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Improving leader effectiveness: impact on employee engagement and retention

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Abstract

Purpose – Fixing problems in an organization often involves developing managers in order to increase leader effectiveness. This paper aims to discuss the aforementioned issue.

Design/methodology/approach – Data collection includes multiple surveys and small group interviews. Analysis uses rigorous coding methods to construct a model of critical organizational values and behaviors essential for leadership effectiveness. The authors bring "theory to practice" by applying complexity leadership concepts in the authors' intervention strategy.

Findings – Findings are categorized into three parts: identifying critical culture value gaps, applying complexity concepts to a scenario-based training intervention, and identifying intervention outcomes. Outcomes include transformed work environment led by leaders who respect others, share decision-making and enable employees to be interdependent.

Research limitations/implications – This explanatory case study contributes to research by applying complexity leadership theory to create a practical consulting intervention.

Practical implications – This work provides a template and process for managers using complexity leadership to inform their client interventions.

Originality/value – This case study identifies value shortfalls in a manufacturing plant, documents a scenario-based training intervention which develops managers to build organizational trust. Results include reducing turnover, improving job satisfaction and increasing production.

Keywords Case study, Complexity theory, Employee retention, Scenario based training

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Organizations increasingly struggle to retain their employees, particularly those at an entry level. These concerns are often tied to a decrease in employee engagement and trust as well as an increase in workplace stress. Specifically, organizations that have experienced the highest crisis in retaining and hiring entry-level employees are in the manufacturing, service, distribution, health care and farming industries (Ellinger *et al.*, 2002; The Conference Board, 2021; Uhl-Bien, 2021; van Hoek *et al.*, 2020). More than ever before, organizations struggling with employee shortages are hiring outside consultants to equip their frontline supervisors and managers to build an engaged team environment that supports the accomplishment of their team production objectives (Barrero *et al.*, 2020; Corbishley, 2020; Maurer, 2021). Consultants in operations logistics have highlighted the importance of managers creating positive workplace environments (Bushe and Nagaishi, 2018; Keller *et al.*, 2020; Maxey and Moore, 2017). Furthermore, organizational change consultants who assist organizations to become more adaptive, resilient and innovative point to rethinking leadership practices to move from authoritarian to adaptive strategies (Moore *et al.*, 2020a; Uhl-Bien and Marion, 2009; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007).

Organizational change initiatives have a 25% rate of success (Bucy *et al.*, 2016). A high rate of change failures partially point to the need for manager development to lead cultural change initiatives (Gallup, 2019). Schein notes that "Culture creating, culture evolution, and culture management are what ultimately define leadership …" (1992, p. 11). Correcting

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problems in an organization often involves developing managers to increase leader effectiveness who understand the interactions of their employees within their intertwined technical and social domains (Donnelly *et al.*, 2020).

This explanatory case study identifies leader shortcomings in a manufacturing plant and develops these leaders to build organizational trust. We use grounded theory coding methods as they are rooted in the perspectives of participants, allowing us to identify meaning from their viewpoint, culminating in abstracting a process or theory (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Strauss and Corbin, 1997, 1998). Applying grounded theory inquiry and qualitative case study methods, we identify leader shortcomings and provide an example of organizational change. We describe "casual links in real-life interventions" (Yin, 2003, p. 15). In this case, intervention was a result of substandard findings in two corporate surveys over a four-year period combined with high turnover, low employee satisfaction, low leader-employee trust, and low production levels. These issues prompted our research question: How do managers improve leader effectiveness, thus increasing employee engagement and retention?

Theoretic approach

A major contributor to leader ineffectiveness is an autocratic leadership style that clashes with the expectations of followers who value respect, openness to new ideas and decentralized problem-solving. Therefore, we utilize concepts from complexity leadership theory to interpret both research results and intervention strategies. Theoretical concepts of complexity leadership move from leader-centered and bureaucratic leadership behaviors to focus on collective, interactive dynamics that produce adaptive outcomes (Burnes, 2005; Marion, 2008; Uhl-Bien and Marion, 2009; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007; Greenhalgh, 2020). Generally, these easily facilitated group "processes" and organizational dynamics include collaboration, shared problem-solving, self-organization, information sharing, creativity, innovation and organizational learning (Uhl-Bien, 2021; Nguyen, 2021). Because complexity leadership focuses on creating an adaptive organization, it must emerge from the bottom up (Holland, 1995); it rests on employee engagement. This approach to adaptive leadership requires leaders to nurture an environment that encourages appropriate, ever-shifting levels of freedom and control based on conditions (Backlander, 2019; Diesel and Scheepers, 2019; Marion, 2008; Uhl-Bien and Marion, 2009; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007). This means employee freedom to innovate, participate in decision-making, interconnected through management support of frontline efforts, to better adapt to the organization's environment (Mills *et al.*, 2010; Hanson and Moore, 2023). These processes are often counter to traditional leadership and management methods, as they increase levels of ambiguousness and nonpredictable outcomes. While a relatively new theory, complexity leadership has produced much in the way of academic theory elaboration and discussion. But more is being applied to real world situations such as health care (Hanson and Ford, 2011), organizational change (Burnes, 2005) and business consulting (Moore *et al.*, 2020b).

