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Heflin: Prescription for Retention

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Prescription for Retention: The Influence of Leadership on Employee Retention in Healthcare

Abstract

There is a substantial amount of research that aims to better understand leadership. The purpose of this single case study was to understand how a leader's behaviors influenced employee retention in one healthcare facility in the Orlando, Florida metro area. According to Lee and Kim (2022), it is important to understand how a leader's behaviors influence employee retention. Therefore, this single case study includes 21 healthcare professionals from a single healthcare facility in Orlando. Each participant completed an electronic quantitative survey that asked them to rank their leader's likelihood of behavior on a 5-point Likert scale. Upon completion of the survey, the participants scheduled one-on-one live interviews. These interviews took a deeper dive into understanding the behaviors of their leaders and how those may or may not have influenced their decision to remain or leave the organization. The findings of this study were aggregated using MAXQDA and revealed three overarching themes. The themes included open door/listening, personal connection, and focusing on the numbers. Participants felt these three behaviors demonstrated by leaders were significant in their decision to remain with or leave the organization.

Keywords: leadership, retention, listening, personal connection, bottom-line leadership

Introduction

There is a considerable amount of research on the topic of leadership (Amabile et al., 2004; Farrington & Lillah, 2019; Naeem & Khurram, 2020). One may postulate that as organizations strive to reach excellence among their teams and their service lines, the reliance on leadership increases. This calls for an understanding of how leaders play a pivotal role in the organization. As leaders engage with each team member there is the possibility that these interactions may be positive or negative in nature (Raso & Fitzpatrick, 2021). These interactions have the potential to impact team member performance. Therefore, it is important to understand how a leader's behaviors influence employee retention (Lee & Kim, 2022). This understanding can range from a team member's level of engagement and their desire to remain with the organization.

The goal of this study was to gain a greater understanding of the nuance of behaviors exhibited by leaders and how those influenced an employee's decision to remain with the organization. The study was conducted as a qualitative single case study. There was a total of 21 participants who have been employed with one healthcare facility in the Orlando, FL metro area for at least 90 days. The participants were recruited using the snowball method. Participants completed a consent form prior to engaging in the research study.

Each participant completed a brief survey asking them to rate their leader on a 5-point Likert scale as it related to specific behaviors. This was used to jump start the conversations once the participants moved into the one-on-one live interview portion of the study. Upon completion of the survey, each participant engaged in a live interview where questions were asked to identify their leader's behaviors and how they influenced the participant's decision to remain or leave the organization. The qualitative findings from this study were analyzed using MAXQDA and the

three emergent themes discovered were open door/listening, personal connection, and focusing on the numbers which are discussed further in this study.

Background of the Problem

When searching for existing research on the topic of leadership, one can find a plethora of articles. Many aspects of leadership have been studied in various ways. An area of importance that requires more exploration is that of employee perceptions of how leader behaviors impact the work environment (Amabile et al., 2004; Raso & Fitzpatrick, 2021). More specifically, understanding employee perceptions of their leader's actions and behaviors have potential to impact an employee's desire to remain with the organization. Available research does touch on the need for leaders to create positive work environments to support employee retention but lacks specificity into the behaviors that are demonstrated by leaders (Covella et al., 2017). Other research focused on leadership behaviors and leader effectiveness do not touch on how those may impact retention (Derue et al., 2011). This is a critical topic as many organizations are focusing on employee engagement and retention. Houssein et al. (2020) indicated that retention is critical for organizations to maintain a competitive advantage and therefore, the topic of retention has gained attention of employers.

Much of the existing research in leadership is limited to understanding one's specific leadership style. While I believe this is important, I also feels that there is a possibility that a leader's actions may not be inclusive of their adopted leadership style and therefore can miss critical behaviors that influence employee success. For example, research has been conducted on the topic of authentic leadership (van Droffelaar & Jacobs, 2018), empowering leaders (Tian & Zhang, 2020), and self-serving leadership (Zahid, 2019), to name a few. These studies are

important but lack the specificity needed to have a full understanding of the leader-employee relationship.

Existing research does demonstrate interesting findings focused on an individual's perceptions of their work environment, how this may or may not be influenced by their direct leader (Amabile et al., 2004), and sheds light on the leader-employee relationship. The study performed by Amabile et al. (2004) evaluated employee perceptions of leader actions and how that may influence creativity in the workplace. Lee and Kim (2022) noted that employee perceptions of leaders are directly linked to their overall perceptions of the organization and general state of morale. This is an important step in understanding leader influence in the workplace. A deeper exploration is necessary to understand the extent of a leader's influence over an employee's intention to stay rather than specific to creativity alone.

