture of democracy within the workplace empowering employees to fully participate in organizational processes (Taneja, Sewell, & Odom, 2015). Additionally, transformational leaders have inspired their employees to view problems from new viewpoints and contribute suggestions to solve problems in new ways (Liang, Chang, Ko, & Lin, 2017). The leaders thereby affected the extent to which employees feel that their ideas are respected, considered meaningful (Shuck & Rose, 2016), encouraged (Wang et al., 2015), and integrated into the decision-making processes of the changing organization (Wang et al., 2015). When leaders expressed genuine appreciation for their employees' efforts at the workplace, workplace satisfaction and employee engagement increased (Abelha et al., 2018; Antony, 2018). Through such work environments, leaders have motivated employees to desire more responsibility and new challenges in their jobs (Abelha et al., 2018) and to suggest ways of promoting sustainability in the organization (Wang et al., 2015). Motivated employees have considered job challenges as opportunities rather than difficulties to be overcome (Mäkikangas, 2018); employees with this attitude have often been involved in job crafting (Tims, Derks, & Bakker, 2016). Such employees used ingenuity and perseverance to overcome challenges found in environments of limited opportunities and job constraints (Mäkikangas, 2018). Leaders have encouraged self-efficacy through strategies to facilitate employee voice. Employees' engagement in the workplace has benefitted from the atmosphere created by the addition of self-efficacy and voice within the organization by leaders.

Self-efficacy and change readiness. Self-efficacy has also encompassed a readiness for change where employees, through the example of their leaders, could embrace the implementation of organizational change (Matthysen & Harris, 2018). Change commitment represents an alignment of employees with the organizational change and has predicted the level of support for change within the organization (Carter et al., 2014). When leaders have contributed to the creation of a *change-ready* culture within the organization (Dagher, Chapa, & Junaid, 2015), they have broken the tendency in the higher education industry to hoard what is considered to be proprietary knowledge (Anbumathi, 2016). This readiness to embrace change has lead to greater effort, persistence, cooperation, interaction, and contribution from teams formed from various functional groups within the organization (Gray, Wilkinson, Alvaro, Wilkinson, & Harvey, 2015). Leaders whose organizations are under constant change have required proactive measures within the strategic plan for the organization to remain sustainable (da Silva et al., 2018). Austin and Nauta (2015) showed higher levels of self-efficacy are associated with career growth prospects when employees believed they have had job growth opportunities. Okurame (2014) shared that these empowered employees contributed to the workplace and suggested how to complete the work more efficiently or with fewer people. This empowerment also fostered a feeling of resiliency by allowing the employees opportunities to build skills in adaptability (Gray et al., 2015). Employees, through their self-efficacy beliefs, supported the development and sustaining of a work environment open and accepting of the changes vital to modern organizations.

Self-efficacy and growth mindset. A mindset is a theory or assumption a person holds that guides thoughts, feelings, and actions related to their abilities (Keating & Heslin, 2015; Mrazek et al., 2018) where an individual tends to embrace incremental personal growth (Ng, 2018). A growth mindset encompasses the element of acceptance (Matthysen & Harris, 2018) as well as growth and change (Keating & Heslin, 2015). Smith (2013) presented the imagery of *permanent whitewater* as a way for leaders to manage change, through teamwork, with a leader watching for and strategically adjusting constantly and consistently for obstacles encountered during normal business change and growth. Some companies have created organizational units solely dedicated to continually examine organizational processes and seek effective responses and methods to anticipate changes needed in the industry and the organization. Recognition of the difference between change and transition has been key to a leader's success in managing change and developing an organizational mindset toward change and growth. Change resulted from new factors in a situation. Transition has been the process that workers have used to adjust, internally, to the changed situation. Change occurred after an effective transition. Leaders have sought to encourage the transition, of behavior and thought adjustments, from old traditions and procedures to newer traditions and procedures. Leaders showed employees that the reason to make the transition is greater than the resistance to change. Qualities of good leadership have included resilience, courage, patience, compassion, self-value, self-confidence, perseverance, strategic thinking, time management, tolerance for diversity, and self-competition, *soft skills* (de Carvalho & Rabechini, 2015) necessary to manage within an organization involved in major change.

Situations have existed that challenge the workplace environment supportive of employee self-efficacy. When organizational changes have affected the job duties and job skills needed, employees may have felt powerless and frustrated as these changes threatened their self-efficacy (Smollan & Pio, 2018). Mergers, acquisitions, and reorganizations also frequently reduced opportunities for upward career growth for employees, increasing employee uncertainty and discouragement although many organizations' leaders attempted to compensate by fostering lateral advancement (Antony, 2018). As shown by Li, Pérez-Díaz, Mao, and Petrides (2018) in their study of Chinese primary teachers and principals, a decrease in organizational trust similarly often decreased job satisfaction. Similarly, Gregory, Milner, and Windebank (2013) found in particular, that lower income workers and female workers reported a larger dissatisfaction with their employment when economic factors affected the job structure and balance of work. Employee engagement and retention declined when employees questioned if their engagement mattered through contribution, influence, or reward to the organization (Shuck & Rose, 2016). Leaders, therefore, have watched situations where employees might become less engaged due to changes in the individual’s job situation resulting from changes to the organization as a whole.

Acquisition Integration Approach

Using an organized approach or plan for the activities and policies during organizational change, leaders have effectively managed the change process. Within their seminal work, Haspeslagh and Jemison (1991) outlined the major steps leadership undertook to manage the acquisition process for the best results. The planning process for most acquisitions has fallen between the extremes of highly planning all aspects of the acquisition and the polar opposite, acquisitions that have been events of opportunity (Haspeslagh & Jemison, 1991). The planning process allowed the leaders to develop skills within the organizations’ employees, to transfer skills between the organizations where needed, and to create plans to manage issues stemming from change, conflict, and dislocation (Baltzley, 2016). The successful plan allowed leaders to maintain processes and progress of the merger and acquisition initiative within the context of the overall strategic plan (Haspeslagh & Jemison, 1991). The key to a leader’s success in the integration of their organization has been the development of a plan to guide the organization and its employees.

The typical merger process has consisted of distinct stages or steps. The four stages of the merger and acquisition process are (1) formation of the idea, (2) justification of the acquisition, (3) integration of the firms, and (4) evaluation of the results of the acquisition (Reis et al., 2015). Reis et al. (2015) also emphasized that leaders had to manage each step of this process carefully to achieve overall success with the initiative.

Caiazza and Volpe (2015) posited that leaders need a fine balance of integration for the best outcome, as *too much* integration leads to culture clashes between the organizations. This balance in integration consisted of a complex process of activities designed to create an organization that satisfies overall strategic objectives as well as the objectives of the integration (Caiazza & Volpe, 2015). The leader's influence during each of these steps or stages has been important to the success of the integration plan.

The IMPROVE model (Clardy, 2013) provided leaders with a process to integrate the three elements critical to change: organizational processes, employee motivation, skills, and opportunities to act, and a plan for the implementation of change (processes and steps). The IMPROVE model encompassed the following concepts. I represents increasing organizational capacity for change, encouraging a growth mindset or change mentality (Clardy, 2013). M is management approval for change (Clardy, 2013). No change effort will succeed if not supported by the top management of an organization. P is preparing the direction and leadership for the change process (Clardy, 2013). R is raising employee motivation to embrace change (Clardy, 2013). O stands for operationalizing the change (Clardy, 2013), creating a plan. V is validating the success of the change process (Clardy, 2013). E is embedding the change into the organization (Clardy, 2013), solidifying the changes into the organizational structure and culture.

Strategies that support the employees of the organization have also been important to the success of the integration plan. Effective leaders have utilized the strategies proposed by Haspeslagh and Jemison (1991) for managing the merger or acquisition process and provide a supportive work environment that addresses employee concerns (Gray et al., 2015). Francis and Keegan (2018) showed in their study that opportunities to discuss tensions felt on the job are important to employees. Leaders worked to provide a supportive environment by identifying ways to build trust with employees (Mangundjaya, 2015), sustained quality relationships by acting less on authority and more as a guide, mentor, and coach (Jyoti & Bhau, 2015) and created a value system (Rao, 2017). Research studies have shown that leaders who have provided clear and consistent communications throughout the organizational change process reduce resistance in individual employees thereby fostering favorable employee and organizational outcomes (Petrou, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2018). For a greater chance at successful integration, leaders have included a framework to guide communication throughout the change process.

Communication. Integral to an organizational change strategy (Antony, 2018), an effective communication plan has established avenues to relay information concerning the organization's change strategies (Appelbaum, Karelis, Le Henaff, & McLaughlin, 2017a) as well as to close the gap between employee expectations and reality (Rao, 2017). Williams, Feldman, and Conners (2016) found in their study of the effects of the merger of two college campuses that 68% of stakeholders and 71% of professional staff in the merged organization felt they did not have adequate information about the implementation of the merger. This finding corroborated the belief that an effective communication plan encouraged an organizational norm of acceptance of change (Vosse & Aliyu, 2018). In fact, as Angwin et al. (2016) suggested in their study of communication strategies in mergers, organizational leaders utilizing rich and continuous communication throughout the entire merger realized more successful goal attainment and higher levels of commitment by their employees.

The successful communication plan bound employees together for a common objective (Antony, 2018), creating the expectation that the purpose and outcome of the merger are positive and helpful (Shuck & Rose, 2016). A successful communication plan relayed the long-term vision, the plan and timeline to secure that vision, the role and consequences to the employees (Anbumathi, 2016; Appelbaum, Karelis, Le Henaff, & McLaughlin, 2017b). Additionally, Verčič and Vokić (2017) found a definite link between internal communication and employee engagement. Verčič & Vokić further shared that the most important venues for impactful communication included feedback, informal communication, and communication in meetings. Leaders should notify employees of decisions that affect them before implementation and give employees opportunities to voice concerns and provide input into these decisions (Shantz, Alfes, & Latham, 2016). A communication plan continues even after the organizational changes have concluded through post-change messages to the organization's employees, as well as to other stakeholders (Antony, 2018). A communication plan covered all aspects of change that affected all of the organization's stakeholders.

The communication plan has been a useful tool for an organization's leaders. The leaders nurtured internal communication processes in order to encourage the participation of employees in the business of the organization (Kang & Sung, 2017; Karanges, Johnston, Beatson, & Lings, 2015) as well as to convey the organization's values and mission (Antony, 2018). The leadership's communication plan has encouraged an atmosphere open to change and positive attitudes toward the new organization (Antony, 2018), allowing a new shared identity and trust to emerge amongst the organizational members (Rabl, Del Carmen Triana, Byun, & Bosch, 2018), and creating a workplace where relationships have often been based on meaning and worth (Karanges et al., 2015). Positive organizational identity and employees' identification with that identity has correlated with retention, job performance, organizational citizenship behavior, and cooperative behavior, all components of employee and work engagement (Kumar & Pansari, 2015). Through these efforts, leaders developed a new identity, for the evolved organization that encompassed cultural, institutional, and historical components incorporated from the original organizations (Marchand, 2015). The communication plan did more than inform, it also instructed and involved the employees within the organization.

