

RESPONDING TO GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN WORKPLACE ENGAGEMENT: SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES FOR BUSINESS MANAGERS

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Abstract

Small business managers are experiencing a 30% turnover of employees, costing U.S. businesses \$41.3 million per year. The purpose of this case study was to explore strategies that experienced small business managers use to respond effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement. Using a purposeful sampling technique, managers possessing successful experience in issues related to generational differences in the workplace were recruited from small firms located in the Midwestern United States to participate in semistructured interviews about engaging a multigenerational workforce. Methodological triangulation was used to analyze the data collected through semistructured interviews, organizational documents and observations. Three themes emerged: providing resources and incentives, giving opportunities, and forming relationships between managers and subordinates. These themes aligned with leader-member exchange theory, indicating the need for managers and subordinates to establish high-quality relationships, which results in more engaged employees. Responding effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement may lead to less employee turnover, which may increase revenue.

Keywords: Generational differences; Workplace engagement; Successful strategies

The National Business Education Association (NBEA) recognizes business competencies that are essential for all individuals to possess to function effectively in a diverse, multigenerational business workforce (NBEA, 2013). The most diverse and educated generational cohort, the Millennials, has started entering the workplace at a critical time. Millennials are a large emerging generational cohort of individuals born between 1978 and 1999, characterized as digital natives desiring personalized work experiences, placing a high value on a work-life balance, and wanting to have their voices heard so they can make an impact (Murphy, 2012). Baby Boomers, once known as the largest generational cohort and the largest population of employees, are starting to reach retirement age and will soon be leaving the workforce (Ferri-Reed, 2015). Baby Boomers are the largest generational cohort in the U.S. workplace, consisting of individuals born between 1946 and 1964 and known for high education levels, dual-income households, the need for individuality, and a focus on health (Loroz & Hegeson, 2013). The exodus of Baby Boomers from the workplace will leave Millennials with the title of the largest generational cohort in the workplace (Farrell & Hurt, 2014).

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Because of this changing trend in workforce demographics, organizations are experiencing a more diverse workplace. Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and Millennials have a variety of differences that make sharing the workplace a difficult task. Generation Xers are the generational cohort following the Baby Boomers, consisting of individuals born between 1966 and 1980, characterized as an independent generation that started the push for a better work-life balance (Krahn & Galambos, 2014). Employers must adapt to new work demands being made by entering employees. As the dynamics of the workplace change due to differing values held by new-entrant Millennials, employers must find more effective strategies for engaging, communicating, and retaining the three generational cohorts in the workplace (Mecha, 2013).

While Baby Boomers are known for valuing achievement and contributions to society, Generation Xers are known for being independent with a high need for balance between work and life, but are often stereotyped as slackers (Brown, 2012). Millennials, similar to Generation Xers, have a high need for flexibility at work, but are mostly known for being technologically savvy, closely connected to technology, very expressive with their thoughts and feelings, and valuing empowerment in the workplace (Thompson & Gregory, 2012). In order to engage all employees, managers must be able to balance the needs of all the generations in the workplace.

Profitability and productivity are affected by employee engagement (Richards, 2013). In order to have a productive work environment with engaged employees, employees' needs must be met (Mecha, 2013). Understanding the different needs and expectations of the generations in the workplace could assist managers with implementing the best method for managing and engaging all employees despite their differences (Thompson & Gregory, 2012; Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012).

Nature of the Problem

Employee turnover is a well-documented problem in various industries with reported turnover rates in 2014 ranging from 31% to 43% (Dusek, Ruppel, Yurova, & Clarke, 2014). That same year, employee turnover costs ranged from 25% to 240% of the annual salary of the position needing replacement, depending on seniority and skills required of the position (Dusek et al., 2014). In the United States, employers paid \$600 billion in turnover costs in 2018 and can expect that number to increase to \$680 billion by 2020 (Fox, 2019). Millennials are more likely to leave their jobs when they become dissatisfied, further contributing to attrition rates as high as 30% in some industries (Childs & Donovan, 2012). Millennials are not as engaged or motivated in the workplace as individuals from previous generations, negatively impacting revenue as a result of a high attrition rate (Holt, Marques, & Way, 2012; Kappel, 2012). The business problem investigated in this study is that some small business managers lack strategies to respond effectively

to generational differences in workplace engagement that lead to a high employee attrition rate. The overarching research question was as follows: What strategies do small business managers use to respond effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement that lead to a high employee attrition rate?