Lastly, a study performed by Raso and Fitzpatrick (2021) began to tap into a more specific area of focus by studying clinical nurses in the healthcare arena and relational leadership. The qualitative study gathered identified the positive and negative behaviors of leaders that contributed to understanding relational leadership. While the value of this study is high, the authors indicate that studying relational leadership alone is not enough to create healthy working environments. Therefore, focusing more on leadership behaviors rather than on styles is essential.

Business Problem Studied

The reasons why organizations may have decreased retention of their workforce is often multifaceted. While the growing body of evidence shows that leaders do have influence over employee retention, there is a lack of specificity. Therefore, the specific business problem to be

addressed is the possible lack of effective leadership behaviors and their influence on employee retention within the healthcare industry in the Orlando metro area.

Methodology

Choosing the appropriate study design method and approach is key to a successful research study (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018). There is not a single approach that works for each study. Rather, the researcher should choose a methodology that will yield quality research and increase the likelihood that the findings will make a positive impact in the field of study (Sovacool et al., 2018). A researcher must fully understand the various approaches to conducting research that can be used in a study. The questions being asked within the research will drive the selection of appropriate methodology (Mohajan, 2018).

The method and design selected for this study was a qualitative method flexible design, single case study. The purpose of this single case study was to identify and explore leadership behaviors that had a positive or negative influence on employee retention within the healthcare industry in Orlando. The single case study design was most appropriate for this project as the focus was on conducting a live interview with 21 participants within a single healthcare organization in Orlando. The qualitative approach allowed the participants to be interviewed with open-ended questions to evaluate the influence of leadership on a deeper level. Lastly, a flexible design allowed for pivots in this single case study to account for any unexpected events. The data collected from participants provided a small amount of data triangulation to add value to the study findings.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process for qualitative studies is complex and often challenging to execute quickly (Watkins, 2017). The analysis of data is considered to be one of the most

essential components of a study (Ravindran, 2019). To aid in discovery of new findings, it is important to ensure the appropriate tools are utilized and the work is well organized (Watkins, 2017). The case study approach for this project is applicable as Wohlin (2021) noted that case studies are when the researcher works with participants rather than action studies where the researcher is involved with the participants. This single case study looked at empirical evidence while focusing on a contemporary and real-life issue of the leadership influence on employee retention within a healthcare facility in the Orlando area.

The qualitative data gathered in this single case study were evaluated for common themes and trends. The goal was to identify common behaviors of leaders that positively or negatively influenced an employee's decision to remain employed. The approach of descriptive statistics was used in this type of study. The data collected from the interview portion of this case study were run through a data analysis software system called MAXQDA to begin coding various key words or phrases within the live interviews. This software provided flexibility and rich-text data that increases study quality by coding, theming, and categorizing data captured in this qualitative single case study (Alam, 2021). Coding allowed discovery of common themes from the live interviews that helped to paint an in-depth understanding of how leaders influenced employee retention in this single case study.

This single case study aimed to collect data from the individual live interviews and applied codes to various key words or patterns observed. This single case study aimed to identify possible behaviors that influenced an individual's decision to remain with the organization by adopting the descriptive statistics method. While the sample size of this single case study could not provide generalizations, it did highlight key areas that larger research studies can investigate. The data were interpreted to present themes and patterns through the use of categorial

aggregation. The data from this single case study were clearly represented using visual aids such as a table or graph to identify the frequency in which each behavior was reported. Additionally, the data were presented in categories that allowed a clearer understanding of which leader behaviors were perceived as positive and which were perceived as negative in relation to employee retention.

Triangulation is used in research to combine theories or methods to improve outcomes (Jackson, 2018). It is one of the most-used techniques to demonstrate validation (Massaro et al., 2019). The results of the electronic survey served as an initial gathering of identified leader behaviors that was used to drive discussion during the interview. The results from the electronic survey were not compared or correlated to the interview data. It was viewed as supportive to the interview. The reasoning for this decision is that heavy triangulation between qualitative and quantitative data moves into a mixed method design (Fusch et al., 2018). This study focused on a flexible qualitative single case study design. However, the triangulation occurred between the data collected through the participant interviews and the observations made by me during the interview process. My observations are kept in note form for reference.