Inclusion. An effective communication plan provided for the inclusion of all employees into the emerging organization. This inclusion reduced insecurity and increased the predictability of leadership during organizational change (Appelbaum et al., 2017a). A climate of inclusion allowed diverse members of the workplace to feel less discrimination and, therefore, positively influenced behavior and outcomes (Bodla, Tang, Jiang, & Tian, 2018). Leaders strengthened the relationship between an organization's diversity practices and employee trust in the company, which then allowed more employees feel included in their organization (Downey, van der Werff, Thomas, & Plaut, 2015). Leaders have considered differences in the demographics of employees when creating the communication plan, diversity plan, and overall leadership style (Bourne, 2015). Generational differences have been recently identified regarding response and perception of various communication, diversity, management styles, channels, and methods (Ertas, 2015). Inclusion has existed when an employee has felt valued and treated equitably (Bodla et al., 2018). Managers have celebrated diversity by encouraging and fostering involvement and engagement between the different cultures within the organization and developing employee self-efficacy regarding decision making within the job setting (Bodla et al., 2018; Ribando & Evans, 2015). Leaders developed a dynamic and inclusive organizational culture (Ribando & Evans, 2015) through policies that foster respect for and place value upon diverse opinions, perspectives, and backgrounds (Solebello, Tschirhart, & Leiter, 2016). Nart et al. (2018) shared that diversity within the organization is not the challenge. The challenge has been integrating and utilizing that diversity to achieve the organization’s goals most effectively; often this challenge has been met when the organizational leaders created multicultural teams (Bodla et al., 2018). An inclusive work environment, as shown by Bodla et al. (2018), limited the negative effects of diversity (especially demographic diversity) in the workplace. Furthermore, Daniels (2016) shared employee engagement emerges from the workplace experiences dependent on organizational culture and the existing subcultures from within the organizations’ departments. Leaders’ consideration of the diversity of employees in the organization contributed to the feeling of inclusion those employees experienced and allowed individuals to add value to the organization.

Mergers

Many people, including researchers, have used the terms merger and acquisition interchangeably. However, consolidation activities involving two or more organizations into a single entity is a merger, not the acquisition of one by another (Reis et al., 2015). Organization leaders have undertaken mergers to create value (Caiazza & Volpe, 2015; Friedman & Friedman, 2018), reduce costs (Caiazza & Volpe, 2015; Friedman & Friedman, 2018), acquire complementary resources and capabilities (Caiazza & Volpe, 2015; Reis et al., 2015), create market share, solve management issues, or generate synergies (Hu & Huynh, 2015). Other higher education institution leaders have believed larger institutions were needed to have good teaching and research results (Zeeman & Benneworth, 2017). However, researchers have shown that greater size, past a minimum level, does not add to the likelihood of meeting desired outcomes in teaching and research (Zeeman & Benneworth, 2017) but rather merging departments often benefited students more (Friedman & Friedman, 2018). Organization leaders often sought to secure access to global markets or establish innovative cultures within specific organizations (K. M. Park & Gould, 2017). K. M. Park and Gould (2017) identified six distinct waves of mergers in the nations of the western hemisphere; the last wave spanned a shorter period than the others due to financial turbulence of the decade from 2000 to 2010 (K. M. Park & Gould, 2017). The difference between acquisition and merger as well as the reasons behind the specific organizational change are important to the initial perceptions of the employees toward the change occurring to the organization and the effects on employees.

Employee engagement in mergers. Researchers have studied many aspects of employee engagement. Recent employee engagement researchers have focused on the issues of attaining or leveraging performance outcomes rather than the conditions that develop performance (Friedman & Friedman, 2018; Shuck & Rose, 2016). Research studies, including one by Barnard and van der Merwe (2014) concerning a merger of three universities in South Africa in the mid-2000s, documented the success enjoyed by leaders who followed change management strategy objectives to convert the overall goal of the organization from surviving to thriving after the merger. Other researchers indicated first that employees’ engagement is often proportional to their perceived return from the organization and then that organizational leaders want more engagement from their employees than they know how to develop or can invest to develop (Popli & Rizvi, 2016; Shuck & Rose, 2016). Employee engagement has been shown in numerous studies to strongly relate to key organizational outcomes and organizational competitiveness in the marketplace (Popli & Rizvi, 2016). Researchers currently define employee engagement as the integration of commitment, involvement, attachment, and positive attitude (N. Gupta & Sharma, 2016). The level of engagement of an organization’s employees has been essential to the success of an organizational change initiative. Therefore, leaders’ understanding of employee engagement has been crucial when the organization was about to undertake a change initiative.

Organizational change. Leaders’ actions and policies have influenced elements of the organizational change process. Three dynamic elements are typical of an organizational change process (Podgorski & Sherwood, 2015). First is the internal processes (e.g., communication, decision making, accountability structures, success metrics); second is employees' talents, skills, and motivation (Alagaraja & Shuck, 2015); and third is the collected strategies to include in the integration plan (Podgorski & Sherwood, 2015). Successful leaders have recognized their employees' need to identify with the organization (Abelha et al., 2018; Ismail et al., 2016). Organization leaders have remained flexible to create a supportive environment that addressed employee needs (Gray et al., 2015; S. Gupta & Singla, 2016) and to minimize the reduction of motivation and productivity after the integration process (Reis et al., 2015). Daniels (2016) shared that study participants often cited positive momentum as the root of high employee engagement within their organizations. Leaders who understood and made efforts to manage the effect organizational change has had on employees and the work environment have impacted the fulfillment of their employees' needs during these times of change.

Leaders have influenced the environment and culture of the organization during organizational change through the organizational change plan. Four core components to major change management processes include planning for change, managing the change, communicating to and engaging the organization, and measuring the success of the change process (Podgorski & Sherwood, 2015). With the organizational change plan, the leadership have created and sustained a change-ready culture where the need for change, improvement, growth, and innovation was present while promoting employee confidence to deal with change (Clardy, 2013). Jin and McDonald (2017) found supervisor support of employees directly influenced employee engagement within the work environment. Leaders gauged and then fostered an atmosphere of openness toward change within the organization, critical to the success of an organizational change where workers viewed the change as credible and of value to themselves and the organization (Rabl et al., 2018). Merger integration encompassed the processes that initially created an organizational identity, informal communication channels, and then ultimately brought the entity into a state of cohesion (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2015; Lamm, Tosti-Kharas, & King, 2015). In times of organizational change, leaders have looked for opportunities to steer employees toward the change (Lamm et al., 2015; van den Heuvel, Schalk, Freese, & Timmerman, 2016). Additionally, leaders have sought opportunities to transform situational stress into productive stress through inclusive communication strategies, collaborative problem solving, individual learning and growth, and positive organizational influences (Knight, Patterson, & Dawson, 2017; Sharma & Bhatnagar, 2017). Leaders who have employed strategies that empower employees to adjust their job tasks to their needs and preferences (Demerouti, Bakker, & Halbesleben, 2015) and who have provided a work environment that fosters empowerment of the individual employee (Mäkikangas, 2018) often increased effective work behaviors. By working with employees and utilizing a plan, leaders have positively influenced the work environment and the overall culture of the organization.

Organizational identity in mergers. Leaders have also guided the organizational identity developed during an organizational change initiative. Organizational identity is a degree of closeness of an employee’s definition of his attributes to his interpretation of the organization’s attributes (Mete, Sokmen, & Biyik, 2016). Organizational identity is a means by which organizational members make sense of internal and external changes that occur (Petriglieri, 2015; Stensaker, 2015) and establish a new pattern of thought and action (Febriansyah et al., 2018) and even new groups, departments, and organizations (Friedman & Friedman, 2018; Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2015). One of the biggest challenges for change leaders has been the tendency for employees to continue to identify with their initial organization and resist adopting the identity of the merged organization (Ismail et al., 2016). These differing organizational identities largely stemmed from the mission statements of the original organizations (Daniels, 2016). When organizational members believed in and chose to define themselves as a part of the stated organizational identity (Antony, 2018) and began to share in the vision and mission of the organization (Alagaraja & Shuck, 2015; Antony, 2018), they have engaged in efforts designed to foster engagement and further development of that shared identity (Stensaker, 2015). At the conclusion of the integration process, the leaders evaluated the results of the initiative for success in attaining the goals (Clardy, 2013). The process to encourage engagement became continuous, including a feedback mechanism to make the implementation of engagement sustainable (Appelbaum et al., 2016). This feedback mechanism has allowed leaders to develop a sustainable change-ready mentality by creating a framework to adjust the direction of change in the organizational and continually seek new solutions to problems encountered while pursuing organizational goals (Antony, 2018). By successfully creating an organizational identity, leaders have encouraged engagement of the employees in the efforts of the merger leadership and the attainment of the goals of the new organization.

Higher education mergers. Much research is available on corporate mergers. Significantly fewer researchers, however, have focused on higher education mergers

(Boling, Mayo, & Helms, 2017) especially studies concentrating on employee engagement (Daniels, 2016). In fact, Febriansyah et al. (2018) shared that higher education engagement efforts typically focus on the area of faculty and staff development. Research findings of a study by Blesse and Baskaran (2016) of municipal mergers in Germany supported the trend that compulsory mergers result in the combined organization accounting for a decrease in total expenditures of about 5%. This research finding has been compelling to higher education leaders, encouraging consideration of organizational merger as a tactic to reduce costs to maintain competitiveness and sustainability in the higher education market (Boling et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2016). Higher education leaders increasingly recognized the shortcomings of the existing educational model in providing sustainability in existing markets (Balotsky, 2018). One study, by van Wingerden, Derks, and Bakker (2017), suggested that educational organizations' leaders have been entering into activities to foster employee engagement to improve performance of the employees individually and the organization collectively. Researchers have studied higher education mergers less frequently than mergers in other industries. This lack of research, therefore, has left room for additional research studies in the higher education industry.

The environment within an industry influences the type of merger the organizations' leaders will undertake, which influences the effects felt by the stakeholders of the merging organizations. Three types of mergers and acquisitions exist: horizontal, vertical, and conglomerate (Gautam, 2016; Hu & Huynh, 2015). Horizontal integration occurs between peer organizations within an industry; vertical integration occurs between two companies in an industry dealing with related but not the same product; conglomerate integration occurs between companies of totally unrelated products and sometimes even industries (Hu & Huynh, 2015). Mergers in higher education organizations typically consist of the horizontal integration of two similar educational institutions.

In 2012, the Georgia Board of Regents decided to consolidate 8 of 35 state institutions of higher education (Ribando & Evans, 2015). Similarly, the leadership of the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) decided to consolidate 13 technical colleges starting in 2008 ("Facts about the administrative mergers of 13 TCSG colleges," n.d.). The general aim of leaders undertaking mergers in higher education was to keep from having to increase tuition and fees to make up the shortfall from declining state budget allocations for higher education institutions (Ribando & Evans, 2015). From 1975 to 2012, state government contributions decreased from 60.3% to 34.1% of total budget allocations for higher education institutions (Ribando & Evans, 2015); most higher education institutions' budget allocations come from a combination of federal, state, and personal funding sources (Ribando & Evans, 2015). Where some leaders voluntarily undertake mergers to improve services or products, other mergers have been initiated based on fiscal considerations.

Employee Engagement in Organizational Mergers

The organizational mergers of this study are in nonprofit higher education; more specifically, these organization leaders undertook horizontal mergers within the colleges of this study. This study was qualitative, to explore the strategies the leadership of these three organizations used to encourage employee engagement throughout and following the merger process. Through the interviews of key organizational leaders, I explored the processes and evaluations of achievement of the merger initiatives that fostered employee engagement and created sustainability for each organization. An organizational communication plan, efficacy and inclusion strategies, and cultural integration activities were expected to be present in the data provided by the participants. In the study, I explored these strategies and compiled a report of activities used by these leadership teams in their respective efforts to foster an environment that embraced change, improvement, learning, growth, and innovation in their organizations.

Leaders who exhibit strong leadership skills through their choice of the leadership style most effective for the changing environment within the organization can be a strong influence on the success of the organizational change. Through transformational leadership skills, leaders have encouraged employee engagement by building trust within the employee-leader relationship as well as encouraging employee voice and self-efficacy. The environment of change readiness that often ensues from strong employee engagement allowed the leaders of an organization to more effectively direct the organization through the different stages of an organizational acquisition or merger. Components integral to the success of leaders' efforts included a communication plan, inclusion of all employees, and recognition of the diversity within the organization. Integration of these components manifests through the strategies organizational leaders use to encourage the development and sustainability of engagement in the organization's employees.

Transition

The purpose of the study was to explore strategies higher education leaders may use to encourage employee engagement during periods of organizational mergers. Goldberg and Allen (2015) advised researchers that the literature review includes information to provide the background for the study. Often readers might find that the researcher presented disparate or conflicting ideas in this background; but the study researcher also presented the reasons for including each idea and how each contributed to the study (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). The literature review included discussion on transformational leadership theory, self-efficacy theory, and acquisition integration approach as well as how these three parts of the study lens may relate to employee engagement during organizational mergers. The remainder of the literature review included discussion on (a) communication, (b) inclusion and diversity, (c) organizational change, (d) organizational identity, (e) mergers in higher education, (f) growth mindset, and (g) voice.