While some complexity leadership theory processes lack detailed study, others confirm relationships to effective adaptation. For example, research by Diesel and Scheepers (2019) show a strong relationship between complexity and an innovation environment that pursue emergent change (Kearney and Lichtenstein, 2022). Others show links between complexity and adaptive, inclusive organizations (Shani and Coghlan, 2018; Värlander, 2012).

Application. Our case study occurs at a large manufacturing plant in the southeastern USA. The plant produces parts for the automotive industry and has seen tremendous growth over the past 8 years. It now earns over $1 billion in revenue per year. Despite this success, the plant has triple-digit annual turnover among its hourly employees. Every two years, the employees complete a corporate-sponsored culture survey. The surveys indicate serious leadership issues between the front line and their leaders, with little change in the past four years. These leadership issues led to our involvement as consultants.

Now we will discuss the organization under study, then provide a synopsis of qualitative research findings to identify gaps in leader effectiveness. Next, we transition to practitioner applications of complexity leadership interventions through scenario-based manager development. Finally, we present indicators of the program's success in transforming a workplace culture to engage and retain its employees.

The organization

The plant employs over 900 people who are either full-time company employees or hourly temporary employees. Full-time company employees represent 80% of the workforce; 10% of these are salaried employees, and the remaining 70% are full-time hourly employees. The other 20% are temporary hourly employees who fluctuate based on the production demands.

The plant stresses traditional factors such as safety, quality, delivery, and cost (Moore, personal communication, May 31, 2016). The company does not focus on worker-manager relationships but rather on tasks and high production levels. Additionally, little time is devoted to employee or leader professional development or task-oriented training. Furthermore, the company made a number of attempts to initiate cultural change efforts with few results. Finally, they engaged outside consultants—researchers—to assist them in cultural change; in large measure, this action was implemented to change manager and supervisor behaviors that affect employee perceptions.

Upon arrival, we reviewed the corporate surveys and other historical data. We noticed that despite the standard posting of organizational values, serious value-based issues existed between frontline employees and supervisors as well as senior leaders. Significant shortcomings included failing to demonstrate a sense of caring or value for employees, respect for employees, and regard for employee opinions. Table 1 displays the seriousness of employee feelings and perceptions at their plant. This corporate survey included input by all plant leaders and employees.

Table 2 presents the formal corporate values, which are prominently displayed in the manufacturing plant. We present the survey results showing how many employees were satisfied with each aspect of the organization.

Table 1.
Partial results of latest corporate culture survey administered at 2-year intervals

Item priority rank	Item (survey question)	Effectiveness (% positive Perception)
1	I see trust and mutual respect in our workplace	33%
2	[Company] cares about me as a person	34%
3	I can try new things even if they lead to occasional mistakes	33%
4	At work, my opinions and ideas seem to count	34%
5	I think that the collaboration between departments is going well	27%

Source(s): 2014 Corporate Culture Survey

Table 2.
Formal employee satisfaction results

Formal organizational value	Corporate culture survey
Respect for each other	33%
Power of collaboration	27%
Personal integrity	Leader integrity 49%

Source(s): 2014 Corporate Culture Survey

Culture of employee engagement

Leader effectiveness is increased or decreased by the overall organizational culture (Lockwood, 2007; Markos and Sridevi, 2010). Managers who truly desire long-term change in leader effectiveness must address the organizational culture so that leadership behaviors align with the organizational culture and norms (Devi, 2009; Macey *et al.*, 2011). Generally employee engagement focus comes from a company's concern for productivity (Harter *et al.*, 2002). However, organizations should consider building a win-win scenario to balance organizational effectiveness with employee well-being (Little and Little, 2006; Lockwood, 2007; Macey *et al.*, 2011; Markos and Sridevi, 2010; Parker and du Plooy, 2021). Organizational leaders during change initiatives develop interconnectivity between its employees which enables adaptive and innovative solutions (Heifetz, 2003; Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2017; Diesel and Scheepers, 2019; McKim and Goodwin, 2021). Bushe and Nagaishi (2018) identify the importance of employees feeling that they can express their opinions and that their needs are being addressed (Gagné and Bhave, 2011). Consequently, groups goals are clearer and there are fewer distractions (Bushe and Nagaishi, 2018). Shani and Coghlan (2018) stress that employee engagement at all levels fuels important aspects of shared problem-solving and adaptiveness. Adaptiveness implies a shared protocol or set of values among employees that stimulates interaction, collaboration, shared decisions and overall team effort (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007; Heifetz, 2003). Additionally, Schein (1992, p. 14) highlights development needs in many of these areas, such as learning, innovation, and adaptivity, if successful change is to occur (Markos and Sridevi, 2010).