Conceptual Framework

The leader-member exchange (LMX) theory was used as the conceptual framework. Dansereau, Graen, and Haga (1975) and Graen (1976) advanced the LMX theory and provided a framework for analyzing the relationship between managers' behaviors and interactions with employees and employee engagement (Sinha & Trivedi, 2014). The LMX theory describes leader-member relationships as the opportunities and benefits employees receive from their immediate supervisors in exchange for the employees' commitment to the work unit and their hard work (Chen, Lam, & Zhong, 2012). For employees to be engaged and satisfied with their jobs, they must have a positive relationship with their supervisors and know what is expected of them (Sinha & Trivedi, 2014). Once supervisors and subordinates develop expectations of one another, these expectations drive the course of their relationship as well as the subordinates' career outcomes (Xu, Huang, Lam, & Miao, 2012). Sinha and Trivedi (2014) argued that work-related interpersonal relationships affect turnover rates and subordinates' attitudes and job performance. The LMX theory provided a valuable foundation for this study because this theory explains and highlights the importance of specific leader behaviors and their effect on the quality of the relationship managers are able to form with their subordinates (Neubert, Wu, & Roberts, 2013).

Literature Review

Small business managers must be prepared to deal with millennials entering the workplace who expect drastically different employment experiences than their predecessors, the baby boomers (Holt et al., 2012).

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement has been the subject of research for the last decade because of the ever-changing business environment (Lewis, Thomas, & Bradley, 2012). Many engagement theories explain what leads to employee engagement, the outcomes, and the way it can be achieved. The benefits of engagement include employee ownership of processes, lower employee turnover, organizational commitment, and other benefits that are important for organizations to recognize in order to remain competitive and successful (Memon, Salleh, Baharom, & Harun, 2014; Slack, Corlett, & Morris, 2015).

Engagement at work emerged as a desirable behavior in the workplace between 2003-2013 as uncertainty regarding job security continued to rise (Agarwal, 2014). Organizations recruit with the intent to attract, select, develop, and retain the most

qualified candidates who are the best fit for the positions at hand. Employees, used as a competitive advantage, are one of the most important resources to businesses (Memon et al., 2014). Recruiters also strive to select employees who will be most likely to remain with the organization for a long period while also doing an exceptional job. Creating an environment with high employee engagement is important because employees who are more engaged are less likely to leave the organization (Memon et al., 2014).

Kahn (1990) defined engagement as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work role and in a way that allows them to express themselves cognitively and emotionally during work tasks” (p. 694). Engagement involves an investment of emotions and an effort in work roles that leads to above average work performance. Employee engagement and work engagement are often used synonymously, though the two phrases refer to different employee relationships. Employee engagement is the relationship between an employee and the job, the organization, or the role in the organization. Work engagement is the relationship between the employee and the work performed (Barnes & Collier, 2013).

Employee engagement researchers have focused the effect that employee engagement has on employees, their work, and the organization. Engaged employees have reduced absenteeism, perform more efficiently and effectively than disengaged employees, and are less likely to leave an organization (Bhuvanaiah & Raya, 2014). Engaged employees have a positive attitude about the organization and are more attached to the job than disengaged employees. In addition, engaged employees also consistently exceed expected levels of performance and strive for continuous improvement of themselves and work processes (Bhuvanaiah & Raya, 2014). Engaged employees contribute more to the organizational goals because of the higher level of organizational commitment. Recent studies have shown that employee turnover can be predicted by an employee’s intent to leave the organization, which is best determined by the employee’s level of organizational commitment (Adkins, 2016). There is a connection between employees’ organization commitment and level of engagement.

Employee engagement can be enhanced in the workplace by creating fulfilling work experiences (Kassing et al., 2012). Enhancing employee engagement can reduce absenteeism, increase work quality and individual performance, improve job satisfaction, and increase organizational commitment, which increase organizational profitability (Bhuvanaiah & Raya, 2014). Engagement can be enhanced through the use of management principles and processes, the minimization of employee stress, and the promotion of employee well-being and self-management (Bhuvanaiah & Raya, 2014; Medlin & Green, 2014).