In Section 2, I presented the research project and method. I identified the planned research process and selection of the participants. The ethical research process, as it relates to the population, sampling, and data gathering has also been discussed in Section 2. Finally, I discussed data collection and data analysis techniques.

Within Section 3 is the results of the study data analysis and implications. This section began with an introduction restating the purpose statement of this research study. This introduction has been followed by the qualitative findings, professional practice applications, social change implications, action and future research recommendations, researcher reflections, the conclusion and, lastly, the appendix for the research study.

Section 2: The Project

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies higher education leaders use to successfully foster employee engagement before, during, and after an organizational merger intended to improve organization sustainability. The target population consisted of nine leaders from three merged higher education organizations who used strategies to successfully foster employee engagement before, during, and after an organizational merger. The findings from my study could contribute to social change by identifying effective strategies for encouraging employee engagement. Employee engagement has increased productivity in student education (Febriansyah et al., 2018), increased employment security (Antony, 2018), fostered continuous service to local community members, increased employee loyalty toward the organization (Thompson et al., 2015), and developed relationships within the local communities (Antony, 2018).

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher is to conduct the study and to collect the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). As the data collector, the qualitative researcher should become immersed in the circumstances of the phenomenon, gaining insights into the participants' experiences (Halcomb, 2016). Further, when collecting interview data, the researcher could quickly react to clarify, summarize, and explore unusual or unexpected responses (Merriam, 2009). The case study researcher seeks to identify the common and unusual items from the data (Ridder, 2017). According to Merriam (2009), the researcher must use care to conduct effective interviews and carefully monitor the data collection process to ensure that all available data is collected from participants and documents. I performed the data collection for this study following the guidelines put forth by Merriam in her review of the process.

A member of the IE staff of a college during its merger, I had little, if any, influence on policy-setting decisions at the college. I have had a working relationship with several of the employees of the chosen colleges; however, I did not supervise any employee at the chosen colleges prior to or during this study, even though I worked within another college's IE office. I had no influence in terms of job continuity or salary determination for any employee of these colleges. The staff of the IE or IR office of the college routinely collects data via surveys, interviews, focus group interviews, and other data collection methods to fulfill its purpose within the college hierarchy. Faculty and staff are familiar with IE staff issuing these types of information requests. Consideration of the rights and well-being of participants of the IE department's routine data collection efforts originated from the code of ethics outlined in these colleges' employee handbooks. A researcher connected to the organization will either be a total or partial insider (Greene, 2014). The total insider will approach the experiences of the phenomenon from the viewpoint of someone who intimately shares in those experiences. The partial insider will approach the research with a certain distance or detachment from the participants. I approached the data collection and analysis as a partial insider, detached in my primary role as the researcher while nonetheless informed by the role I served in my former organizational position as a member of the IE office at a college that underwent a merger. Berger (2015) suggested the viewpoint of the insider can lead to the identification of themes that would go unrecognized by an outsider to the industry.

The Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) authors provided guidance on ethical principles of studies involving human subjects. Ethical researchers respect the privacy and confidentiality (and when applicable, anonymity) of research study participants (Brakewood & Poldrack, 2013). Marshall and Rossman (2016) included this respect of the participants in what they term *trustworthiness* and *objectivity* on the part of the researcher and the research process. I offered no incentive for participation in the doctoral study to limit any implication of bias. According to Zutlevics (2016), participation in studies that provide incentives can negatively affect the participants' judgment and put participants at unnecessary levels of risk. I performed the research study following the Belmont guidelines and those offered by Marshall and Rossman.

The researcher, especially the first-time researcher, must recognize that the background experiences and personal values of the researcher structure the lens for reviewing data, at least partially and often unconsciously (Baillie, 2015; Baškarada, 2014; Berger, 2015). Additionally, the researcher tends to discover the data themes he or she anticipated (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016; Morse, 2015b). I recognized the potential bias to the analysis lens; however, as a collector of data through interviews and documents as required by my career, I have had experience recognizing personal bias and maintaining research protocols. Baškarada (2014) stipulated that through planning and organization a researcher can manage bias further by controlling analysis to report the resulting data. It is important for the qualitative researcher to reduce researcher bias first by recognizing bias exists in the study method, since, by nature, qualitative data is more subjective because the customary primary data source is participant interviews (Berger, 2015). Additionally, population sample sizes are usually relatively small in qualitative studies (Morse, 2015b), not allowing for randomness within the population and thereby not providing a broad range of response data. Researchers conduct interviews to obtain the participants' retrospective and current views on the phenomenon of study interest (Baškarada, 2014). Researchers could limit interview bias by adhering to an interview protocol (Jamshed, 2014), following the semistructured interview method (Baškarada, 2014), using multiple data sources (Baillie, 2015) and manage their own perspectives and points of view through reflexive practices (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). Baškarada said that case study researchers utilize documents to gather contextual information when direct observation does not provide all the desired data. I conducted interviews using an interview protocol (Appendix) and also collected data from archival organization documents where available.

Participants

I collected data from three colleges that formed from mergers between 2008 and 2016. According to Yin (2018), a qualitative study researcher could collect data from one organization, chosen for its very uniqueness, for what that one organization could reveal about a specific phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Marshall and Rossman (2016) defined an *instrumental case* as one in which the case is reflective of a larger phenomenon. Researchers study multiple cases when the cases either support each other in similar data or contrast with another, either anticipated or not (Baškarada, 2014). Multiple cases typically lead to more dynamic and robust data and findings (Baškarada, 2014). In this study, these three colleges were each unique cases because of their geographical locations within the state and the resulting differences in organizational culture, employee background, and student clientele. Findings on the effectiveness of the employee engagement strategies from these cases were expected to reflect on the larger phenomenon of employee engagement during a merger.

One of the most important criteria for inclusion in the sample population is the participants' knowledge of the research topic (Baillie, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Therefore, I selected participants who were full-time college leaders who had experience with successful employee engagement strategies during the merger at their organization and were still employed at the time of the interview. Meeting these criteria ensured participants aligned with the purpose of the research study.

After I secured the letter of cooperation from the organizations, the IE or IR office staff provided either a listing of faculty and staff email addresses or a means to distribute an email to these employees. I began the relationship-building portion of the research process by sending candidates an email briefly outlining the purpose of the study, the criteria for participation, and my contact information for the study. I obtained and used an email account outside the company email system for confidentiality and secure retention of data and correspondence. Developing a data collection process and informing of participants of that process is key to the success of any research study (Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2018).

As a former member of the IE staff of a college, I have had a working relationship with some of the employees of these colleges. This working relationship was further developed into a researcher/participant relationship through professional correspondence as I answered any questions or concerns until the individual decided whether to participate in the study and signed the informed consent form. This relationship-building continued with the interview, discussed at greater length in the population and sampling section that follows. Relationship-building is an important task for the researcher to obtain participants and for productive interviews (Baillie, 2015; Drabble, Trocki, Salcedo, Walker, & Korcha, 2016).

The objective of this research study was to explore the research question, What strategies do college leaders use to successfully foster employee engagement before, during, and after an organizational merger intended to improve organization sustainability? College leaders with supervisory experience with employee engagement initiatives could contribute to the data for the study of this research question. As found by Vaughn and Turner (2016), researchers' conversations with participants can provide meaningful information that leaders could utilize when forming policies and other organizational decisions in higher education mergers.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

Researchers use a quantitative method to examine interrelationships and differences among narrowly defined variables, typically performing statistical analysis and interpretation (Halcomb, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2018). Researchers use a qualitative method to explore and understand the complexities and processes involved in the nonnumerical aspects of the phenomena in depth (Leung, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2018), as well as the variations and context surrounding the phenomenon (Gentles, Charles, & Ploeg, 2015). Qualitative researchers study subjects in their natural environment and explore the artifacts that remain after the conclusion of an event to explore their deeper significance to capture the inner meaning of the research problem (Abro, Khurshid, & Aamir, 2018). Researchers do this by investigating informal and unstructured linkages and processes within organizations (Marshall & Rossman, 2016); often when no clear solutions exist to the problem that exists (Paradis et al., 2016). Aspects of a researchers' study using qualitative methods include culture, interpretation, ideology, and details of people's lives (Galloway, Kapasi, & Whittam, 2015). I thus decided to use the qualitative study methodology for this study.

The quantitative method is appropriate to statistically evaluate a theory or hypothesis or collected numerical data (Barnham, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016) and objectively find issues influencing the final results of the study (Abro et al., 2018). The main goal of the quantitative researcher is to understand and explore the similarities and differences of an event while focusing on predicting and controlling the phenomena (J. Park & Park, 2016), sometimes even constructing statistical models (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Given that I did not intend to conduct a statistical evaluation of numerical data but sought to investigate aspects of employee behavior that cannot be meaningfully studied quantitatively, I determined that the quantitative approach was not appropriate for this research study.

Mixed methods researchers focus on issues that require blending both qualitative and quantitative research elements (Maxwell, 2016), investigating the convergence of results, and reviewing different facets of the phenomenon, especially the contradictions in differing perspectives (Abro et al., 2018). Blending the two methods could result in more thorough insights into phenomena especially when researchers find that existing research is fragmented or inconclusive (J. Park & Park, 2016) or could indicate additional avenues of research by quantifying areas of interest in qualitative study data or qualifying areas of interest from quantitative study data (Carayon et al., 2015). Mixed method research is useful when the goal is to understand as well as to generate new theoretical insights (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Mixed method research can provide necessary detailed and varied findings for the study of more complex phenomena (Molina-Azorin, Bergh, Corley, & Ketchen, 2017). Mixed method research was not appropriate for this study since the intended emphasis was on exploring and understanding strategies rather than on examining numerical data on the event, expanding the theories utilized, or supporting the formation of a new theory.

Research Design

Yin (2018) stated that case studies enable researchers to look holistically at organizational and managerial processes through direct observation and interviews of participants familiar with the subject phenomena. Case study design is descriptive by design, thereby suitable for studies where the researchers expect depth and detail in the research data (Singh, 2016). Case study design is rooted in investigating the causal relationship between the participants and the phenomena, or in investigating the cause of the resulting condition (Baškarada, 2014) in an effort to investigate and understand complex real world issues in detail (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017) within the environmental context of the phenomenon studied (Ridder, 2017). The case study incorporates data from multiple sources, including interviews, documents, or observation of participants (Colorafi & Evans, 2016) and gain an in-depth, balanced understanding of the phenomenon (Taylor & Thomas-Gregory, 2015). Case study researchers have found documents helpful in constructing a better understanding of unobservable aspects of the phenomena (Paradis et al., 2016). Through direct interaction with the study participants as well as the inclusion of organization documents, I explored the strategies college leaders could use to foster employee engagement before, during, and after an organizational merger.

I considered three other qualitative designs: phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory. When using the phenomenological study format, researchers seek to draw meaning from in-depth, long-term investigation of the lived experiences of the interviewees. Hennink, Kaiser, and Marconi (2017) stressed that only those people who have experienced a phenomenon could express first-hand observations and feelings about the phenomenon with the outside world. Phenomenological descriptions are very context-dependent, leading to data that is not generalizable (Giorgi, 2015). The phenomenological researcher takes the experiences of the participants and reflects more deeply on the meaning of the experiences (Giorgi, 2015). My exploration of the study participants' experiences and the difficulty in generalizing phenomenological data compelled me to decide against using a phenomenological design for the research. Ethnographical researchers seek patterns from extended interviews and observation of a group's culture and interpersonal interactions (J. Park & Park, 2016) or, more simply, what the people are doing as well as what they say they are doing (Baskerville & Myers, 2015). The ethnographic researcher investigates a specific contemporary, abstract concept in human terms (Salmona, 2015; Yin, 2018) and investigates the relationships between aspects of the phenomena and roles of individuals within the cultural group (Kruth, 2015). This study did not require the data typically obtained from ethnographic observation of individuals. Thirdly, I considered grounded theory. Grounded theory is a study method where the researcher studies a process in depth by primarily interviewing participants who have engaged in that process (Johnson, 2015). The researcher, through their study, seeks to combine new observations with existing theory to build new perspectives to better explain phenomena (Murphy, Klotz, & Kreiner, 2017). This study did not seek to create theory but rather to describe and analyze employee engagement strategies occurring in instances of collegiate mergers.