Organizational values and norms are embedded in everything an organization does (Schein, 1992; Tatchell, 2006). As Schein (1992) and others have noted, formal values and organizational norms are the primary foundations of organizations. Core values significantly impact organizations, causing them to improve employee retention and satisfaction as well as address challenges related to restructuring and growth (Tatchell, 2006, p. 29). A culture of strong core values also has a positive impact on recruiting (Tatchell, 2006). Organizational cultural change can be prosocial or maladaptive if not properly managed or nurtured (Markos and Sridevi, 2010). Organizational values and norms may evolve unchecked due to a lack of understanding and intentionality by managers. Inadvertently, negative reinforcers may arise, which stymie organizational goals. To purposefully change culture, leaders must understand their own culture—what it is, how it is represented, and what they want to change (Schein, 1992). Cameron *et al.* (2014) offer helpful ways for leaders to identify their existing culture and offer methods for reshaping it. We applied their principles in some of our cultural change efforts.

Some elements are critical to successful organizational change. Foremost is the fact that organizational members must be involved in the change (Hodges, 2016) because people are the organization (Hodges, 2016; Simon, 1997). However, managers often ignore employees in change efforts (Hodges, 2016), perhaps because the organization is driven by a "criterion of efficiency," which is represented as production numbers or revenue (Simon, 1997, p. 250). Furthermore, managers often have the misconception that control is the quickest and simplest way to invoke change. The problem resonates with complexity leadership in that executive control in change efforts often suppresses the key to organizational adaptation: participation by members who promote ideas, create innovations and solve problems (Marion, 2008, p. 5). The primary focus on efficiency and control comes at the cost of people-oriented dynamics and represents an outdated organizational model that is representative of the industrial age (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007). Uhl-Bien and Marion (2009, p. 636) posit that "informal interactive dynamics... produce much of the adaptability in organizations" and are essential among organizational members for collective sense making (Uhl-Bien and Marion, 2009).

Both Schein (1992) and Hodges (2016) mention the uncertainty and anxiety faced by organizational members during times of change. To address this, both authors stress the need

for communication and attention to cultural factors that do not change, such as organizational history, past success, strong organizational values and vision. Additionally, from years of experience in applying complexity leadership elements, we have found that involving followers in the change increases buy-in, providing a sense of comfort and an element of excitement. Moreover, enabling employees to understand that changes are emergent (sudden) and unpredictable prepares the organization for a more ambiguous process (Marion, 2008; Tsai *et al.*, 2019; McKim and Goodwin, 2021). Ironically, our experience indicates that organizational leaders are frequently stressed over outcomes that are nonpredictable. Their focus is not on general measures or improvement but on the inability to forecast specific production numbers or accurate cost-benefit analyses. Organizational leaders may not understand the organizational benefits of strengthening trust, focusing on professional development, building relationships with employees, in short embracing complexity.

Another critical aspect of change is identifying employee needs (Hodges, 2016). We found two considerations to be helpful in both motivating employees to participate in change and improving the overall trust and production level of the organization. The first consideration is the employees' professional development needs. From the employee's perspective, what improves his/her job performance? Is it specialized training or certification? Leaders may need to reflect on what improves their employee's effectiveness. The second consideration is the collective needs of groups, teams and departments. Group dynamics can often be improved by meeting collective needs, such as team structure, team training and resources. Addressing these considerations embeds trust in the organizational culture, often improves production and allows organizations to remain united through challenging times. In a recent work in psychology, mindfulness is linked to leader effectiveness that emanates from behaviors that enable trust-based relationships between leader and followers (Edmondson, 2019; Stedham and Skaar, 2019; Jung and Choi, 2020). Specifically, Stedham and Skaar (2019) discuss leader behaviors such as humility, authenticity, transparency, observation, positivity and resilience, which build trust and leader effectiveness.

Leading cultural change is certainly an important event that has ethical implications (Hodges, 2016; Schein, 1992). Values have a central role in organizational life and leader responsibilities (Burns, 2003). Leaders create formal organizational values, implementing personal and professional values in their daily decisions. Our research site offers an example in which formal organizational values represent one perspective, but the daily norms practiced by supervisors represent the opposite: while the word *respect* was espoused by the organization as a key value, the lack of respect demonstrated to subordinates was noted as one of the predominant complaints from the floor, which resulted in a lack of trust between followers and leaders. Thus, one of our foremost challenges was to embed espoused values, attributes and behavior into the culture of the manufacturing plant. Once accepted and practiced, these norms can be largely self-sustaining.

Research methods

Our research question for this case study is as follows: How do managers improve leader effectiveness, thus increasing employee engagement and retention? How and why questions lend themselves to theory and model building to grasp or solve the problem facing the researcher (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Yin, 2003). The case study method is unique, allowing researchers to integrate (a) real-life events, (b) organizational processes (c) and archival records to produce generalizable lessons (Yin, 2003). The context and artifacts of the workplace are important factors in providing meaning to findings. For this case, we applied an explanatory case study strategy so that other organizations could see an example of addressing value change and so that we could offer generalizable concepts. We used

grounded theory coding methods to first break down data, second organize the data in related categories and third delineate relationships between those categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). From this coding we create a processual model. This inquiry process is rooted in the view of the participants and inductively comes to conclusions and generalizations to explain the relationships between actors (Creswell and Cresswell, 2017; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). We sought to apply our research findings to build a processual model (Yin, 2003).