Management processes are activities that managers must complete regularly to support the mission of the organization. Activities that enhance the manager-subordinate relationship include setting objectives and goals with subordinates, discussing progress toward those goals, and providing subordinates with resources, support, and feedback (Medlin & Green, 2014). Employee engagement is a heavily

researched topic. Extensive information exists about the meaning of engagement, its importance and ways it can be enhanced. While manager behaviors enhance employee engagement, there is little information about specific behaviors that create the positive work environment needed to enhance engagement.

Generational Differences

Three very different generational cohorts, including baby boomers, Generation X, and millennials, are experiencing various milestones in the workplace (Kaifi, Nafei, Khanfar, & Kaifi, 2012). While baby boomers are entering and nearing retirement, Generation Xers are reaching the mid-career milestone. While a number of millennials have been in the workforce for up to ten years, many of the younger millennials are new entrants into the workforce (Kaifi et al., 2012). Each generation has its own set of values, beliefs, characteristics, lifestyles, and attitudes, which were created by social, political, historical, and economical experiences through their lifetimes (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014). The shared experiences and timeframe of Millennial births have created a large cohort which is nearing the size of the largest generational cohort, the Baby Boomers (Solnet, Kralj, & Kandampully, 2012).

New entrants into the workplace bring differences in commitment, job satisfaction, motivation, and leadership style that have not been previously experienced (Costanza, Badger, Fraser, Severt, & Gade, 2012). Differences in the three generational cohorts that are currently in the workforce have been shaped by a number of lifetime experiences, which created a new generation that is radically different from previous generations (Costanza et al., 2012; Solnet et al., 2012). The Civil Rights movement, the war on drugs, the rise of the Internet, the September 11 tragedy, and the Great Recession of 2008-2009 are a few of the events that impacted the way the generational cohorts respond to social and environmental stimuli (Solnet et al., 2012).

Generational differences have a number of positive and negative outcomes in the workplace that have recently been of interest to researchers (Costanza et al., 2012). The diverse work habits and values of generational cohorts have led to tension and miscommunication between employees and managers, reducing efficiency in the workplace (Kaifi et al., 2012). Differences in communication styles and technology use have led to changes in recruiting tactics, training methods, employee rewards, and job design (Costanza et al., 2012). In order to effectively lead a multigenerational workforce, small business managers must completely understand the characteristics affecting each generation and the differences among them. In addition, each generational cohort must be defined, along with common experiences that shaped its values, beliefs, and attitudes (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014; Kaifi et al., 2012). The results of this study may allow managers to incorporate strategies to facilitate engagement across generations in the workplace.

Method

Researchers use the case study design to explore real-world issues and practices in business and management research (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2015). Researchers also use the case study design to investigate a phenomenon in-depth within the participants' natural setting and triangulate data to validate findings (Ridder, 2017). The case study research design was used to explore the what, how, and why of a particular phenomenon in its natural setting, which is generational differences in workplace engagement. Five small business managers were interviewed. Organizational documentation was secured from each small business manager to be able to conduct methodological triangulation.

The qualitative research method helps researchers gain an understanding of descriptions, interpretations, and explanations of phenomena by analyzing participants' perceptions and real life experiences. Qualitative researchers analyze various sources of data including participants' words, actions, emotions, behaviors, and thoughts in order to provide a subjective measure of the phenomena (Harrits, 2011; Rowley, 2012; Yin, 2018). The qualitative research method was used to seek participants' explanations of and meanings associated with a phenomenon, which were best discovered through various sources of data.

Participants

A purposeful sampling method (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Palinkas et al., 2014; Yin, 2018) was used to select participants to ensure participants possessed successful experience in managing employees of multiple generations (Kaczynski, Salmona, & Smith, 2014; Palinkas et al., 2014; Yin, 2018). The criteria for selecting participants were as follows: (a) business managers must be experienced in issues related to generational differences in workplace engagement that lead to a high employee attrition rate; and (b) the selected managers must be working in small accounting firms. Following these guidelines for selecting participants ensured that the participants selected would align with the overarching research question.