A researcher has reached data saturation when data analysis shows no new themes or ideas, and when the information provided would allow another researcher to replicate the study (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The researcher should start the analysis with the first collected data, and continue analysis while collecting new data, recognizing when no new themes occur and when data begins to repeat (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). This process, collecting while analyzing data, is an important aspect of iterative data collection, which can effectively recognize theoretical saturation (Hennink et al., 2017). I began preliminary analysis of the data as soon as I started coding the themes. Given examples of other case studies and consideration of my research topic, I expected that saturation would occur after approximately five interviews at each of the organizations. Saturation occurred with fewer interviews than expected, repetition of answers to the interview questions occurred at three interviews at an individual organization.

Population and Sampling

I anticipated the number of research participants to be 15 individuals (approximately five per college), selected from those fulfilling the participation criteria (the research sample). The final number of research participants was nine; one additional person supplied applicable organizational documents. I selected the three colleges to provide a base knowledge concerning employee engagement during mergers. Researchers choose participants or organizations to fully reveal the aspects being studied about a phenomenon (Harrison et al., 2017) and determine sample size to represent the population involved in the study's area of inquiry (Boddy, 2016; East, 2015). Desiring to obtain representative coverage of each division of the college, I selected this population due to the number of remaining qualifying leaders from the three college mergers. Huls et al. (2018) defined inclusion criteria as attributes that qualify someone to participate in a study and exclusion criteria as attributes that disqualify a person from participation. A researcher's use of inclusion and exclusion criteria create the boundaries for the sample population (Huls et al., 2018). The first qualifier for the research sample was that the college leader had successful employee engagement strategies to contribute to the research study. Second, the person must have been employed, full-time, with the college at the time of the merger until the study interview.

Researchers choose the sampling strategy best suited to the purpose of their research (Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposeful sampling was the chosen sampling method for the study. Purposive sampling produces a collection of data, experienced in many different participants' perspectives (Reiser & Milne, 2016), in a thoughtful, strategic manner thereby producing a rich, deep, and thick dataset (Cope, 2014). Different retrospective and real-time experiences allow for a fuller view of the phenomenon (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

The number of participants is not the goal of saturation, posited Fusch and Ness (2015), but rather the goal is to explore the range (both depth and breadth) of experiences within the participants' responses (Merriam, 2009) and the quality and richness of the data (Hennink et al., 2017). Similarly, qualitative researchers usually have a proposed sample size, but expand the sample with additional participants until additional interviews yield no new data (Kruth, 2015). Although I expected the number of participants to be 15, the selection of new interview participants stopped when additional interviews yielded no new data. Data saturation, specifically theoretical saturation (Fugard & Potts, 2015), has occurred when the collection of additional interviews or documents results in no new data, themes, or codes (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Morse, 2015a), or when additional data collection results in the same replies to the questions, as shared by Marshall and Rossman (2016). Through these replies, the researcher will capture differences as well as similarities between participant experiences of the phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015) as both elements are vital for researchers to investigate the entire phenomenon. Hennink et al. (2017) shared that their first interview provided the majority of codes for their study with the remaining interviews providing only a few, additional, codes. Hennink et al. also noted that code saturation identifies issues but needed additional data to investigate the meaning of the data fully. Hagaman and Wutich (2017) shared that fewer interviews are necessary when the study sites contain relatively homogeneous populations as compared to heterogeneous, or culturally diverse, populations. Data saturation could, however, be an unrealistic goal when the researcher does not limit the scope of the study enough at the onset (Bengtsson, 2016). I anticipated that the inclusion of supervisors' experiences in employee engagement strategies would allow a controlled, yet broad enough perspective to collect applicable strategies while obtaining data saturation.

Interviews are conversations between the participant and the researcher relating to the research study topic (Merriam, 2009). Participant interviews are most productive when conducted at a time and place convenient to the participant (Kruth, 2015) and in a location relatively free from interruption (Farooq & de Villiers, 2017). I intended to conduct interviews for this study in a neutral setting such as a conference room, when possible, on the college campus most convenient for the participant, typically the participant's primary campus. However, when schedules and distance did not permit an in-person interview, I scheduled a GoToMeeting session (including the audio and video components of the software) at a time convenient for the participant. The use of interviewing methods other than the face-to-face interview carries the potential for a negative impact on the richness and depth of data collected (Drabble et al., 2016). Farooq and de Villiers (2017) shared, however, that telephone interview methods may decrease interviewer effect and allow participants more freedom in answering sensitive or embarrassing questions. Rahman (2015) found little difference between the face-to-face interview and the telephone interview when considering response validity and quality. Increasingly, researchers must use multiple interview methods to access the populations for their research studies (Farooq & de Villiers, 2017). Online and video interviews are becoming more viable as the Internet, and inexpensive and easy to use technologies, are increasingly available (Farooq & de Villiers, 2017). The researcher's primary goal is to establish a rapport with the participant (Baillie, 2015; Drabble et al., 2016) to ensure receiving the fullest responses from participants during interviews.

Ethical Research

The researcher uses ethics in the research process to build integrity in qualitative research (Allen, 2015). I provided potential participants with documents that outlined the research study procedures and protocols (Appendix). I answered any questions broached by participants about the research study procedures and protocols either via email or telephone or when asked at the start of or during the interview. The informed consent process introduced the purpose of the study, notified of expected participant commitment to the study, outlined risk and voluntary nature of participation, and provided the interview plan. Researchers obtain informed consent from potential participants, now a required procedure for a research study, stemming from many historical instances of harm being done to study participants, both in the United States and in other countries (Morse & Wilson, 2016). Institutional review boards (IRB) exist, as regulatory committees, to approve and oversee standards for studies involving human subjects

(Blackwood et al., 2015). Before granting approval to perform the research of the study, the review board requires the researcher to create a plan to provide the study procedures and protocols to participants showing the protections to ensure the organization and individuals' confidentiality (Bengtsson, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam, 2009).

The Informed Consent Letter, the Interview Protocol (Appendix), and the initial email to potential participants contained the procedure for withdrawing from the research study. The participant could have withdrawn from the research study at any time for any reason by either an email or verbal indication of the intention to withdraw. This withdrawal policy followed the guidance in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). I abided by the study organizations' governing entity's policy concerning incentives and gifts (TCSG, n.d.) and provided no incentives to participants of this research study. Study participants could view incentives as reciprocation (Zutlevics, 2016). Reciprocation could raise the possibility of bias because participants may think they are required to answer the interview questions as the researcher wishes (Zutlevics, 2016).

I provided the study participants the objective of the study and a summary of the ethical research procedures as outlined in the Belmont Report, the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) application, and the training I completed with the National Institute of Health concerning research participants. I also provided the IRB approval number (12-08-17-0529706) to all participants within the consent form.

Providing these items ensured participant notification of the protections provided to them within this research study.

For the duration of the research study implementation, I maintained all correspondence and records on a password-protected computer account separate from the organization's computer and email systems for complete protection of participant confidentiality. I assigned each participant an identifying code (e.g., P1, P2, etc.) upon receipt of the Informed Consent Form. The matching of an identification code to participants develops a level of protection for the participant's confidentiality (Morse & Coulehan, 2015). I used the individuals' identification codes when recording all research study data to safeguard participant confidentiality, and I secured the USB drive containing all the study data in a locked safe for 5 years before the scheduled destroying of all data records.

I forwarded a copy of the summary of findings from the doctoral study to the head of the technical education school system in Georgia for use in any additional college merger(s) within the system. As shared by Castillo-Montoya (2016), the decision of the applicability to use this study's research findings for further college merger initiatives rests solely within the purview of those recipients. I may grant limited access to raw data, except participant identities, to third parties on request, subject to ethics and privacy guidelines. Protocols for protecting participant identity when releasing raw data for further research use are outlined in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

Data Collection Instruments

A single researcher is the primary research instrument in qualitative studies (Baillie, 2015; Merriam, 2009). I filled that role for this research study. Stake (1995) stated that the role of the gatherer of interpretive data is central to the qualitative, case study researcher. What data the researcher gathers, and the means of collection, form the core of the research study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) and without skillful interviewing, the researcher may not obtain data that fully describes the participants' experiences of the phenomenon (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016). I compiled data for this study from participant interviews, organizational documents, and entries in a reflective journal.

The most common qualitative data researchers collect is the rich and deep descriptions of the natural world of the individual participant or participant groups (Abdalla et al., 2018; McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). The researcher can also collect stories containing examples and experiences of the participants in regard to the phenomena (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016). The use of semistructured interviews with leaders from two or more sites establishes reliability and validity in the collection of the data (Abdalla et al., 2018; Wilson, 2016). I conducted interviews using a semistructured format, featuring open-ended questions. Open-ended questions are an integral part of the semistructured interview format where participants respond to carefully prepared questions (Morse, 2015b), providing vivid descriptions and recounting of their experiences (Morse, 2015b). In-person interviews lend to the quality and depth of responses received when used with a comprehensive and rigorous interview protocol

(Rahman, 2015). Interview protocols also contribute to research transparency (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). See the interview protocol for this study in the Appendix.

Whether in person or over the telephone (Drabble et al., 2016), recording the interview and taking notes during the interview (Bengtsson, 2016) enhances the reliability of the collected data (Abdalla et al., 2018) and increase data quality (McGonagle, Brown, & Schoeni, 2015). Researchers capture and preserve much meaning and knowledge from participant interviews and can analyze that data in depth (Nordstrom, 2015). I electronically recorded the interviews for use in the transcription process and recorded in a journal any situations or observations concerning the interview that might have been significant to the analysis of the data. Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that field notes could assist the researcher to recall details from the interview session where integrity or quality of the data might be affected, ensuring the reader's ability to understand the progression of the researcher's decisions leading to the study findings (Baillie, 2015). Another tool of the researcher is the reflective journal, a tool to record notes, feelings, reactions, initial interpretations and speculations, and any developing hypotheses (Merriam, 2009).

Reliability and validity of the study data are a vital concern to the qualitative study researcher (Abro et al., 2018). The scope or depth of the study increases as researchers explore the phenomenon from multiple perspectives (Abro et al., 2018; Morse, 2015b; Wilson, 2016). The use of multiple sites for the population provided depth within the data for the study. Where available and provided, an additional source of data for this study was organizational documents. These documents included written communication from organizational leadership to employees about the merger and task timetables within individual departments. The document with the richest data included completion comments for each task on the merger task timetable. This document contained:

- sections for consolidation of each major division of the merging colleges, the Board of Directors, the College Foundation, and advisory committees;
- legal issues;
- accreditation documents needed (including a prospectus);
- steps to consolidate the colleges' calendars, catalogs, course schedules, and manuals;
- changes to the offered programs and the faculty within those programs;
- clinical agreements within the community for the nursing programs, the initiatives with the area high schools, online/distance learning classes, and agreements with other educational institutions for transferability of student credit;
- employee considerations (contracts, payroll schedule, payroll system, retirement systems, defined contributions, credit unions, direct deposit, etc.), and
- coordination of physical utilities, new construction projects, marketing efforts, the college website, and communication forums, etc.

Member checking, when used as another aspect of data collection by researchers, increases the validity and reliability of the data (Abro et al., 2018; Morse, 2015b). Member checking is the process in which a summary of the content of the participant's interview is submitted to the participant to check for the correct interpretation of the information provided (Bengtsson, 2016; Birt et al., 2016; Caretta, 2015). I provided a summary of the interview content to each participant via email and requested any corrections or additions to that summary from each interviewee. Participants returned no applicable additional or revised information to reflect in the transcripts or summary documents.