This study was framed on an epistemological stance of constructionism in which collective meaning and hence values were generated by organizational members (Crotty, 1998). Our methods of data collection and analysis were qualitatively oriented to be conducive to the discovery of the collective and organizational beliefs, values and norms of the workforce. Qualitative methods disseminate data, grouping or summarizing the data in a thematic analysis (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Creswell and Báez, 2020). Consequently, individual perspectives are minimized while collective perspectives are elevated. Essentially, we abstract data to a level where participant perspectives are in harmony.

Data collection

In qualitative research findings, data can be collected from interviews, observations and artifacts. We employed each of these avenues. Data collected from observation extend beyond watching personal or group behavior; this method also includes informal interactions with employees. First, we reviewed data from the last four years of corporate surveys. Second, we conducted focus group interviews with open ended questions to collect detailed data on the major issues that emerged from the surveys. These group interviews were done at the operator level, across departments and shifts. This was extremely important to identify the actual narratives from the participants working in the plant to understand how and why they felt the way they did. Third, we constructed a survey to validate our findings from the corporate survey and to expand our understanding of major plant issues. Finally, we captured data through observations by walking the production floor, taking pictures of production boards (department visual management boards), and engaging front lines with informal questions and dialogue.

Artifacts such as company records and other cultural elements that shaped the plant environment were noted (pictures, posted values, statues, display cases, etc.). Additionally, we referred to two corporate culture surveys administered over a four-year period as well as other plant records. We maintained coding notes and photographs to capture data.

To validate findings and collect additional information on each topic, we produced a plant survey that included some open-ended questions. Both the corporate survey and our survey were distributed to the entire workforce; the response to our survey was over 60% (Hanson and Moore, 2018).

Once significant themes were identified from the surveys, we conducted small group interviews with a total qualitative sample of 18 participants. Interviews were conducted on-site in a private setting to offer participants a sense of confidentiality and to remove outside noise and interruption. Participants were advised that the interviews were voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point. Interviews consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions that explored the how and why of issues and allowed us to clarify and pursue emerging themes until data saturation was achieved.

Analysis

To process qualitative data, we referred to Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three-step coding method, which is known for maintaining rigorous analytical methods. In open coding, we divided interview data into phrases. In axial coding, we sorted and resorted related data,

placing them into general categories and subcategories that describe content or meaning. Once categories were established, we conducted selective coding to determine the central category. This step also involved making sense of categorial relationships. In building process models, this might demonstrate the flow of activities that lead to the phenomena under study. All three steps involve painstakingly writing coding notes that track each step and final conclusions.

As a result of our analysis, we constructed an initial model of critical organizational values and behaviors essential for effective leaders. To validate our model, we presented findings to participants as a member check to ensure that findings remained grounded in organizational perspectives and not in researcher bias (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Findings

Our findings are categorized into the following: process utilized, results and leadership impact. First, the process utilized in scenario-based leader effectiveness training started by identifying the leadership gaps at the plant, then establishing effective leadership standards, and finished by developing the scenario-based leader effectiveness training. Second, the results demonstrate participating leaders' perceptions of the training and the changes still observed in the plant after two years.

Process utilized in leader effectiveness intervention

Table 3 presents a model of critical issues and sub issues within plant culture. Five keys areas emerged as being critical to employees. These categorical themes and subthemes are the most pressing issues to resolve if trust is to be restored between frontline workers and their leaders.

Scenario-based training

These scenarios include real-life examples and context gathered from interviews and frontline workers' input. Managers and supervisors agreed that their primary focus should be on providing respect and exhibiting a sense of caring to demonstrate to employees that they are valued and their opinions matter. Table 4 displays specific measurable items in our

Awards and recognition	Availability of training and development	Overtime issues	Respect and sense of caring	Streamlining inventory
Employees feel there is little appreciation for their work They seek verbal thanks or positive comments on work	Employees have expectations for job training and development that are not met Experienced workers want to give input Training accommodations lacking Constructive feedback missing	Employees are burned out and feel overworked This is related to lean programs and personnel reductions This is also related to poor planning	Lack of respect related to management behavior The way employees are treated Do not see management on the factory floor Leaders not holding others accountable	There seems to be little planning; this could be related to a lack of respect or sense of caring Employees deplete materials and must shut down lines

Table 3.
Leadership gaps

Note(s): Adapted from Leading with complexity: A case of culture transformation, by Hanson and Moore (2018), p. 16

evaluation tool, each representing formal organizational values as well as participant practices and perceptions.

Scenarios were crafted to reflect the value-based issues within the plant and open the topics for discussion after each situation. To address shortfalls, we constructed a leadership development program for supervisors that utilized scenario-based training and evaluation, which was centered on improving leader effectiveness. We created seven leader effectiveness scenarios that represent approximately 20 h of training. The specific goals of the scenario-driven activities were to strengthen leader values, attributes, and behaviors reflective of the shortfalls identified in research findings. This development also focuses on building strong, cohesive teams, thus reducing turnover and increasing production. For example, each scenario was built around a major theme from our analysis, such as respect. It would be counterproductive to attempt to evaluate all values, behaviors and attributes in each scenario. A subset of the most relevant measures was selected for observation in each scenario. The following themes identified major issues that frontline workers considered to be most important to relationships between leaders and frontline employees.