Achieving data saturation enhances the validity of the study. Researchers reach data saturation when no new themes and codes exist in data collection (Lowe, Norris, Farris, & Babbage, 2018). Sample sizes between one and 10 are best suited for case studies because sample sizes greater than 10 do not guarantee greater richness in data (Rowley, 2012). When a theory is straightforward, two to three cases should be sufficient to reach data saturation (Rowley, 2012; Yin, 2018). In order to achieve data saturation, data were collected from five small business managers. After completing each interview, data were analyzed to determine if data were repetitive and to determine if additional interviews beyond the initial five were needed. Data collection continued until no new information emerged. The participant selection criteria ensure that the participants are able to provide information that aligns with the overarching research question. The

criteria used for selecting participants were that small business managers had to possess successful experience in issues related to differences in generational engagement in the workplace.

Data Analysis

Five stages of data analysis exist, including (a) collecting the data, (b) separating the data into groups, (c) regrouping data into themes, (d) assessing and analyzing the information, and (e) developing conclusions (Yin, 2018). Following this order, data were collected from participants using semistructured interviews and from making observations of participants and artifacts in the workplace. The interview protocol consisted of the following steps: (a) introduced ourselves to participant; (b) presented informed consent form, reviewed its contents, answered questions and addressed concerns from participant; (c) secured signed informed consent form from participant; (d) gave participant a copy of the final version of the informed consent form; (e) turned on recording device; (f) followed procedure to introduce participant with pseudonym/coded identification, noting the date, time, and location; (g) began interview; (h) followed up with additional questions; (i) discussed member checking with participant; (j) thanked the participant, (k) reiterated contact numbers for follow up questions and concerns from participants. Upon completion of the data collection process, data were recorded and transcribed to conduct data triangulations to obtain major themes. The interview questions used were:

1. Why do employees leave your organization?
2. How do you control employee turnover?
3. How do you address problems with employee engagement?
4. How do you engage millennials and why do you use that method?
5. What strategies work best to engage baby boomers?
6. What strategies do you recommend to individuals attempting to engage baby boomers and millennials?
7. How do your interpersonal relationships with subordinate millennials affect their engagement?
8. Why does your relationship affect millennials in that manner?
9. What skills do managers need to possess to be well prepared to deal with generational differences in engagement?
10. How do managers in your organization gain the knowledge and skills needed to properly deal with differences in generational engagement?
11. How does the behavior of managers contribute to engagement of millennials in the workplace?

Methodological triangulation (Yin, 2018) was used to verify the patterns of information found in two sets of data collected from conducting semistructured interviews and analyzing organizational documentation. Using a software program

to assist with data analysis and interpretation may assist a researcher with effective organization of grouped data by regrouping data into themes (Rowley, 2012; Yin, 2018). NVivo was used to sort and organize the data into categories by words and themes according to frequency. Common words and phrases across all interviews were searched. All identified themes were coded. The themes that emerged as a result of data analyses should be correlated with current research studies and with the conceptual framework (Stake, 2010; Tan, 2010; Yin, 2018). For this reason, the themes that emerged from this study were correlated with current research studies and with the conceptual framework.

Reliability and Validity

Qualitative researchers establish reliability and validity by addressing Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four widely accepted criteria, which are dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Reliability is a measure of the ability to repeat the study and yield data with similar results (Hess, McNab, & Basoglu, 2014). To enhance credibility of this study, *member checking* with each participant was conducted by giving participant researchers' interpretations of their answers to interview questions and asking participants to verify the accuracy of such interpretations.

Validity

Validity is established by providing evidence of accurate data collection and findings which accurately represent reality (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Yin, 2018). To ensure validity, *methodological triangulation* and *member checking* were used. Comparing and analyzing information collected from more than one source is best described as *triangulation*, which establishes credibility by providing detailed evidence from observations of more than one source (Heale & Forbes, 2013).

While dependability refers to the stability and consistency of the data, transferability refers to the applicability of the study results from one study to another (Cope, 2014; Elo et al., 2014). For these reasons, suitable study participants were selected, detail-oriented demographic information was included, extensive data analyses were conducted, and results were presented in a clear format to increase the transferability of this study. External validity is a measure of the transferability of the findings to other populations. Transferability can be achieved by relating the data collected in the study to the theory selected as the conceptual framework that is generalizable to larger populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2018). The results of this study are applicable to research of similar situations and, consequently, are considered transferrable.