Data Collection Technique

Selection of an appropriate data collection technique is essential to collecting the most suitable data for the research project (Abdalla et al., 2018; Merriam, 2009). Commonly used data collection techniques include interviews, observations, focus groups, and document analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2018) and, sometimes, stories of experiences from the phenomenon (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016). I chose to use the semistructured interview and the organization document analysis techniques of data collection for this research project. The interviews from the three colleges were the primary data source; secondary data came from the applicable organizational documentation submitted from another participant. I outlined the basic purpose of the study, steps of the interview process, steps after the interview, and potential avenues for dissemination of the findings and research study data in the interview protocol (Appendix).

The interview is the most common qualitative research method researchers employ due to the way in which the technique brings forth rich and detailed data (Baillie, 2015). Marshall and Rossman (2016) asserted that a detailed interview guide creates order and structure to the interview providing professionalism to the research process. Merriam (2009) shared that the researcher lists, in the interview protocol, the questions he or she intends to ask in the particular order desired, as well as other aspects of the interview, such as whether the interview is face to face or completed in another manner. These questions will often start relatively neutral and move into more in-depth and potentially emotionally charged subjects later in the interview (Merriam, 2009). Researchers find background information on the organization or circumstances of the phenomenon within documents to serve as contextual information for the study (Baškarada, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Documents could help portray the values and beliefs of the participants and the espoused values of the organization as a whole (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

After I had the interviews transcribed from the interview recordings, I summarized the data. I provided each participant with this synopsis of their interview for review to confirm the integrity of content and ideas as intended. This review process, member checking, is the opportunity for the participant to provide additional information (Caretta, 2015; Kornbluh, 2015; Morse, 2015b) and, as necessary, to ensure the researcher has fully recorded and detailed the experience of the participants (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016) without researcher bias or preconception, thereby enhancing reflexivity (Thomas, 2017). For that reason, member checking could be counterproductive to the research process as the additional information may not be intrinsic to the core research question of the study (Morse, 2015b). After completing member checking, I analyzed the data from interviews and the organizational documentation received.

Data Organization Technique

For the duration of the research study, I maintained all correspondence and records on an independent, password-protected computer account for the protection of participant confidentiality. I recorded interviews using at least two of the following: a recording application on my smartphone, an Olympus recorder, model DM-720, and the recording feature of GoTo Meeting for any interviews completed remotely. This redundancy in recording techniques ensured a usable audio record of each interview. The files containing the transcribed interviews and organizational documents are saved independently of the files in the evaluation software, NVivo. Yin (2018) shared that the qualitative researcher needs to maintain separate files for the raw data and the analyzed data to prepare to potentially share the raw data for further evaluation or research use. The qualitative researcher often utilizes a software program designed to store and analyze the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I used the software package NVivo 12 to store coded data and resulting evaluation for this research study. I maintained these raw data files and NVivo files on a personal, password-protected laptop.

I scanned the pages of the reflective journal I kept during the interview process and destroyed the original hard copies. A reflective journal is useful for a researcher to record thoughts from the interviews and data analysis concerning factors that might influence the data, ideas of different directions or themes occurring in the data, and items that need clarification from the information source(s) (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). Through reflective journaling, the researcher can record personal perspectives and biases. Recognizing these biases exist, the researcher can minimize their influence on the interpretation of the data (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016). Field notes and documents from the organization are common components of a database (Stake, 1995), and should be easily retrievable for further study (Yin, 2018); use of the pdf format is common and acceptable for storage of these types of research documents (Yin, 2018).

I moved all of the electronic files to a single USB drive solely dedicated to the research study after completing the study. I will safeguard the research study USB drive, in a locked safe. After 5 years, I will destroy the USB drive containing the research study data.

Data Analysis

Yin (2018) stated that a researcher must have a plan for examining and developing the findings for the data and the analysis process for the research study. Triangulation is a strategy used by researchers to increase the depth of the collected data for a research study (Morse, 2015b) through the use of either multiple collection or analysis methods (Archibald, 2016). Triangulation can also include analyst triangulation where multiple researchers analyze the data (Amankwaa, 2016) and environmental triangulation where data collection is performed utilizing different environmental situations (ie time of day, day of the week, etc) that could influence the phenomenon or the participant’s view of the phenomenon (Abdalla et al., 2018). For this research study, I used both data triangulation, through interviewing participants from three sites, as well as methodological triangulation, through the use of three distinct theories as the theoretical lens.

Data triangulation is a method of triangulation where researchers collect data from multiple, but dissimilar, individuals or groups or at different times or locations from multiple perspectives (Cope, 2015). Researchers use data triangulation to examine conditions in contrasting groups (Cope, 2015) and to discover misleading dimensions within the data (Abdalla et al., 2018). Case study researchers also could use methodological triangulation, the most commonly utilized form of triangulation (Abdalla et al., 2018); using multiple theories is one means to triangulate study data (Baillie, 2015). Through theoretical triangulation, the researcher attempts to limit or counterbalance the shortcomings of one theory by introducing additional theories with which to view the data (Jentoft & Olsen, 2019).

Researchers need a clear, logical sequence of steps in the data analysis process (Yin, 2018). An analysis plan is also vital to the success of the research process and for presenting the connections found within the collected data (Bengtsson, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Yin (2018) developed a five-step data analysis method; the steps include: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding. I will utilize Yin's method to perform content analysis on the data. Content analysis is a strategy whereby a researcher analyzes data through systematic coding and categorizing data, usually text data (Bengtsson, 2016). Coding is the intermediate step between data collection and in-depth data analysis (Vaughn & Turner, 2016). Once interviews concluded, I had interview recordings transcribed and summarized the transcript data for the member checking process. Member checking must be completed on the interview summary as interviewees may not agree with the researcher’s analysis of synthesized data from multiple interviews (Morse, 2015b). When each interviewee completed member checking, I evaluated the interview summary for the ideas or themes. I entered the transcribed interviews, the identified ideas or themes, and the provided organizational documents into the data analysis software, NVivo 12. NVivo was used by Drabble et al. (2016) to manage the data of their qualitative study and to perform the coding necessary for the analysis of the research data. As shared by Salmona and Kaczynski (2016), the use of software, such as NVivo, can assist a researcher in building codes and categories during data analysis to investigate levels of meaning that were, prior to the use of technology, impossible. The software’s embedded features were also used to locate any additional, repeating phrases. From the recurring words and entered themes, I developed codes within the software using an inductive approach. Codes are an important part of the analysis process for research conducted using an inductive approach, the typical approach of a qualitative study (Malterud, 2015; Morse, 2015b) and are described as one or more catchwords that either relate to the content or a characteristic of the overall theme within the data (Evers, 2016). The counterpart to the inductive approach, where the researcher develops patterns and categories from the data, is the deductive approach (Malterud, 2015). The deductive approach is more often used to explain a single case from a general rule (Malterud, 2015). Researchers may increase the sample size to collect data until redundancy occurs in the information (Hennink et al., 2017). I intended to increase the sample size, adding new interview summaries until I determined that I had reached data saturation, or redundancy, for the study. I expected to reach data saturation after five interviews at each of the three sites but reached saturation sooner.

The researcher looks for meaning through patterns found within the data (Morse, 2015b; Stake, 1995) because, as shared by Dasgupta (2015), patterns provide meaning to understand reality. Researchers seek linkages between the developed themes to indicate relationships between the ideas and to provide an understanding of the various experiences of the phenomenon (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016). Multiple case researchers seek similarities and differences between the cases (Abdalla et al., 2018). I interpreted how the resulting coded data answered the research question of the study to explore employee engagement strategies before, during, and after organizational mergers. I analyzed the codes within the lens of the theoretical framework for this study. The theories included within the theoretical framework for this study included the transformational leadership theory by Bass (1985), the self-efficacy theory by Bandura (1977), and the acquisition integration approach by Haspeslagh and Jemison (1991). Ongoing research in the areas of these theories was integrated as needed until the conclusion of the study. I concluded the study with a summary of findings. The findings section should include the analysis procedure and concepts of the theoretical framework to provide the reader with the information necessary to utilize the study and the findings (Abdalla et al., 2018; Morse, 2015b).

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Study researchers in the natural sciences were the first to conceive the concepts of reliability and validity (Yazan, 2015). Next, qualitative study researchers utilized these concepts in research in the social sciences (Yazan, 2015). Theorists such as Merriam, Stake, and Yin often differ on how a researcher best achieves reliability and validity in a qualitative research study (Yazan, 2015). Reliability is where the researcher shows consistency and quality of measurement within the research process (Marshall & Rossman, 2016), whereby a researcher creates a framework to allow for replication of the study process and results (Leung, 2015). The primary aim of the researcher working on increasing reliability is to establish consistency and dependability or to establish the context of the study (Leung, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

First, the researcher should outline the study decisions (Abdalla et al., 2018); researchers often keep a journal for decisions made during the research process (Baillie, 2015). These journal entries demonstrate the stability of the data as well as any conditions that might affect the data collection process (Houghton, Casey, & Smyth, 2017). The use of a journal to document decisions provides transparency (Baillie, 2015) and allows the researcher to defend the data in a challenge and provide evidence of iterative questioning of the data (Connelly, 2016). I documented decisions in a journal to create transparency and an audit trail for the readers of the study.

Secondly, the researcher should use member checking to improve the quality and integrity of the collected data (Abdalla et al., 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Member checking is the process whereby the researcher verifies the interpretation of themes from the interviews were the intended thoughts of the participants (Abdalla et al., 2018; Noble & Smith, 2015). The member checking process also allows participants to provide feedback to enhance the researcher's understanding when needed (Abdalla et al., 2018; Baillie, 2015; Noble & Smith, 2015). The researcher then links the verified data interpretations to a variety of literature to increase confidence in the observations of the phenomena and to incorporate the concepts within the data into reports (Houghton et al., 2017). I utilized member checking to verify the veracity of the collected data.

Validity

Validity is the presentation of the observation of the data so that the reader believes the presented information to be truthful and valuable (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). To establish validity, the researcher must establish credibility and trustworthiness (Abdalla et al., 2018) by relaying experiences and descriptive portrayals of the phenomena (Abdalla et al., 2018) utilizing appropriate tools, processes, and data to meet the needs to answer the research question (Leung, 2015). The researcher must provide information documenting decisions and assumptions during the research process (Abdalla et al., 2018). Researchers could increase validity by utilizing member checking in the data collection and analysis process (Abdalla et al., 2018). Through member checking, the researcher asks the participants to judge the trustworthiness of, or to confirm, the authenticity of the data (Kornbluh, 2015; Noble & Smith, 2015) or to provide additional data or to correct the data (Morse, 2015b).

Triangulation is the technique of collecting data through multiple methods or evaluation of the data through the use of more than one theoretical perspective to obtain a complete understanding of the phenomena and achieve construct validity (Abdalla et al., 2018). Use of more than one theoretical perspective brings the potential for different data participants or perspectives to the study of the phenomena (Morse, 2015b). The main purpose for a researcher to use triangulation is to confirm the data and to complete the collection of data to get richer data and help confirm the results of the research (Noble & Smith, 2015).

Transferability, or generalizability, refers to the degree that study results could be transferred to another setting or context (Leung, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016) while preserving meanings and inferences from the study (Noble & Smith, 2015). The researcher creates transferability by including clear descriptions of culture, context, research methods, and demographics and selection process of study participants (Abdalla et al., 2018) and provide examples of the raw data in the form of rich quotes (Noble & Smith, 2015). Houghton et al. (2017) further shared that the researcher must accurately describe the analysis of the data and the relationship between the original data and the results. The researcher will often support the demographic or ethnic description of the participants with a chart of variables, averages, or frequencies, on age or education levels, for example, particularly when that information might make the study less generalizable to another population (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Leung, 2015). I provided a summary of the demographics of the study population, including any variables that might make the study ungeneralizable. I included descriptions of the context and culture of the organization and phenomena for the readers.