(1) Lack of respect in negative situations

(2) Lack of listening to associate's needs and concerns

(3) Lack of constructive feedback

(4) Lack of care demonstrated

(5) Lack of team building efforts

(6) Lack of recognizing the performance and value of others

(7) Lack of communicating plant information, supervisor concerns, and priorities

Figure 1 describes the cultural value change model, which consists of four phases: pretraining, orientation and scenario training, feedback debriefing and self-evaluations and outcome assessments.

Leader development began with pretraining, which focused on understanding employee perceptions of critical plant issues to identify cultural value gaps. Training scenarios were then developed and piloted with the management team.

The second phase was training orientation, which introduced the overall purpose of the training. Each scenario comprised a small group (five to seven members) that was guided by two trainers on a simulated production line. Each participant had a script of a type of employee they were to embody for that scenario exercise. For evaluation, one trainer focused on group facilitation and debriefing, whereas the other highlighted leader facilitation and debriefing. Each group was informed that participants may need to ad-lib the script to focus on real issues at the plant (that address scenario topics) and that the instructors might play various roles to facilitate the scenario. Each member would act as the group leader in one of

Core values	Attributes	Behaviors
Respect	Character	Constructive feedback
Excellence	Positive attitude	Empowerment
Integrity	Friendly approach	Communication skills
Responsibility	Confidence	Recognition
Collaboration	Listening skills	Team building
Trust	Sense of caring	Development

Table 4.
Effective leader standards

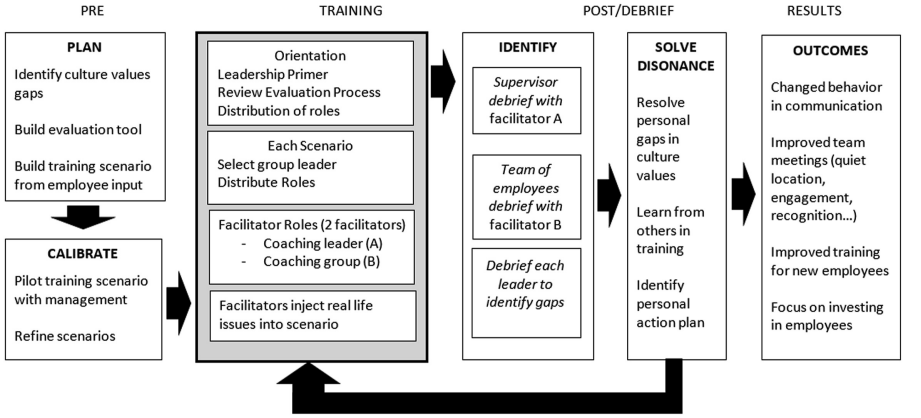

Figure 1.
Scenario-based leader effectiveness model

the scenarios. At the start of each scenario, one team member was appointed as group leader. The group then received the scenario background and role-playing instructions. The two facilitators answered questions, provided additional input as the scenario unfolded and intervened as needed. Interventions were intended to maintain focus on the outcomes to be evaluated and to ensure realistic scenarios.

The third phase of the training was the debriefing. One of the facilitators debriefed the leader via the evaluation instrument. The second facilitator debriefed the team as a group, also utilizing the evaluation card for group discussion. For example, the group facilitator asked whether there were ways to improve the demonstrations of respect to teammates. At the conclusion of the debriefing, the leader and the group shared lessons learned and offered corrections. Based on the lessons learned, corrections were introduced in later scenarios to improve supervisor performance. Scenario leaders identified gaps in the way they displayed the values, attributes, or behaviors that were being evaluated and then constructed individual development plans for improvements.

Finally, the last phase of the training was observed behavioral outcomes. In other words, the leaders applied what they learned. Examples include supervisors who changed their communication strategies with employees, redesigned their daily meetings for greater employee engagement, and focused on developing employee training.

Evaluation system

The training evaluation card (Appendix) lists the leader values, attributes, and behaviors that are expected by both plant leaders and employees. Each item has three measures: exceeds expectations (EE), meets expectations (ME), or offers opportunity for improvement (OI). The evaluation also utilizes the same three measurements for overall performance ratings for each scenario. The evaluation tool is meant to be helpful and constructive, focusing on developing leaders rather than measuring their ability to perform required tasks.

During each scenario, facilitators assessed a subset of values, attributes, and behaviors that was directly relevant to the focus of the scenario. These were prioritized and rated on the previously mentioned three performance measures. When the scenario was complete, facilitators opened the discussion by asking team members what they thought and what examples they observed during the training. The facilitators prompted the group as necessary to gather lessons learned. Once group discussion ended, the group moved to the next scenario, where a new leader was identified, and scenario cards were distributed. In the

meantime, the previous leader from the earlier scenario received private feedback and discussion with one of the facilitators. Once the private feedback session was over, the leader was expected to devise an action plan by identifying values, attributes and behaviors to stop, continue, or start. They were also asked to produce a plan to implement these changes. The proposed action plan was due to supervisors 1 week after training was complete.