Confirmability, which takes place after credibility, transferability, and dependability are established (Cope, 2014), refers to the ability of researchers to demonstrate that the research data are the actual interpretation of study participants without the researchers' biases (Bryman, 2012). As these experts suggested, each interviewee's responses were considered very carefully and researchers' thoughts,

insights, and biases were recorded. Reaching data saturation, the point where data results become repetitive, is the end goal of selecting a sufficient number of participants and the most appropriate sample size for a case study (Yin, 2018). In order to achieve data saturation, data were collected through face-to-face interviews, using open-ended questions, from small business managers until the data became repetitive. Reliability and validity in this study were achieved by conducting *member checking* and *methodological triangulation*.

Findings

The overarching research question used to guide the researchers was: What strategies do small business managers use to respond effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement that lead to a high employee attrition rate? Three themes emerged from data analyses: (a) providing resources and incentives, (b) giving opportunities, and (c) forming relationships between managers and subordinates. LMX theory was used as the conceptual framework to answer the overarching research question of this qualitative, single case study. The theory aligned with the literature and themes discovered in the findings.

Theme 1: Providing Resources and Incentives

The first theme that emerged is the importance of the exchange of resources and incentives from managers to subordinates, which was identified as a reason employees leave the organization, if lacking, and a means to retain and engage the employees, if present. LMX theory suggests that high-quality, leader-member relationships are based on the exchange of trust, resources, and information (Chaurasia & Shukla, 2013), which were confirmed. According to the literature and LMX theory, low quality leader-member relationships in which there is no exchange of resources, low trust, lack of respect, and low management support, have a higher risk for employee turnover (Biron & Boon, 2013).

The findings are consistent with the literature, as resources and incentives satisfy lower order needs required to establish a high-quality relationship between leaders and employees (Agarwal, 2014). All participants explained that employees leave their organization for reasons related to resources and incentives, such as pay, training, and amount of work. Participants reported using resources such as pay options, management support, encouragement, and training as incentives to help employees meet their personal and professional goals and to minimize employee turnover. None of the participants recommended that managers use resources and incentives to engage both Millennials and Baby Boomers collectively in the workplace.

Four types of resources and incentives emerged as notable during data analyses: *pay*, *expectations*, *rewards*, and *management support*. According to the literature, using pay, rewards, and management support to motivate employees qualifies as transactional leadership (Breevaart et al., 2014). Transactional leadership is

an important piece of LMX theory. High quality relationships are based on the exchange of resources and incentives provided by leaders (Burch & Guarana, 2014). According to the literature and participants, setting expectations allows employees to understand minimum performance expectations and what type of support they will need from management to perform to the standard (Kangas, 2013). In order to form the high-quality leader-member relationships required of LMX theory, leaders must set expectations for employees and be consistent with measuring outcomes.

In accordance with LMX theory, rewards should be fairly distributed and based on pre-established outcomes to be effective (Fein, Tziner, Lusky, & Palachy, 2013). Participants discussed rewards, such as recognition, affirmations, pats on the back, and/or gift cards. Participants explained that employees need to know that management acknowledges and recognizes their work. All participants believe that management support is important in engaging employees. Participants described management support as solving problems, making positive changes in the environment, supporting employees' life goals, being hands-on, and having technical knowledge.

Theme 2: Giving Opportunities

Giving opportunities in the workplace emerged as the second theme. Participants used intellectual stimulation, such as developmental roles and opportunities, to engage their employees, which is consistent with the literature on LMX theory related to increased responsibility and autonomy (Biron & Boon, 2013). Managers must be aware of employees' developmental needs and their need to satisfy higher order needs, once their basic needs are met through resources and incentives (McCleskey, 2014). According to LMX theory, in order to engage employees, leaders must provide opportunities for employees to develop (Graen & Schiemann, 2013; Shunlong & Weiming, 2012). Participants confirmed the importance of giving opportunities to engage a multigenerational workplace. Employees often leave the organization for better opportunities with another organization, but if the current organization provides better opportunities, employees become more engaged and stay with the current organization. Participants mentioned that employees have left the organization in search of better opportunities with other organizations. The opportunities sought by employees outside the organization included the attainment of an improved work-life balance, assignment of fewer responsibilities for more pay, and development of additional marketable skills and training.

When engaging Millennials, participants reported giving them the opportunity to show others, including management, how to take full advantage of the technology because Millennials are described as technologically savvy. Participants agreed that opportunities are important in engaging Baby Boomers. Participants explained that Baby Boomers acquire much knowledge about the job itself and the processes that are important to share and pass along to others in the workplace. Participants expressed the need that employees have to experience an opportunity to affect the

goals and direction of their unit through their input. Employees must be given the opportunity to advance in their careers or to assume additional responsibilities, such as special projects and tasks that will allow for advancement opportunities.