The next area of validity is confirmability or the level that other researchers could corroborate the study (Abdalla et al., 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The basis of confirmability is the systematic record-keeping of all methodological decisions (El Hussein, Jakubec, & Osuji, 2016). Instances of outlier data (Abdalla et al., 2018), quotes from the data (Houghton et al., 2017), and description of the analysis process (Connelly, 2016) all contribute to the perception of neutrality and accuracy within the study (Bengtsson, 2016). Procedures to audit for and control bias must be present (Abdalla et al., 2018). The researcher prepares these procedures through planning and organizing the research study and through the use of research methods suitable for the study (Abdalla et al., 2018; Yazan, 2015). I attempted to ensure confirmability by providing instances of outlier data, rich quotes from the collected data, and presentation of the plan and execution of the research study and the research methods used.

Data saturation is the last means of assuring the validity of the research study. Data saturation occurs when patterns develop within the data, and no new themes come from the addition of new data (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Data saturation occurs when the researcher has captured the full breadth of the participants' experience of the phenomena (Merriam, 2009) and data replication or redundancy occurs (Hennink et al., 2017). The concept of saturation relies on the adequacy of the researcher at sampling the population for the desired information concerning the phenomena (Moser

& Korstjens, 2018). I added new participants and other data to the research until no new themes occurred.

Transition and Summary

Within Section 2, I presented the plan for the doctoral study of employee engagement strategies used by higher education leaders during periods of organizational mergers. Supervisory personnel, employed throughout the merger period from three chosen colleges, were identified as the study population and invited to participate. I presented the interview protocol and lens for the study. The lens was a combination of the transformational leadership theory, self-efficacy theory, and acquisition integration approach. Within Section 2, I discussed the limitations, delimitations, and assumptions I made as the researcher in this study. Finally, Section 2 also includes the rationale used to make these choices.

Within Section 3 of the document, I included findings and results of the study. I analyzed the data to determine the key themes. Additional components of the discussion included applications to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further research, and my personal reflections as the study researcher.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore strategies higher education leaders use to successfully foster employee engagement before, during, and after an organizational merger intended to improve organization sustainability. Data collection included semistructured interviews of nine participants who had met the following criteria: have knowledge of employee engagement strategies within the setting of a college merger and employed, full-time with the college from the time of the merger until the study interview. Additionally, the IE office of one organization submitted organizational documents for inclusion in the study. The following four themes emerged during the analysis of the collected data: (a) strategies establishing a communication plan; (b) strategies creating a cohesive culture, identity, or team; (c) strategies mitigating barriers to employee engagement; and (d) strategies assessing successful implementation for ongoing modification and adjustment of engagement strategies. The themes provided strategies that could help encourage positive employee engagement within a college undergoing a merger. In Section 3, I provide findings, applicable previous scholarship, and evidence from the data collection process and analysis.

Presentation of the Findings

The central research question for this study was: What strategies do higher education leaders use to successfully foster employee engagement before, during, and after an organizational merger for improving organization sustainability? In preparation for this study, I conducted a literature review that included 149 sources, including sources for three theories combined into the conceptual framework lens for analyzing the data collected from semistructured interviews and organizational documentation. I used NVivo to manage the data from interviews and organizational documents as well as to manage the analysis and synthesis, as suggested by Casey et al. (2016). Four major themes emerged from the data collected during the participant interviews and review of organizational documents. These themes were (a) strategies establishing a communication plan; (b) strategies creating a cohesive culture, identity, or team; (c) strategies mitigating barriers to employee engagement; and (d) strategies assessing ongoing modification and adjustment of engagement strategies. Table 2 outlines the number of times each theme occurred in the interviews and the organizational documentation.

Table 2

Number of Codes in Participant Interviews and Organizational Documents

Theme	Participant Interviews	Organizational Documents
Establishment of a communication plan	59	38
Creation of a cohesive culture, identity, or team	16	2
Strategies to mitigate barriers to employee engagement	22	1
Measures of assessment for ongoing modification and adjustment of engagement strategies	11	1

Emergent Theme 1: Establishment of a Communication Plan

Gautam (2016) shared that one of the most frequently blamed reasons for merger failure is employee dissatisfaction resulting from inadequate communication. Communication is vital for a transformational leader to successfully manage employees as well as an important component of the acquisition process as included in the planning and implementation portions of the acquisition integration approach, one of the theories included in the conceptual framework for this analysis; transformational leadership theory is also a portion of the lens. The theme of communication encompasses three subthemes of strategies used to foster employee engagement: (a) meetings, (b) addressing job concerns, and (c) information concerning merger progress. The count of participants who cited a sub-topic within the theme of communication and the frequencies of mention of each of the subtopics are in Table 3.

Table 3

Frequencies of Communication as an Employee Engagement Strategy

Theme or Sub-theme	Participants who mentioned	Count of references
Communication	3	4
Meetings	1	1
Group meetings	8	17
Individual meetings	3	9
Voice (with communication with supervisor)	6	11
Job concerns		
Job security	3	4
Job position: description and/or duties	5	9
Cohesive culture, identity, or team	5	16
Barrier mitigation		
Change resistance	6	9
Logistics	4	11
Salary equity	2	2
Assessment measures		
Direct assessment	5	7
Subjective assessment	3	4

Meetings. The participants cited meetings as the most used strategy to encourage employee engagement. Eight of the nine participants shared that meetings of groups of employees or full departments or divisions were scheduled and held. Three participants indicated that they initiated personal meetings with all the individuals of their departments. Six of the participants indicated that they worked to ensure that employees had a voice, meaning the leaders ensured that the employee's opinions and input were valued. Efforts such as those cited are qualities typical of a transformational leader as outlined within transformational leadership theory research.

Job concerns. Participants shared that the top concern of the majority of their employees, that potentially would affect employee engagement if not addressed quickly, was questions regarding job security. Perceptions of underlying reasons for decisions concerning jobs and potential layoffs affect the level of organizational commitment (Jacobs & Keegan, 2018). P4 told employees that "the top priority was that everyone keeps the job." P5 also said, had his college not merged, that one or both of the colleges would have shut down in the recession of 2009; as it was, the merger increased the sustainability of the college, so no instructors were laid off or fired.

Individuals look to see where they fit within the new organizational structure (Dîrvă & Rădulescu, 2018). Additionally, employees can see other employees as competitors, not as teammates, when the workplace is in a period of major change (Dîrvă & Rădulescu, 2018). Improving job fit can significantly increase employee engagement and productivity (Commons, Miller, Ramakrishnan, & Giri, 2018). Several leaders proactively addressed this concern through the preparation and issuance of a statement regarding their college's procedure concerning individual employee job positions early in the merger process although the specific message varied from one organization to the next. P1 said that all employees interviewed for positions rather than leaders assign employees to positions. Alternatively, P1 and P10 spoke with their counterparts at the other college about employee strengths (skills and knowledge) before assigning tasks. P3 said the job description was important to employees (that the description fit the actual job duties); also important, is that supervisors spread the work equitably according to P3 and P10. Febriansyah et al. (2018) shared that the organizational climate influences employee engagement; further mentioning that employees whose personal interests and work style mimic that of the workplace will be more likely to be engaged at work. Additional strategies suggested that can boost employee engagement and innovativeness within the job role:

- concentrate efforts to promote intrapreneurship (employee well-being and job performance) (Gawke, Gorgievski, & Bakker, 2018);
- encourage work engagement since engaged employees face work stress with job and personal resources, which can include self-efficacy and support from teammates (Hakanen, Peeters, & Schaufeli, 2018); and
- foster sense-making where a person evolves through reflection on past experiences to find meaning within those experiences to apply to current situations (McCauley-Smith, Williams, Clare, & Braganza, 2015).

Addressing employee job concerns can increase employee engagement by decreasing feelings of insecurity and even redirect employee choices toward those that are for the good of the entire employee workforce even when those decisions are individually disadvantageous. Plans for communication of items concerning employees is cited as a major component of the acquisition integration approach. Communication, overall, is also a major component of a transformational leader's strategy toward effective workforce management and mitigation of issues that might affect the work environment. Activities which recognize individual's initiative are one important way leaders encourage self-efficacy within their employees.

Progress to merger completion. Restructuring should be done quickly, be well planned, and move quickly and decisively; merger initiatives with long implementation processes result in initial enthusiasm waning with the employees (Dîrvă & Rădulescu, 2018). Protracted change processes that simultaneously create and destroy aspects of the organizational policies and structure can unleash complex and multidimensional effects to a workforce not privy to the overall plan (Jacobs & Keegan, 2018). The governing body, TCSG, announced in September 2008, and reaffirmed in December 2008, that thirteen colleges would merge into six. Four of these mergers were effective July 1, 2009, only 9 months after the merger announcement. Eight additional merging organizations concluded their respective merger (into four new organizations) in similarly expedient time frames. Leaders need to relay messages concerning the progress toward the completion of various tasks in the implementation to employees in a timely and recurring manner. Again, communication of the plan and progress to the completion of that plan is a means for a leadership team to convey necessary information to employees, congruent with transformational leadership theory and acquisition integration approach research.

Emergent Theme 2: Cohesive Culture, Identity, or Team

The next theme that emerged concerned the development of a cohesive culture, identity, or team. The success of an organization's departments, as well as the employees within those departments, is critical to business sustainability; the key to that success is the development of workplace culture with a view to innovation (Ahmed, Shah, Qureshi, Shah, & Khuwaja, 2018; Amah, 2018). Organizational integration can allow the different cultures of the firms to coexist in the new organization as opposed to the traditional idea of integration where the cultures must mesh together and form a new culture (Yoon & Kim, 2015). None of the three organizations that participated in the study developed into the coexisting model of organizational integration.

Morale or employee attitude are important components of building the new organization (Ahmed et al., 2018; Amah, 2018). True organizational integration can result in feelings of alienation in which the employee no longer identifies with the organization (Dîrvă & Rădulescu, 2018) when there are clashes between the cultures of the different organizations (Gautam, 2016). One strategy to combat this occurrence is for leaders to encourage employees to actively participate in building an uplifting work environment rather than be passive targets of the team-building and workplace-enhancing efforts (Kinnunen, Feldt, & Mauno, 2016). The influence of an empowering leadership team was one major finding of the study by Lee, Idris, and Delfabbro (2017). More specifically, Getachew and Zhou (2018) found that the transformational leader can affect behaviors in their employees through intellectual stimulation (encouraging innovation and creative in problem-solving), inspirational motivation (recognizing employee worth for contributions) and idealized influence (serving as a role model with high morale and enthusiasm behaviors).

Another measure of success in establishing division cohesion, presented by P4, is recognition of excellence and leadership, such as, in the case for his department, in piloting new programs for the college system. A successful strategy for team cohesion can be to schedule fun activities to promote overall greater work engagement within the unit (Plester & Hutchison, 2016). Some ways to utilize this strategy are to attend a sporting event together (a Braves baseball game, as shared by P9), schedule a department retreat (shared by P8), or hold a "Family Feud" type game at an all-staff meeting (stated by P6). P5 stressed their overall college philosophy of cohesiveness by stating, "We're here for the students; we're about the students." Departmental or collegiate interaction/cohesion/attitude statements were specifically expressed by P1, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9, and P10; these concepts were an undertone within statements made by the other two participants. Creation of a cohesive culture, identity, or team in integral to the acquisition integration approach and is typically a goal of the transformational leader as well as a strategy for encouraging self-efficacy within the organizational workforce. The frequency of mentions by the participants is outlined in Table 4.

Table 4

Frequency of Cohesive Culture, Identity, or Team as an Employee Engagement Strategy

Theme	Participants who mentioned	Count of references
Cohesive Culture, Identity, or Team	7	16

Emergent Theme 3: Barrier Mitigation

One of the interview questions concerned barriers the participants encountered when attempting to encourage employee engagement at the merging organizations. The subthemes that resulted from the data analysis were (a) change resistance, (b) logistics, and (c) salary inequity. Participants were also asked how they each addressed these barriers. The skill to adequately and proactively overcome obstacles in the workplace is exemplified by the transformational leader. Strategies leaders might use to encourage employees to evolve from change resistance to change leaders are often those that correspond to innate skills demonstrated by employees strong in self-efficacy. The three subthemes are components of concern for leaders to address within the plan integral to the acquisition integration approach (see Table 5).