Results from the scenario-based leader effectiveness exercise

Development results were exhibited in two ways. First, supervisors positively evaluated the training and personally assumed ownership for implementing specific prosocial behaviors. The second evidence of change was the new behaviors modeled in the plant, which were observed by the researchers in the plant and reported by the human resources department. For example, supervisors moved their daily team meetings to quieter areas so employees could better participate and interact. Some managers posted elements and figures from the leadership training to remind the team of the importance of key values. Other supervisors added positive recognitions for team members during their team meetings. For excellent team achievements, a banner with a team picture celebrated their performance.

Supervisors were not the only ones presenting changed behavior in the plant. The management team, some of whom participated in the pilot training, also supported the new values. To acknowledge one of the top plant issues, they created an employment "bridge" from assembly to machining, allowing employees to transition from less skilled to more skilled positions. Consequently, employees wanted to improve their professional development and access additional training. The human resources department also demonstrated a change in behavior by supporting frontline supervisors with the training evaluation card. In one-on-one interactions with supervisors, the human resources team member addressed specific issues by reinforcing training values. Furthermore, the human resources department commissioned the development of another scenario-based training program for department managers. Finally, the human resources department was trained to conduct the scenarios, thus becoming trainers themselves.

Additionally, supervisors disclosed the impact of the training and explained how they were changed and how they developed. Table 5 presents three ways the training was effective. First, the role play simulated real-life manufacturing realities between employees and supervisors. Second, the subsequent reviews allowed supervisors to learn how to improve by removing or adding specific behaviors to increase their effectiveness. Finally, supervisors added their new behaviors to their identification badge as a reminder of their commitment.

After completing the training, team leader participants identified behaviors to stop, continue, or start, which was essential to their leadership development. One supervisor said, "I saw myself in the training. It was like looking in a mirror—and I saw myself. Right there I decided to change and I have not looked back." Supervisors most often chose the core value of respect to improve their leadership style. They implemented a sense of caring for employees by being dependable and confident and listening effectively with a friendly approach. Finally, they improved their communication behavior to offer constructive feedback, provide employee development, and encourage empowerment, considering these elements to be essential to their success as leaders. Table 6 lists the summary of the key takeaways from supervisors.

Supervisors understood that supporting their employees—instead of being controlling and authoritarian—is key to effective leadership. Demonstrating respect and caring in employee interactions while building employee skill and confidence is effective in building employee engagement. Participants identified the improvements they planned to implement in their departments, such as developing training plans, identifying and improving training

What was the best part of the training?	Representative quotes
Role play or scenarios for better learning	This allowed us to be engaged by mimicking real-life manufacturing and materials as well as assembly team leader or associate issues. This was by far the best we have had
	I enjoyed doing the scenario to see how to handle situations and sharpen our skills. It grew different skills to improve my own leadership
	It put into perspective the reality on the floor. It was eye opening and mind changing
After-action review and debrief	Seeing the positives and negatives from the team after my scenario was helpful
	Learning from the scenarios and talking about what happened—what went well and did not go well—was informative
	I enjoyed the positives and negatives after the role plays. I was able to add tools that I can utilize that I never thought about before
Engagement with coordinator, team leaders and coach	I liked engaging with fellow team leads and instructors as well as getting to know the other team leaders and coordinators
	Doing this training with team leads from different departments provided insights on how they do things. I gained ideas from other leaders who have been here longer than me

Table 5.
Developmental results: effectiveness

	Supervisor key implemented improvements	
Core values	Respect is connected to trust	
Values	Sense of caring or dependability, confidence, listening skills and friendly approach	
Behaviors	Communication skills (constructive feedback, development and empowerment)	

Table 6.
Training results: Supervisor exit survey

weaknesses in associates, providing clear procedural orientation to new employees and providing effective communication and constructive feedback to employees. Table 7 describes their key takeaway behaviors.

Two years after the introduction of the training scenarios, changes remain in place. Table 8 presents three main changes.

The human resources department continued to offer the scenario-based training to supervisors on a quarterly basis. They plan to offer training to any frontline employee considering a supervisory position. The human resources team has focused on supervisor development instead of being compliance focused, reactionary and punitive in supervisor and employee partnerships.

The plant culture has changed to adopt a participative decision-making approach instead of a top-down, autocratic leadership approach. Figure 2 describes how supervisors and engineers have learned to engage others in working toward consensus to achieve greater buy-in and more effective solutions.

Discussion

An outcome of this consulting work demonstrates how complexity leadership concepts is an effective framework to operationalize intervention strategies. This allowed us to build understanding and a common language to contextualize why values are important in change efforts. How can employees be collaborative in a hostile environment? How can organizational adaptation occur if employees do not participate? In this case, strengthening critical values and behaviors enabled teamwork and adaptivity to occur.