Participants believe that Millennials and Baby Boomers benefit most from the opportunities created by working together. Millennials receive the opportunity to share their knowledge about technology with Baby Boomers and management. Baby Boomers receive the opportunity to share their knowledge with other employees about the workplace, work processes, what has and has not worked in the past. This study found that increasing employee responsibilities may result in higher engagement levels, which is consistent with the literature. Increasing responsibility creates an exchange between leader and members, which is consistent with supporting a high-quality, leader-member relationship (Biron & Boon, 2013).

The opportunities and benefits employees receive from their immediate supervisors in exchange for the employees' commitment to the workplace is the foundation of the LMX theory (Chen et al., 2012). According to the literature, high-quality leader-member relationships must fulfill a need for both parties to influence behavioral outcomes (Biron & Boon, 2013). Participants in this study explained the importance that giving opportunities has in the engagement of their employees, which aligns well with LMX theory. Participants claimed that giving opportunities that elicit engagement in a multigenerational workplace is a process that varies overtime.

Theme 3: Forming Relationships Between Managers and Subordinates

The formation of relationships between managers and subordinates emerged as the third theme. In accordance with LMX theory, low-quality leader-member relationships, which lack communication, rewards, and mutual understanding, are more likely to result in employee turnover (Furunes et al., 2015). The relationship between the manager and employee, among other elements, has an effect on employees' intentions to leave the organization (Elanain, 2014). Participants explained the importance of forming relationships between managers and subordinates to employee engagement. Participants stated that employees leave their organizations because of the relationship the employee has formed with management. Participants stated that they form relationships with their subordinates in an effort to lower employee turnover.

According to the literature, employees become engaged and satisfied with their jobs when a positive relationship with their supervisors exists and when employees understand what is expected of them in the workplace. In LMX theory, high-quality, leader-member relationships are based on the development of trust between the leader and member, which is created through knowing one another on a personal level (Sinha & Trivedi, 2014). Participants in this study agreed that forming relationships with their employees is critical to lowering employee turnover.

Three subthemes emerged in the area of forming relationships, including getting to know employees personally, communicating with employees, and allowing employees to get to know their managers. Participants discussed the importance of getting to know employees personally, which includes talking to employees one-on-one, asking employees about their interests and goals, communicating effectively with employees, and allowing employees to get to know their managers. Participants described communication as an effective tool for engagement, though each presented a different method of communication. Participants stated that they get to know their employees, open themselves up, and allow employees to get to know them on a personal level. According to Park et al. (2015), in order to have an effective leader-member relationship, managers and employees must get to know one another through a norming process. The results support the literature in that managers perceived as caring individuals interested in others and establishing interpersonal relationships will yield more engaged employees (Schyns et al., 2012).

According to the literature, trust and the perception of fairness are important factors when establishing a high-quality, leader-member relationship. LMX theory is based on the quality of the relationship between leaders and members. Interpersonal relationships and trust between leader and member are important to establishing a high-quality relationship (Schyns et al., 2012). Participants stated that it is important to get to know their employees on a personal level to gain their trust and to help them feel comfortable with management. This subtheme includes getting to know employees' interests and having conversations about those interests. Getting to know employees also includes learning and understanding employees' goals. Participants explained that employees' goals may not be geared toward staying with the organization; however, participants claimed that managers would be better equipped to show their employees ways managers can help them achieve their goals, if managers know their employees' goals. Another element of knowing employees on a personal level is learning what employees need from management and how to effectively communicate with each individual employee. Participants pointed out that while every employee is different, employees can be placed into generational cohorts. It is important to focus on individual needs and to provide the group with whatever it needs to achieve its goals.

Transaction leadership, transformational leadership, and communication are the key elements of high-quality, leader-member relationships described by LMX theory, which are needed to engage employees and encourage them to remain with an organization. Participants explained the importance of communication, managers engaging with employees, managers showing their care for their employees, and establishing interpersonal relationships between managers and employees (Schyns et al., 2012). Managers participating in this study described communication as an effective tool for employee engagement.