Table 5

Frequencies of Barrier Mitigation as an Employee Engagement Strategy

Theme or Sub-theme	Participants who mentioned	Count of references
Barrier Mitigation		
Change resistance	6	9
Logistics	4	11
Salary inequity	2	2

Change resistance. Resistance to change often results from difficulties in combining the processes and overall systems for the merged organization (Leslie et al., 2018). Also, employees can think that their identity is under attack because the values and image of the company with which they identify are under revision (Dîrvă &

Rădulescu, 2018). P4 and P9 shared the importance of one on one meetings to allay fears (fear-based resistance), as well as the strategy of maintaining an open-door policy (P2).

Mergers require leaders to adopt new business processes and systems (Schönreiter, 2018). P6 submitted that it was 18 months before the respective college foundations joined to become one foundation at his college. P5 spoke at length about the technical issues coordinating and consolidating computer systems; other participants mentioned this effort at their own organization. One of the organizational documents submitted for inclusion in the data was the status of various colleges' efforts to consolidate their computer networks, and specifically, the student records system. P10 shared the situation encountered at his institution, namely finding major differences between colleges' philosophies toward network security and internet access that needed to be addressed and a consensus found.

Employees are more engaged when they identify with the organization's values and purpose (Glavas, 2016). Getachew and Zhou (2018) cited an overall positive effect on employees when leaders clearly communicate the organization vision. Leaders suggested the need to foster the organizational culture changes (P2, P4) because many employees expressed feelings that they did not get a chance to provide input in the decision to merge. Several participant comments echoed the sentiment of this quote from P2, "This isn't fair. We didn't ask for this." Those participants that spoke of similar conversations with their employees said they worked to encourage a change and growth mindset, reminding the employees that no one employed at the colleges had had input on the decision to merge. P4 summarized this new reality with the statement, “This is going to happen. This is happening. This has happened.”

Logistics. The primary logistics concern discussed by participants was the distance between the merging colleges. Strategies utilized by the participants to address this concern included:

- visit different campuses multiple times a month (P3, P8) and alternate campuses for meetings (P3, P8);
- install fiber optic cable between campuses and create consistent telephone extensions for all staff (P3);
- cross-train between divisions within the department to allow all members of each division to attend the periodic retreats (P8);
- issue a weekly employee newsletter (P6); and
- organize team-building activities (P9-attend Braves Game, P6-Family Feud game at college’s all-staff meeting, and P10-all departmental staff meeting to discuss merger task spreadsheet).

P5 suggested the importance of creating and reinforcing the mission-minded statement, “We’re here for the students; we’re about the students.” College leaders can overcome the issue of distance between physical campuses with activities and a working environment that fosters a focus on the college mission. Leaders preparing and conveying a guiding mission is integral to the effective implementation of the acquisition integration approach.

Salary inequity. P5 and P6 addressed employee salary, stating that no one would get a pay cut. Similarly, P3 shared that college leaders had started to address salary inequities between similar positions in the original college staffs. Salary inequity can be an employee engagement issue, as all state salaries are publicly available. Leaders can promote a better work environment and better morale within the workforce by addressing such issues.

Emergent Theme 4: Assessment Measures

The fourth theme presented by the participants was strategies by which they measured, or assessed, the level of employee engagement and, thereby, the success of the strategies utilized to encourage employee engagement. Jones, Hussey, Boettcher, and Simon (2019) created and presented a competencies document to establish a common culture to include mechanisms for assessment and revision, encouraging the personal and professional growth of employees. Creation of a plan of action to measure the success of engagement strategies correlates with the outline of steps for organizational integration as found within the research on the acquisition integration approach (Haspeslagh & Jemison, 1991). Such efforts by leaders also set the baseline and gauge periodic evaluation so leaders can initiate activities and policies to encourage self-efficacy amongst the employees (see Table 6).

Table 6

Frequencies of Assessment Measures as an Employee Engagement Strategy

Theme or Sub-theme	Participants who mentioned	Count of references
Assessment Measures		
Directive assessment	5	7
Subjective assessment	3	4

Direct assessment. Qualitative and quantitative evaluation assessment can be performed through employee satisfaction surveys and performance evaluations (Amah, 2018). The employee satisfaction survey was cited as a data collection tool at their organizations (P5: every few years, P6: annually, and P8: no frequency stated). Other participants provided additional assessment tools: enrollment numbers (P4), time to task completion (P10), and performance evaluations (P4).

Subjective assessment. A second means of obtaining feedback on or of assessing the status of employee engagement within the workplace is for leaders to utilize subjective assessment measures. One subjective measure is to ask questions of middle managers staff, as suggested by P2, who said the main questions to ask are "How's everybody doing? How's everybody accepting changes?" Another means of subjective assessment is to be open to questions from staff members as suggested by P1, "questioning staff equals engaged staff." Using this, a leader can often judge the overall attitude of staff; studies, such as the one by Brough, Drummond, and Biggs (2018), presented research findings that attitude often indicates how staff members are coping with workplace stress. P10 said, "Attitude is one of the most important things. If somebody is turned off, then a lot of times, they're going to turn off their innovation. Their productivity is going to go down. Cooperation is going to go down." A strategy to incorporate to impact worker attitude is to encourage a continuous improvement attitude; P9 relayed, "I didn't treat it as a before, after, or during. I treated it simply as the best practices for business… in general." As P4 stated, "I try to stress (that) change is constant in education." Another strategy leaders can utilize to impact employee attitudes is to create compelling job assignments or tasks for employees and relay the worth of those positions to the organization as a whole (Jena & Pradhan, 2017). The use of such strategies correlates with actions taken by effective transformational leaders as noted within transformational leadership theory research.

Applications to Professional Practice

This qualitative multiple case study identified strategies that were utilized by leadership teams in mergers to enhance sustainability within the organization. Sustainability is viewed as transformational change impacting business culture and the organizational relationship with the community (Appelbaum et al., 2016). Leaders' inattention to any area of organizational integration (processes, behavioral, or cultural) may result in decreased chances of reaching organizational performance goals (Teerikangas & Thanos, 2018). Researchers have often studied difficult integration and the resulting problems for the organization; however, the factors leading to effective integration have been less frequently studied and are imperfectly understood (K. M. Park, Meglio, Bauer, & Tarba, 2018). Each of the participants in this study relayed an understanding of the importance of engaging employees during the merger to remain effective and sustainable as an organization.

Strategies

The shared strategies could be beneficial material for leaders of an announced but not initiated merger to consider for implementation within their own merger plan. Early on, leaders can make decisions on whether to standardize policies and procedures or to harmonize, meaning to strike a balance between unification and local variation (Schönreiter, 2018). Several participants cited being proactive in initiating engagement strategies as vital to the success of sustaining morale and limiting employee dissatisfaction. Meng and Berger (2019) found that leader performance and organizational culture affected employee engagement, trust, and job satisfaction. Several of the participants relayed strategies that they believe would have been beneficial, with the wisdom of hindsight to their successes and failures along their journey to the completion of their merger.

The first strategy suggested by participants is to balance leadership. Effective leadership is characterized by centralizing decision-making and crisis management (Dîrvă & Rădulescu, 2018). Identification of upper-level leaders who have merger and acquisition experience can, therefore, be important to achieve the best outcomes (Field & Mkrtchyan, 2017). Second, leaders need to monitor performance measure, creating and/or encouraging cooperation and joint projects (Teerikangas & Thanos, 2018). A tactic for finding this cooperation is to strive for consensus (P1, P5, P6, P9, and P10). Supervisors also should remain open to resolving or “dealing with” uncontrollable or difficult situations (Clark & Sousa, 2018) with an understanding that, as P4 stated, “change is constant in education.”

Next, leaders need to manage employee change resistance: to encourage *employee belongedness* and joining (Appelbaum et al., 2017b) and to emphasize embracing the newly merged organization. Leaders must understand the cultural and psychological barriers to organizational integration (Appelbaum et al., 2016). Leaders will enhance belongingness by increasing employee’s perception that the new organization is more attractive than the original organizations (Appelbaum et al., 2017b; Dîrvă & Rădulescu, 2018). These efforts might decrease the uncertainties and effects of perceived change in status and power as well as fear of job loss (Nandi & Nandi, 2017). Effective change leaders will recognize that satisfaction with status quo and inability to discern the need for changes to existing nonfunctional/dysfunctional organizational structure or culture may factor into resistance to change within the organization (Appelbaum et al., 2017b).

Recommendations

Leaders’ example. Getachew and Zhou (2018) recommended that the transformational leader can affect behaviors in their employees through intellectual stimulation (encouraging innovation and creativity in problem-solving), inspirational motivation (recognizing employee worth for contributions), and idealized influence (serving as a role model with high morale and enthusiasm behaviors). Managers should be optimistic about employee’s reactions to change as their actions can affect employees’ support for change (Fugate & Soenen, 2018). Leaders should recognize the contributions and value of individuals while encouraging *champions of change* (Fugate & Soenen, 2018). Champions of change are those individuals who engage in problem-solving, promote the benefits of change to others, and decrease resistance to the change process amongst their fellow employees (Dorling, 2017). Top leaders should encourage institution, department, and individual focus on the college vision and mission (at the core, serving students). Two shared statements follow that back this effort to encourage mission focus: (P5) “We’re here for the students; we’re about the students.” and (P9) “People are really motivated by a sense of place and purpose.” Leaders influence their employees through their own example of the desired behaviors and attitudes.

Job concerns. The next recommendation participants shared was for leaders to address employee concerns about job assignment, position status, and compensation inequities (P3) early. P5 shared that the college’s president held an all-staff meeting for the initial, official announcement the day the state governing board officially decided on the merger. When their fears are allayed, employees may then begin to react with concern for others in their department or the organization as a whole (Jacobs & Keegan, 2018). Also, when possible, supervisors should inform employees on the greater purpose and meaningfulness of each job position so the employee can gain a sense of having made a difference and impact through their efforts (Jena & Pradhan, 2017).

Articulation of purpose. Additionally, clear articulation of the purpose of the changes lends to greater success of the change initiative overall (Appelbaum et al., 2016). Communication can promote openness to change, foster a willingness to embrace uncertainty and allow opportunities to creatively resolve tensions in the workplace (Francis & Keegan, 2018). The study participants undertook to establish a reliable pattern of frequent communication to manage expectations of the merger, as suggested by Fugate and Soenen (2018), and to prepare the employees in advance of changes that are happening, as suggested by Dîrvă and Rădulescu (2018). Participants shared efforts undertaken at their organizations:

- included all departmental staff on department email correspondence (P4);
- established regular leader availability (P1, P2, P3, P4, P8, and P9);
- suggested that leaders could have all employees change campuses for a time, thereby managing expectations and encouraging communication between all members of the department (P2);
- created and posted a PowerPoint presentation early in merger process for employees and community members (organizational documentation); and
- created a college website to share merger information, progress updates, and engagement-encouraging messages (organizational documentation).

The change process can be either directed (tightly defined and unchanging goal with a clearly defined process) or planned (a clear end goal that might be modified with a flexible and participative change process) (Kerber & Buono, 2018). The choice of the particular type of change process is made by the organization's leaders (Kerber & Buono, 2018). The integration process of a merger is an ongoing and evolving process of change, taking firms, on average, 15 to 10 years to realize positive performance figures (Teerikangas & Thanos, 2018). External factors will exacerbate, or even exaggerate, and extend the resolution of some challenges such as information system integration issues (Henningsson, Yetton, & Wynne, 2018). Adroitly summed up by P1 "I am not sure when *after* the merger is going to be." Choices the organization's leaders make will impact the way in which the organization's employees will approach and resolve challenges and will influence the length of time to completion of the integration process.