What improvements would enable you to be more effective in leading your teams?	Representative quotes
Training improvements	More in-depth reviews of policies and procedures before they are released company wide
	Identifying weaknesses and tailoring specific training to develop associates. Clear training program. Better job aids (visual instructions)
	More one-on-one time with trainer, leader, or coordinator for new associates before being released
Daily team leader meetings	State the positives first. Focus on positive aspects occurring in the facility instead of dwelling on negative elements. Allow time for comments, concerns, feedback and teambuilding
	Recognition of something exemplary (in performance) daily for associate or associates. If you have a negative to review, start with a positive and end with a positive
	Should be held in quieter areas than the production floor to minimize distractions. Provide a quiet, informal space to hold meetings
Employee communication and feedback	Compliment positive aspects of employee performance while providing constructive feedback to improve behavior. Do not go into meetings with a telling attitude. Listen to the associate
	Disciplinary conversations need to involve both team leader and coordinator in a quiet place
	Follow through with corrective action
	Offer constructive feedback on the first day

Table 7.
Training results: supervisor takeaways

Changes evidenced in the plant 2 Years later	
Human resources' focus on development	This department has continued quarterly scenario training for supervisors, and they plan to involve backup supervisors or aspiring supervisors in future trainings
	Human resources have focused on the development of supervisors, thus reducing the number of employee issues. They have utilized the training evaluation card and development plan with supervisors
Culture of participative decision-making	Management continues to seek representation from many internal stakeholders before making major decisions
	They have intentionally incorporated other departments in implementation teams
Supervisors' adoption of employee values	Human resources have reported that they have lower employee turnover, fewer employee issues and increased employee participation and engagement
	Human resources have also reported that supervisors and plant managers who have exhibited values of respect have been promoted to mid-level management; one employee has been promoted to an international assignment as a plant manager

Table 8.
Training results: workplace transformations

Second, this complexity leadership intervention changed our consulting approach from being specialists who implemented strategic organizational changes to being facilitators who developed leaders to enable teams to make decisions, solve problems and participate in strategic decisions. This fundamental change, based on increased leader effectiveness,

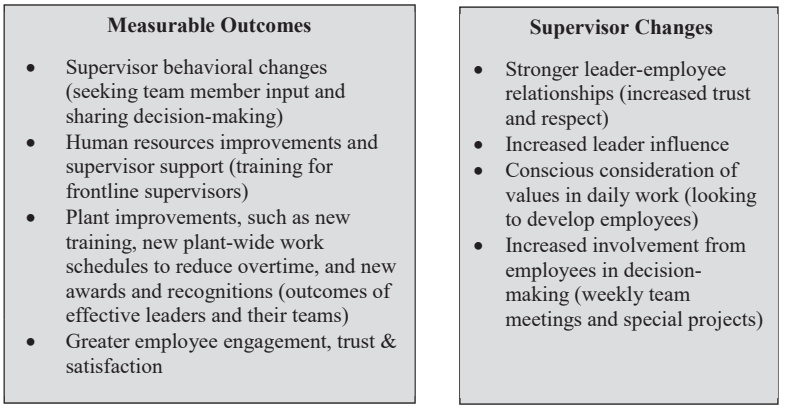

Figure 2.
Improvements in leader effectiveness

transformed the workplace environment to display respect, shared decision-making and increased employee engagement.

Implications

We cite two implications within our work. First, this study reveals practical ways to utilize research and address developmental shortfalls in *organizational leader effectiveness*. While many methods contributed to this, we provide one method that demonstrates how leaders' cultural values, attributes and behavioral shortcomings are identified, provided meaning and value and addressed in leader development.

Secondly, scenario-based training reveals universal utility when adapted to each organization's needs. It implements context and work-related problems with reflection and decision-making, thus placing issues into cultural boundaries. In other words, employees are challenged to operationalize organizational values and ethical behavior (i.e. consideration, respect, etc.) into daily life. Packard and Jones (2015) highlight the importance of seeking opportunities and methods to improve leader development processes, and we believe our work contributes to this important endeavor. Specifically, we provide answers to our research question: How do managers improve leader effectiveness, thus increasing employee engagement and retention? Many other training possibilities exist, and we echo Packard and Jones' (2015) call to continue to seek new opportunities and methods to improve leadership skills.

Future research

Over the past 24 months, COVID-19 has undeniably changed the way companies organize and execute work. One of the main challenges that organizations have faced during times of this pandemic is a crisis in retaining and hiring entry-level employees. Increasingly, organizations are finding that the effectiveness of their leaders is a key component to creating healthy workplaces, which are proven to engage and retain employees. Mary Uhl-Bien (2021) highlights many adaptive entrepreneurial changes made to meet COVID challenges. Her examples are bottom-up, where various actors rose to facilitate solutions to significant problems. Her examples provide a rich opportunity for detailed research on both complexity dynamics and the impact on organizations. We suggest that the disruption of COVID to the status quo of organizations results in much the same sort of disequilibrium found in the case study itself. In this situation, we propose that the complexity leadership approach was

effective in times of functional disruption—that being little cooperation between management and the frontline. This work facilitating a transition stage where employees and their leaders adapt to new challenges. The organization was not trying to recapture a past reality of employee engagement based on previous values but rather looked to establish a new culture where participants shared their opinions and energies to build a new, stronger team. Adaptivity, with a participative leadership style, has the opportunity to create a new innovative and resilient team to solve new challenges. Medical industry and education have adapted rapidly but many public sectors have not applied complexity leadership adaptive practices (Hanson and Ford, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2021).