Participants believe that it is important to sit down with employees individually to speak with them in a one-on-one, face-to-face meeting. This individual

communication may be used to discuss the employee's goals, expectations, changes in the organization, assistance, and other issues. Participants explained the importance of communicating with employees in a group or team setting. Participants stated that because groups may have different needs, it is important to speak with the group as a whole to understand its needs and to allow the group to collectively explain its concerns or successes. Participants also suggested allowing employees to communicate their suggestions for improvement and organizational goals to managers in an attempt to establish unit goals collectively. According to the literature, low levels of communication and poor communication channels are related to low-quality, leader-member relationships (Fein et al., 2013). The high-quality, leader-member relationships described in LMX theory are based on positive, two-way communication between leaders and members (Biron & Boon, 2013).

Participants described the importance of allowing employees to see that managers are vulnerable and on the same level as the employees. Participants stressed the importance of being understanding and sensitive in communicating with employees, instead of being stern, self-centered, or arrogant. The participants suggested working alongside employees and being genuine when communicating with employees, allowing employees to see and understand that the manager does not always have the best answer. Allowing employees to get to know their manager allows the manager to share own path to success and goals for the future. The results of this study, which suggest that communication between leaders and members is an important factor in creating the relationship between leaders and members that leads to engaged employees, are consistent with the literature and LMX theory (Biron & Boon, 2013; Burch & Guarana, 2014; Schyns et al., 2012).

Discussion

This study is relevant to understanding the way small business managers should respond to generational differences in engagement in the workplace. The aim was to explore the strategies that experienced small business managers use to respond effectively to differences in generational engagement in the workplace. Small business managers can apply this information to professional practice to (a) engage Millennials in the workplace, (b) engage Baby Boomers in the workplace, (c) engage a multigenerational workforce, (d) reduce disengagement-related employee turnover, and (e) create employee engagement strategies.

This study's findings support transactional and transformational leadership as elements of LMX theory in the workplace. The results of this study indicated that managers should provide resources and incentives to employees, give employees opportunities, and get to know their employees. Getting to know employees helps build the trust needed to create a high-quality, leader-member relationship, which leads to a more engaged employee less likely to leave the organization (Sinha & Trivedi, 2014). The results are relevant to professional practice because this study includes practical solutions to respond more effectively to employee engagement

in a multigenerational workplace. The findings may serve as a practical guide of transferrable information for managers supervising multigenerational workforces. Managers may also use the findings of this study to supplement their management approach and reduce employee turnover.

Recommendations

Small businesses account for 99.9% of the businesses in the United States (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2018). Small business managers should pay attention to this study's results to understand the way other small business managers engage a multigenerational workforce. The following recommendations are offered in an attempt to benefit current and future small business managers: (a) use pay, expectations, rewards, and support to engage employees; (b) give employees opportunities in connection with the resources they are provided; and (c) get to know employees and communicate with them effectively. The first recommendation is for small business managers to use pay, expectations, rewards, and support to engage employees. Providing resources and incentives to employees may help managers engage employees in the workplace. This study's participants strongly recommended providing management support to employees as a resource that contributes to employee engagement.

The second recommendation is for small business managers to give employees opportunities in connection with the resources they are provided. The findings indicated that giving opportunities, which are connected to employees' resources, helps elevate employees to the next level of engagement. Opportunities satisfy employees' higher order needs after their basic needs are met through resources and incentives (McCleskey, 2014). Participants in this study explained the benefit of providing baby boomers with developmental opportunities, which facilitate positive relationships between the baby boomers and millennials. The final recommendation is for small business managers to communicate effectively with their employees, allowing them to know their employees much better. Responses from participants included that *communication* is an important factor in getting to know employees. Participants indicated that communicating with their employees in face-to-face and one-on-one meetings is more successful in engaging employees.

Recommendations for Future Research and Limitations

The use of the case study research design can present a limitation related to the number of participants available in the target sample population. Recommendations for future research include focusing on different small business industries in varying geographical locations. The data were limited to small businesses located in the Midwestern United States. A small sample size of small business managers may have limited the generalizability and transferability of the data. Researchers could also consider a quantitative study with a larger sample size to determine if it could lead to generalizability of the research results. Researchers should focus

on each of the specific themes identified within this study, including (a) providing resources and incentives, (b) giving opportunities, and (c) forming relationships between managers and subordinates, to engage in more specific research in those areas.

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