Findings

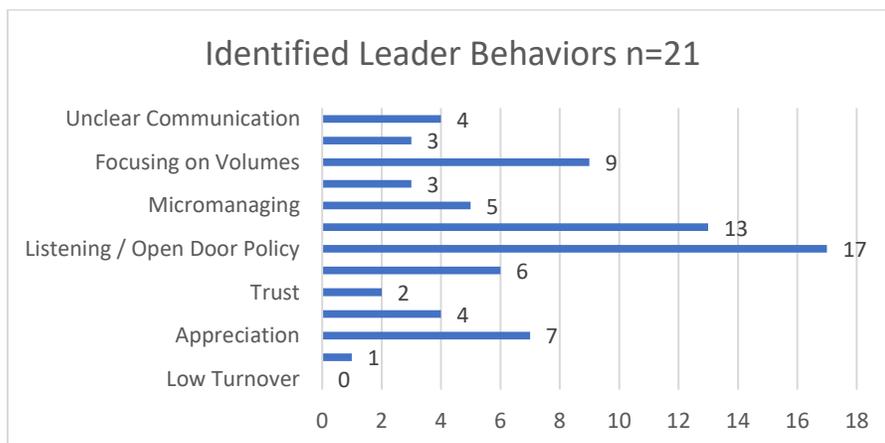
This qualitative single case study revealed three emergent themes that demonstrate a relationship with leadership behavior and employee retention within one healthcare facility in the Orlando metro area. The themes were identified by the frequency in which the leader behaviors were mentioned during each live interview. The themes included listening/open door policy, personal connection, and focusing on the numbers. Collectively the themes generated from this single case study suggest that identification of specific leadership behaviors is important when considering how those influenced employee retention in one healthcare facility in Orlando. Of

the 21 participants interviewed, 17 indicated that a leader who listens and has an open-door policy was important in their decision to remain with the organization. Next, 13 of the 21 participants in this single case study indicated that it is important that their leader desired to have a personal connection with them. Lastly, the third theme identified was bottom-line leadership where leaders place high focus on business metrics. There were nine out of the 21 participants that felt their leader demonstrated bottom-line tendencies.

In addition to these three themes, another aspect that was closely monitored was that of a leader’s positive or negative behaviors in relation to growth opportunities for team members. Of the 21 one-on-one interviews conducted, 17 of the 21 participants indicated that a leader who supported team member growth positively influenced their decision to remain employed with the organization. There was rich discussion during the participant interviews that left me inspired. I believed that participants felt comfortable and desired to share their feedback about their leader’s behaviors. The assessment of collected data was compared to existing literature on leadership styles and behaviors that have been shown to influence employee retention.

Figure 1

Emergent Theme 1: Listening / Open Door Policy



During the live one-on-one interviews, the participants were asked to reflect on their leader's positive behaviors and how those influenced their decision to remain with the organization or choose to find employment elsewhere. The first theme to be discovered was that of listening and an open-door policy. Of the 21 interviews conducted, 17 participants indicated that listening/open door policy was influential in their decision to remain with the organization. The participants felt that it is important that their leader actively listened to them in times of need or in moments of constructive feedback. Additionally, the participants felt it is important that their leaders have an open-door policy. This allows them to feel comfortable approaching their leader for any type of discussion whether it be positive or negative. The participants in the study noted that having a leader who sat and listened during casual conversation made it easier to approach them in times of need. One participant mentioned that they do not want their leader to perceive every conversation as complaining so having a leader with an open-door policy allowed them to stop in for casual conversation which led to developing a more personal connection.

Emergent Theme 2: Personal Connection

The second emerging theme discovered from the conversations with participants was that of personal connection. The data revealed 13 of the 21 participants felt that it is important for their leader to build a personal connection with team members. Participants noted that their leader took time to get to know them as a person rather than only from an employee to leader relationship. This included asking questions about their family or remembering important dates and milestones that occurred in the participant's life. The participants felt that a leader who took time to connect with them on a personal level, despite how busy they may have been that day, was a demonstration of their commitment and showed they value their team members. Some

leaders also took the time to ensure the team member's needs were met. On busy days, the leader would deliver food or treats for the team to boost morale among the team.

Emergent Theme 3: Focusing on the Numbers

Another common theme throughout the one-on-one live interviews was a feeling that leaders focus more on the production of volumes. Nine of the 21 participants noted that they perceived their leader spent more time worrying about meeting set quotas or producing enough revenue value units (RVUs) than they did about the wellbeing of their teams. Team members compared their work with a production line and focusing on seeing as many patients as possible within the shortest amount of time. The participants felt that this approach caused them to feel burnt out and compromised their ability to care for patients, themselves, or others. One team member was quoted saying "There's such a numbers game..." and he went on saying "A negative of a bad leadership is always thinking of the bottom line and I think that bottom line is what causes people to have a high rate of turnover" (Participant 2). Most employees recognized that their hospital is a business, and it is important to meet set business metrics, but not at the expense of the wellbeing of team members.