Communication strategy. Communication contributes to employee perception of a quality relationship with the organization (Kang & Sung, 2017) although the need for communication is subjective and perceptual (Dîrvă & Rădulescu, 2018). P2 had to alter the communication strategy when one division began to think that drop-in visits were more oversight than supportive. Messages of quality and timely information are vital (Fugate & Soenen, 2018), even to say there is no new information (Dîrvă & Rădulescu, 2018). Communication plan strategies shared by participants included:

- two-way information sharing (P1 and P5);
- a weekly newsletter (P6);
- meetings: regular and drop-ins to faculty, classrooms, labs, etc. (P2), individual (P3 and P4), and departmental (P9 and P10); and
- committees: joint committees, typically within a department (P6) and a task force of key employees, typically college-wide (P8).

Task completion. Leaders can concentrate employee efforts on the tasks at hand and the strategy necessary to realize the merge by creating practices, principles, and policies (Dîrvă & Rădulescu, 2018). Second, leaders can recognize the process will continue and delve deep within the organization (Rouzies, Colman, & Angwin, 2019) to initiate necessary changes. Finally, leaders can manage and secure functional organizational structures (and resources for those systems) as well as foster a new post-acquisition culture (Rouzies et al., 2019). Some of these specific task-oriented efforts cited by participants include:

- (P2) meeting about necessary joint activities,
- (P5) creating a master merger checklist, broken into departmental subsets,
- (P10) drafting a spreadsheet of tasks to divide among staff, and
- (Organizational documentation) showed the creation of a task spreadsheet for the overall systems/technology integration for the college.

Recognition and support. Leaders can recognize contributions and value the individuals within the organization. One strategy is for leaders to introduce reward and recognition mechanisms to provide support and career advancement opportunities to employees, building trust and confidence between employees and their supervisors (Jena, Pradhan, & Panigrahy, 2018). This support and advancement plan should adapt to the strengths and weaknesses of the organization and the individuals (Dîrvă & Rădulescu, 2018). P5 suggested to celebrate successes; P9 stated, “People wanted acknowledgment, to be heard and opinions valued.” One strategy indicated by researchers is to provide personal feedback, benchmarking, and coaching to employees (du Plessis & Boshoff, 2018). Through self-monitoring activities, individuals can monitor their own performance and adjust to maintain the standards of their workplace (Marques-Quinteiro, Vargas, Eifler, & Curral, 2019).

Research indicates leaders can create and maintain a supportive work environment and supportive relationships within the workplace (Barrick et al., 2015; Brough et al., 2018) by encouraging individual development, job satisfaction, and high performance. Conversely, the lack of a perceived supportive environment in the workplace leads to poor work attitudes, job dissatisfaction, and work disengagement (Brough et al., 2018). An organization's leaders reach all levels of the workforce when providing support to the supervisory levels, as the emotions of the managers may impact group performance (Hassett, Reynolds, & Sandberg, 2018). This impact is a phenomenon often described as the *trickle-down* effect of engagement from a manager to the employee (Lu, Xie, & Guo, 2018). Geue (2018) related the six dimensions of positive practices: care, support, inspiration, meaning, forgiveness, and respect which is also known as perceived fairness (Appelbaum et al., 2017b). Specific strategies undertaken at participant colleges included:

- P9 provided resources needed to be successful in their jobs,
- P10 increased expenditures for upgrades to systems of underdeveloped college's network,
- P3 increased the technical capacity of college through the installation of a campus-connecting fiber optic cable, and
- P3 created four-digit extensions for all staff to ease communication.

These strategies encouraged a *growth mindset*, an environment of continuous improvement where abilities, skills, or talents are open to further development (Clark & Sousa, 2018) that is often influenced by transformational leadership (Caniels, Semeijn, & Renders, 2018). Leaders' establishing such an environment might decrease the impact of the negative construct or negative event by making the negative stimulus less a perceived anomaly of everyday life thereby limiting the perception of the need to urgently address and resolve the negative event (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). Leaders can seek to encourage individuals with self-efficacy (du Plessis & Boshoff, 2018), change-readiness, and resilience (Appelbaum et al., 2017b); these individuals are better able to cope with stress (Marques-Quinteiro et al., 2019).

Implications for Social Change

This study aimed to contribute to social change by identifying effective strategies for leaders to utilize to encourage employee engagement that ultimately could influence the community by providing the best training and education to students for employment in the workplace. Initial literature research indicated that employee engagement could increase productivity in student education (Febriansyah et al., 2018), could foster continuous service to local community members (Thompson et al., 2015), and could develop relationships within the local communities (Antony, 2018). Evidence shows, however, that top-down initiatives tend to be less sustainable in some industries, such as education because employees and community input can be necessary for socially responsible sustainability (Appelbaum et al., 2016). Study participants shared several instances where consideration, communication, and interaction with the community benefitted the organization as well as individuals within the community. These easily replicated instances included:

- regular news releases to community media outlets (specifically provided in organizational documentation but strategy employed at each institution);
- obtaining consensus from community board members (P5) and other intentional involvement of the community (P6);

- rearranging locations of program offerings and staff concentrations to reflect the needs of the communities served (all three colleges); and
- college infrastructure improving expenditures (P3, P5, and P10), potentially additionally improving student outcomes.

Thoughtful changes to the organization, changes leaders made to address employee and community concerns, can positively affect the community.

Recommendations for Action

Organizations can thrive when their leaders can effectively respond to changing circumstances (Hicks & Knies, 2015). Flexibility within the workplace, e.g. flexible schedules, can affect employee engagement, resilience, and performance, especially amongst younger employees (Bal & De Lange, 2015). One recommendation is for leaders to develop a *mindfulness* outlook within the workforce, in which individuals look forward toward success with positive, optimistic expectations regardless of past problems or setbacks or based upon habitual or negative patterns (Charoensukmongkol, 2017). Charoensukmongkol (2017) suggested mindfulness training could prepare employees to adapt more readily to change or integration. Mindfulness also extends to leaders; mindful leaders consider the contributing factors of an acquisition to set appropriate goals and prepare for potential issues (Rebner & Yeganeh, 2019).

Brett (2018) reported study findings concerning the factors involved in the decision of with whom a small, specialty focus college should merge which could prove to be useful for other organizations' leaders considering a merger. Nite, Hutchinson, and Bouchet (2019) utilized the escalation of commitment theory, studying the continued and, sometimes even escalating, commitment to failing projects and courses of action by individuals and organizations. Nite et al. cautioned for study and reflection before continuing commitment to a particular course of action, actions that might be influenced by individual motivations and biases rather than the good of the organization. Leaders should monitor the effectiveness of any chosen strategy, including those intended to encourage employee engagement, and make adjustments to the implementation as needed.

The findings from this study will be sent to the head of the Technical College System of Georgia so the information could be utilized in any future mergers within the system as these findings would be most applicable and generalizable to colleges within the TCSG system. I will also seek opportunities to present the findings at conferences within the state's higher education community. I will publish the study within Walden's ScholarWorks database and seek additional avenues of scholarly publication in industry journals so the findings will be available to a broader range of merging institutional leaders.

Recommendations for Further Research

Limitations identified from earlier in the study were addressed below and can be further mitigated through additional study. Although many successful strategies for educational mergers can be suggested, leaders must evaluate each as it correlates to the individual organization's strengths and needs to ensure applicability, as shared by Linkweiler (2018) in studying airport acquisitions in Sydney, Australia as well as Budapest, Hungary.

First, this study included participants from only three of the ten college mergers in the college system. Although this was perceived to potentially be a limitation, I was able to obtain data from participants from all the major divisions of the college system, including: president, provost, information technology (college computer systems), financial services, student affairs, marketing, and strategic initiatives as well as being provided significant documentation from one college's IE office. The second limitation was the time available for participant interviews. This was, periodically, an issue as the participants were all very busy within their positions at their respective college. Many had to schedule the interview forward from the initial contact due to major projects or deadlines within their department. One participant delayed the interview 2 months from the initial contact due to the end of fiscal year processes. Finally, the research concerned the strategies of employee engagement, not the effectiveness of the strategies.

Participants relayed some success measures; however, a longitudinal study would more completely and objectively research effectiveness of the employee engagement strategies. A longitudinal study would address this limitation if an opportunity arose to conduct a study of employee engagement of an organization before the merger announcement, during merger activities, and after merger completion, as well as the study designed to measure the effectiveness of the employee engagement strategies employed. The longitudinal study by Kaltiainen, Lipponen, and Holtz (2017) of employees of two merging Finnish civil service organizations, utilizing multiple data collection periods, is an example of how this research could be furthered through additional study.

Reflections

Like Hiller and Vears (2016), I acknowledge having had prior experience and perspective on the research topic. Two different organizations (one in higher education and one in a major accounting firm) underwent a merger during the time of my employment with each organization. This lived experience provided a relevant perspective that influenced my desire to perform this research and contributed to the lens used to view the data of this study. As suggested by Houghton et al. (2017), I used multiple sources of data to enhance rigor and reduce the effect of bias from my prior experience with mergers. Additionally, I kept a journal to reflect on the data collection process, following the guidance of Hiller and Vears (2016), to also limit the effect of personal bias. I had thought, from the review of scholarly literature, that inclusion of diverse cultures or demographics of people would be more of a concern that participants would speak of in the data collection process, but this was not a concern raised through the participant interviews of this study.

Conclusion

One aspect of the planning process for leaders' consideration during mergers is effective employee engagement strategies. Leaders can integrate employee engagement strategies into an effective plan of strategies concerning communication, culture, barrier mitigation, and ongoing assessment of the impact of specific plan components. Effectiveness can sometimes be measured and monitored, as shown by Russell (2019) in a study of Georgia's university system mergers in which statistics indicated students were retained at higher rates. Russell attributed this positive retention finding to increased productivity at specific campuses affected by consolidation. With approximately $1.7 trillion in merger and acquisition activity within the U.S. during 2016 (Thomson Reuters, 2017), leaders embarking on a merger must consider all available strategies found in the research and planning phase of the acquisition process in order to most effectively reach the organization's goals and remain sustainable (Rebner & Yeganeh, 2019). The findings of this study contain additional strategies encouraging employee engagement during mergers as presented by the study participants. These findings were compiled from three institutions within one educational system in one state, so must be considered an example of recommended employee engagement strategies that might require additional research to apply outside of this particular industry segment.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

The goal of this study is to examine strategies that foster employee engagement before, during, and after organizational mergers, specifically in the higher education industry. The following constitutes the Interview Protocol for this study. An Interview Protocol informs participants of the steps of events within the interview.

Before the interview, the researcher will:

- Provide potential participants with an emailed invitation to participate in the study, a copy of the interview protocol, a consent form, and the list of interview questions.
- Confirm receipt and understanding of the provided documents.
- Schedule the time and place for the interview.
- Answer concerns and questions.

During the interview, the researcher will:

- Obtain the signed consent form, if not already received from the participant.
- Confirm participant’s agreement for the interview to be recorded.
- Confirm participant’s understanding of the right to withdraw voluntarily from the interview and study at any time, for any reason.
- Remind the participant that identifiable interview responses and participant identity are kept strictly confidential. Aggregated responses and selected quotes from the interviews will be within the concluding research report.

- Address any questions or concerns.

After the interview, the researcher will:

- Thank the participant for their contribution to the study.
- Transcribe the interview responses and determine if a second interview is necessary.
- Send the synopsis of participant answers to the interview questions for verification of participant meaning (member checking activity).
- Receive confirmation of accuracy of meaning interpretation from all participants.
- Convert all received paper documents (e.g. emails and/or minutes from meetings discussing policies or procedures to encourage employee engagement) to digital format and destroy paper documents.
- Save all files to USB drive and maintain in a locked box for five years, then destroyed.

After publication, the researcher will:

- Send the 1-2 page summary of findings to all participants.
- Advise the participants of publication location for the full research report.
- Send the summary of findings and an electronic copy of the completed study to the leadership of higher education organizations within the study's geographical area.