Limitations

A limitation of this paper is that it is a single case study within which we articulate generalizable concepts and models that typify the value in case study research, as noted by Yin (2003). Future research can elaborate these concepts by conducting additional case studies.

Another limitation is that we conducted development training for approximately one year. While significant, we were unable to evaluate the full effectiveness of training over an extended period of time. We did not have access to longitudinal company data regarding turnover and employee productivity. As many researchers discuss in their development programs, individual perceptions of lasting benefits decline over time (Packard and Jones, 2015). Our results pointed to increased trust, production, and employee satisfaction. We trained the human resources staff to become the plant's trainers; however, we cannot provide direct observations of how training evolved after our tenure at the plant. The human resources department's continued training indicates that they value its role in developing leader effectiveness to change their organizational culture.

Conclusion

This case study describes one method to improve leader effectiveness and increase employee engagement and retention. Developing leader effectiveness via value changes in organizational culture connects leaders to followers. This engagement improves organizational levels of trust, which are necessary to strengthen employee job satisfaction, reduce turnover and improve production. Increased leader effectiveness becomes a competitive advantage in a challenging labor market in which individuals value leaders who demonstrate that they respect their employees, are open to new ideas and decentralize problem-solving to the team.

While some management development approaches train managers with premade tools and standards (Hedman, 2016), we constructed a tailored development program to address specific organizational issues and improve leader effectiveness. This theory-to-practice case study allowed a supportive theoretical lens to integrate related concepts in intervention strategies to improve organizational performance. We suggest further research to confirm the link between complexity leadership concepts and effectiveness in leaders. Furthermore, complexity leadership concepts focus on leader behaviors that enable employee interactions and interdependence as well as shared decision-making, which builds trust in and effectiveness of the leader.

This paper provides an explanatory case study that demonstrates how real cultural issues can be analyzed and utilized to conduct a critical model of organizational values and behavior. In this case, leader effectiveness training produced changes in supervisors, departments and the plant. Supervisors expressed that they were encouraged to develop stronger leader–employee relationships, which increased their influence. Trust increased as they provided conscious consideration and allowed employees to become more involved in

decision-making. Department heads changed to exhibit respect toward employees. Notably, the human resources department invested time in supervisor development as a strategy to reduce the number of employee issues that came to their offices. Department leaders discovered the value in gathering input from different departments concerning the impact of new changes in the plant. Overall, employees were more engaged, participating in decision-making and being treated with more respect.

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Appendix
Training evaluation card

DATE:
NAME:
SCENARIO:

Leaders will go through a team scenario to gather feedback in order to strengthen their leading ability.

E = Exceeds Expectations
M = Meets Expectations
O = Opportunity for Improvement

Leader Cultural Evaluation
For Training Purposes Only

Values	**Respect** E M O	**Integrity** E M O	**Collaboration** E M O
Uses [redacted] values as the frame of reference for interactions at all levels of the organization	*Upholds the dignity & consideration of others; shows appreciation & caring attitude.*	*Maintains high personal and professional standards; Honest with leaders and followers.*	*Seeks and adopts ideas and suggestions of others; Explains why when they are not used.*
	Excellence E M O	**Responsibility** E M O	**Trust** E M O
	Seeks Improvement of service, products & relationships.	*Fulfills obligations to associates, the plant, and [redacted]*	*Shows full faith and confidence in team members; Trusts team members unless shown otherwise.*
Attributes	**Character** E M O	**Friendly Approach** E M O	**Listening Skills** E M O
Uses these leadership attributes as guiding principles for his/her leadership style	*Fulfills promises, meets obligations; Supportive to associates, peers, and leaders.*	*Approaches others with a friendly, professional style; Offers to assist others.*	*Maintains open body posture, allows the other to talk; Recognizes and reviews other person's points.*
	Positive Attitude E M O	**Confidence** E M O	**Sense of Caring** E M O
	Approaches challenges with a helpful, encouraging outlook.	*Seeks self-improvement of leadership and task responsibilities; Sufficiently prepared for duties.*	*Looks out for the needs of team members and group; Displays concern and interest in their development*
Behaviors	**Constructive Feedback** E M O	**Communication Skills** E M O	**Teambuilding** E M O
Uses these competencies as a model for professional leadership behavior	*Offers helpful, supporting suggestions rather than negative comments.*	*Seeks input and explains decisions; Keeps associates informed on line/plant activities.*	*Strengthens professional relationships of the group; Facilitates open communication and group support.*
	Empowerment E M O	**Recognition** E M O	**Development** E M O
	Less controlling; Encourages others to make decisions.	*Expresses appreciation to individuals and the group; Recommends awards for team.*	*Assists employee in overcoming operational issues; Helps them successfully achieve production goals.*

OVERALL ASSESSMENT Number of ratings E: __ M: _ O: __ Total rating: (Circle one) E M O

Circle only those that apply. Explain "O" or "E" rating (on reverse side).

Stop: _____
Continue: _____
Start: _____

DEVELOPMENT INPUT BY LEADER

ONE STOP:

ONE CONTINUE:

ONE START:

ACTION PLAN (DUE IN ONE WEEK): HOW WILL YOU MAKE YOUR PROPOSED CHANGES?

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