Next, participants were asked during the one-on-one live interviews to identify leadership behaviors that they perceive as positive. This question was not specific to their particular leader but looking at a more global perspective and considering all leaders. Responses to this question varied. Some behaviors identified were repetitive of current behaviors demonstrated by the participant's leader which were noted during the live interview in earlier asked questions. Table 5 below provides a listing of some of the behaviors the participants perceived as positive and that they feel would positively influence their decision to remain with an organization.

Table 1*Positively Perceived Leadership Behaviors*

Trust	Inclusivity in decision making
Being receptive	Gratitude/acknowledgement
Confidence	Developing relationships
Loyalty	Patience
Caring	Approachable
Listening	Fair
Personal Connection	Accountability
Taking time to understand challenges	Good communication
Recognition	Supportive
Transparency	Honesty
Helpful	Presence / Availability

The gathered data are helpful to better understand the behaviors that team members desire to see displayed by their leader(s). These behaviors provide a tangible listing of actions that a leader can use to improve the overall morale within their teams. Additionally, understanding that these behaviors were described by the interviewed team members, who are on the frontlines, is helpful when considering how to retain existing talent within the organization.

Lastly, during the live one-on-one interviews, participants shared behaviors they felt were perceived as negative and would negatively influence their decision to remain employed with an organization. This question was not specific to their particular leader but looking at a more global perspective and considering all leaders. This does not provide an exhaustive list of negatively perceived behaviors but provides a good listing as a starting point.

Table 2*Negatively Perceived Leadership Behaviors*

Lack of support	Empty promises
Focusing on volumes/numbers/revenue	Poor communication
Lack of a relationship	No open door
Not listening	Lack of transparency
Not caring	Lack of physical presence
Micromanaging	Jumping to conclusions
Decreasing employee resources	Knit Picking
Consistently denying requests	Favoritism
Overworking / Excessive Workload	Singling people out
Not holding others accountable	Ignoring concerns
Oversharing confidential information	Gossiping
Reactive versus proactive	Lack of appreciation

The responses to this question were helpful in identifying specific behaviors that a leader may demonstrate that could negatively influence team morale. It is important to identify these behaviors as sometimes leaders may not realize they are acting in a certain way. Furthermore, these behaviors have potential to influence a team member's decision to stay or leave the organization.

Christian Perspective

These behaviors demonstrated by leaders are truly the embodiment of Christian leadership. These servant leaders prioritize the needs of their team members ahead of their own. This leadership style aligns closely with Jesus' teachings in the book of Mark. Mark 10:43-45

states, “Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be a slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (New International Version, 1973). It is possible that leaders who approach leading others with a servant heart may inspire a sense of loyalty and commitment from their team members.

In summary, the leadership behaviors of open door/listening and personal connection can perfectly integrate with a Christian worldview. This worldview promotes compassion, empathy, and servant leadership. The incorporation of these values, supported by scriptures, creates a workforce environment that not only supports employee retention, but also echoes Christian ethics to foster personal and spiritual growth. It is my prayer that coupling these Christian principles with organizational practices will result in work environments that are more encouraging and allow for a fulfilling work experience for team members and leaders.

Conclusion

This single case study collected data from 21 participants. These participants were interviewed on a one-on-one basis via telephone, in-person, or virtual as determined by the participant. The data collected during the live one-on-one interviews were analyzed in a system called MAXQDA which allowed grouping of themes and commonalities in the research participant’s feedback. The data analysis revealed three overarching themes that include open door/listening, personal connection, and focusing on the numbers. These findings indicated that these three themes were most important to employees when they considered their desire to remain with or to leave the organization. This information is helpful in identifying tangible ways that leaders can do to engage their team members and create an environment that is inclusive to

retention. While this study was performed at a single healthcare institution in the Orlando, Florida metro area, it can be easily replicated for other healthcare sectors or industries.

There remains great benefit in replicating this study with a larger population of participants. Overall, the findings of this single case study lend valuable information to the field of leadership study. Coupled with the existing literature on leader-follow relationship and employee retention, organizations and leaders alike should be able to utilize this information to create training opportunities for new and existing leaders.

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